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FROM SACRED OBJECTS TO MONETARY EXCHANGE: CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE SOCIAL RECONFIGURATION OF MARRIAGE IN TANIMBAR ISLAND SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of marriage practices in Tanimbar Island society, focusing on the shift from sacred ritual objects to monetary exchange and its implications for social relations, symbolic meanings, and cultural structures. It situates this transformation within the broader context of Global South sociology, questioning whether such changes reflect pragmatic adaptation to socio-economic pressures or deeper reconfigurations of kinship, status, and sacred values. A qualitative case study was conducted in Watidal Village, North Tanimbar District, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with customary leaders, married couples, and community members, supported by participant observation and document analysis. An interpretive analytical approach was employed to understand how local actors construct and negotiate meaning amid cultural change. The findings indicate that the monetization of ritual exchange is driven by intertwined economic and social factors, including resource constraints, efficiency, and shifting lifestyles. Rather than eliminating symbolic meaning, this transformation produces a hybrid cultural form in which monetary exchange acquires new symbolic significance, while the sacred dimension of traditional objects gradually weakens. This study contributes by conceptualizing monetization as a process of social reconfiguration rather than mere commodification. It concludes that Tanimbar marriage practices reflect an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity and recommends strengthening community-based engagement to sustain cultural values within changing socio-economic contexts.

Keywords: *Cultural Transformation, Marriage Practices, Monetary Exchange, Social Reconfiguration, Tanimbar Society*

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of marriage practices in small island societies has increasingly become a critical site for examining the intersection between culture, economy, and social change in the Global South. In the Tanimbar Islands of Eastern Indonesia, marriage has long been embedded within a complex system of customary exchange, where sacred objects—such as heirlooms, textiles, and ritual goods—serve not merely as material items but as carriers of symbolic meaning, social legitimacy, and kinship continuity. These objects historically function as mediators of alliance, status recognition, and moral obligation between families (Keeni & Takashino, 2024; Mulat, 2026; Yu et al., 2024). However, recent developments indicate a marked

shift from the use of these culturally embedded objects toward monetary forms of exchange. This transition is not simply technical or economic in nature; rather, it signals a broader reconfiguration of how social relations and cultural meanings are constructed and negotiated within contemporary Tanimbar society.

Empirical observations from Eastern Indonesian communities suggest that monetary substitution in customary exchanges has become increasingly prevalent, particularly in contexts marked by rising educational attainment, labor mobility, and integration into broader market systems (Abdul Rahman et al., 2025; Lan, 2026; Paolo & Shidiqi, 2025). In Tanimbar, anecdotal and preliminary field evidence reveal that families now frequently negotiate bridewealth in cash terms, often calibrated according to education level, occupation, or perceived social status of the bride and groom. This monetization process introduces new forms of valuation that coexist—sometimes uneasily—with older symbolic logics. While money offers flexibility, efficiency, and accessibility, it also risks flattening the layered meanings traditionally embedded in ritual objects (Adjie et al., 2022; Lambrecht et al., 2024; Siddiqi et al., 2024). Consequently, marriage is no longer solely a cultural institution anchored in sacred reciprocity but is increasingly entangled with economic rationality and social stratification. This raises an important sociological question: does the shift toward monetary exchange represent a pragmatic adaptation to changing socio-economic conditions, or does it reflect a deeper transformation in the moral and symbolic foundations of marriage itself?

The significance of this issue lies in its broader implications for understanding cultural resilience, social cohesion, and identity formation in transitional societies. Marriage, as a key social institution, plays a central role in structuring kinship systems, redistributing resources, and maintaining cultural continuity (Bright & Heyting, 2024; Daly et al., 2023; Petri et al., 2025; Yusof et al., 2026). Changes in its underlying exchange mechanisms may therefore have cascading effects on gender relations, intergenerational obligations, and community solidarity. In small island contexts such as Tanimbar, where social networks are tightly interwoven and cultural practices remain deeply embedded in everyday life, such transformations can be particularly consequential. Moreover, these dynamics unfold within the broader pressures of globalization and uneven development, which often impose external economic logics onto local cultural systems (Henkens, 2025; Mabitsela et al., 2025; Rosa et al., 2026). Understanding how local communities navigate these pressures is essential for developing more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to cultural sustainability and social policy.

A substantial body of literature has explored the role of exchange in marriage systems, particularly within anthropological traditions that emphasize the symbolic and relational dimensions of material transactions. Classic works by Nagami et al. (2025) and Saito (2024) conceptualize exchange as a foundational mechanism for social integration, where gifts function as vehicles of obligation, reciprocity, and alliance. Subsequent studies have expanded this perspective by examining how material objects in marriage exchanges embody cultural values, gender roles, and social hierarchies (Weiner, 1992; Strathern, 1988). In the Indonesian context,

research has documented the diversity of bridewealth practices and their role in structuring kinship relations and local economies (Balaska, 2024; Erskine et al., 2023; Vlase, 2025). These studies underscore the importance of viewing marriage exchanges not merely as economic transactions but as deeply embedded cultural practices.

