

Clifford Geertz's Examination of the Symbolic Significance of Dowry within Islamic Legal Practices

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Abstract

Problem statement: The transformation of dowry from an Islamic legal obligation into a symbol of social prestige presents both normative and social challenges; however, it remains understudied within the anthropological perspective of Islamic legal discourse. **Objective:** This study explores the dynamics of the interpretation of dowry within the marriage practices of the Banyukuning Village community in Semarang Regency, with a particular emphasis on the tension between cultural symbolism and legal obligations as dictated by Islamic law. The central inquiry of this research is how the community interprets and practises dowry within both social and religious contexts. **Methods:** This study positions itself as an empirical investigation of Islamic law, employing a qualitative interpretative approach. Grounded in Clifford Geertz's theory of cultural symbols and the Maqasid Sharia framework, field data were thematically analysed through interviews, observations, and documentation. **Results:** The findings indicate that dowries are interpreted in diverse ways: as symbols of social prestige, manifestations of commitment, or mere administrative formalities, contingent upon social background and generational factors. This symbolic practice frequently conflicts with the principles of Sharia law, which advocate simplicity and justice, thus generating social pressure and the potential for domestic conflict. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that an educational and regulatory approach is necessary to reconcile cultural values with Islamic legal principles, ensuring that the practice of mahar remains relevant and does not become a social burden that undermines the intended purpose of marriage.

Keywords: Clifford Geertz, Cultural Symbolism, Dowry.

Abstrak

Fenomena pergeseran makna mahar dari kewajiban hukum Islam menjadi simbol status sosial menimbulkan persoalan normatif dan sosial yang belum banyak dikaji dalam pendekatan antropologi hukum Islam. Penelitian ini membahas dinamika pemaknaan mahar dalam praktik pernikahan masyarakat Desa Banyukuning, Kabupaten Semarang, dengan fokus pada ketegangan antara simbolisme budaya dan kewajiban yuridis dalam hukum Islam. Berangkat dari pertanyaan utama mengenai bagaimana masyarakat memaknai dan mempraktikkan mahar dalam konteks sosial dan religius, penelitian ini menempatkan dirinya sebagai studi hukum Islam berbasis empiris dengan pendekatan interpretatif kualitatif. Melalui teori Clifford Geertz tentang simbol budaya dan pendekatan Maqasid al-Syariah, data lapangan dianalisis secara tematik berdasarkan wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahar dimaknai secara beragam: sebagai simbol prestise sosial, manifestasi komitmen, maupun sekadar formalitas administratif, tergantung pada latar sosial dan generasi. Praktik simbolik ini kerap bertentangan dengan prinsip syariat yang menganjurkan kesederhanaan dan keadilan, sehingga menimbulkan tekanan sosial dan potensi konflik rumah. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa diperlukan pendekatan edukatif dan regulatif untuk menyeimbangkan antara nilai budaya dan prinsip hukum Islam, agar praktik mahar tetap relevan dan tidak menjadi beban sosial yang menghambat tujuan pernikahan.

Kata Kunci: Clifford Geertz, Mahar, Simbolisme Budaya.



Introduction

Marriage, from the perspective of Islamic law, is an institution that encompasses spiritual, social, and legal dimensions. It is not merely a civil contract but also serves as a means of preserving lineage (*hifz al-nasl*), honour (*hifz al-'irdh*), and social stability (Hamzah, 2024). A key element of marriage is the dowry, which constitutes a mandatory gift from the husband to the wife, an inherent right established at the time of the marriage contract. This obligation is emphasised in the Qur'an, specifically in Surah An-Nisa, verse 4, which mandates the provision of the dowry as a demonstration of respect and sincerity towards women (Yusri et al., 2024). The Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI) and Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage further stipulate that the dowry is the wife's right that must be fulfilled without stipulating a specific amount, provided it is based on mutual agreement and the financial capacity of the parties involved. This principle underscores that the dowry should function as a symbol of respect and responsibility rather than as a financial burden or a means of social status (Monica Putri et al., 2024).

