

## The Ethnobiology of Merarik Kodeq in Lombok

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**Abstract:** The tradition of *Merarik Kodeq*, or early marriage, remains a serious issue for the Sasak community in West Nusa Tenggara. The aim of this study is to explore the ethnobiological perspective on the *Merarik Kodeq* culture in West Lombok and to identify the efforts made by the local government of West Lombok Regency to curb the growing prevalence of *Merarik Kodeq*. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, namely couples who married at an early age. The results show that the average age of early marriage in Sekotong Barat Village is 16–17 years. At this age, reproductive organs are still in the developmental stage, especially the female reproductive system, which functions as the place for fetal development. Therefore, pregnancies occurring at this age pose a high risk of miscarriage, birth defects, and even maternal and infant mortality. In response to the increasing rate of *Merarik Kodeq* or early marriage, the local government initiated a movement known as the Anti-*Merarik Kodeq* Movement.

**Keywords:** Etnobiology, Early Marriage, Reproductive Health

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a ceremonial union that legally binds a man and a woman in the eyes of both religion and the law. In Indonesia, the legally recognized age for marriage is 19 years old for both men and women, as stated in Law Number 16 of 2019, which amends Law Number 1 of 1974 concerning marriage in Indonesia. Marriages that occur under the age of 19 are referred to as early marriages, and among the Sasak people in West Nusa Tenggara, this practice is known as the "Merariq Kodeq" tradition. In this tradition, a girl is taken away or "abducted" from the authority of her parents before the religious and customary wedding ceremony takes place. Through this act of abduction, a Sasak man is considered more honorable or courageous for taking the risk—especially if his actions are discovered by the girl's parents or if his choice is rejected by his own family (Aniq, 2012). Unfortunately, this tradition has negative physical, mental, and economic effects on couples who marry at an early age, a practice known as *Merarik Kodeq*. Although this form of marriage is prohibited by law, it is still practiced due to its acceptance by social norms.

According to the Head of the Agency for the Empowerment of Women, Child Protection,

and Family Planning (BP3AKB), half of the population of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) engage in early marriage. Based on BP3AKB data from 2014, the percentage of early marriages in NTB reached 51.8%, and in 2015 it was 34.9%. The number of adolescents involved in early marriage in NTB accounts for one-third of the total population of 4.8 million (Fadjar, 2018). The Office of Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, Population Control, and Family Planning (DP3AP2KBA) of West Lombok Regency recorded 245 cases of underage marriage from January to October 2020 (Khalid, 2020).

Biologically, a child has not yet reached reproductive organ maturity, making sexual intercourse with the opposite sex risky. If forced, it can lead to depression, extensive tearing, infections, trauma, cervical cancer, neuritis, and premature births, all of which pose serious dangers to both the mother and the baby (Husnaini, 2019). From an economic perspective, early marriage can also have negative impacts, such as increasing poverty rates due to limited job opportunities caused by low levels of education. Various studies on early marriage have been conducted previously. For example, a study by Sekarayu & Nunung (2021) concluded that the ideal reproductive age for women is between 20–30 years. The impacts of early marriage include a

higher risk of maternal mortality, physical disabilities in children, stunting, and other adverse outcomes for both mother and fetus due to the mother's body not being physically prepared for pregnancy.

Another study conducted by Sari et al. (2020) stated that, biologically, female reproductive organs are still in the process of maturing and are therefore not ready to handle pregnancy—even if the physical condition appears healthy. This is something that many adolescents engaging in early marriage are unaware of, though it poses serious dangers to both mother and baby. In terms of obstetric risks, pregnancies under the age of 19 are associated with maternal death, hemorrhage, miscarriage, molar pregnancy, and premature labor. In terms of the child's quality: there is a high rate of Low Birth Weight (LBW), an increased risk of birth defects, and a 5 to 30 times higher risk of infant mortality.

There is a need for further action regarding the *Merarik Kodeq* trend through ethnobiological studies and public education on the impacts of early marriage, in order to support the achievement of one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targeted for 2030. The SDGs aim to empower women and eliminate underage marriage practices. The fifth goal of the SDGs is to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” Gender equality refers to a condition in which the rights and obligations of male and female citizens are equally fulfilled. Sub-goal 5.3 of this objective is to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage” (Tan, 2021). The aim of this research is to explore the ethnobiological perspective on the *Merarik Kodeq* tradition in West Lombok and to identify the efforts made by the local government of West Lombok Regency to prevent the increasing prevalence of *Merarik Kodeq* or early marriage in the region.

