Symbolic Power of Sasak Women as Reflected in the Sasak Marriage Processes

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Abstract. The position of women in the *Sasak* community is often assumed to be weak by most people inside and outside of that community. A number of social and cultural events have been cited as evidence, ranging from soft voice, slow movement to a passive role in the family and domestic sphere. Wedding and its processes are the site in which women's personal and domestic roles symbolically represent women's actual position in the community. In the *Sasak* community, the wedding processes are labelled as *merarik* [elopement] and its stages have resulted in conflicting views on women's position. With more rights for groom-to-be to enact the elopement, women are seen as being deprived of their rights to stay single or to choose the grooms. Being eloped without the consent of woman and her parents led to the view that woman is being stolen, downgrading their level to non-human materials and prone to domestic violence. Closer, in-depth investigation to the core cultural ideology always reveals new inside perspectives. This is the merit of the article, investigating the actual position of *Sasak* women in their own cultural tradition. This paper revisits and reviews the true meaning and processes of *merarik* and how they have actually framed cultural expectations that they have to achieve in the course of life. Ethnography is used for data collection where *Sasak* weddings are observed and key informants are interviewed. With content and ethnographic analyses, the study shows convincing evidence that *Sasak* women have strong bargaining positions, stronger than generally assumed.

Keywords: Power · Women · Role · Marriage · Sasak

1 Introduction

There is a wise word saying that "there is a strong woman behind a successful man". The term "strong" can be interpreted as strength in terms of personal psychology and socio-political domination. The understanding of the term 'strong' is assumed to be contradictory with the general assumption that women are physically and psychologically weak. Thus, women are likely to need more protection than do the men. This stereotype leads to another assumption that women do not have any power whatsoever in every stage of life. The fact that women are slower in physical movement and are softer in

intonation than men reinforce the stereotypically lower social position of women in any society compared to men.

Subconsciously, society's general determination and construction of women in social structure based on differences in gender and in social status will finally influence men and women's life. For example, in the categorization of color, pink is associated with young feminine female identity and, thus, only young women can wear anything pink. Young men with feminine identity will be likely to wear anything in pink as a way of constructing a preferred young female identity. Purple is often associated with women's social status as a widow. Preferred by women of a widow status, purple clothes are generally avoided by young and adult women for the fear of misconstruction for socially stigmatized status as widows or for the fear of inviting unwanted social course of not marrying all the way in life (spinsters) or becoming widows (due to divorce from the curse). One the contrary, blue is associated with masculine male identity and blue is associated with masculinity although women can also wear anything blue.

Societal rules have also confined women to domestic roles and men to public roles. In marriage life, for example, society has commonly determined that women [wives] are responsible for domestic affairs while men [husbands] take charge of public matters. Thus, women are encouraged to stay at home and do the housework such as preparing the meal, cleaning the house, taking care of the kids and even ironing the clothes. Men are obliged to work outside of the home atmosphere such as hunting, cultivating the lands, rearing animals, trading, or going to the offices. Even when women [wives] also work outside of the domestic space, they are still expected to be in charge of the domestic chores. On the contrary, men [husbands] who fail to find work outside of the domestic atmosphere will fail to take charge of the domestic works as these are under the responsibility of 'the lady of the house' [*ibu rumah tangga*] or 'the owner of the house' [*epene bale*]. Even when they take charge of the chores, they will do them secretly beyond the suspecting eyes of other men because doing such works is a sign for being 'the man of the house' [*bapak rumah tangga*] or 'a husband being afraid of his wife' [*suami takut istri*]. Such situations do not only apply to people living out-of-town or in rural areas, but also to those who live in cities with modern contemporary lifestyles.

This study will review and revisit the true meaning of *merarriq* and its processes and how these processes formed the view of women's position in *sasak* community. Once the true meaning of *merariq* is revealed, we expect that it will also reveal how *sasak* community place the women in their community. There are several studies that also talked about *merariq* and its processes where those studies conclude that women's position in *Sasak* culture is under the men's. This phenomenon raises gender bias and different treatment. Nasri [1] states that gender bias happened in *Sasak* community in the name of women's obedience in religion, which led to women's subordinate position. Another study conducted by Fitriana et al [2] reveals that even though women seem to have power and bargaining position that is shown by the marriage (processes), but once the whole process of the marriage (*merariq*) is done, she will find that her position is under the man's.

The researchers believe that this study is crucial in order to raise the true position of women in *sasak* community by reviewing the meaning of *merariq*. The researchers also believe that this study will raise the understanding of how *sasak* community actually

place women in the social life. Finally, the gender equality in *Sasak* community that has been covered by the stereotype of them will be revealed.