Social practices within various Muslim communities often reveal a shift in the meaning of the dowry. In certain regions, such as Banyukuning Village, Bandungan District, the dowry transcends its legal obligation and becomes a symbol of the groom's family's status and prestige. The amount of the dowry is frequently perceived as a measure of economic capability and social standing, particularly among families of middle to upper social status. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Khairuddin (Khairuddin, 2024) and Awaliyah et al. (Awaliyah et al., 2024), who observed that dowries in various communities often undergo commodification, where their economic value eclipses their spiritual significance. Conversely, some communities, particularly among younger generations and families with limited economic resources, are beginning to adopt a pragmatic perspective that emphasises mutual agreement and financial capability as the primary criteria for determining the dowry (Kuswandito et al., 2025).

The shift in the interpretation of the dowry is not exclusive to Indonesia. A study conducted by Awaliyah et al. (Awaliyah et al., 2024) indicates that similar trends are observable in other Muslim countries, such as Malaysia and Pakistan, where the size of the dowry has significantly increased due to social pressures, despite Islamic teachings advocating for simplicity. In Pakistan, for instance, the dowry is frequently employed as a means of negotiating social status, resulting in elevated wedding costs and exacerbating economic disparities. In Malaysia, despite state regulations establishing a minimum dowry amount, societal practices often exceed these thresholds in pursuit of family prestige. This global phenomenon suggests that the dowry has evolved into more than a mere legal or ritual instrument; it has become a social symbol that significantly influences marriage dynamics across diverse Muslim cultures.

Despite the extensive research conducted on dowries, the majority of studies in Indonesia continue to focus on normative legal aspects, such as analyses of regulations within the KHI and classical fiqh. Research exploring the symbolic meaning and cultural dimensions of dowries remains relatively limited (Monica Putri et al., 2024). This study seeks to address this gap by examining dowry practices in Banyukuning Village through the lens of Clifford Geertz's symbolic theory. This theoretical framework facilitates the interpretation of the dowry as a complex

cultural symbol that not only signifies individual commitment but also reflects the social structure, status, and collective values prevalent within society.

This study also holds practical relevance. Excessive and prestige-oriented dowry practices can generate economic tensions and impede the fundamental goal of marriage as a means of establishing a harmonious family. Research by Nazarit (Nazarit, 2024) indicates that the practice of deferred dowry within the Tolaki community in Southeast Sulawesi often leads to post-marital conflicts due to the absence of realistic agreements. This underscores the necessity for social education and a legal approach that prioritises simplicity and fairness. By conducting an in-depth exploration of the meaning of dowry in Banyukuning Village, this research aims to provide valuable insights to the community, religious leaders, and policymakers, facilitating a balance between sharia values and social realities.

Specifically, this study seeks to address two primary questions: (1) How does the community of Banyukuning Village interpret dowry within social, economic, and religious dimensions? and (2) How does the symbolism of dowry interact with Islamic legal norms and local cultural practices? By addressing these questions, this study aspires to enrich the literature on Islamic family law from a cultural perspective while also offering practical recommendations to ensure that the practice of dowry remains a means of respect and social cohesion in marriage, rather than a burden.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in empirical legal research. This approach was selected due to the fact that the issues under examination pertain not only to the normative dimensions of Islamic law but also to the social and cultural factors that influence the practice of dowry within the community (Kusumastuti et al., 2025). The primary focus of the research is to explore the symbolic significance of dowry in the marriage customs of the Banyukuning Village community, Bandungan District, and to understand how the community interprets dowry within social, economic, and religious contexts.