## METHODS

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative ethnographic research method. The informants involved were selected using purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria, namely couples who married at an early age. The research was conducted through interviews with several target groups: (1) couples who married young (*Merarik Kodeq*), (2) community leaders, and (3) the head/staff of the DP3AP2KBA (Office of Women's

Empowerment, Child Protection, Population Control, and Family Planning) in West Lombok. The data were analyzed using qualitative analysis, which consists of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and finally, drawing conclusions and verification. Data collection was carried out with credibility by recording interview results as evidence of the authenticity of the data and to ensure it was not manipulated by the researcher. Documentation was carried out for each informant as additional proof of the research's validity. The instruments/tools used by the researcher to collect data were: (1) the human instrument (the researcher), (2) observation sheets, and (3) interview and documentation instruments.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

*Merarik Kodeq* is a marriage tradition widely practiced by the Sasak people in the province of West Nusa Tenggara. *Merarik Kodeq* means "stealing" a future wife or proposing in secret without the knowledge of the girl's parents. This process is carried out with the aim of avoiding competition with other men or as a way for the man to demonstrate his courage and seriousness. The average education level of those who engage in *Merarik Kodeq* is typically junior or senior high school graduates, and some are still attending junior or senior high school. Therefore, the generally low level of education is one of the factors influencing the occurrence of *Merarik Kodeq* cases, particularly in West Lombok.

There are several factors that contribute to the occurrence of *Merarik Kodeq*. First, the educational factor: children often feel bored with studying and become stressed by school activities and assignments. A declining interest in learning and student fatigue with education can drive early marriage. Although often considered trivial, many children engage in *Merarik Kodeq* simply because they are tired of going to school. The lack of seriousness and motivation among children to pursue higher education becomes a contributing factor to *Merarik Kodeq*. This aligns with the findings from interviews conducted with several informants. Second, the family factor is also a major cause that drives underage children to commit *Merarik Kodeq*. This factor is often related to economic issues and a lack of harmony within the family. Children may feel the desire to escape from an environment that they perceive as uncomfortable or unloving, prompting them to engage in *Merarik Kodeq* to break free. This is

especially common among girls who grow up in broken homes.

According to Sekarayu & Nurwati (2021), one of the economic reasons behind early marriage is the belief held by some parents that they are unable to meet their child's basic needs or afford their education. As a result, they decide to marry off their children in the hope of relieving themselves of financial responsibility or with the expectation that the child will have a better life through marriage. Third, the traditional factor: Based on an interview with the head of the DP2KBP3A (Office of Women's Empowerment,

Child Protection, Population Control, and Family Planning) in West Lombok, one major cause of the high prevalence of *Merarik Kodeq* is a Sasak cultural tradition known as Nyongkolan. Nyongkolan is a ceremonial procession that is part of a traditional Sasak wedding. It features the bride and groom dressed in striking traditional attire and elaborate makeup, accompanied by a parade from the groom's house to the brides. Many children become fascinated by this event when watching it and develop the desire to become a bride or groom themselves.

**Table 1.** The Number of Merarik Kodeq Cases in West Lombok from 2020 to 2022

No	Month	2020		2021		2022	
		M	F	M	F	M	F
1.	January	8	29	10	29	7	19
2.	February	12	24	6	17	6	11
3.	March	4	23	2	6	4	18
4.	April	9	29	0	3	1	2
5.	May	5	19	3	8	2	15
6.	June	22	87	1	12	2	16
7.	July	16	43	0	8	1	14
8.	August	18	67	4	18	2	14
9.	September	16	46	4	16	2	15
10.	October	10	46	2	11	1	6
11.	November	8	32	6	18	4	17
12.	December	12	33	5	16	16	16
<b>Total</b>		140	478	43	162	48	233

Source: DP2KBP3A West Lombok Regency

Based on data obtained from DP2KBP3A West Lombok, in 2020 the percentage of early marriages reached 5.93%, with 140 males and 478 females. In 2021, the percentage of early marriages was 3.12%, consisting of 43 males and 162 females. In 2022, the percentage increased slightly to 3.55%, with 48 males and 233 females. According to Subandi Sardjoko (Deputy for Community Development and Culture at the Indonesian National Development Agency), if this trend continues unchecked, it will disrupt the government's plans for sustainable development (Sustainable Development Goals). It may also result in a generation that is unproductive and unable to contribute to the advancement of the nation in the future. The high rate of early marriage in West Lombok needs serious attention, especially from the local government. Based on data from DP2KBP3A West Lombok Regency, there was an increase in early marriages from 2021 to

