

# The Bride Wealth of the Ambai Serui Tribe Marriage: A Christian Faith View

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## Abstract

A bride wealth is a package of cultural items and money given to the bride and her family by the groom family as a prerequisite for a formal wedding. Bride wealth practice is ubiquitous, increasingly expensive and creates various marriage related personal and social problems. The objective of this study is to describe the process of determination, material elements, delivery and cultural meanings of bride wealth in the Ambai tribe traditional wedding. The study was conducted using autoethnography methodology supported with in-depth interviews with two emic resource persons, and documentary, photos and videos as secondary sources of data and information. The study shows that in the Ambai tribe tradition, the bride wealth is a prerogative request of the bride nuclear family but it goes through a collective negotiation process that makes it remain reasonable and acceptable to all parties. The bride wealth related processions strengthen the social bonding and the materials reflect indigenous wisdom of the Ambai tribe. Christian education on bride wealth is expected to strengthen the existing culture. Christian education should be able to maintain indigenous culture without in conflict with the principles of the Christian faith.

**Keywords:** *Bride Wealth, Ambai Serui, Autoethnography, Semiotics, Christian Faith.*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Culture is about the way people live. Culture is essentially the values that emerge from interaction between individuals. These values are recognised directly or indirectly as time passes in the interaction. Sometimes, these values occur in an individual's subconscious and are passed on to the next generation (Anwar & Cangara, 2016). Likewise, the Ambai people remain adhere to their culture and tradition. A tradition that is still carried out today, for example, is "Aira," which is a sign of gratitude to someone who is returning from overseas for the first time. They are characterised by flushing or washing the face with water from one antique dish, complemented with sago wrap and fruits<sup>1</sup>. Other traditions are haircuts, ear stabs, ankle bracelet removal, bride wealth in wedding, death, and release of grief.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, researchers will discuss bride wealth payments. In this paper, researchers will discuss bride wealth delivery to the bride and her families by the groom and his families in an Ambai wedding ritual.

There are many phases in human live cycle, one of which is marriage, that are celebrated with rituals. It may not be all people agree with the need for cultural rite, because people have choices and priorities in life. Those who choose to get married

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Waromi, the resource person of this study. Interview (Jayapura: October 9),2023, 6.53 p.m.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Fonataba, the resource person of this study, Interview (Jayapura, October 28),2023, 7.40 p.m.

will arrive at this phase, a critical phase that must be passed. Marriage is generally one of the significant and essential events in a person's life history. Therefore, such an important event will not be missed by a person as they go through the events of daily life. The wedding event is indeed celebrated with ceremonies based on noble and sacred culture (Pratama & Wahyuningsih 2018). Marriage is unique, every tribe and nation must have different wedding traditions and cultures. Indah et al. (2013) reported that people of Sosiri village, as an example, have a tradition that before the bride and groom are married, there is a custom called the stone axe tradition (*tomako*). The common tradition of this community is bride wealth payments, and not all communities are required to use beads and stone axes (*tomako*). But the chieftain's son must use beads and stone axes (*tomako*). The elements of a wedding ritual generally vary by social status.

One of the most famous Ambai cultures is the bride wealth wage culture or *esu wiwing* among the Ambai people (Embran, 2021). Song lyrics are famous for bride wealth culture, "...piring gantung, motor johnson, tambah lagi dozer satu" (namely hanging plates, Jhonson motorcycles, and one dozer. Ambai traditional bride wealth is one of the essential components in Ambai traditional marriage. The Ambai's traditional bride wealth consists of various goods, ranging from animal valuables to services. Ambai Serui tribe adheres to a patriarchal culture, father's family name (*Keret*) is inherited as the family name of his children.<sup>3</sup> Instead of dowry that is paid by the bride family, the primary marriage payment in Ambai tribe tradition is bride wealth that is delivered to the bride family by the groom family. The value of Ambai's traditional bride wealth varies, depending on the social and economic status of the groom's family. However, in general, the traditional Ambai bride wealth is among the most expensive compared to other tribes in Papua (Suarjana, 2017). Nevertheless, we fail to find any scientific research literature on the Ambai is bride wealth. We may say that this article is an initial exploratory review that would trigger many more comprehensive research in the future.