The research site was established in Banyukuning Village, Bandungan District, Semarang Regency, Central Java. The selection of this location was informed by a notable social phenomenon—namely, the variation in the interpretation of dowry among communities with diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary analysis. Research informants were selected using purposive sampling, which entails choosing subjects deemed capable of providing pertinent information related to dowry practices (Sarie et al., 2023). The informants included prospective brides and grooms, parents of both parties, as well as religious and community leaders. A total of ten informants were interviewed, comprising four prospective brides and grooms, four parents of the bride and groom, and two religious leaders. The interviews were conducted face-to-face using a semi-structured guide, allowing researchers to delve deeper into the informants' perspectives on dowries (Afdhal Chatra et al., 2023).

This study also employed secondary data comprising relevant legislation, such as Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage and the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI), scholarly literature pertaining to Islamic family law, and prior research findings

concerning the practice of dowry within Muslim communities. This secondary data serves to bolster the legal analysis and to compare field findings with existing regulations and literature (Chairul Huda, 2021).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques. The researcher categorised the findings from interviews and observations into principal themes pertinent to the research focus, such as the symbolic significance of dowry, differences in perception based on socio-economic status, and the association between dowry practices and the teachings of Islamic law. This analysis is contextualised within Clifford Geertz's symbolic theory to interpret the role of dowry as a symbol representing social, cultural, and religious values within society (Najmah et al., 2023).

To ensure data validity, this study employs both source and method triangulation. Source triangulation is achieved through the comparison of information from various categories of informants (prospective brides and grooms, parents, and religious leaders), while method triangulation is accomplished by integrating interviews, observations, and documentary studies. Additionally, the member check technique was applied by reconfirming the interview results with informants to ensure the accuracy of the data (Nurfajriani et al., 2024).

Diverse Interpretations of Marriage Dowries in Indonesia

Research conducted in Banyukuning Village, Bandungan District, reveals that the meaning of dowry in marriage is multifaceted and influenced by the social, economic, and religious backgrounds of the community. These findings were derived from interviews and supported by participatory observation and documentation. The results of this research indicate that dowry is not solely regarded as a legal obligation based on Islamic teachings but also as a symbol of social status, personal commitment, and administrative formality in marriage.

Within the socio-economic context of the Banyukuning community, the practice of providing dowry cannot be divorced from the influence of social constructs associated with the status of the families of the bride and groom. This study found that among families with middle to upper social and economic status, dowries are often perceived as a measure of financial capability as well as a symbol of social prestige. The amount of the dowry is not only viewed as the fulfilment of a religious obligation towards the wife but has also expanded in meaning to become a medium for representing the status and honour of the groom's family.

This phenomenon is illustrated in an interview with Mrs. Sulastri, a housewife from a prominent merchant family in Banyukuning Village. In her perspective, dowry is not merely considered a formality or administrative requirement in marriage, but rather as a symbolic expression of appreciation and responsibility of men towards women. She stated:

For me, the dowry serves as a symbol of equality and respect for women. In our tradition, the provision of a dowry signifies the man's commitment to assuming responsibility within the marriage and caring for the woman who will become his wife. Moreover, it underscores the moral principle that marriage constitutes a bond that necessitates effort and sacrifice. A substantial dowry is often perceived

as an indication of the man's family's wealth and seriousness regarding the union". (Sulastri, 2025)

This statement elucidates that the symbolic value of dowry within certain communities is not solely predicated on legal or spiritual dimensions, but is also intricately woven into the social value system that exists within the community structure. Dowry is positioned as a reflection of the morality, sincerity, and economic capacity of the prospective husband, as well as a medium of social communication that affirms the status and honour of the family in the eyes of the community. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of a study (Hamid et al., 2025), which revealed that in Mandailing society, the dowry has experienced an increase in value as it serves as an indicator of the groom's family prestige, despite the practice potentially imposing an economic burden on the prospective groom.

In the normative religious dimension, the majority of religious and community leaders in Banyukuning Village interpret dowry as a symbol of a man's commitment and responsibility in marriage, which is deeply rooted in Islamic law. Within this framework, dowry is not understood merely as a material aspect, but as a moral representation of a man's sincerity to engage in a lawful and responsible married life.