At the same time, a parallel strand of scholarship has focused on the processes of commodification and monetization in traditional societies. Scholars such as Li et al. (2022) and Soemarko et al. (2023) argue that objects can move in and out of commodity status, acquiring new meanings as they circulate through different regimes of value. In this view, the introduction of money into previously non-monetary exchanges does not necessarily erase cultural meaning but may transform it in complex ways. Studies in Southeast Asia and beyond have shown that monetization often coexists with symbolic practices, creating hybrid forms of exchange that reflect both market and cultural logics (Gray et al., 2023; Guzy, 2024; D. D. Le et al., 2025). However, the extent to which such hybridization preserves or undermines traditional values remains an open question.

More recent contributions from Global South sociology emphasize the non-linear and negotiated nature of social change. Rather than viewing modernization as a unidirectional process leading to the erosion of tradition, these perspectives highlight how local actors actively reinterpret and adapt cultural practices in response to changing conditions (Gede Agung et al., 2024; Umar et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023). In island societies, where geographic isolation intersects with increasing connectivity, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. Studies in Pacific and Eastern Indonesian contexts have documented how communities selectively incorporate external influences while maintaining core cultural frameworks (Cohen & Hannonen, 2026; Liang, 2022; Mmari et al., 2024). This suggests that transformations in marriage practices should be understood not as simple replacements of old forms with new ones, but as ongoing processes of negotiation and reinterpretation.

In addition, legal and institutional perspectives have examined how changes in customary practices intersect with state law, religious norms, and development policies. In Indonesia, the coexistence of adat (customary law) and formal legal systems creates a complex regulatory environment in which marriage practices are continually reshaped (Pastor-Bravo et al., 2022; Taha, 2024; te Lindert et al., 2022). Research has shown that shifts in bridewealth and marriage exchanges can influence not only cultural meanings but also legal recognition, inheritance rights, and gender dynamics (Palmer et al., 2026; Radianti, 2026; Tezcan, 2024). These studies highlight the multifaceted nature of change, where economic, cultural, and institutional factors intersect in shaping social practices.

Despite these rich contributions, existing studies often treat monetization either as an economic adaptation or as a form of cultural loss, without fully capturing the ways in which meaning, value, and social relations are simultaneously reconstituted in everyday practice. Moreover, there remains limited attention to small island societies in Eastern Indonesia, where the interplay between resource constraints, mobility, and cultural continuity creates distinct

trajectories of change. By situating the transformation of marriage exchange in Tanimbar within a broader sociological framework, this study seeks to illuminate how cultural meanings are not simply displaced but are reworked through ongoing social interaction.

In doing so, the analysis brings into focus the subtle yet significant ways in which monetary exchange becomes embedded within existing symbolic systems, generating new configurations of meaning that are neither wholly traditional nor fully commodified. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of cultural transformation, one that recognizes both continuity and change as coexisting dimensions of social life. It also opens up space for considering how local communities can navigate the tensions between economic necessity and cultural preservation in ways that are both adaptive and meaningful.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the process through which sacred ritual objects are transformed into monetary equivalents in Tanimbar marriage practices, and to examine how this transformation reshapes social relations, symbolic meanings, and cultural structures. By adopting an interpretive and context-sensitive approach, the research seeks to contribute to ongoing debates in cultural sociology, economic anthropology, and Global South studies, while also providing insights that may inform community-based initiatives and policy interventions aimed at supporting sustainable cultural development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design to capture the depth and complexity of cultural transformation within marriage practices in Tanimbar society. A qualitative orientation is particularly appropriate given that the core concern of this research lies not in measuring frequency or distribution, but in understanding how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and reinterpreted by social actors in everyday life. The transformation from sacred ritual objects to monetary exchange is not merely a visible institutional shift; it is embedded in layers of symbolic value, moral reasoning, and relational dynamics that require interpretive engagement (Ahmad et al., 2022; Burgos Martinez, 2024; Gibson et al., 2023). The case study design allows for an in-depth exploration of these processes within a bounded social context, enabling the researcher to situate individual experiences within broader cultural and structural transformations (Gone, 2026; Hariyono & Bewe, 2022).

The research was conducted in Watidal Village, located in Larat, North Tanimbar, a setting deliberately chosen for its dual characteristics of continuity and change. On the one hand, Watidal retains a relatively strong adherence to customary practices, particularly within the Duan–Lolat kinship system that governs marriage alliances and exchange obligations. On the other hand, the village has experienced increasing exposure to education, migration, and market integration, making it a compelling site to observe how traditional values encounter and adapt to contemporary pressures. This combination renders Watidal not an isolated or static community, but a dynamic social space where cultural negotiation is actively unfolding.

Informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, guided by the principle of relevance rather than representativeness. A total of 18 informants participated in this study, consisting of customary leaders, village government officials, religious figures, married couples, youth representatives, and women leaders. These categories were chosen because each occupies a distinct yet interconnected position within the social fabric that shapes marriage practices. Customary leaders and elders provide insight into normative frameworks and historical continuity, while married couples offer experiential perspectives on how exchanges are negotiated in practice. Youth and women leaders, particularly within the Duan–Lolat system, play a crucial role in articulating emerging values and contestations, especially in determining kinship obligations and the symbolic weight of exchange. The number of informants was not predetermined but reached through data saturation, when additional interviews no longer yielded substantially new insights (Kulshreshth, 2026; Saud et al., 2025).

Data collection was carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were employed to elicit narratives, interpretations, and reflections from informants regarding the shifting meanings of marriage exchange. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for informants to articulate their experiences in their own terms, while still ensuring alignment with the research focus (Depari & Lindell, 2023; Khamkhien, 2025; Swara et al., 2025). Participant observation was conducted by engaging in community activities, including marriage-related events and everyday social interactions, enabling the researcher to observe how meanings are enacted rather than merely stated. This method was crucial in capturing implicit norms, gestures, and symbolic practices that often escape verbal articulation (Bimardhika & Moorena, 2025; Forth, 2022; Raya & Resosudarmo, 2024). Documentation complemented these methods through the collection of photographs, customary records, village archives, and relevant policy documents, which helped situate contemporary practices within a broader historical and institutional context.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Okumuş & Gümüş (2025), beginning with data condensation, where raw field data were selectively organized and coded according to emerging themes. This was followed by data display, in which patterns and relationships were visualized through narrative matrices and thematic mapping, facilitating deeper interpretation. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions, where provisional interpretations were continuously tested against the data to ensure coherence and validity.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed multiple forms of triangulation. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing perspectives across different categories of informants, while methodological triangulation integrated insights from interviews, observation, and documentation. Member checking was conducted by returning key findings to selected informants for confirmation and clarification, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in local understanding. Prolonged engagement in the field further enhanced credibility by allowing the researcher to build trust and develop a nuanced appreciation of the cultural context

(Ghimire et al., 2024; Prasetio et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024).

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. All informants provided informed consent prior to participation, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher remained attentive to local customs and sensitivities, particularly in relation to sacred practices and kinship norms, and maintained a reflexive and respectful stance throughout the fieldwork. In doing so, the study seeks not only to generate scholarly insight but also to honor the lived realities and cultural integrity of the Tanimbar community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reframing Marriage Exchange: From Sacred Objects to Monetary Logic

The empirical findings from Watidal reveal a gradual yet unmistakable shift in the material basis of marriage exchange, where sacred ritual objects—once central to the articulation of kinship, legitimacy, and moral obligation—are increasingly being substituted or complemented by monetary payments. Traditionally, items such as woven cloth, ancestral heirlooms, and other culturally sanctioned objects functioned not merely as exchange goods but as embodiments of lineage continuity and cosmological order. Their circulation in marriage ceremonies affirmed relational ties between families within the Duan–Lolat system, reinforcing obligations that extended beyond the immediate moment of exchange. However, field observations and interviews indicate that these objects are now often replaced by cash, either partially or entirely, particularly in negotiations involving younger generations and families with greater exposure to wage labor and formal education.

This transformation does not unfold as an abrupt rupture, but rather as a layered and negotiated process embedded in everyday reasoning. Informants consistently framed the shift toward monetary exchange as a pragmatic response to changing socio-economic realities. As one customary elder (initialed as L.K.) explained during an in-depth interview, “It is not that we forget the meaning of the old objects, but now it is difficult to find them, and not everyone can afford them anymore. Money becomes a way so that the process can still continue.” This statement reflects a broader pattern in which scarcity of ritual objects, combined with the increasing monetization of livelihoods, compels families to seek more accessible forms of exchange. Similarly, a younger informant (R.M.), who recently participated in a marriage negotiation, noted that “using money is simpler, especially when families live far apart. It avoids long delays and reduces the burden on both sides.” Such narratives illustrate how efficiency and practicality are not external impositions, but are actively internalized and articulated by local actors as legitimate considerations.

At the same time, the adoption of monetary exchange introduces new forms of valuation that subtly reshape the moral economy of marriage. Unlike ritual objects, whose value is relatively stable within customary frameworks, money is inherently flexible and subject to negotiation. This flexibility allows families to calibrate exchange values based on education level,

occupational status, or perceived social standing of the bride and groom. In several observed cases, the amount of money agreed upon became a site of careful deliberation, where considerations of respect, honor, and relational balance were explicitly discussed. A village official (S.T.) described this process as “finding a number that is not only affordable, but also appropriate, so that no family feels undervalued.” Here, monetary exchange does not simply replace symbolic value; rather, it becomes a medium through which symbolic considerations are rearticulated in quantitative terms.