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Papua is one of the major islands in Indonesia, consisting of many tribes and languages. According Widodo (2022), there are 307 regional languages in the Land of Papua This number is based on research conducted by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Kaligo, 2022). Papua is a province of Indonesia located on the island of western New Guinea. Papua is also often referred to as West Papua because Papua can refer to the entire island of New Guinea, including the eastern half of neighbouring countries, East New Guinea or Papua New Guinea. West Papua is the preferred name for nationalists who want to secede from Indonesia and form their own state. This province used to be known as West Irian from 1969 to 1973 The name was later changed to Irian Jaya by Suharto when inaugurating the Freeport copper and gold mine, which remained in official use until 2002. The name of this province was

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<sup>3</sup> Fonataba, Interview (Jayapura, October 28),2023, 7.40 p.m.

changed to Papua following Law Number 21 of 2001 Papua Special Autonomy. During the Dutch colonial era, this area was called Dutch New Guinea (Mery & Dewi, 2019).

The Ambai tribe inhabits the island of Ambai, located south of Yapen island, Papua, off the coast Sereui city, the capital of Yapen regency. The total population is around 7500 people spread across ten villages. Their language belongs to the Austronesian language family and is divided into several dialects, such as Wadapi, Manawi, and Rondaway (Hidayah, 2015). According to Embram (2021), the original Ambai people belong to Melanesia ethnic group that include indigenous people of Fiji and Vanuatu. The word *ambai* was derived from *embai* that in local language means *moon*. The Ambai people claim that they are the moon tribe that is the light for the Ambai island. The Ambai people were first encountered by a Spaniard expedition lead by Alvara de Swedra Ceron in 1528.

The Ambai people build the houses above the sea level along the seashore. Residency is clustered by kin (*keret*). The main staple is sago. Sago trees grow very well in coastal areas. Their livelihood is very much dependent on fishery. Canoe or boat is an essential basic need for Ambai people for its role both for transportation, fishing and other livelihood activities. For Ambai people boat is livelihood symbol (Embram, 2021). We may say that the Ambai indigenous culture, including wedding ritual, is maritime related. The Ambai highly respect their ancestors' culture (Embram, 2021). The indigenous religion of the Ambai tribe is animism that believe in deities and ancestors' spirits. The gospel started spread out in the Yapen surrounding island in 1912-1918 (Infomuky, 2023). Presently, the majority of the Ambai people are Christians.

### **C. METHOD**

The study used the focused ethnography methodology (Abraham & Simatupang, 2023). While the traditional ethnography is about describing and understanding culture of a particular society in its natural setting in macro perspective (Roper & Shapira, 2020), the focused ethnography (Higinbottom) or mini ethnography (Fusch et al. 2017) explore a particular culture element such as bride wealth in the Ambai ethnic group in this case. Ethnography is basically observing and people's behavior in their own environments so you can obtain a holistic understanding of their world, one that you can intuit on a deeply personal level and then describing it in a systematic report Nova (2014). In the study, the ethnography inquiry was conducted by SI, the first author of this paper. She is a member of the Ambai ethnic group that makes her proper to take the role emic perspective of the Ambai marriage cultures. PS, the co-author of this paper, is a member of Batak ethnic group in other island of Indonesia, took the role of etic perspective. The study also used documentary, photos and videos as secondary sources of data and information. As a way of thrust worthiness enhancement, triangulation was conducted through in-depth interviews with Mr. Jan Waromi and Mr. Edward Fonataba, two prominent knowledgeable leaders of the Ambai community.