Such situations are not unique to particular cultures but are applicable to the majority, if not all, Asian cultures, including *Sasak* culture. However, before we tease out how women are positioned in the *Sasak* culture, let us examine how women are generally positioned in discursive practices.

2 Review of Related Literature

2.1 Gender and Women Power

Women have been socially constructed at the second position in the social strata. They are considered weak and in need of protection from men. The roles of both have been socially shaped and carried out by both of them even from an early age. This is agreed by Bem [3] in gender schema theory where she introduced that children develop ideas and theories about what it means to be masculine or feminine (called gender schemas) from an early age and use these theories to categorize information, make decisions, and regulate behavior. The assumption of the weakness of women is also constructed by the way they talk and behave to a man or to another woman. Low voice intonation and soft movements are the characteristics of women that are socially shaped by society. Sidnell in Mendoza-Denton [4] states, "women must be careful in both how they move through a community (who they interact with, etc.) and in how they talk – both concerns that emanate from a community construction of gender roles".

There is evidence that women have different patterns that they apply when they talk to men. Women asked more questions and used back-channeling signals to encourage others to speak, they are also shown to use more instances of you and we and do not protest as much as men when interrupted [5]. On the other hand, men interrupt more, challenge, dispute, and ignore more, try to control what topics are discussed, and are inclined to make categorical statements. Men tend to dominate the situation of the conversation especially in cross-sex conversation by interrupting, controlling the topic and using less back-channel signals than women. Thus, in their interactional patterns in conversation, men and women often seem to exhibit the power relationship that exists in society, with men being dominant and women being subservient [5].

According to Toffelson in Wardhaugh & Fuller [6] power is 'the ability to control events in order to achieve one's aims' and is also 'the control someone has over the outcomes of others' [6]. Robert Dahl [7] offers what he calls an "intuitive idea of power" according to which "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do". Hence power is the ability to influence or direct others to do some actions. Women are believed to be powerless according to numerous factors that are discussed above. It is assumed, therefore, that male speakers do not only control, dominate, and command power in society but also in cross-sex talk. Hence, power in language is seen as a measure of dominance, control and influence which is exercised by one language user, the male speaker, over another, the female speaker. "Just as male dominance is exhibited through male control of macro-institutions in society, it is also exhibited through control of at least a part of one micro-institution" [8].

On the other hand, we need to consider another perspective of domination, Talbot [5] also advocates caution when applying the idea of dominance to gender differences in language: 'A major determinant [of the dominance framework] is that male dominance is often treated as though it is pan-contextual. But…...all men are not in a position to dominate all women.' Dominance clearly fails as a universal explanation of gendered language differences. An interesting discussion from De Bruin and Lewis in [8] introduces an interesting nuance into their discussion on the invisibility of women in business: they refer to women "who play, or are seen as playing" a supporting role. The nuance is important, and has significant implications for governance. Female copreneurs can be seen as exerting an auxiliary, subordinate power, while in reality they hold significant policy-making and operational powers. Does the invisibility of female copreneurs take away their power? In other words, is invisible power synonymous with no power?

These theories by the scholars seem to emphasize that men do not fully have domination over women. An interesting story of President Obama and his wife is an illustration of the role and power that women actually have. It will give us a broader insight of women's power.

President Obama and his wife were enjoying dinner at a famous restaurant. While they were enjoying dinner, one of his bodyguards asked if it is possible for the restaurant owner to speak privately with Michele Obama, and the couple agreed. A moment passed, Michelle returned to her husband, and Obama asked about the topic of their conversation. At this point Michele is simply saying that the owner of the restaurant is his ex-boyfriend. Responding to the answer, Obama then said "if you married him, maybe you would currently run this luxury restaurant", but Michele's answer is quite surprising "no! if I married him, of course he would be the President of America by now!" [8].

Although the story is a fictitious story, but it is an illustration that gives an idea of how women can play a role in the success of their husbands. We should consider the reason Obama became the President of the US, that the person who supported and motivated Obama to enter politics was Michelle. Meanwhile, to fully support her husband, she sacrificed the successful career in law that she might have achieved due to the fact that she graduated from Harvard University. We can analyze this urban story from two different perspectives. The first is the point of view of those who say that the woman's sacrifice is a part of her destiny, especially since she has to take care of all household matters. On the other hand, it has a more optimistic and egalitarian view, where this story describes the role of women in giving a decisive influence on the actions of their husbands, and of course also emphasizes the superiority of husband-and-wife partnerships.