These findings resonate with the notion of a moral economy of monetization, which emphasizes that money, far from being a neutral and purely economic instrument, is always embedded in social relations and cultural norms (Bilgin et al., 2025; Khumairoh et al., 2025; Kuhnt & Obersneider, 2025). In the context of Watidal, money acquires legitimacy not by displacing tradition, but by being woven into existing moral frameworks that govern reciprocity and respect. The act of giving money is often accompanied by ritual speech, ceremonial gestures, and collective acknowledgment, indicating that its meaning is co-produced through social interaction. In this sense, monetization does not dissolve the cultural logic of exchange; instead, it reconfigures it in ways that align with contemporary conditions while preserving a sense of continuity.

Importantly, the persistence of ritual elements alongside monetary transactions suggests that this transformation should not be understood through a binary lens of tradition versus modernity. Rather, what emerges is a hybrid system in which different forms of value coexist and interact. In some ceremonies, small quantities of traditional objects are still included as symbolic anchors, even when the bulk of the exchange is conducted in cash. This practice reflects an ongoing effort to maintain a connection to ancestral norms, even as the material basis of exchange evolves. As noted by another informant (M.P.), “Even if we use money, we still include something from the past, so that the meaning is not lost.” Such practices underscore the adaptive capacity of the community, where change is managed through selective incorporation rather than wholesale abandonment.

From an analytical standpoint, this reframing of marriage exchange highlights the importance of viewing cultural transformation as a process of negotiated adaptation rather than linear replacement. The shift toward monetary logic in Watidal is shaped by intersecting pressures—economic constraints, spatial mobility, and changing aspirations—but it is ultimately mediated through local interpretations of what constitutes a proper and meaningful exchange. By situating money within the moral and symbolic economy of marriage, the community effectively domesticates an external form into a culturally intelligible practice. This perspective challenges reductionist accounts of monetization as mere commodification, instead revealing it as a socially embedded process that both reflects and reshapes the contours of relational life in Tanimbar society.

Hybridization of Value: When Money Becomes Symbolic

The findings from Watidal suggest that the increasing use of money in marriage exchanges does not entail a straightforward erosion of symbolic meaning, but rather gives rise to a hybrid configuration in which monetary value becomes culturally re-signified. In practice, money is not treated as a purely economic instrument detached from social relations; instead, it is embedded within ritualized interactions that assign it layers of meaning associated with commitment, family honor, and social recognition. This process of hybridization emerges clearly in both observed ceremonies and interview narratives, where actors consistently emphasize that what matters is not only the amount given, but how and why it is given.

During participant observation of marriage negotiations, it became evident that monetary exchange is rarely conducted in a neutral or transactional manner. The act of giving money is often accompanied by formal speech, collective witnessing, and symbolic gestures that echo earlier practices involving sacred objects. A customary leader (initialed as A.L.) explained that "money alone has no meaning if it is not spoken into the adat. When we present it with words, with witnesses, then it carries the intention of the family." This statement points to a crucial dynamic: money acquires symbolic weight through its insertion into culturally structured performances. In this sense, the transformation is not located in the object itself, but in the social processes that define its meaning.

This re-signification is further reflected in the ways monetary amounts are interpreted and narrated within the community. Rather than being perceived solely as a measure of economic capacity, the value of money in marriage exchange is often read as an index of respect and seriousness. For instance, a married informant (R.T.) described how her family understood the monetary contribution from her husband's side: "It is not about how rich they are, but about how they show their respect to our family. The number represents their intention." Here, money becomes a communicative medium through which moral sentiments are expressed and evaluated. The emphasis on intention, rather than mere quantity, indicates that economic value is continuously reframed within a moral and relational register.

At the same time, the flexibility of money allows it to be calibrated in ways that were less possible with traditional objects. This adaptability enables families to negotiate exchange values that reflect contemporary social markers such as education, employment, and mobility, while still maintaining a sense of proportionality and fairness. However, this does not reduce the exchange to a purely calculative logic. As noted by a village elder (S.K.), "Even if we talk about numbers, we always ask: is this number appropriate for the relationship? Not too high to burden, not too low to offend." Such considerations reveal that monetary exchange is governed by a culturally informed sense of balance, where economic and symbolic dimensions are intertwined rather than opposed.