This perspective is underscored by K.H. Ahmad Baidlowi, a religious leader of considerable influence in the region. In an interview conducted with him, he stated:

The dowry is, in fact, obligatory in Islam. It constitutes a right that must be granted to women and reflects the responsibility of men to care for their wives. The provision of a dowry signifies that men demonstrate their commitment and responsibility within the institution of marriage. (Baidlowi, 2025)

This statement illustrates a profound understanding of the normative function of dowry as a woman's right under Islamic law, whilst simultaneously reflecting a man's moral responsibility as a husband. In this context, dowry is not perceived as a form of compensation or a means of exchange, but rather as a form of respect and an affirmation of the woman's position within the institution of Islamic marriage (Hartono et al., 2025).

This religious perspective aligns with the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, which states that 'The best dowry is the easiest' (H.R. Ahmad). This hadith emphasises the principle of ease in the implementation of marriage, indicating that the nobility of a marital bond does not reside in the size of the dowry, but in the sincerity of intention and the awareness of responsibility of each partner. This principle also underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between sharia provisions and social welfare in the practice of dowry (Yusri et al., 2024).

Field data indicate that this understanding is still strongly held by religious leaders and certain members of society who are oriented towards traditional Islamic values. The dowry is regarded as part of the mechanism for protecting women's rights and serves as an instrument for establishing the structure of responsibility within the family. The emphasis on moral aspects and male responsibility is predominant in local religious narratives and is frequently referenced in family mediation or deliberation processes when there are differences of opinion regarding the amount or form of the dowry.

Amid the prevalence of symbolic dowry practices laden with social status values, a new trend has emerged among younger generations and lower-middle-class communities, reflecting a pragmatic and functional perspective on dowries. Within this group, dowry is no longer positioned as a measure of prestige, but rather as a form of commitment that is proportional and realistic, commensurate with the capabilities of the male party and the outcomes of mutual agreement.

One representation of this perspective can be found in an interview with Mas Joko, a 26-year-old prospective groom from a local farming family in Banyukuning Village. In his account, he stated:

“In my view, the size of the dowry need not be substantial. The key consideration is reaching an agreement that is financially feasible for both parties. A large dowry may impose a significant burden. More crucially, the emphasis should be placed on the intention and commitment to coexist harmoniously”. (Joko, 2025)

Mas Joko's statement reflects a more substantial approach to dowry, conceptualised as a rational agreement between two individuals who wish to establish a household. For this demographic, the essence of marriage is predominantly centred on mental readiness and emotional commitment, rather than on the nominal value or form of the dowry bestowed. This perspective also mirrors the economic realities faced by many young people, who are compelled to achieve financial independence despite having limited resources.

Field observations and interviews with several informants indicate that social pressure plays a significant role in determining the amount of dowry, particularly in communities that maintain strong hierarchical social structures and collective cultures, such as in Banyukuning Village. This pressure manifests in the form of unwritten social expectations that influence the families of both the bride and groom to establish the dowry according to standards deemed socially 'appropriate', rather than solely based on the financial capacity and mutual agreement of the two parties.

In this context, families from the upper-middle class often experience psychological pressure to provide a substantial dowry. This obligation is not merely a fulfilment of religious duties but also aims to uphold social prestige and family reputation. A modest dowry is frequently perceived as a symbol of inadequacy and can inadvertently tarnish the reputation of the groom's family within the surrounding community. Conversely, for families from lower-middle-class backgrounds, this social pressure translates into a significant financial burden that may have long-term detrimental effects.