## D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The Wedding Processions

Payment of bride wealth, according to Ambai tribal custom, is also called *Ra rirau*.<sup>4</sup> The event of *Ra rirau*, or bride wealth payment, is one of a series of significant Ambai wedding ceremonies. Bride wealth is an integral part of Ambai culture. The son and biological parents prepare bride wealth. This shows the ability of the man to enter new households. Bride wealth shows the ability of the man to support his wife and children in the future. Ambai Bride wealth Payment: The man appreciates the woman's parents who have supported and raised the daughter into a mature girl.<sup>5</sup> Fonataba stated that the man's parents had been preparing treasures in the form of plates since the boys were young. The bride wealth also states the position/position/rank of the man proposing to the woman. This event is usually done after or before the wedding. The point is that there is no clear stipulation on when the bride wealth is delivered. Customarily and culturally, the purpose of bride wealth payment is that the man claims responsibility for providing for or being responsible for the life of the bride to be.

At the time of delivery of the bride wealth, the group will walk to the woman's house. At the forefront are uncle (*Om*) and aunt (*Tanta*) from the man's side. In Ambai tradition, the mother's brother or uncle (*Om*) must be cared for well because the uncle plays an essential role. There is a saying: if a child misbehaves, then people will say: this is probably because he has not made a custom ear stab for him. *Om* from the mother's family has the right to reprimand and advise the children. Therefore, during the bride wealth delivery (*Mas Kawin*), *Om* and *Tanta* will stand in front of the group at the woman's family home.

Several steps must be passed before and after the bride wealth payment according to the Ambai Serui tradition. The first step is preparation of both families. The men's side will come to the woman's side and declare their intention of coming. At this stage, they usually bring a large plate and some money. In this first stage, the woman's side has not yet answered, and the man's side promises to come at the appointed time to hear the decision from the woman's side. It used to happen more often that the girl to be proposed to be a *maneta*. *Maneta* is a girl from a family of a mother or father. According to Jan, actually, in terms of *maneta*, it cannot be negotiated/asked because the *maneta* is part of the family, so they do not need negotiation anymore; it is bound by tradition. (Waromi, n.d.). In the second stage, the man's family came to hear the decision of the woman and her family. Right after this, the man's family will come again to ask for the woman, and the woman's side is allowed to propose the amount of bride wealth requested to the man's side. This step is called *Dambeduari*, meaning that the audience knows that the girl has been engaged. (omi, n.d.)

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<sup>4</sup> Waromi, "Interview," n.d.

<sup>5</sup> Waromi, "Interview," n.d.

In the third step, the man will gather his family. The family that gathers is from the father's side of the family and the mother's side of the family. They will collect the bride wealth requested by the woman. A time will be determined to collect the bride wealth. All the amount of goods and money given must be even and will be divided in half, namely for the family of the father and mother on the woman's side. In addition, when the man's family comes to the woman's house, there is an event: "*ketuk pintu*." The man's family representative will knock on the door of the woman's family house. They will greet like a rhyme with representatives of the woman's family so that the woman's family opens the door and accepts the man's family to enter the house. After the door was opened, the man's family gave a plate and money to the representative of the woman's family who opened the door, and also gave the plate and "*uang susu*" (token money for the mother's breast feeding) to the biological mother of the woman. Here is an example of a sentence in *Anuai* that at the time of knocking on the door: *Irape Ira Manina Maninao, Irana sumoi kaiwo arepi iramanina* (I came.... as the aunt (Tanta) of....). While the song was being sung, the man's spokesperson conveyed the heart "the intention of the arrival." I asked the woman what the purpose of the arrival of the man and his family was, then answered with the words: I want to take *Andori Wiaing / Jambu Ambai*. Then there are variations of the poem delivered by the spokesperson and finally, "yes" by the woman. After the woman's family opens the house door, the man's family can meet the woman. As a sign of agreement, a plate and other items are handed over as a sign that the woman accepts the man and his family and will proceed with the wedding plan.<sup>6</sup>

In the fourth step, the man and his family will return to the woman and her family. Both families will plan the right time to complete the request in this meeting. Payment of bride wealth will be made after or before the wedding. The fifth step is the engagement. At the time of the engagement or pre-marriage, a small part of the property is given. This event also informs the public that the woman has been engaged, and no one can take her away. There is no ring as a sign of the engagement, only a ceremonial event where the family of the man and woman are present to witness. After the engagement and all of the traditions, the woman can freely come to help in the man's house.