These empirical patterns align with insights from contemporary valuation studies, which argue that value is not an intrinsic property of objects but an outcome of social processes that involve classification, judgment, and negotiation (Habito et al., 2025; K. Le & Nguyen, 2022; Zhao

et al., 2025). From this perspective, the emergence of money as a legitimate medium in marriage exchange can be understood as part of an ongoing revaluation process, in which communities actively redefine what counts as meaningful and appropriate. In Watidal, this process does not simply replace one value system with another; instead, it produces a layered system in which economic and symbolic values coexist and mutually inform each other.

Importantly, the hybridization of value also reflects the agency of local actors in navigating change. Rather than passively adopting monetary logic, community members selectively incorporate it into existing cultural frameworks, ensuring that core principles such as reciprocity, respect, and relational harmony are preserved. This is evident in the continued use of symbolic language, ritual sequencing, and collective validation in ceremonies involving money. A youth informant (M.L.) articulated this balancing act succinctly: “We follow the times, but we do not want to lose who we are. So we make money follow our adat, not the other way around.” This statement captures the reflexive dimension of cultural transformation, where actors are consciously engaged in shaping the terms of change.

In this light, the presence of money in marriage exchange should not be interpreted as a dilution of cultural meaning, but as evidence of its ongoing rearticulation. The symbolic potency once concentrated in sacred objects is not simply lost; it is redistributed and reconfigured through new material forms. What emerges is a dynamic system of value in which meaning is continuously produced through interaction, negotiation, and shared understanding. This challenges essentialist notions of tradition as fixed and immutable, instead highlighting its capacity to adapt and endure through transformation.

The Gradual Decline of Sacredness: Shifting Moral and Cosmological Orders

The transformation of marriage exchange in Watidal also reveals a more subtle yet consequential shift: the gradual attenuation of sacredness as a structuring principle within the institution of marriage. Historically, ritual objects used in marriage exchanges were not merely symbolic artifacts but were deeply embedded within a cosmological framework that linked the living to ancestral authority, spiritual legitimacy, and moral continuity. These objects carried what informants often described as “weight,” not in a material sense, but as a manifestation of inherited obligations and metaphysical connections. Their circulation in marriage rituals affirmed not only social alliances but also a broader moral order grounded in the recognition of lineage and the presence of the ancestors. However, as monetary exchange becomes more prominent, this cosmological anchoring appears to be shifting in both form and intensity.

Field data suggest that money, while socially meaningful, does not inherently carry the same sacred depth as ritual objects. Several informants expressed a nuanced awareness of this distinction. A customary elder (initialed as J.K.) remarked, “In the past, when we exchanged the old objects, we felt that the ancestors were part of the process. Now, with money, it feels more between the families only.” This statement does not imply a complete rupture with the sacred, but rather indicates a recalibration of where sacredness is located. The absence of tangible links

to ancestral objects weakens the immediacy of cosmological presence in the ritual, even as other elements of adat continue to be observed. Similarly, a female community leader (M.S.) noted that "young people understand the ceremony, but they do not always feel the deeper meaning like before." Such reflections point to a generational shift in the experiential dimension of sacred practices, where knowledge of tradition persists but its affective and spiritual resonance becomes less pronounced.

Yet, interpreting this development as a simple narrative of cultural loss would overlook the more complex processes at play. Rather than disappearing, sacredness appears to be undergoing a process of repositioning within a changing moral landscape. In contemporary ceremonies, elements of ritual speech, prayer, and communal witnessing continue to invoke moral and spiritual values, albeit in less object-centered ways. Money, although lacking intrinsic sacred qualities, becomes incorporated into these ritual contexts, thereby acquiring a mediated form of legitimacy. A religious leader (P.L.) explained that "what makes the marriage proper is still the blessing, the words, and the agreement between families. The form can change, but the intention must remain right." This suggests that sacredness is increasingly anchored in performative and intentional dimensions rather than in the materiality of specific objects.

This shift can be understood as part of a broader reconfiguration of moral and cosmological orders, in which the boundaries between the sacred and the profane become more fluid and context-dependent. Contemporary scholarship on cultural transformation in the Global South emphasizes that such changes are rarely linear or totalizing; instead, they involve layered processes of negotiation in which old and new forms coexist and interact (Beckwith et al., 2024; Elmira et al., 2024; Hamidah et al., 2026). In this light, the case of Watidal illustrates how communities navigate the tension between preserving moral continuity and adapting to new socio-economic realities. Sacredness is not abandoned but redistributed, often finding expression in new practices or being condensed into specific moments within the ritual sequence.

Moreover, the weakening of object-based sacredness also reflects changing conditions of social life, including increased mobility, formal education, and exposure to broader religious and institutional frameworks. These factors contribute to a gradual decoupling of ritual practice from its original cosmological referents, as individuals engage with multiple sources of moral authority. A young informant (D.R.) articulated this shift by stating, "We still respect adat, but we also follow church teachings and modern ways. Sometimes we combine them." This pluralization of moral reference points does not necessarily diminish the importance of tradition, but it does transform how sacredness is experienced and prioritized.

