

Premarital Tradition and the Social Legitimation of Relationships Leading to Marriage in the Kendawangan Malay Community

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Abstract

Scholarship on Malay marriage traditions has largely focused on the integration of custom and Islam, the symbolic dimensions of ritual, or the transformation of customary practices under modernization. However, considerably less attention has been given to how premarital rituals function as social mechanisms that legitimize relationships between prospective spouses and their families before marriage. This article examines premarital tradition among the Malay community in Kendawangan District, Ketapang Regency, West Kalimantan, with particular attention to its ritual stages, symbolic meanings, and social functions. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the study draws on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis. The findings show that premarital tradition in this community consists of four interrelated stages (*merisik-risik*, *membuka mulut*, *ngantar tande*, and *ngantar barang*), which collectively regulate communication between families, clarify the relational status of the prospective couple, and publicly affirm the seriousness, responsibility, and commitment of the prospective groom. At the symbolic level, pantuns and *tepak sirihs* (betel sets) serve as media of customary communication and respect, rings signify social bonding and public recognition of engagement, while gift offerings (*hantaran*) represent financial preparedness and moral responsibility for future household life. This article argues that premarital tradition within the Malay community functions not merely as cultural heritage or customary symbolism but also as a mechanism of social legitimation through which personal relationships are transformed into collectively recognized and socially sanctioned marital relations. By foregrounding this legitimating function, the study extends scholarship on Malay marriage practices beyond dominant concerns with ritual symbolism, the integration of custom and Islam, and the transformation of tradition under modernization.

[Studi mengenai tradisi perkawinan pada masyarakat Melayu selama ini lebih banyak menyoroti integrasi antara adat dan Islam, dimensi simbolik ritual, atau transformasi praktik adat di bawah pengaruh modernisasi.]

Namun, masih relatif sedikit perhatian diberikan pada cara ritual pranikah bekerja sebagai mekanisme sosial yang melegitimasi hubungan antara calon mempelai dan keluarga mereka sebelum perkawinan dilangsungkan. Artikel ini mengkaji tradisi pranikah pada masyarakat Melayu di Kecamatan Kendawangan, Kabupaten Ketapang, Kalimantan Barat, dengan menitikberatkan pada tahapan ritual, makna simbolik, dan fungsi sosialnya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan etnografi melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tradisi pranikah pada masyarakat ini terdiri atas empat tahapan yang saling berkaitan (merisik-risik, membuka mulut, ngantar tande, dan ngantar barang) yang secara bersama-sama mengatur komunikasi antar keluarga, memperjelas status hubungan calon mempelai, serta menegaskan secara terbuka keseriusan, tanggung jawab, dan komitmen calon mempelai laki-laki. Pada tataran simbolik, pantun dan tepak sirih berfungsi sebagai media komunikasi adat dan penghormatan; cincin menjadi simbol pengikatan sosial dan pengakuan publik atas pertunangan; sedangkan hantaran merepresentasikan kesiapan nafkah dan tanggung jawab moral menuju kehidupan rumah tangga. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa tradisi pranikah dalam masyarakat Melayu tidak semata-mata berfungsi sebagai warisan budaya atau simbol adat, melainkan juga sebagai mekanisme legitimasi sosial yang mentransformasikan hubungan personal menjadi relasi perkawinan yang diakui dan disahkan secara kolektif. Dengan menekankan fungsi legitimatif tersebut, studi ini memperluas kajian tentang tradisi perkawinan Melayu yang selama ini lebih didominasi oleh perhatian pada simbolisme ritual, integrasi adat dan Islam, serta perubahan tradisi akibat modernisasi.]

Keywords: Malay Community, Marriage Rituals, Premarital Tradition, Social Legitimation, Symbolic Meanings.

Introduction

Marriage is a major social institution through which kinship relations are formed and reproduced across societies (Armani, 2004; Nanda, 2015). From an anthropological perspective, marriage is not simply understood as the union of two individuals but as a social mechanism that connects families, relatives, and communities through the formation of affinal ties, thereby extending social networks and reinforcing cohesion among groups (Anser, 2007; Power & Ready, 2019; Stoebenau et al., 2026). For this reason, the process leading to marriage is rarely treated as a purely personal decision; rather, it typically involves family members and the wider social environment, both of which play a role in recognizing and validating the relationship being formed. In many societies, such recognition does not emerge instantaneously through the marriage contract or wedding ceremony itself but is instead produced gradually through premarital rituals and practices that regulate relations between families, reduce social uncertainty, and clarify the status of the prospective couple before marriage takes

place (Krasheninnikova, 2026; Rancew-Sikora, 2019; Schweingruber et al., 2004). Premarital ritual, in this sense, can be understood as part of a broader social mechanism that links personal relationships to collective acceptance within a community.

