

Marriage Customs of the Suluk Community from an Islamic Perspective: A Study in Lahad Datu, Sabah

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i6/25734> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i6/25734

Published Date: 13 June 2025

Abstract

Among Muslim communities, debates frequently arise regarding the relationship between *adat* and *syariah*, often leading to polemics that necessitate further discussion to ensure that the customs being practiced are in accordance with Islamic teachings. This study focuses on the marriage customs of the Suluk community in Lahad Datu, Sabah. A portion of the Suluk population in Lahad Datu continues to preserve and uphold the authenticity of customs inherited from their ancestors, passing them down to the present alpha generation. The objective of this research is to analyse the marriage customs of the Suluk community from the perspective of Islam. In line with this, the study adopts a qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and library research. Several main criteria were applied in the selection of informants, including that informants must be individuals well-versed in Suluk marriage customs and originate from the Suluk ethnic group in Lahad Datu, Sabah. The findings of the study reveal that certain elements within the marriage customs of the Suluk community conflict with Islamic teachings. These include practices such as *malam berinai* ceremonies that involve excessive entertainment, the performance of *mandi adat*, and traditional dances during celebratory events such as engagements and weddings. However, it is also acknowledged that some beliefs and practices within the Suluk community do not contradict Islamic principles.

Keywords: Adat, Islam, Lahad Datu, Marriage, Suluk, Traditional

Introduction

Adat is a way of life inherited from ancestral generations, becoming deeply ingrained in daily living and difficult to abandon Ismail (2012). According to Azman and colleagues (2024), *adat* refers to practices learned from previous generations within a community. Fundamentally, the customs practiced from past to present are influenced by earlier belief systems, particularly animism and Hinduism Azman (2024).

According to Hasmin (2023), the Suluk ethnic group is an indigenous population of the state of Sabah. Based on data from the Department of Statistics in 2010, there were 79,205 individuals of Suluk descent recorded in Sabah. In a study by Mokhtar and colleagues (2022), Lahad Datu was identified as one of the districts with the highest Suluk population, with a total of 10,709 individuals.

Although times have changed and technology continues to advance rapidly, the practice of marriage customs within the Suluk community remains prevalent. The uniqueness of cultural heritage and ancestral traditions is undeniably important and must be preserved as a way of honouring the struggles and legacy of past generations. However, as Muslims, it is essential to carefully evaluate which customs are permissible and which may conflict with Islamic teachings. Therefore, this study discusses several traditional practices of the Suluk ethnic group that are still observed in marriage ceremonies and analyses these customs from an Islamic perspective. In line with this aim, the researcher focuses on three specific practices within Suluk marriage customs: *magpassal* (henna night), *magpaigu* (ritual cleansing), and *mangalay* (entertainment dance during wedding celebrations).

Literature Review

Previous studies have shown that the practice of *adat* (customs) in marriage is not limited solely to the Suluk community. Researchers have also explored the marriage customs of various other ethnic groups. For instance, the study "*Adat Perkahwinan Masyarakat Jawi Peranakan India Islam di Pulau Pinang, Malaysia: Dari Perspektif Islam*" concludes that the Jawi Peranakan Indian Muslim community in Penang continues to be influenced by Hindu beliefs. Elements of *khurafat* (superstition) are still present in their customary practices. Despite these practices conflicting with Islamic teachings, the community continues to uphold traditional taboos passed down from their ancestors.

Another relevant study by Buntung and colleagues (2020) highlights the contradictions between *adat* and *syariah* (Islamic law) among the Murut Tahol community. Their practices include *tunang pengayangan* (fictive engagement), marriage between cousins, and the tradition of *sogit* (a form of compensation or fine). The researchers suggest that such customs should be abandoned when they contradict Islamic teachings. Islam, being a comprehensive and holistic religion, prioritizes the preservation of *syariah*. For example, the practice of fictive engagement clearly opposes Islamic values, as it may lead to *zina* (illicit sexual relations). Islam, therefore, advocates for lawful marriage to manage desires in a permissible manner and to avoid sinful behaviour.

Furthermore, a study by Azman and colleagues (2024) provides important insights into the pre-marriage customs of the Suluk community in Lahad Datu, Sabah. The study focuses on three main pre-marital processes: *pag pasihil* (initial inquiry or scouting), *pag-pangasawa* (formal proposal), and *pag turul taima* (presentation of dowry or gifts). The findings indicate that certain practices observed by the Suluk community during these stages are inconsistent with Islamic principles. One such belief is the avoidance of engagement or marriage ceremonies during the month of *Safar*, based on the fear that doing so may lead to permanent misfortune such as divorce or lifelong suffering.