2.2 Gender in Sasak Culture

Sasak ethnic group is the native ethnic group who live in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara. There is no clear evidence about who the ancestor is. There are some theories that say that their ancestors are from Java, but others say that the *Sasak* ethnic group is a mixture of Java and the native people who live in Lombok. Lalu Bayu Windya, Chairman of the Executive Board of the *Sasak* Customary Council, [9] said that the *Sasak* people who are the native inhabitants of the island of Lombok consist of migrants from various regions, mainly from the island of Java. Their arrival happened in several waves of migration. According to Sudirman in Haq [10], The *Sasak* ethnic group is thought to

have come from the Mongoloid race, a sub-Malay-Indonesian race spreading over most of the territory of Indonesia.

Gorris in Fakih [11] states that etymologically, the word "*sasak*" comes from the word "*sah*" [go] and "*shaka*" [ancestor]. Thus, it can be concluded that "*sasak*" means "going to the ancestral land". Others see it as coming from "*saksak*" [canoe], echoing canoe as the mode of ancestral migration. Still others associate it with an ancient book Nagarakertagama where *Sasak* names "lombok' [humble], '*Sasak*' [steadfast], 'mirah' [gem] and 'adi' [respected] were used as the name of *Lombok Sasak Mirah Adi,* a kingdom of nations of people highly respected as a marvelous gem for their humble and steadfast nature.

In the *Sasak* culture, patriarchy has become a long-established system. The superiority of men over women is traditionally institutionalized. The values that are related to masculinity are considered to be higher than values of femininity. The social position of men is higher than that of women. The social functions are also divided. For example, women should stay at home and do all the housework, while men are encouraged to go outside of the house to work. When a husband does the house work, the community will recognize him not as 'a real man' and he will be called as "*kalah siq senine*" [defeated by his wife]. The wife, on the contrary, will be titled as '*Sinine lenge*" [bad wife] for forcing the husband to do the house chores. Occasionally, the husband could get involved in the chores when there is an unavoidable circumstance: for example, wife being sick or giving birth). The most elaborative situation where the power of *Sasak* men and women is contested is in the *Sasak* wedding process known as *merariq* [elopement] as well as in the many stages in there and this is the focus of the current study.

3   Methods

This study applies ethnography in data collection in which *sasak* weddings are observed and key informants are interviewed which gives a more complete picture of the position of women in *sasak* customs. Ethnography is a form of qualitative research that is used to research and analyze culture and language. According to Reeves et al [12] ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions that occur in groups, teams, organizations, and communities. In addition, Savile & Troike [13] state that ethnography is a field that deals with linguistic and cultural analysis and description.

4   Discussion and Finding

4.1   Position of Woman in the Process of Marriage in Sasak Culture

In the *Sasak* marriage process, men are generally assumed to be more dominant. On the contrary, when correctly analyzed, women and woman position in such processes are not as weak as mostly assumed. In all marriage stages, the position of *Sasak* women is not actually as weak as generally assumed.

In the *Sasak* tradition, there are several types of marriage, namely [10] *Memaling/Merariq, Memagah, Nyerah Hukum, Kawin Gantung,* and *Belakoq. Merariq* is interpreted into two meanings. The first is *Merariq* which refers to "marry" and another one

is a process or a form of marriage. Saladin in Fitrianita et al [2] states that etymologically, the word *Merariq* originates from the word "*rari*" which means' "run" in *Sasak* language. "*Merariang*" means "*Melaiang*", both of which mean that the man kidnaps the woman he wants to be his wife. *Merariq*" is the most popular form of marriage in *Sasak* where the woman and the man decide to marry after several stages. There is an unwritten rule in the *Sasak* ethnic group that a man will be said to be a real man when he can bring (not to say as kidnapping) his prospective bride, this process is also known as "*Memagah*"/"*Memoger*" [10].

Memagah/memoger refers to a form of marriage that involves carrying away the woman without her consent and breaking the rule of the tradition. The man with the help of his friend takes the girl away when she is away from the supervision of her parents and it is usually done during daylight. An interview with one of the women who got married in the form of *Memagah* provides a testimony on how it is conducted. Lilik (pseudonym) [14] said that when she got married, she had absolutely no idea that her husband who was her lover back then would take her away without her consent and without her parents' knowledge:

> "*waktu itu saya belum mau nikah, saya dijemput untuk makan bakso, pas saya minta pulang, malah saya dibawa ke rumah pamannya dan saya dikunci di dalam kamar, saya teriak dari dalam sambil gedor pintu, tapi ndak ada jawaban, saya bilang saya belum mau kawin, saya mau kuliah, pulangin saya, saya ndak mau, tapi namanya adat, saya ndak bisa bilang apa-apa, lagian pantang pulang kalau sudah ditau warga kita sudah merariq*" [14].