Within Malay communities in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, the process leading to marriage has traditionally been organized through a series of customary stages that regulate relations between the prospective bride and groom and their families before the marriage contract. Among the Malay community in Kendawangan District, this premarital tradition generally consists of four stages (*merisik-risik*, *membuka mulut*, *ngantar tande*, and *ngantar barang*), through which the seriousness and commitment of the prospective spouses are progressively established (Rahmawati et al., 2006). The continuity of this tradition indicates that marriage is not understood merely as a personal bond between a man and a woman but as a social event that unites two families into a relationship that must be built gradually, honorably, and in ways that are collectively acceptable. Although this tradition faces pressures arising from social change and the expansion of communication technologies, both of which have led to certain adjustments and simplifications in practice (IA, personal communication, October 2025), it continues to be maintained as an important part of the process leading to marriage (field notes, June 2025). For this reason, premarital tradition among the Malay community merits scholarly attention not only as a form of cultural inheritance but also as a social mechanism that continues to be negotiated in contemporary society to regulate interfamily relations and clarify the status of the prospective couple.

Studies of marriage traditions in Malay communities can generally be categorized into three broad strands. The first strand focuses on the relationship between Malay customs and Islamic values, arguing that the stages of marriage rituals reflect Islamic principles integrated into local customs, such that custom and Islam are understood as complementary normative systems governing Malay social life (Nordin et al., 2025; Samad, 2023; Tinkong & Mohamad, 2021). The second strand approaches marriage rituals as symbolic systems representing cultural values, in which *pantun*, *tepak sirih* (betel set), *tepong tawar* (ritual blessing ceremony), ritual foods, and other ceremonial objects function as media of social communication conveying messages of respect, courtesy, gratitude, and familial harmony (Gafar et al., 2019; Saiin et al., 2023; Salleh, 2014). The third strand emphasizes the impact of modernization on Malay marriage practices, arguing that social change, technological development, and the growth of consumer culture have altered the form of ritual performance while weakening the intensity of social interaction that once underpinned marriage traditions in rural communities (Mohd Zahari et al., 2011; Syarif & Khamim, 2025; Syed Husin et al., 2024). Taken together, these strands suggest that Malay marriage

traditions constitute a site where religion, culture, symbolism, and social change continuously intersect and are renegotiated in contemporary life.

Despite these contributions, previous scholarship has largely approached Malay marriage traditions as expressions of custom-Islam integration, symbolic cultural systems, or traditions transformed by modernization. Less attention has been given to how the stages of premarital tradition function as a social mechanism through which recognition of the relationship between prospective spouses is gradually formed before the marriage itself. In other words, existing studies have tended to emphasize the symbolic meanings of rituals or the changing form of tradition, while paying comparatively limited attention to the social functions of rituals in generating legitimacy for interfamily relations. It is from this gap that the present article departs. Focusing on the Kendawangan Malay community, this study examines the practice of premarital tradition and identifies its symbolic meanings and social functions. It argues that the Malay premarital tradition should be understood not merely as cultural heritage or customary symbolism but as a mechanism of social legitimation that transforms a personal relationship between prospective spouses into a relationship collectively recognized by family and community.

Research Methodology

This study employed an ethnographic fieldwork approach to examine the practice, social function, and symbolic meaning of premarital tradition among the Malay community in Kendawangan District, Ketapang Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Fieldwork was conducted over three months between June and November 2025. The Kendawangan Malay community was selected as the research site because it continues to preserve a relatively complete sequence of customary premarital rituals, namely *merisik-risik*, *membuka mulut*, *ngantar tande*, and *ngantar barang*. These four stages remain actively practiced and continue to play a significant role in regulating relationships between the families of the prospective bride and groom before marriage. The persistence of this tradition amid ongoing social change and modernization makes this community a particularly relevant site for exploring how cultural practices, social values, and symbolic meanings are produced, maintained, and negotiated in a contemporary Malay community.