2022. The number of adolescents marrying rose from 205 in 2021 to 281 in 2022

The increasing number of marriages involving underage adolescents has raised concerns from health, psychological, and socio-economic perspectives. Based on interviews conducted in Sekotong Barat Village, couples who engaged in early marriage often experience conflicts with their partners. The psychological effects reported by informants in Sekotong Barat align with research by Maudina (2019), which revealed that couples who marry at a young age tend to be more emotional, stressed, and feel burdened. Most informants stated that they faced a surge in economic difficulties at the beginning of their marriage, as they had to learn to live independently. Of the nine informants, four were still dependent on their parents because the husband had not yet secured permanent employment. On average, the husbands of early marriage couples worked as construction laborers, while the wives stayed at home as housewives. From a social

perspective, women tend to experience more severe impacts due to early marriage. Early pregnancy often leads young mothers to isolate themselves from their peers out of shame.

According to a study by Fadlyana & Shintia (2009), individuals who marry young often feel ashamed, afraid, and inferior in the eyes of their neighbors—especially when the marriage is prompted by premarital pregnancy, which leads them to withdraw from social interactions in their communities. The most fundamental aspect of this research is examining the impact of early marriage from an ethnobiological perspective. This is closely related to the Merarik Kodeq tradition, which poses health risks to both mothers and their babies. Based on the data collected from informants, the average age of early marriage in Sekotong Barat Village is 16–17 years. At this age, the reproductive organs—especially in females—are still in the development stage and not fully mature to support pregnancy. Therefore, pregnancy at this age carries high risks such as miscarriage, birth defects, and even maternal and infant mortality. This is supported by a study conducted by Sekarayu & Nunung (2021), which states that the optimal reproductive age for women is between 20 and 30 years. Marrying before this age significantly increases the risk of birth defects, maternal mortality during childbirth, and other complications.

The adolescent body, particularly during the age range categorized as early marriage, is not yet anatomically prepared for pregnancy or childbirth. According to Isnaini & Sari (2019), women under the age of 20 are highly vulnerable to obstetric fistula. This condition can also result from early sexual activity (Fadlyana, 2016). Fistula is a childbirth injury that leads to the formation of an abnormal hole or passage between the vagina and rectum or bladder. This causes continuous leakage of urine and/or feces into the vagina, resulting in chronic incontinence. Obstetric fistula may also occur due to prolonged and obstructed labor, where the baby's head becomes stuck in the birth canal for an extended period. The pressure from the baby's head on the vaginal wall can damage tissue and lead to the formation of a fistula.

The dangers that may threaten the health and safety of mothers and children when women become pregnant under the age of 20 are as follows:

1) Maternal Mortality

The risk of death in pregnant adolescents is significantly high due to the biological immaturity of their reproductive organs. Medically, a woman's reproductive system under the age of 20 is not yet fully developed. The cervix of a teenage girl is still highly sensitive, and if pregnancy is forced at this stage, it can lead to cervical cancer and even maternal death during childbirth. According to Sekarayu & Nurwati (2021), marriage under the age of 20 increases the risk of cervical cancer, immature cervical cells, and exposure to the Human Papillomavirus (HPV).

2) Physical Disabilities in Newborns.

This condition arises from the fact that the eggs of females under 20 are still maturing and not fully viable, which could potentially lead to congenital defects. Additionally, early pregnancy is associated with a high risk of premature birth and low birth weight. As noted by Hanum & Tukiman (2015), the underdeveloped state of ovum cells in girls under 20 increases the likelihood of delivering babies with physical abnormalities.

3) Stunting or Chronic Malnutrition in Children.