The sixth step is the formal wedding. The men's and women's families would gather at each other's family homes and pray together before going to church. Before the Ambai people knew Christianity, the man and his family would come to the woman's house to hand over the bride wealth, and after the event, the woman would follow her husband. This is called "*nikah adat*". After the Ambai people learned the gospel, they performed a marriage blessing in the church. After the blessing of marriage, the bride is brought by the groom (her husband).

In the seventh step, after the wedding ceremony and bride wealth are given to the woman, the woman's family will buy and collect kitchen or household utensils. Two or three days are needed for the collection of such kitchen utensils. In the past,

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<sup>6</sup> Waromi, Interview (Wednesday, November 1, 2023), 10.59 p.m.

kitchen utensils were wooden cooking utensils; as time passed, the household appliances collected were diverse. Nowadays, the woman's family will buy rice cookers, washing machines, gas stoves, refrigerators, etc. The delivery of kitchen utensils means that the female family prepares their child to be a diligent wife who performs the duties of a wife and mother in her household and uses her kitchen utensils, does not use or borrow from the kitchen of the in-laws or the kitchen of another family (brother or sister-in-law). In the eighth step, the woman's family delivers kitchen utensils to the place where the new family lives. In this event, the woman's family again meets the man's family. There would be a banquet together, which was prepared according to the agreement of both sides of the family.

## 2. The Materials and Meanings of the Bride Wealth

There are seven materials of the Ambai bride wealth basic package.<sup>7</sup> The first is a large porcelain called *kapai rerawa* or *ben-bepon* (the prime dish, *ben* means dish, *bepon* means prime). *Ben-bepon* also means respect and brotherhood (Fairyo, 2015). It is an antique/old, rare and high value large platter called with diameter 50 cm and height 7 cm. In the past, it was of China origin that made it very rare and difficult to find. Presently, *ben-bepon* can be obtained in free markets in various choice of prices.

The second artefact is *mole-mole*, that is a large porcelain storage jar. *Mole-mole* is usually used to store wet sago, the main staple of the Ambai people, for a long time. The indigenous people believed that a large porcelain jar symbolize a woman to get pregnant, the porcelain would be used a dish and a porcelain cup for drinking medicine during the pregnancy (Suroso, 2018). In the past, the *Mole-mole* was an original China made porcelain storage jar that was very rare and expensive. Presently, *mole-mole* can be procured from free markets in various choice of prices.

The third artefact of the bride wealth is cash as token for mother's breast food that is called *Bai inang ne ui dunung fo* in Ambai language or *Air susu ibu* in Indonesian language. This token is a reflection of the Ambai people of their respect and gratitude that sacrifices to take care of their children with sincere love starting from pregnancy, breast feeding, growing to adulthood and teaching wisdom in their whole life long.

The fourth artefact is motor boat (engine), commonly called *Motor Johnson*, a brand name of motorboat engine, if the bride's parents work as fishermen). Boats are essential for livelihood activities either fishing or land-based farming. It should be noted that *Johnson* is the brand name of a motorboat engine brand name originating from Australia. Presently, there some other motorboat engine brand names, such as *Yamaha*, available with various prices in free markets in Ambai islands. Again, the bride wealth is flexible, constantly adjusts to the reality of contextual dynamics.

The fifth bride wealth material is cash money (*Ra rirau*). The total sum of the money is divided in two halves, a half for each of the bride mother's and father's kindreds. Mr. Jan Waromi, a resource person of this study, explained that the total

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<sup>7</sup> Waromi, Interview (Thursday, October 19, 2023), 06.00 p.m.

amount of the Ra rirau is adjustable according financial condition of the groom. It should not be too a constraint for an Ambai gentleman to get married.