Data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation focused on community activities related to the enactment of premarital tradition as well as the social interactions surrounding it. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six purposively selected informants whose knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in implementing premarital customs made them particularly relevant to the research focus. The informants included two customary leaders, two religious leaders, and two tradition practitioners. This combination of informant

categories was intended to capture diverse perspectives on customary practices, religious values, and lived experiences in the enactment of premarital tradition. Interviews were audio-recorded using digital devices and supplemented by field documentation, including photographs, observation notes, and other supporting materials. In addition to primary data, this study also drew on secondary sources, such as scholarly journal articles, books, and previous studies relevant to Malay marriage traditions and symbolic cultural practices.

Table 1
Research Informants

Informant Code	Gender	Informant Category	Interview Date
IA	Male	Customary leader	October 2025
HI	Male	Customary leader	November 2025
MH	Male	Religious leader	November 2025
MN	Male	Religious leader	October 2025
EY	Female	Tradition practitioner	November 2025
RY	Male	Tradition practitioner	November 2025

Source: Compiled by the author, 2025.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative analysis developed by Miles et al. (2014, pp. 30–32), which comprises data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, field observations, and documentary materials were first transcribed and coded, then organized into thematic categories related to the practice of premarital tradition, its social functions, and the symbolic meanings attached to them. In interpreting the data, the study employed a symbolic meaning framework to examine how cultural symbols embedded in premarital rituals represent social values within the Kendawangan Malay community. Additionally, it utilized a social constructionist perspective to explain how these practices and symbols are produced, interpreted, and sustained as mechanisms through which recognition and social legitimacy are conferred upon relationships leading to marriage. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the study applied source and technique triangulation throughout the research process.

Premarital Tradition within the Kendawangan Malay Community

Based on field observations and interviews with informants, the premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community consists of four principal stages: *merisik-risik*, *membuka mulut*, *ngantar tande*, and *ngantar barang*. Together, these stages form a structured sequence of social practices that mediate relations between two kin groups before marriage. Within local Malay understandings, marriage is not conceived merely as the union of two individuals but as a social process that brings two families into a relationship through a series of orderly, gradual, and customarily regulated stages. Each stage serves a distinct

function, yet all are interconnected in building interfamily relations, clarifying commitment, and securing social recognition for the relationship being formed. Although certain aspects of their implementation have been adjusted in response to changing communication patterns and the dynamics of modern life, the basic structure of this tradition remains intact and continues to be regarded as an essential part of the path toward marriage.

Table 2
Stages of Premarital Tradition within the Malay Community

Stage	Description
<i>Merisik-risik</i>	An initial stage of inquiry between the families of the prospective bride and groom to ascertain the response and readiness of the woman’s family.
<i>Membuka mulut</i>	The formal delivery of a marriage proposal through <i>tepak sirih</i> and customary communication initiated with <i>pantun</i> .
<i>Ngantar tande</i>	A formal engagement marked by the presentation of a ring as a sign that the woman has been officially proposed to.
<i>Ngantar barang</i>	The delivery of various gift items prior to marriage as both practical preparation for the wedding and a sign of the groom’s readiness.

Source: Compiled by the author, 2025.

Merisik-risik marks the initial stage in forming a relationship between the families of the prospective bride and groom. It functions as a preliminary inquiry during which information about the prospective spouse is gathered, each family’s background is introduced, and the possibility of a more formal relationship leading to marriage is explored (Rahmawati et al., 2006). In practice, *merisik-risik* takes the form of a visit by the man’s family to the woman’s family in an intimate and informal setting. Although this process was traditionally mediated by a matchmaker, locally known as *mak comblang* or *telangke telangke* (MN, personal communication, October 2025), the findings suggest that such intermediaries have become less central due to the expansion of communication technologies and more direct interaction between families. Nevertheless, these changes have not altered the core function of *merisik-risik* as a means of initiating interfamily relations and ensuring that the path toward marriage proceeds through channels acceptable to both families (field notes, June 2025).

The exploratory nature of this stage is clearly reflected in the accounts of informants. IA explained, “*The man’s family visits the woman’s family to agree on when the merisik-risik will take place, and only after that do discussions begin about the possibility of marriage*” (IA, personal communication, October 2025). A similar view was expressed by MN, who noted that *merisik* usually involves a visit by the prospective groom’s family to the prospective bride’s house to convey good intentions and initiate discussions about the possibility of marriage (MN, personal communication, October 2025). From the perspective of

a traditional practitioner, this stage is primarily understood as a way of introducing the two families to one another. As RY put it, “*The purpose of the merisik-risik tradition we carried out was simply to introduce the two families and to learn about each other’s family background*” (RY, personal communication, November 2025). In this sense, *merisik-risik* functions as an initial mechanism for establishing kin relations that later stages will formalize and strengthen.