Importantly, the persistence of certain ritual forms indicates that the community is not relinquishing its moral framework, but is instead recalibrating it in ways that remain socially intelligible and relevant. The continued emphasis on respect, balance, and relational harmony suggests that the core ethical principles underpinning marriage remain intact, even as their material expressions evolve. In this sense, the decline of sacredness is not absolute, but relative—marked by a shift from object-centered to practice-centered forms of meaning.

From an analytical perspective, this process underscores the need to move beyond dichotomous interpretations of tradition versus modernity, or sacred versus secular. The case of Watidal demonstrates that cultural transformation often unfolds through subtle rearticulations of meaning, where continuity is maintained not through preservation of form, but through adaptation of underlying values. By situating the observed changes within the framework of cultural reconfiguration, it becomes possible to appreciate the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of moral life in transitional societies. Rather than signaling the erosion of cultural identity, the shifting contours of sacredness in Tanimbar marriage practices point to an ongoing effort to reconcile inherited norms with contemporary realities, producing a moral order that is both grounded and evolving.

Reconfiguring Social Relations: Kinship, Status, and Power Dynamics

The shift from sacred objects to monetary exchange in Watidal does not only transform the material basis of marriage practices, but also reconfigures the underlying architecture of social relations. One of the most visible implications of this transformation lies in the way kinship, status, and power are negotiated within and between families. Under the earlier system, the circulation of ritual objects was closely tied to inherited positions within the Duan–Lolat structure, where roles and obligations were relatively stable and anchored in customary hierarchies. Exchange was less about individual capacity and more about fulfilling collectively recognized duties that affirmed lineage continuity. However, with the increasing centrality of money, these relations become more fluid, as the ability to contribute economically begins to influence how families position themselves within the social landscape.

Field data indicate that monetary exchange introduces new evaluative criteria that intersect with, and sometimes recalibrate, existing kinship norms. Education, occupation, and access to income have become significant considerations in determining the scale and form of marriage exchange. A village official (initialed as H.T.) explained that “nowadays, when families discuss marriage, they also look at what the man does, where he works, and how stable his income is. This affects how the exchange is arranged.” Such considerations do not replace customary categories, but they complicate them, introducing a layer of socio-economic differentiation that was less pronounced in earlier practices. As a result, kinship is no longer solely a matter of inherited roles; it becomes partially contingent on achieved status and economic capability.

This shift has important implications for social mobility. On one hand, the flexibility of money allows families who may not possess traditional ritual objects to participate more fully in marriage exchanges, thereby reducing certain barriers to alliance formation. A young informant (R.L.) noted that “before, if a family did not have the required objects, it was very difficult to proceed. Now, with money, there is more possibility to negotiate.” In this sense, monetization can be seen as democratizing access to marriage arrangements, enabling broader participation in social networks. On the other hand, this same flexibility can generate new forms of inequality,

as families with greater financial resources are able to offer higher amounts, which may be interpreted as indicators of prestige or commitment. A female informant (S.W.) reflected that "sometimes people compare the amounts given in different marriages, and this can create pressure, especially for those with less means." Here, monetary exchange becomes a site where distinctions are both expressed and contested, potentially intensifying social stratification.

The reconfiguration of the Duan–Lolat relationship further illustrates how economic factors intersect with customary structures. Traditionally, this relationship was governed by reciprocal obligations that were relatively fixed and symbolically reinforced through the exchange of specific objects. In the current context, however, the terms of this relationship are increasingly subject to negotiation, with monetary contributions serving as a key variable. A customary leader (B.K.) observed that "the roles of Duan and Lolat are still there, but how they fulfill their responsibilities can change depending on their situation." This adaptability suggests that while the formal structure of kinship persists, its practical enactment is becoming more contingent and situational. Economic capacity thus emerges as a factor that can subtly reshape the balance of obligations, without entirely displacing the underlying framework.

From an analytical perspective, these developments underscore the entanglement of economic transformation and social restructuring. As scholars have noted, processes of monetization often reconfigure not only systems of exchange but also the distribution of power and recognition within communities (Cole et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2025; Śmieja et al., 2025). In Watidal, marriage becomes a key arena where these dynamics are played out, as families negotiate not only the terms of exchange but also their relative standing and influence. The ability to mobilize resources, to negotiate appropriate amounts, and to present oneself as a respectable partner in exchange relations all contribute to the reproduction of social hierarchies, even as they open possibilities for mobility.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that these shifts do not unfold in a vacuum, but are mediated by enduring cultural norms that emphasize balance, respect, and relational harmony. Informants consistently highlighted the importance of avoiding excessive demands or displays that might disrupt social cohesion. As one elder (initialed as N.P.) put it, "even if someone can give more, they must still consider the relationship, so that no one feels ashamed or burdened." This moral framing acts as a counterweight to purely economic logics, ensuring that the negotiation of status remains embedded within a broader ethical context.