The sixth bride wealth material is the Ambai lady indigenous accessories that include waist belt beads (*Sireu*) and upper arm bracelet of either stone (*Ampa*) or of sea snail shell (*Paseda*). Again, there are a wide range of material alternatives to choose for this bride wealth material. It is all up to the groom sincerity and financial affordability.

### **3. Theological Reflection**

In the perspective of the Christian faith, marriage is the union that God Himself established in the Book of Genesis. God Himself initiated Adam and Eve to be bound by a marriage covenant involving one man and one woman (Pardede, 2019). Marriage is sacred and will be well prepared by the candidate and their family. It is remembered that marriage is once in a lifetime according to the teachings of the Christian faith, and in Christianity, there is no divorce. Christians universally regard Christian marriage as something sacred, an institution established and ordained by God (Embugushiki, 2010). In a Christian marriage, the Bible should guide Christian family life. Christian authority is the Word of God, the written and Living Word.

The husband is the head of the family and must love the wife. In a Christian marriage, each family member is to love one another as Jesus loved man. Unconditional love is a gift and includes being accepted and forgiven. God's grace was demonstrated in the incarnation. Christ coming in human form makes our forgiveness possible. Because parents can count on their love and acceptance, children can trust their parents to love and direct them. (Anthony, 2012) Culture is a good thing and needs to be preserved; in culture, some norms bind an indigenous community. Culture is the result of social interaction in society. In social interaction, society will develop values, norms, and rules considered excellent and correct. These values, norms, and rules are then passed down from generation to generation and become customary norms. (Sukardika, 2020)

In the life of the Ambai tribe, the demand for bride wealth payments is expensive compared to other tribes in Papua. The Ambai highly value women as the pride of the tribe. To ask for an Ambai girl, a man must pay a bride wealth or property to the woman's family (Embram, 2021) The clan's social status can be judged when their son wants to ask for a girl. The amount of property delivery largely determines whether the loan is accepted or rejected. The girl's parents can refuse a loan if they feel their daughter's property is small. The girl's family can ask for the property as they see fit (Embram, 2021) The Christian faith values all human beings, and no one has a higher value than another despite having high possessions and social status. The expensive payment of bride wealth also creates other problems, such as couples who are supposed to marry well end up not passing through the stages that are by custom and also the Christian faith. They marry first and do not perform the blessing of the Christian faith. In this case, neither men nor women value themselves.

In the Bible, it tells how Rebekah begged for Isaac. Then the servant took out gold jewels and regalia, gave gold and silver jewels and regalia, and gave them all to Rebekah; also to his brother and his mother was given a beautiful gift. (King James Bible Online, 2023, Gen. 24:53). There is no demand for the quantity or value of goods; this is a gift from the man's family to the woman's family. This gift must be interpreted as a form of love and appreciation from the man to the woman, not a payment that ultimately has a negative impact. The husband has power over the wife by having paid a bride wealth. Hence, the husband treats the wife according to his wishes; this triggers domestic violence committed by the husband against the wife. The husband feels entitled and free to treat his wife, and the wife cannot do anything because it has been paid in full. Man is a creation of God created in God's image.

The Bible says that human is a creature created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore has inherent dignity and rights. This human dignity comes from humans being created as intelligent, accessible, and social beings. Human trafficking is a violation of human dignity because it treats human beings as objects and commodities. Jesus Christ gave His life for man to have a relationship with God. The use of the term bride wealth is more appropriate than the term bride wealth payment, so the meaning contained in the words is more about giving out of appreciation/love and not paying and mastering.