> ("I didn't want to get married that time. I was invited to have Bakso, but when I asked him to take me home, he took me to his uncle's house. I was locked in a room. I screamed and hit the door, but no answers. I told him I didn't want to get married, I wanted to continue my study, but it didn't work, you know, once you *merariq*, you can't go home").

Based on Lilik's story, we find that she was powerless against the marriage that will be conducted soon after she was kidnaped. The traditional law states that a woman who is taken away by a man until the time limit determined by custom, is considered to be married soon. It is forbidden for her to go home before the whole process is completely done.

Nyerah Hukum is a form of marriage where the entire wedding procession including the wedding costs is handed over to the bride's side. It happens when the groom comes from another ethnic group. "*Kawin Gantung*"*,* also called "*Kawin Todong*"*,* is a child marriage. In this form of marriage, the bride and groom are married traditionally when they were young to bind them, while a legal marriage will be carried out when they reach adulthood. "*Belakok*" is a marriage that is conducted by proposing to the woman.

In order to get a broader picture of the process of the marriage, here are the steps of marriage in *Sasak* tradition;

4.1.1 Midang

The first process of marriage in *Sasak* culture is the existence of "*Midang*" which can be interpreted as the visit of a man (or more) to a woman's house to introduce himself and to approach the women that is witnessed by her parents. At this stage, the woman might be assumed to be powerful in rejecting some unwanted visits. While men are socially encouraged to make the visits, woman can play her rights to oppose unwanted visits by hiding in the bedroom and telling parents or siblings to lie about her whereabouts in order to expel the men from the house. Thus, while *Sasak* women are assumed to be socially weak, they are discursively powerful in selecting the really wanted future husband.

Lalu Bayu Windya, Chairman of the Executive Board of the *Sasak* Customary Council [9], explained that there isn't any prohibition for the woman to accept men to come to visit nor there is any limitation as to how many men are permitted to come, as long as they are witnessed by the parents and the traditional values are applied. This rule causes the contestation of every man who comes to visit to show their best side to the woman whom they are attracted to. The woman, in this case, is free to choose the man she wants to be his future husband according to the criteria she decided before. In the end, "*Midang*" is the way *Sasak* culture elevates the position of women. Here, we can see that women have their bargaining values in the process. There is no any coercion in determining the prospective husband, it shows us the equal position of men and women

4.1.2 Mbait/Merariq

"*Mbait*" *is* also defined as "*Merariq*". Once the woman decides on her future husband in the process of "*Midang*", she will make an appointment with the chosen one to do the next step called "*mbait*" with or without the knowledge of their parents. "*Mbait*" refers to 'take', it means that the man delegates his relatives to take the woman at the appointed place before. The customary rules applied to "*Merariq*" are that she should be picked up by the man's relatives in between the time of *Magrib* (sunset prayer for Muslims) and *Isya*' (the prayer time done in evening) and will be brought to the man's relative's house. In the process of "*mbait*", there will be a possibility that the woman becomes sad and misses her family. In this situation, *Sasak* culture provides the solution. She will not be permitted to come back home once she is picked up before the whole process of *merariq* is conducted, then she will be accompanied by an appointed menopausal woman, who is called as Holly Woman [9]. The existence of the Holy Woman is also to keep the moral values so that the man and the woman are protected from acts that violate customary norms.

Another respondent, Nani [15] (pseudonym) said that the one who invited to do "*merariq*" was herself:

> "*lueq dengan mame mele lek aku mba, laguk ndek ku demen, iye doang kance ku mele, ye ampok ku tenaq ne merariq, trus ku bejanji bedait ngkah magrib lek deket kubur, nah arikne sak bait aku, meno wah mba*" [15].

> ("There were some guys who wanted me to be their wife, but I only liked him, that's why I invited him to *merariq*, I made an appointment to meet up after *maghrib* (sunset prayer) prayer near the graveyard and his brother picked me up, that's it")

Based on Nani's story, we find that in the implementation of *merariq*, women have a fairly balanced role with men in determining the course of marriage. In this story we see how the men patiently wait for the woman's decision to choose the man who will be chosen as her husband. Hence it shows that women are actually more powerful than men in deciding her future husband.

The stages after the "*merariq*" in *Sasak* marriage processes are criticized by Fitriana et al. [2]. She assumed that once the "*merariq*" is conducted, then the gap between men's superiority and women's inferiority becomes more clearly visible. In order to reveal the truth, the next stages will be discussed below.