The statement by Mr Suparno, the father of a prospective bride, illustrates the tension that arises between religious values, economic needs, and social expectations that afflict lower-middle-class families. He stated:

"We are an ordinary family; however, there are instances when neighbours or relatives impose substantial dowry demands to avoid societal disapproval. If such demands are excessive, my child and her future husband may face significant challenges post-marriage, potentially resulting in financial indebtedness." (Suparno, 2025)

This statement reflects the social dilemma experienced by families with limited economic resources. On one hand, they seek to uphold the dignity and image

of the family within a competitive social environment; on the other hand, they recognise that an excessively high dowry can impose significant economic burdens on couples embarking on a new life together. Such social pressure generates an imbalance between idealism and reality and has the potential to obscure the primary purpose of marriage as a means of achieving peace (*sakinah*) and well-being.

This study reveals variations in the interpretation and practice of dowries, influenced by differences in social status, generational perspectives, and family dynamics. Among families with upper-middle-class economic backgrounds, particularly within the older generation, dowries are not merely perceived as a legal obligation under Islam but have evolved into symbols of social status and familial pride. In this demographic, dowries are typically presented in the form of gold, substantial cash sums, or other luxury items. The high nominal value often serves as an indicator of economic capability and a means of maintaining prestige in the eyes of society. This practice reflects a symbolic orientation towards dowries, wherein social representation takes precedence over their legal or spiritual functions.

Conversely, in lower-middle-class families, especially among the younger generation, dowries are more frequently viewed as simple and functional formalities. In this context, the nominal value of the dowry is relatively modest and may sometimes consist of symbolic items such as a set of prayer tools, a Qur'an, or simple objects imbued with religious and emotional significance. Although straightforward, the act of giving a dowry is still regarded as a form of commitment and respect for the woman, without imposing an economic burden upon her. This perspective illustrates the younger generation's endeavours to restore the essence of the dowry as a legitimate and meaningful right of the wife, rather than an exploitative requirement.

A tendency towards pragmatism is also evident across all generations of young people, irrespective of their social background. For this group, the ideal dowry is flexible, adapted to the financial capabilities and mutual agreement of both parties. Good intentions and mutual consent are deemed more significant than the nominal value of the dowry itself. Nevertheless, they continue to encounter social challenges, particularly in the form of pressure from extended families or traditional norms that do not wholly endorse the simplification of dowries. This phenomenon reflects a tension between the new values embraced by the younger generation and the traditional social expectations inherited from previous generations.

This finding aligns with a study (Anwar, 2024) conducted in Yogyakarta, which identified that non-material dowry practices, such as symbolic items, services, or moral commitments, are increasingly favoured by young couples as a means of enhancing the significance of the dowry without imposing economic burdens. This choice signifies a transformation in the understanding of dowries towards a more inclusive, rational, and egalitarian direction and indicates a cultural shift in dowries from symbols of wealth to symbols of commitment and relational justice in married life.

The Significance of Marriage Dowry within Clifford Geertz's Theoretical Framework

The results of research on the meaning of dowry in Banyukunig Village reveal the complexity of interactions between religious norms, social structures, and local culture. These findings necessitate a thorough analysis using Clifford Geertz's theoretical framework and the Maqasid Sharia approach, in addition to being compared with research findings in various local and international contexts to comprehend the dynamics of dowry symbolism as a whole.

Drawing upon Clifford Geertz's theoretical framework regarding cultural symbols, the dowry in the marriage practices of the Banyukuning Village community can be interpreted through three levels of meaning: intrinsic, social, and cultural meanings, which collectively define its function and role in community life (Gaol & Lena Meo, 2025). First, at the intrinsic level of meaning, the dowry is perceived as the fundamental right of the wife that must be provided by the husband in accordance with Islamic law. This perspective is predominantly upheld by religious leaders and the majority of the younger generation in Banyukuning, who interpret the dowry as a manifestation of a man's commitment and responsibility upon entering into a marital bond. Consequently, the dowry functions as a normative instrument that affirms the legitimacy and validity of the marriage according to Islamic law (Tjahjadi et al., 2020).