Customary marriage, which is characterised by a bride wealth payment system, becomes a place to equalise women and goods, causing injustice in treating women and as a means of increasing economic value. Marriage is a bond between a man and a woman that aims to form a family. In a marriage, especially in Ambai culture, a bride wealth payment is given from the man to the woman. Bride wealth is usually in the form of money, valuables, and livestock. The bride wealth is a symbol of binding the relationship between the two families. Bride wealth is the responsibility of the man to the woman. Bride wealth payments within the Ambai tribe are an exciting thing because they are expensive dowries. Bride wealth is usually in the form of money, valuables, and livestock. The bride wealth is a symbol of binding the relationship between the two families (Embran, 2015). Bride wealth is an integral part of Ambai culture. The Ambai highly value women as the pride of the tribe. To ask for an Ambai girl, a man must pay a bride wealth or property to the woman's family (Embran, 2021).

There are three basic principles that need to be considered from the perspective of the Christian faith in paying bride wealth according to the customs of the Ambai Serui tribe. First, the principle of love. In a Christian marriage, love comes first. Married couples should have love and love one another. Marriage is the union of two persons and families of both parties. Second, the fairness principle. The principle of justice should be part of a Christian marriage. No parties are harmed or felt unfairly treated. Justice in a Christian marriage means giving equal rights and duties to both parties. Secondly, bride wealth payment should not burden the bridegroom's family. The bride wealth must be agreed upon by both parties and not be forced by either party. Third, legal principles. The payment of bride wealth should not be a hindrance to marriage. Christian marriage is a sacrament that worldly things must not limit. It

often happens that because of the difficulty of collecting bride wealth, men and women choose to live together without marriage ties; after a few years, a marriage blessing and bride wealth payment are carried out. In this case, their marriage would not be legally recorded in the Civil Registry Office and would not be recorded in the church administration either. Thus, both men and women remain in single or unmarried status in their personal identity documents or papers.

The payment of bride wealth according to the custom of the Ambai Serui tribe has some similarities with Christian marriage. Bride wealth in the Ambai Serui tribal tradition symbolises respect for the bridegroom's family to the bride's family. It is also in line with Christian marriage, symbolising Christ's reverence for His church. But there are some things to consider from the perspective of the Christian faith. First, the payment of bride wealth should not be a hindrance to marriage. Christian marriage is a sacrament that worldly things must not limit. Second, bride wealth payment should not burden the bridegroom's family. Both parties must agree upon the bride wealth and not be forced by either party. Third, bride wealth payments should be based on the principle of love. Love in a Christian marriage means accepting and loving one another regardless of social or economic status. Love has the meaning of giving by not asking for something in return. In terms of bride wealth payments, it is expected that Christian faith will be the basis so that men do not position themselves as powerful parties and women as enslaved people or victims who eventually often encounter domestic violence.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The bride wealth tradition of the Ambai tribe remain intact with its indigenous wisdom and cultural values. It evolves and adjusts with contextual development. Of in particular is the change in the provisioning of the bride wealth. In the past, it was the sole responsibility of the groom and his nuclear family. Presently, the bride wealth is provided through a collective mutually sharing system. In the past, the bride wealth materials were scarce and market exchange did not exist. Presently, all of the bride wealth materials are available in the market with various choices.

The bride wealth payment must be interpreted as a gift as Jesus Christ gave His life for man so that man has fellowship or relationship with God, and just as God is responsible for human life, so is the man or husband responsible for the woman (his wife). We suggest that Christian education should actively teach the indigenous people of Ambai not to judge people according to their personal and social status, but instead should value humans as God's creations who have basic human rights for dignity and love people as Jesus loves humans. Customs and culture are God creations that should be taken care of and used to glorify God and spread His gospel.

Through the collection of bride wealth, the indigenous people of the Ambai tribe provide support to couples who will build new families, which is done in cooperation. A remain problem is its popular name, payment for bride price, that connotes commodification of women, as if the women have been paid in full by their husband and family. We suggest, instead of saying paying bride pride or *membayar*

*mas kawin* in Indonesian language, it is better to say “to deliver bride wealth” or *menyerahkan harta kawin* in Indonesian language.

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