Once the preliminary inquiry has taken place, relations between the two families progress to the stage known as *membuka mulut*. This stage marks the formal delivery of a marriage proposal from the groom’s family to the bride’s family. It is signaled by the arrival of the groom’s family bearing a *tepak sirih* as part of the customary procedure. The event typically begins with an exchange of pantun before the proposal itself is conveyed (field notes, June 2025). In this context, *membuka mulut* is not merely a means of expressing the intention to marry; it also serves as a customary communicative space in which relations between the two families are negotiated in a manner considered polite and honorable (Rahmawati et al., 2006). Through this stage, intentions that were previously exploratory become more explicit and public before both families.

This practice is vividly illustrated in EY’s recollection of her own marriage process. She explained, “*The man’s family came to our house bringing a tepak sirih, then pantun was exchanged to open the proceedings, after which they expressed the purpose of their visit, namely, to propose marriage*” (EY, personal communication, November 2025). Similarly, MN described how the man’s family arrived at the woman’s house carrying *tepak sirih* and betel nut, conveying the purpose of their visit through pantun (MN, personal communication, October 2025). Significantly, acceptance or rejection of the proposal was not always communicated directly but rather through the customary symbolism attached to the *tepak sirih*. As HI explained, “*If the tepak sirih is returned empty, it means the proposal is accepted; if it is returned intact as before, it means it is rejected*” (HI, personal communication, November 2025). These findings indicate that communication in Malay custom operates not only through spoken language but also through symbols and ritual conventions collectively understood as part of the social process of reaching agreement between families (Salleh, 2014).

The next stage is *ngantar tande*, a formal engagement ritual conducted once mutual understanding has been reached between the two families. At this stage, the man’s family formally visits the woman’s house, bringing a ring and several simple items as symbols of the relationship (field notes, June 2025). The ring is placed on the woman’s finger in the presence of both families, marking the transition from preliminary negotiation to a bond that has received familial recognition (Rahmawati et al., 2006, p. 38). Therefore, *ngantar tande* functions not only as a marker of engagement but also as a process through which the social

status of the couple's relationship is clarified before both the family circle and the wider community.

Figure 1
Ngantar Tande Ceremony



Source: Field documentation, 2025.

The binding significance of this stage is reflected in IA's statement: "Once the ring has been placed, the woman is officially considered engaged and may no longer accept proposals from others" (IA, personal communication, October 2025). A similar account was provided by RY, who noted that once the ring had been placed, both families present immediately announced that the woman had been formally proposed to (RY, personal communication, November 2025). At the same time, interviews revealed that the practice of *ngantar tande* is shaped by moral and economic considerations and is not regarded as an obligation that should impose an undue burden on either family. As MH emphasized, "Offerings that are excessively luxurious or financially burdensome for the man's family are not encouraged; marriage should be made easier, not more difficult" (MH, personal communication, November 2025). In this respect, *ngantar tande* functions as a mechanism that combines social recognition, relational commitment, and shared moral consideration within Malay premarital customs.

The sequence of premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community concludes with the *ngantar barang* ceremony. This stage occurs shortly before the wedding and involves delivering various gifts from the groom's family to the bride's family (Rahmawati et al., 2006, p. 38). These gifts typically include clothing, jewelry, toiletries, cosmetics, household items, and a sum of money intended to help cover wedding expenses (*uang asap*) (see Figure 2). Unlike earlier stages, which primarily focus on initiating relations and strengthening commitment, *ngantar barang* emphasizes practical preparation

for married life. Through this ceremony, the prospective groom's readiness is demonstrated not only through words but also through tangible material contributions presented before both families (field notes, June 2025).

Figure 2
Ngantar Barang Ceremony



Source: Field documentation, 2025.

This practice is illustrated in RY's description: "*We came bringing decorated gifts such as clothing, jewelry, toiletries, cosmetics, batik cloth, sarongs, and uang asap*" (RY, personal communication, November 2025). IA provided a more detailed account, explaining that the gifts may include household items, clothing, jewelry, toiletries, cosmetics, underwear, and *uang asap*, which is intended to help finance the wedding celebration (IA, personal communication, October 2025). The presentation of these items is carried out symbolically before both families and is generally preceded by customary pantun as an opening to the event. In this way, *ngantar barang* functions not only as the transfer of material goods before marriage but also as an affirmation of the prospective groom's social, economic, and moral readiness to enter married life.