4.1.3 Besejati-Beselabar

Kaharudin in Haq [9] defines *Besejati - Beselabar* as a result of *Merariq*. Besejati begins with a report to the *keliang* or the headman by the parents or family of the prospective groom. Next, the information is conveyed by the *Pembayun* to the woman's family through the *keliang* of the village where the bride is from as soon as possible. The *Pembayun* notifies the truth of *merariq*, when, and where the prospective bride was taken. Based on the information from the *Pembayun*, the *keliang* conveyed it to the parents or the woman's family.

Selabar is a process of asking the parents or family of the prospective bride to give consent and guardianship to the two prospective brides. In the *selabar* process, many things must be discussed or negotiated to reach an agreement, so that the interests of both families or relatives are accommodated properly. In the negotiation process, several important topics were discussed, namely the issue of customary payments called *ajikrame* and *pisuke*.

4.1.4 Aji Krame

Aji Krame is a number of payments that have been determined by custom as a symbol and social status of the bride and groom and each offspring to be born. Payment of *ajikrame* is mandatory and is an effort so that the *akad nikah* (marriage contract) can be carried out immediately. Lalu Bayu Windya as the Chairman of the Executive Board of the *Sasak* Customary Council, [9] states that *Aji* refers to level or values while *Krame* refers to Dignity. Hence, *Aji Krame* also means the level of dignity of the bride and the groom. In determining *Aji Krame*, the things that will be confirmed are regarding: the capacity and potential achievements that have been and may be achieved by the bride and groom.

4.1.5 Sorong Serah

According to Kartikasari [16] *Sorong Serah* consists of two words; *Sorong* refers to 'handed over', while *serah* refers to 'give'. There are two purposes of *Sorong Serah*. First is to deliver the "*Aji Krame*" that is determined in *Selabar*. Second is to determine the status of a woman in a legal marriage according to religion, applicable state laws and regulations.

Sorong Serah Aji Krame is the most essential of the whole *Sasak* marriage process. Lalu Bayu Windya as the Chairman of the Executive Board of the *Sasak* Customary

Council, [9] states that it is not a usual stage that can be missed in the process of the marriage (especially in "*Merariq*") itself. It is the code of behavior for every *sasak* people who just got married. The main point of *Sorong Serah Aji Krame* is about what level of dignity that can be carried by the couple. It is the process of the declaration and testimony about the dignity of a *Sasak* man who is ready to carry out duties in the *Sasak* tradition. Marriage in *Sasak* tradition is an opportunity to gain dignity to achieve piety to Allah. It is because the majority of the *Sasak* people are Muslims where in the religion they believe in, marriage is one of the ways of being piety.

4.1.6 Nyongkolan

Mamiq Anggawe, a cultural practitioner of *Sasak* tribe [17] states that the *nyongkolan* tradition is held in addition to escorting the bride and groom to the bride's family home, it is also intended as a means of announcing to the public that the accompanying couple is officially married, and it is also hoped that no one will disturb the couple. It is arguably the culmination of the ritual of the union of a *terune* (youth) with a *dedare* (girl) in a legal marriage bond according to religion and custom. *Nyongkolan* will be packaged in a very lively celebration party called "*Begawe Beleq*" which costs a lot of money. In the implementation of family *nyongkolan*, the bride and the groom are accompanied by the groom's family, including relatives and friends, to visit the woman's family while wearing traditional clothes accompanied by gamelan and *Gendang Beleq* (a huge traditional drum of Sasak). This stage shows us that women are powerful where the man's family must show his appreciation and respect for the bride by holding a magnificent *nyongkolan* ceremony.

5   Conclusion

Based on the discussion and analysis of the role and position of women in the life of the Lombok *Sasak* community, especially in the marriage process, we have come to the conclusion. *Sasak* people are known to have a deep-rooted patriarchal system, but, in the process towards marriage, the system does not become an obstacle for women in giving their roles. Women in the *Sasak* community still have role and domination over themselves, this can be seen from the various stages that must be passed where most of these stages are carried out on the basis of fulfilling the interests of the bride. The patriarchal system in *Sasak* society seems to cover the role and power of women, but in fact, the stages of *Sasak* marriage show that gender equality has been going on for a long time. Women in *Sasak* actually have bargaining positions in the domestic and public sphere, stronger than generally assumed. Finally, we can state the power and domination of women as women's hidden power since it is covered by the stereotypes that are attached and constructed to them by the people.

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