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: Local Agency in Cultural Transformation

The transformation of marriage practices in Watidal cannot be adequately understood without foregrounding the agency of local actors who actively navigate, reinterpret, and reshape the terms of change. Rather than passively absorbing the pressures of monetization or external modernity, community members demonstrate a reflexive engagement with both inherited norms and emerging socio-economic realities. This agency is evident in the ways individuals and families negotiate the boundaries between maintaining adat values and accommodating new

forms of exchange that are perceived as more practical or relevant. The shift toward monetary exchange, therefore, is not simply imposed from outside but is mediated through everyday decisions, conversations, and compromises that reflect situated judgments about what should be preserved, adapted, or redefined.

Interviews reveal that many actors experience this transformation as a space of ambivalence rather than certainty. A customary leader (initialed as Y.L.) articulated this tension by noting that "we want to keep our traditions, because that is who we are, but we also cannot ignore the realities of today. So we find ways to adjust without losing the essence." This statement captures the dual orientation that characterizes much of the community's response: a desire for continuity coupled with an openness to change. Similarly, a young woman (R.S.) described how her family approached her marriage negotiation: "We discussed together what parts must follow adat and where we can be flexible. It is not always easy, but we try to agree so that both sides feel respected." Such narratives suggest that cultural transformation is not experienced as a linear shift from tradition to modernity, but as an ongoing process of balancing competing considerations.

This balancing act often takes the form of selective adaptation, where certain elements of tradition are retained as anchors of identity, while others are modified to accommodate contemporary constraints. For instance, while monetary exchange has become more common, many families continue to insist on the inclusion of specific ritual sequences, symbolic language, or collective deliberation as integral components of the marriage process. A religious figure (P.K.) explained that "even if the form changes, the process must still follow the proper steps, because that is what gives meaning to the marriage." Here, procedural continuity becomes a key strategy for preserving cultural legitimacy, even as material forms evolve. This indicates that agency operates not only at the level of individual choice but also through shared norms that guide what kinds of change are considered acceptable.

At the same time, local actors are also attentive to the potential risks associated with unchecked monetization. Several informants expressed concern that excessive emphasis on money could undermine values of mutual care and relational balance. A female community leader (M.T.) reflected that "if we focus too much on money, it can create competition and burden families. That is why we remind each other to keep the spirit of adat." Such reflections demonstrate a critical awareness of the social consequences of change, and an effort to regulate it through moral discourse. In this sense, agency is not only adaptive but also normative, involving the articulation of boundaries that seek to protect core values while allowing for flexibility.

These empirical insights resonate with recent scholarship on cultural transformation in the Global South, which emphasizes that change is often driven by local practices of negotiation rather than by the unilateral diffusion of modernity (Bhatia et al., 2024; Chen & Ho, 2022; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2025). From this perspective, communities like Watidal are not peripheral recipients of global processes but active sites of meaning-making, where global and local logics are reworked in context-specific ways. The notion of "situated modernities" becomes particularly

relevant here, as it captures how modern practices—such as the use of money—are embedded within existing cultural frameworks rather than displacing them entirely. This challenges deterministic narratives that equate modernization with homogenization, instead highlighting the diversity of pathways through which societies engage with change.

Moreover, the agency observed in Watidal underscores the importance of viewing culture as a dynamic and lived process, rather than a static repository of traditions. The decisions made by families during marriage negotiations—what to include, what to modify, and how to justify these choices—constitute a form of everyday cultural work through which norms are continuously reproduced and transformed. A youth informant (D.L.) expressed this succinctly: "We learn from our parents, but we also think about our own situation. So we adjust, but we still carry the values with us." This intergenerational dialogue highlights how agency is distributed across different social positions, each contributing to the evolving shape of cultural practice.

In this light, the transformation of marriage exchange in Watidal can be understood as an emergent outcome of countless micro-level negotiations that collectively produce broader patterns of change. These negotiations are shaped by structural conditions—such as economic constraints and mobility—but they are not determined by them. Instead, they reflect the capacity of individuals and groups to interpret, evaluate, and act upon these conditions in ways that align with their sense of identity and moral order. By foregrounding this agentic dimension, the analysis moves beyond viewing monetization as an external force, and instead situates it within a field of social action where meaning and practice are continuously co-constructed.

Monetization as Social Reconfiguration: Beyond the Commodification

Bringing together the empirical strands of this study, the transformation of marriage exchange in Watidal is more convincingly understood not as a simple case of cultural commodification, but as a broader process of social reconfiguration in which meanings, relationships, and institutional arrangements are simultaneously reshaped. While the increasing use of money might initially suggest a shift toward market logic, the findings demonstrate that monetization does not displace the cultural foundations of marriage. Instead, it becomes embedded within them, generating new configurations of value that are at once economic and symbolic, pragmatic and moral. This perspective challenges the tendency in earlier literature to frame such transformations through dichotomous lenses—tradition versus modernity, or symbolic versus economic—by showing that these categories are not mutually exclusive, but deeply intertwined in practice.