Symbolic Meanings in Malay Premarital Tradition: Customary Communication, Social Bonding, and Responsibility

The symbolic meanings embedded in the premarital tradition of the Malay community extend beyond the ritual objects used in ceremonial proceedings; they are also reflected in the actions, interactions, and procedural conventions

that accompany each stage of the ritual sequence. The findings show that these symbols broadly convey three interrelated meanings: customary communication, social bonding, and responsibility in preparation for married life. Through *pantun* and *tepak sirih*, community members express values of politeness, respect, and proper etiquette in establishing relationships between families. The ring signifies social attachment and public recognition of the relationship between the prospective bride and groom, while the exchange of gifts symbolizes the groom’s readiness, responsibility, and commitment to assume the role of husband. In practice, these symbols are not understood as isolated signs but as part of a wider system of meaning that connects individuals to families, families to the wider community, and custom to the religious values that shape Malay social life. Although several informants acknowledged that younger generations are no longer fully familiar with the philosophical meanings underlying these symbols, they continue to be maintained because they still provide social clarity to relationships progressing toward marriage.

Table 3
Symbolic Meanings in Malay Premarital Tradition

Symbol	Symbolic Meaning
<i>Pantun</i> and <i>tepak sirih</i>	Symbols of customary communication, politeness, and respect in conveying a marriage proposal.
Ring	A symbol of relational binding and social recognition of engagement status.
Gift offerings (<i>hantaran</i>)	A symbol of responsibility, readiness to provide support, and commitment to married life.

Source: Compiled by the author, 2025.

The symbolic meaning of customary communication is most clearly expressed during the *membuka mulut* stage, when the groom’s family formally presents a marriage proposal to the bride’s family (Rahmawati et al., 2006, pp. 38–39). At this stage, *pantun* and *tepak sirih* function not merely as ritual embellishments but as cultural devices that regulate how relations between the two families begin to be negotiated. *Pantun* allows the proposal to be articulated through language that is courteous and non-confrontational, while *tepak sirih* serves as a medium signaling respect for the woman’s family and the willingness of both parties to enter a communicative space governed by customary norms (Salleh, 2014). In this sense, symbolic communication in Malay tradition does not simply transmit information; it also creates a social atmosphere in which relations can develop without disregarding the values of decorum and respect central to the Malay community.

This understanding is reflected in HI’s explanation that *pantun* functions to open the atmosphere so that communication becomes more refined and to show respect to the woman’s family (HI, personal communication, November 2025).

Similarly, MN explained that the use of pantun is not contrary to Islamic teachings, as “*There is no prohibition against it; it is much like poetic recitation in Arab tradition*” (MN, personal communication, October 2025). Beyond its role as a medium of communication, *tepak sirih* is also understood as a representation of married life itself. MN further explained that the different tastes of betel leaf, areca nut, gambier, and tobacco symbolize the realities of life because “*Not all tastes are the same—some are bitter, spicy, sour, or astringent; married life is the same*” (MN, personal communication, October 2025). At the same time, *tepak sirih* serves as a vehicle for communicating the family’s decision, as “*if the container is returned empty, the proposal is accepted; if it is returned intact as before, it is rejected*” (HI, personal communication, November 2025). These findings suggest that customary communication within the Kendawangan Malay community operates through symbols that enable intentions, respect, and decision-making to be conveyed in a manner regarded as courteous and dignified (Salleh, 2014).

Within premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community, the ring holds symbolic significance as a marker of relational commitment and social recognition. This meaning is most clearly expressed during the *ngantar tande* ceremony, when the ring is placed on the prospective bride’s finger in the presence of both families. In this context, the ring is not primarily understood as a material object of economic value but as a symbol of social status recognized by the family and the wider community. Its significance lies in marking a transition: a relationship that had previously been at the stage of preliminary negotiation is transformed into one that is publicly acknowledged and socially defined. This meaning is evident in the explanations of several informants, who described the ring as a sign that the woman has already been bound to someone (MH, personal communication, November 2025; MN, personal communication, October 2025). HI further emphasized that a woman who has already been proposed to may no longer accept proposals from others (HI, personal communication, November 2025). Through the placing of the ring, a relationship that was previously tentative acquires a clearer and more collectively recognized form. The symbolic power of the ring, therefore, lies not only in its function as an emblem of attachment between two individuals but also in its capacity to generate social recognition that binds the two families together in the process leading to marriage (Lokman Hakim & Hashim, 2015; Mior et al., 2024).