Second, in terms of social meaning, the dowry is regarded as an indicator of status and a means of representing social stratification. This phenomenon is particularly evident among upper-middle-class families, where the nominal value of the dowry serves as a symbol of family prestige and an indicator of social position within the community. This practice illustrates that the dowry, in addition to being a legal obligation, also functions as a symbolic means of affirming family identity and honour (Gantarang, 2022).

Third, at the cultural level, the dowry is situated as part of the collective norms and values internalised within the social order of the Banyukuning community. There exist unwritten standards regarding the amount or form of dowry that is considered reasonable and appropriate; deviations from these standards often lead to social stigma directed towards the bride and groom, as well as their families. This norm reinforces the understanding that the dowry is not merely a legal practice but a cultural symbol that serves to maintain order and harmony within the community (Beddu et al., 2024).

Through this three-level analysis of meaning, Geertz elucidates how dowries in Banyukuning function not merely as a legal obligation within Islamic marriage but also as multifunctional symbols that mediate relationships among individuals, families, and communities. In essence, dowries serve as intermediaries reflecting the interplay between religious teachings, social structures, and cultural values that pervade local communities.

Within the framework of the Maqasid al-Sharia theory, the practice of determining dowry in marriage is closely associated with the attainment of the principal objectives of Sharia (*maqasid al-khamsah*), particularly *hifz al-nasl* (preservation of offspring), *hifz al-'irdh* (preservation of honour), and *hifz al-mal* (preservation of wealth). Conceptually, a proportionally set dowry functions as an instrument that strengthens marital bonds, affirms the legality and honour of the family institution, and ensures the continuity of offspring without compromising the financial stability of the couple. This practice aligns with the principles of Sharia law,

which regards marriage as a means to achieve peace (*sakinah*), blessings, and the continuity of legitimate offspring (Latifah & Naachy, 2024).

The findings of this study further reveal that the practice of excessive dowries often yields counterproductive effects concerning the objectives of Sharia law. Excessively high dowries impose a substantial economic burden, escalate the potential for conflict between families, and indirectly obstruct young people's access to legitimate marriage. This situation contradicts the essence of maqasid, which prioritises public interest (*al-maslahah*) and seeks to avoid harm (*mafsadah*), thereby positioning excessive dowry practices as a deviation from the very purpose of Islamic law (Kinasih Gusti, 2024).

The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) fatwa underscores the principle of simplicity in determining dowry. Within its various guidelines and fatwas, the MUI emphasises that dowry should not be utilised as a means of social prestige or as a vehicle for imposing excessive material demands that could burden the male party. This principle aligns with the hadith of Prophet Muhammad SAW, which states: 'The best dowry is the easiest' (H.R. Ahmad), highlighting the importance of ease and justice as fundamental values in dowry practices (Ramli, 2023).

The inclination among the younger generation in Banyukuning Village, as revealed in this study, to prioritise agreement, financial capability, and the principle of ease over social prestige can be interpreted as a return to the original spirit of Sharia in the practice of dowry. This phenomenon indicates a shift in values towards a more rational and maqasid-aligned approach, ultimately supporting the achievement of *sakinah* in family life, preserving individual dignity, and ensuring the sustainability of marriage without imposing disproportionate financial burdens.

The transformation in the meaning of dowry from a mere obligation to a symbol of social status is not an isolated phenomenon within Banyukuning Village but rather reflects a broader trend in Muslim communities across various regions. This research finding indicates that dowry has evolved from a mere Sharia instrument validating the legitimacy of marriage to a representation of family dignity, often influenced by factors of social prestige. This shift in meaning is corroborated by numerous cross-regional and cross-national studies revealing similar patterns.

For instance, a study (Hamid et al., 2025) in Mandailing identified significant inflation in dowry values attributed to pressures of social status and family prestige. Research (Awaliyah et al., 2024) reinforces this finding by highlighting how social norms have driven an increase in the nominal value of dowries in various regions of Indonesia, frequently exceeding the financial capacity of the prospective groom. Similar patterns are observed not only at the national level but also globally. In Pakistan, dowries are often leveraged as a tool for negotiating social status, thereby exacerbating the financial burden on families (Awaliyah et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, despite formal regulations governing dowry amounts, social practices frequently exceed these provisions to maintain family image and prestige.