According to Pullong (2020), it is proposed that customary practices (*adat*) should undergo modifications to prevent society from continuing to engage in *khurafat* (superstitious) practices that contradict Islamic teachings. Similarly, in a study by Salleh and colleagues (2021), it is noted that the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) has established guidelines aimed at educating the public on practices that are inconsistent with Islamic principles, particularly those involving elements of superstition. In line with this, the present researcher seeks to provide a more in-depth exposure to the community, enabling them to critically assess which customary practices conflict with Islamic law and which can be preserved. This is particularly important as, based on the literature reviewed, there is a noticeable gap in research specifically addressing the marriage customs of the Suluk community from an Islamic perspective. Consequently, this study is deemed highly relevant as it aims to reform existing practices to ensure that they are implemented in accordance with *syariah* (Islamic law).

Research Findings and Discussion

In the context of Suluk marriage customs, there are several elements that warrant further discussion and analysis from an Islamic perspective. Figure 1 below provides a summary of key practices and beliefs within the Suluk community that demonstrate contradictions when viewed through the lens of *syariah* (Islamic law).



Figure 1 : Amalan adat perkahwinan masyarakat Suluk

Source: Field Study, 2024

Magpassal (Henna Night)

The highly anticipated event for the bride is the ceremony of *Henna Night*. Uniquely within the Suluk community, this *berinai* ceremony is performed twice: the first occurrence takes place on the night before the *akad nikah* (marriage solemnization), and the second occurs after the completion of the *mandi adat* (traditional bath), but prior to the *akad nikah* event itself. During the *malam berinai* ceremony, *kulintangan* musical instruments are played. According to interviews with Informants 3 and 4, the *kulintangan* performances begin as early as seven days before the commencement of the *akad nikah* ceremony. This practice serves the purpose of notifying the villagers that a wedding ceremony will soon take place in the

village. Furthermore, the *henna night* ceremony functions as a unifying ritual between families, symbolizing happiness and blessings for the bride and groom.

Magpaigu (Traditional Bathing Ceremony)

According to Informant 1, the *Traditional Bathing Ceremony* is conducted early in the morning before the *akad nikah* ceremony. This ritual requires several items, including seven *sarong* cloths, candles, and henna brought by the bride's family. Informant 6 also mentioned that this tradition aims to boost the bride's spirit and enhance the radiance of her appearance throughout the wedding ceremony. The *mandi adat* ceremony is led by elder women who are knowledgeable about Suluk customs. The seven *sarongs* are held by female relatives of the bride, such as cousins or siblings, while the bride is positioned in the center. Water is poured over the bride accompanied by the recitation of *syair* (poetry) and prayers, with the hope that the bride gains courage and overcomes nervousness during the event. Upon completion of this process, the bride blows out a candle, symbolizing that in entering married life, challenges will be faced; the candle represents light and guidance, reinforcing the belief that every problem has a solution. Following the *mandi adat*, the bride then dons the full traditional Suluk bridal attire, such as the *baju busana pengantin* (Suluk bridal dress) as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2 : Busana Pengantin Perempuan Masyarakat Suluk
Sumber : Jabatan Kebudayaan Kesenian Negara Sabah

Subsequently, the bride and groom proceed with the *mamasal* ceremony. The materials required for this ritual include bathing soap, shampoo, comb, toothbrush, powder, razor, hand fan, umbrella, makeup tools, perfume, and henna. All of which are provided by the groom. During the *mamasal* ceremony, the bride is required to wear the henna given by the groom, with the purpose of enhancing the bride's radiance. According to Informant 2, the bride who has completed the preparations and the *mandi adat* process is not allowed to eat beforehand, as it is believed that doing so may diminish the bride's radiance. This restriction is one of the prohibitions that must be observed by the bride. Therefore, the bride is expected to eat together with her partner only after the *akad nikah* ceremony has concluded.

Mangalay (Traditional Dance)

Among the renowned performing arts within the Suluk ethnic group is the *mangalay* dance, which consists of various types according to Suluk tradition. Notable forms include *Mangalay*

Ha Patong and *Mangalay Ha Agong*, with the *Mangalay Daling-Daling* being one of the most favored dances. This dance is typically performed during festive occasions such as engagement ceremonies and weddings. Dancers are required to wear traditional attire and long, curved false nails. The artistry of this dance is demonstrated through intricate movements of the body, shoulders, waist, and specific footwork. During the *mangalay* dance performance, spectators may insert money between the fingers of the dancers as a form of support and to celebrate the vibrancy of the dance. Additionally, the performance is accompanied by *kulintang* musical instruments. The larger the number of dancers, the livelier and more festive the event becomes.