In addition to the ring, gift offerings (*hantaran*) in Malay premarital tradition symbolize responsibility, readiness, and social support. These meanings are particularly evident during the stages of *ngantar tande* and *ngantar barang*, when the groom’s family presents various items to the prospective bride and her family. Items such as clothing, toiletries, cosmetics, jewelry, household goods, and *uang asap* are not understood solely in terms of their practical use. Some are even arranged in artistic forms, such as swans or flowers, as expressions of

creativity and respect (Rahmawati et al., 2006). More fundamentally, however, these objects acquire meaning because they represent the man's preparedness to assume the social and economic roles expected of him after marriage (MH, personal communication, November 2025; MN, personal communication, October 2025). This interpretation is reinforced by IA, who described the items delivered during *ngantar barang* as symbols of the groom's sincerity and responsibility (IA, personal communication, October 2025). In this sense, *hantaran* functions as a form of nonverbal communication through which the prospective groom demonstrates his responsibility, capability, and seriousness to the bride's family (Syarif & Khamim, 2025; Ünal, 2021). Rather than being reducible to the material value of the objects themselves, the significance of *hantaran* lies in its ability to make visible the moral and economic obligations that accompany marriage.

Although the symbols used in premarital tradition continue to be maintained, the findings reveal that not all community members fully understand the philosophical meanings underlying them. HI acknowledged that younger generations tend to know how the rituals are performed without necessarily grasping the symbolic meanings embedded within them (HI, personal communication, November 2025). Nevertheless, informants consistently emphasized that these symbols continue to be preserved because they still serve important social functions in community life. For instance, MH explained that the symbolic sequence of the premarital tradition is fundamentally understood as a sign of the groom's seriousness, responsibility, and good intentions (MH, personal communication, November 2025). Similarly, IA noted that the various customary stages and symbols remain necessary because they demonstrate that a relationship has been acknowledged and accepted by both families (IA, personal communication, October 2025). These findings suggest that the continuity of symbolic forms in the Malay premarital tradition is not determined solely by a shared understanding of customary philosophy. Rather, it is sustained by the continued capacity of these symbols to clarify the status of a relationship and to generate social recognition for the process leading to marriage (Mohd Zahari et al., 2011; Ningrum & Yoesoef, 2020). In this respect, the persistence of symbolic practice reflects not only cultural continuity but also the enduring relevance of these symbols as mechanisms through which relationships are made legible, acceptable, and socially validated within the community.

The Social Functions of Malay Premarital Tradition in Regulating Relationships Leading to Marriage

The findings indicate that premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community functions not merely as a sequence of procedures leading to marriage but also as social mechanisms for regulating relationships among individuals, families, and the broader community. The stages of *merisik-risik*, *membuka*

mulut, *ngantar tande*, and *ngantar barang* each perform social functions that enable the marriage process to unfold in an orderly, honorable, and socially accepted manner (field notes, June 2025). In this context, premarital tradition cannot be understood simply as ceremonial cultural inheritances; rather, they operate as social devices that connect personal relationships to kinship structures, customary norms, and the religious values that shape the Kendawangan Malay community.

Table 4
Social Functions of Malay Premarital Tradition

Social Function	Description
Establishing kinship relations	Introducing the two families, building communication, and strengthening social ties prior to marriage.
Safeguarding family honor	Placing the relationship between men and women within a socially acceptable and culturally respected framework.
Affirming seriousness and commitment	Demonstrating good intentions, responsibility, and preparedness for marriage.

Source: Compiled by the author, 2025.

One of the most prominent social functions of premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community is the establishment of kinship ties between the families of the prospective bride and groom. This process begins with *merisik-risik*, an initial stage of family introductions, and is gradually reinforced through subsequent phases that foster communication, trust, and social closeness. Within the local understanding, marriage is not viewed simply as the union of two individuals but as a process through which two kin groups enter into a long-term social relationship (EY, personal communication, November 2025; RY, personal communication, November 2025). As IA explained, “*Merisik-risik aims to enable both families to get to know one another and to convey the good intentions of the man’s family to the woman’s family*” (IA, personal communication, October 2025). This finding suggests that premarital tradition functions as mechanisms for constructing social relations that later become the foundation of familial ties after marriage (Ardiansyah & Masrokhin, 2023; Gafar et al., 2019).