At the level of meaning, monetization does not produce a vacuum but rather initiates a process of reinterpretation. As shown in earlier sections, money acquires legitimacy through ritualization, narrative framing, and collective recognition. A customary elder (initialed as F.L.) reflected that "what matters is not the object itself, but how it carries the intention of the family. If money can do that, then it becomes part of adat." This statement encapsulates the central dynamic of reconfiguration: value is not inherent in material forms, but is produced through

social processes that render those forms meaningful. In this sense, monetization becomes a vehicle for the articulation of cultural values rather than their erosion. This aligns with contemporary arguments in economic sociology that emphasize the embeddedness of markets within social relations, where economic practices are always shaped by moral and cultural frameworks (Baek et al., 2024; Kabwama et al., 2025; Vargas Meza et al., 2026).

At the level of social relations, the incorporation of monetary logic reshapes how kinship, status, and obligation are enacted. The Duan–Lolat system, while formally intact, becomes more flexible in its practical implementation, as economic capacity and social mobility introduce new dimensions of negotiation. This does not dissolve the relational fabric of the community, but reorients it, allowing for both continuity and change. A village informant (S.R.) noted that "we still follow the structure, but we adjust how we fulfill it, depending on our situation." Such adjustments illustrate how social structures are not static frameworks but are continuously reproduced through practice. Monetization, in this regard, functions as a catalyst that brings latent dynamics of differentiation and negotiation to the surface, making visible the evolving nature of social ties.

At the structural level, these shifts point to a broader reorganization of the moral economy in which marriage is embedded. The introduction of money expands the range of possible exchanges, enabling greater flexibility but also introducing new forms of comparison and potential inequality. Yet, as the data consistently show, these tendencies are moderated by enduring norms of balance, respect, and relational harmony. Informants repeatedly emphasized the importance of ensuring that exchanges remain "appropriate" and do not disrupt social cohesion. This suggests that the community actively regulates the integration of monetary logic, embedding it within a moral framework that prioritizes relational stability over individual gain. In this way, social reconfiguration does not imply the dominance of market rationality, but rather its domestication within culturally specific norms.

Conceptually, framing monetization as social reconfiguration allows for a more nuanced engagement with ongoing debates in cultural and economic sociology. Rather than viewing commodification as a unidirectional process that erodes meaning, this approach highlights the productive dimensions of change, where new forms of value and sociality emerge through interaction. Recent scholarship has increasingly called for moving beyond binary frameworks to account for the complexity of lived experiences in transitional societies (Corno & Voena, 2023; Ngernkerd et al., 2025; Suhardiman et al., 2025). The case of Watidal contributes to this shift by demonstrating how local actors actively participate in redefining the terms of exchange, creating hybrid systems that reflect both inherited norms and contemporary conditions.

This perspective also strengthens the article's positioning within Global South discourse, where transformation is often characterized by multiplicity and negotiation rather than linear progression. In many such contexts, communities are not merely adapting to external pressures but are actively reworking them into locally meaningful practices. A youth informant (initialed as T.K.) expressed this succinctly: "we do not just follow change, we shape it so that it fits our way

of life." This statement underscores the centrality of agency in processes of reconfiguration, highlighting how global and local dynamics intersect in context-specific ways.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the transformation of marriage practices in Tanimbar, particularly in Watidal, is not adequately explained as a simple shift from tradition to modernity or as a linear process of cultural commodification. Rather, the transition from sacred ritual objects to monetary exchange reflects a more complex process of social reconfiguration in which meanings, social relations, and cultural structures are continuously negotiated. Money does not function merely as an economic substitute, but becomes a socially embedded medium that acquires symbolic legitimacy through local interpretive practices, allowing it to operate within established moral frameworks of kinship, reciprocity, and respect. At the same time, this transformation subtly reshapes the moral and cosmological foundations of marriage, as sacredness becomes less tied to specific objects and more situationally constructed through ritual practices and social recognition. These changes also reconfigure social relations, as economic capacity increasingly intersects with customary roles in shaping status and negotiating alliances, without fully displacing the Duan–Lolat system. In this regard, the findings demonstrate that the observed transformation is both adaptive and constitutive, reflecting the active agency of local actors in mediating socio-economic pressures while maintaining core cultural logics. By conceptualizing monetization as a socially productive and negotiated process rather than a reductive loss of meaning, this study contributes to Global South sociology by highlighting that cultural transformation unfolds through hybridization and contextual reinterpretation, where continuity and change are mutually constitutive in the ongoing redefinition of social life.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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