Evaluation from an Islamic Perspective

The Suluk ethnic group regards Islam as the foundation of their communal identity. However, in terms of religious practice, a reassessment is necessary to analyse each custom implemented in daily life. It is important to determine whether these practices align with *shariah* or contradict Islamic teachings. Therefore, the discussion concerning the *malam berinai* ceremony performed by the Suluk community is not considered obligatory nor a fundamental pillar in establishing a marriage. As is widely understood, the essential pillars (*rukun*) of *nikah* (marriage) consist of five elements: the prospective bride and groom, the *wali* (guardian), two witnesses, and the *sighah* (offer and acceptance). Only these five elements are the primary *shariah* requirements. It should be emphasized that the main purpose of marriage is to establish a household characterized by *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* (tranquility, love, and mercy), as stated in Surah Ar-Rum, verse 21.

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ
 Meaning: "And among His signs is that He created for you (O men) mates from among yourselves so that you may find tranquility in them, and He placed between you affection and mercy." (Surah Ar-Rum 30:21)

The implementation of **Magpassal (Henna Night)** is not problematic and depends largely on the intention behind it. If the intention is to strengthen familial bonds and the event is conducted without any distracting or inappropriate entertainment, then it is generally acceptable. However, according to Informant 5, most *malam berinai* ceremonies do not observe proper segregation (*ikhtilat*) between men and women, and often include entertainment that may be considered distracting. Therefore, Islam places great emphasis on maintaining boundaries between men and women, and any event or gathering that causes distraction should be avoided to preserve the well-being of one's faith.

This is in accordance with the words of Allah SWT:

رُيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبُّ الشَّهَوَاتِ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ وَالْبَنِينَ وَالْقَنَاطِيرِ الْمُقَنْطَرَةِ مِنَ الذَّهَبِ وَالْفِضَّةِ وَالْخَيْلِ الْمُسَوَّمَةِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ وَالْأَحْرَابِ
 ذَلِكَ مَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الْمَتَابِ

Meaning:

"Beautified for people is the love of that which they desire—of women and children, wealth amassed in heaps of gold and silver, fine branded horses, cattle, and well-tilled land. These are the comforts of worldly life, but with Allah is the best return (i.e., Paradise)."

(Surah Ali Imran: 14)

Next, regarding the assessment of the *mandi adat* ritual, an issue within the Suluk ethnic group's practice during the *Magpaigu* (traditional bathing) ceremony concerns the recitations performed throughout the process. According to Informant 5, these recitations consist of *salawat* (praises upon the Prophet) and *pamanis* (blessings or poetic prayers) with the hope of enhancing the bride's radiance through the ritual. However, Islam teaches that when one has a wish or need, it should be fulfilled through supplication and performing the *salat sunat hajat* (voluntary prayer for a need), seeking Allah's assistance to ease all matters and grant peace of heart throughout the marriage process. This recommendation is supported by the following hadith.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) narrated:

إِذَا سَأَلْتَ فَاسْأَلِ اللَّهَ، وَإِذَا اسْتَعَنْتَ فَاسْتَعِنْ بِاللَّهِ

Meaning: If you ask, ask from Allah, and if you seek help, seek help from Allah. (Hadith narrated by al-Tirmidhi (2516) in his Sunan. He said: the hadith is hasan sahih).

Lastly, the traditional practice of performing the *mangalay* dance during festive ceremonies is clearly contrary to Islamic teachings. The status and dignity of women in Islam are highly protected, and this dance not only leads to distraction but also encourages women to expose their *aurat* (parts of the body that should be covered). There is a warning stated in the Qur'an regarding this matter.

This is in accordance with the words of Allah SWT:

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوْا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوْا فُرُوْجَهُمْ ذَٰلِكَ أَرَبَّ لَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيْرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُوْنَ وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوْجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِيْنَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا

Meaning: Say (O Muhammad) to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is Well-Acquainted with what they do. (30) And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty and not display their adornment except what is apparent thereof. (Surah An-Nur: 30-31)

The above evidence clearly shows the command from Allah SWT to the Prophet to instruct the believing men to lower their gaze from women, and to avoid looking at what is unlawful for them. In summary, the *mangalay* dance custom is indeed contrary to the rulings of Islamic law (shariah).

Conclusion

The customary marriage practices found within the Suluk ethnic group may be performed as long as they do not contradict Islamic shariah. The uniqueness and cultural variations demonstrated in Suluk customs actually reflect creativity and historical heritage. However, practices such as *malam berinai*, when accompanied by excessive entertainment, may lead to sinful behaviour and should be avoided. Likewise, in the *mandi adat* ritual, any regulations made without foundation in shariah must be prohibited. If the intention is to seek a blessing (*hajaj*), this should be done appropriately to avoid wastefulness and to ensure that supplications are made solely to Allah SWT. Finally, the *mangalay* dance tradition should be avoided because it leads to Allah's displeasure, as the entertainment dance is primarily a form of distracting amusement. Although the Suluk ethnic group is rooted in Islam, there remains

a need for reform in practice to better align customs with shariah and to reject those that deviate from Islamic legal perspectives.

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