Premarital tradition also functions to safeguard the honor (*marwah*) of the prospective bride and groom, as well as their families, by situating the relationship between men and women within a socially and customarily recognized framework. Through *merisik-risik*, *membuka mulut*, and *ngantar tande*, a relationship that initially belongs to the personal sphere is gradually relocated into a social arena known to and supervised by both families. This process allows the relationship to proceed openly and in a clearly directed manner, thereby reducing ambiguity and minimizing the risk of social conflict. HI explained that *merisik* is undertaken to safeguard the honor of the prospective bride and groom while at the same time strengthening family relations (HI, personal communication, November 2025). In this respect, the function of the

tradition lies not only in protecting individual reputation but also in preserving family honor as a central moral value within Malay social life (Kholidah et al., 2025; Yazid et al., 2024).

In addition to establishing kinship ties and safeguarding family honor, premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community also functions to affirm the prospective groom's seriousness and commitment to progressing toward marriage. This seriousness is not conveyed through a single act but is gradually demonstrated throughout the entire ritual sequence—from the initial family visit to the formal proposal, the exchange of rings, and the delivery of gift offerings. Each stage represents a visible intensification of commitment before both families. As HI noted, the community understands *membuka mulut* as a sign that the man comes with sincere intentions (HI, personal communication, November 2025), while IA described *ngantar barang* as evidence of the groom's seriousness and responsibility (IA, personal communication, October 2025). These findings indicate that premarital tradition functions as a social mechanism through which personal intentions are transformed into forms of commitment that are collectively recognized and validated (Schweingruber et al., 2004; Wu & Xu, 2023).

Beyond these three functions, each stage of the premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community also reflects an ongoing integration between Islamic values and customary norms (Nordin et al., 2025). This interconnection is evident in the practice of *merisik-risik*, which is used to verify the status of a prospective spouse; in the etiquette of proposal-making, which emphasizes propriety and respectful conduct; and in the implementation of *ngantar tande* and *ngantar barang*, which considers principles of modesty and the economic capacity of the groom's family (Saiin et al., 2023). In practice, custom and religion are not positioned as competing systems but as mutually reinforcing sources of value in regulating the process toward marriage. This is reflected in MH's explanation that *merisik* is important to determine whether a woman is still in her *iddah* period, while the entire sequence of traditions is understood as a sign of seriousness, responsibility, and good intention on the part of the prospective groom, provided it does not contradict Islamic law (MH, personal communication, November 2025). These findings suggest that the continuity of premarital traditions derives legitimacy not only from inherited custom but also from religious values that provide a moral foundation for these practices (Nordin et al., 2025; Samad, 2023; Tinkong & Mohamad, 2021).

Premarital Tradition as a Mechanism of Social Legitimation in the Malay Community

The findings of this study indicate that premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community functions not merely as a sequence of customary rituals preceding marriage but as a mechanism of social legitimation

through which the personal relationship between prospective spouses is transformed into a relationship recognized by families and the wider community (Soucy, 2014; Sulalah et al., 2022; Yazid et al., 2024). The sequence of *merisik-risik*, *membuka mulut*, *ngantar tande*, and *ngantar barang* operates as a set of interrelated stages that gradually move the relationship between a man and a woman from the private domain into the social sphere. *Merisik-risik* opens an initial channel of communication and enables both families to assess the suitability of the match; *membuka mulut* formalizes the intention to marry through a proposal articulated within the framework of customary etiquette; *ngantar tande* publicly clarifies the social status of the engagement; and *ngantar barang* demonstrates the prospective groom's economic preparedness and sense of responsibility. Through these stages, a relationship is not regarded as socially valid merely because marriage is intended but must first pass through a process that demonstrates seriousness, propriety, and familial consent. Premarital tradition, therefore, does more than ceremonially prepare a marriage; it creates a social space through which the relationship becomes legitimate, honorable, and collectively acceptable (Ardiansyah & Masrokhin, 2023; Gafar et al., 2019).

The study further demonstrates that the symbols embedded in premarital tradition derive their significance not primarily from their material value but from their capacity to communicate status, commitment, and responsibility in forms that are collectively intelligible. For example, *pantun* and *tepak sirih* are not merely aesthetic accessories to the proposal ceremony but serve as mediums that regulate how a proposal is conveyed in a courteous and honorable manner. The ring is not simply an engagement gift but a marker of social transition that publicly signals a woman's entry into a recognized bond. Similarly, *hantaran* does not merely represent the transfer of material goods; it also demonstrates the prospective groom's capacity to fulfill the economic and moral responsibilities associated with married life. The symbolic power of these ritual objects, therefore, lies not in the objects themselves but in their ability to render social relationships visible, legible, and acceptable to both family and community. In this context, customary symbols operate as cultural media that translate seriousness, responsibility, and respect into forms capable of producing social legitimacy (Lokman Hakim & Hashim, 2015; Mior et al., 2024; Salleh, 2014).