This shift in the function of dowry has normative implications for marriage practices and significant socio-economic impacts on the well-being of couples. The pressure to meet elevated social standards compels some prospective brides and grooms to incur debt, delay marriage, or resort to precarious alternatives such as informal marriage practices. This burden is not only experienced during the pre-

marriage phase but also yields long-term effects on household dynamics. A study (Nazarit, 2024) on the practice of deferred dowry within Tolaki society demonstrates that establishing an unrealistic dowry amount, particularly when payment is delayed, frequently becomes a source of post-marriage disputes and conflicts. This situation underscores that disproportionate dowry practices may contradict the primary purpose of marriage itself, which is to foster peace (*sakinah*), harmony, and the sustainability of the family.

Consequently, this finding highlights the necessity to reorient the interpretation and practice of dowry to align with the principles of justice and public welfare that constitute the core of Islamic teachings. In the absence of a paradigm shift, the evolving meaning of dowry that excessively emphasises social prestige risks imposing economic burdens, escalating the potential for conflict, and distancing marriage practices from the values of sharia and its social objectives.

Comparative analysis indicates that the practice of dowry in Banyukuning reflects a broader pattern observed in the Muslim world. In various regions of Indonesia, the trend of offering non-material dowries, such as a set of prayer tools or symbolic items, is gaining popularity as a strategy to mitigate financial burdens, as noted (Anwar, 2024) in Yogyakarta. However, social pressure remains the predominant factor influencing the nominal value of dowries in numerous communities.

At the international level, a study (Awaliyah et al., 2024) on Pakistan and Malaysia corroborates that cultural factors and prestige often govern the determination of dowries. In Pakistan, the prevalence of high dowries has even resulted in the phenomenon of delayed marriages or marriages without formal dowries, which has the potential to incite legal disputes. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, although local governments regulate the minimum dowry amount, social practices frequently demand significantly higher values as a symbol of familial status.

Findings in Banyukuning reveal that, while there are parallels with other contexts, unique dynamics persist. The younger generation in Banyukuning tends to adopt a more pragmatic approach, yet they remain ensnared by the social pressures perpetuated by the older generation. This intergenerational dynamic suggests the potential for shifts in dowry practices towards simpler forms if social support and education are enhanced.

The results of this study underscore the importance of the roles of religious and community leaders in reconciling dowry practices with sharia values and in preventing the imposition of socio-economic burdens. Religious leaders possess the moral authority to educate the community regarding the essence of dowries and to remind them not to utilise them as a means of exhibiting status. Additionally, local governments, through the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA), can contribute by disseminating guidelines for establishing reasonable dowries and by providing pre-marriage education that emphasises the principle of simplicity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the meaning of dowry within the Banyukuning Village community is multifaceted, influenced by social, economic, and religious dimensions. Three primary patterns of perception were identified: first, the dowry is regarded as a symbol of social status that reflects the prestige and economic

capability of the groom's family; second, the dowry is understood as a manifestation of the groom's responsibility and commitment to the bride, in accordance with Islamic teachings; and third, the dowry is interpreted more pragmatically as a formality, with its value adjusted according to the capabilities and agreement of both parties.

These findings reveal a tension between religious norms, which emphasise ease and fairness in determining dowry, and social practices that tend to render it a symbol of prestige. This tension can generate economic and social pressures that may undermine the objective of marriage as a harmonious family institution. Therefore, it is essential for religious and community leaders to provide education and a reinterpretation of the function of dowry to ensure that it remains aligned with sharia values while also adapting to social realities. By adopting this approach, dowry can function as a means of respect, commitment, and family unity without becoming a counterproductive burden on the purpose of marriage.

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