These findings also help explain why premarital tradition continues to be maintained, even as certain aspects of their performance have been adjusted in response to modernization, technological change, and shifting patterns of interaction among younger generations. The persistence of this tradition does not necessarily depend on preserving every ritual element in its original form but rather on retaining the social functions embedded within them. For instance, the declining role of the *mak comblang* and the reduced understanding among younger people of the philosophical meanings of ritual symbols do not necessarily indicate the disappearance of the tradition itself (field notes, June 2025). Instead,

they point to a process of cultural selection in which those elements that remain effective in clarifying relationship status, safeguarding family honor, and publicly demonstrating the seriousness of prospective spouses continue to be maintained, while others are simplified or adapted. In this sense, formal change should not be interpreted simply as cultural decline but as evidence of the adaptive resilience of tradition. The durability of Malay premarital traditions lies less in strict adherence to fixed ritual forms than in its continued capacity to function as a mechanism of social legitimation (Ahmadi et al., 2024; Kholidah et al., 2025; Maloko et al., 2024).

Overall, these findings extend existing scholarship on Malay marriage traditions, which has typically emphasized the integration of custom and Islam, the symbolic meanings of rituals, or the transformation of marriage practices under modernization. Previous studies have demonstrated that marriage rituals in Malay and other Muslim societies function to strengthen family relations, express respect, and maintain social harmony, as evidenced in research on *bales nae* among the Sasak, marriage traditions in Koto Balingka, and ritual practices among ethnic communities in Sarawak (Kholidah et al., 2025; Magiman et al., 2025; Yazid et al., 2024). However, the present study suggests that among the Malay community, premarital tradition should be understood not only as cultural expression or customary symbolism but as a staged social process through which legitimacy is gradually produced for the relationship between prospective spouses prior to marriage itself. In this respect, premarital tradition functions as a mediating mechanism linking personal intention to collective recognition, ensuring that marriage is not only ritually prepared but also socially authorized through the interrelated work of kinship involvement, symbolic forms, and customary procedures.

Conclusion

Premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community should not be understood merely as a sequence of customary rituals preceding marriage but as a mechanism of social legitimation through which the personal relationship between a prospective bride and groom is gradually transformed into one collectively recognized by family and community. Through the successive stages of *merisik-risik*, *membuka mulut*, *ngantar tande*, and *ngantar barang*, the path to marriage is structured as an orderly and socially meaningful process. Each stage not only regulates encounters between the two families and clarifies the status of the prospective couple but also affirms the seriousness, responsibility, and commitment of the prospective groom within the framework of Malay customary norms and religious values. At the same time, the symbols embedded in this tradition—such as pantuns and *tepak sirih* (betel sets), rings, and ceremonial gift offerings (*hantaran*)—function as cultural media through which respect, social bonding, financial preparedness, and support for future household

life are communicated. In this sense, premarital tradition within the Kendawangan Malay community operates not simply as cultural heritage or customary symbolism but as a social mechanism that renders relationships leading to marriage legitimate, honorable, and collectively acceptable.

The principal contribution of this article lies in demonstrating that premarital tradition in the Malay community should be understood not only as an expression of the integration of custom and Islam, as a symbolic cultural form, or as a tradition reshaped by modernization, but also as a social process through which legitimacy is produced for interfamily relations before marriage itself. In this respect, the article contributes to scholarship on the Malay community and the Indonesian-Malay world by showing that the persistence of premarital tradition in contemporary communities depends less on preserving ritual form in its entirety than on sustaining its social functions in organizing kinship, safeguarding family honor, and validating marital commitment. This study, however, is limited to a single Malay community in Kendawangan District and draws on a relatively small number of informants; accordingly, its findings cannot be generalized to all Malay communities in Indonesia or Southeast Asia. Future research could, therefore, broaden the comparative scope by examining premarital traditions in other Malay communities or by exploring more closely how generational change, social mobility, and digital communication are reshaping the continuity of premarital tradition and the social legitimation of marriage in contemporary Muslim societies.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all informants before participation. All identifying information was anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

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