Stunting is a multifaceted issue often linked to early marriage, and its root causes include: (1) Physical and Biological Immaturity of the Mother: Young mothers are not physically prepared to support a healthy pregnancy. According to Saipudin et al. (2023), adolescents still require optimal nutrition until the age of 21. Pregnancy during this stage results in a nutritional tug-of-war between the mother and the fetus. If the mother lacks sufficient nutrition, the baby is likely to be born with low birth weight (LBW), increasing the risk of stunting; (2) Lack of Parenting Knowledge and Readiness: Teenage parents often lack essential parenting skills and knowledge, leading to inadequate childcare. Research by Aramico et al. (2013) reveals that children raised in households with poor parenting are up to 8 times more likely to experience stunting compared to those with proper caregiving; (3) Unstable Economic

Conditions: Financial instability limits access to adequate nutrition for both mother and child. Children born into low-income families face a higher risk of malnutrition and stunting due to insufficient dietary intake. This finding

is consistent with Putra (2016), who reported that toddlers from economically disadvantaged households are more frequently affected by stunting than those from higher-income families.

**Table 2.** Number of Pregnancies, Deliveries, and Abortions Among Adolescents Aged  $\leq 18$  in West Lombok in 2022

No.	Sub-district	Pregnant teenager	Teenager who gives birth	Abortus
1.	Sekotong	22	23	24
2.	Pelangan	116	54	24
3.	Jembatan Kembar	17	10	0
4.	Eyat Mayang	63	10	0
5.	Gerung	39	21	0
6.	Dasan Tapen	57	22	5
7.	Labuapi	39	18	16
8.	Perampuan	99	13	1
9.	Kediri	39	13	0
10.	Banyumulek	17	13	0
11.	Kuripan	0	0	0
12.	Narmada	101	8	0
13.	Sedau	109	10	0
14.	Suranadi	92	13	0
15.	Lingsar	21	11	0
16.	Sigerongan	15	7	0
17.	Gunungsari	54	5	0
18.	Penimbung	32	30	0
19.	Sesela	4	3	0
20.	Meninting	11	10	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>959</b>	<b>293</b>	<b>46</b>

Source: West Lombok District Health Office

According to data from the PKPR of the West Lombok Health Office in 2022, there were 959 pregnant teenagers, 293 teenagers who gave birth, and 69 teenagers who experienced abortion or miscarriage. The rate of teenage pregnancy is very high considering the risks that can arise from early pregnancy. Biologically, the female reproductive organs are still in the process of maturing and are not yet ready to handle pregnancy even if the physical condition is healthy. This is something that many teenagers who marry early do not realize, although it poses serious dangers to both the mother and the baby (Sari et al., 2020).

Biologically, teenagers underage have not fully matured reproductive organs, especially for carrying a fetus. The reproductive organs of underage teenagers are still developing. Pregnancy at a young age can bring significant health and social risks. The teenage body is usually not yet fully mature for the heavy process of pregnancy and childbirth. According to Sari et al. (2020), pregnancy under the age of 19 carries

risks such as maternal death, hemorrhage, miscarriage, molar pregnancy, and premature birth.

Becoming a wife and mother requires physical and mental readiness, whereas adolescence is a time for self-discovery and gaining knowledge. During this age, emotional fluctuations often occur, especially when entering the menstrual cycle. The menstrual cycle involves hormone fluctuations, mainly estrogen and progesterone. Increased estrogen levels can interfere with the body's chemical processes, including vitamin B6 (Pyridoxine), which is known as an anti-depression vitamin because it controls serotonin production. Serotonin is very important for the brain and nerves, and insufficient supply can cause emotional changes during menstruation (Yuliani et al., 2017). For some women, these hormone changes can affect mood and emotions. According to research by Yuliani et al. (2017), women of reproductive age experience emotional changes during



menstruation such as irritability, anger, and mood swings.

During adolescence, there is often a tendency to rebel, with many things they want to try. Therefore, marriage at this age is prone to divorce because of mental unreadiness. This is supported by several interviews conducted in the target villages, where couples who marry early experience frequent conflicts between husband and wife at home, making the marriage prone to breakdown. Mental unreadiness to deal with changes after marriage, combined with economic unpreparedness, is a major source of conflicts experienced by those involved in early marriage.

Efforts made by the local government to prevent Merarik Kodeq include the establishment of a movement known as the Anti Merarik Kodeq Movement (GAMAK). This program is under the authority of the Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection Agency (DP2KBP3A) of West Lombok Regency. Furthermore, it is reinforced by the Governor of NTB's Circular Letter No. SE/150/1138/KUM concerning the Maturity of Marriage Age since 2018 and supported by Regional Regulation No. 09 of 2020 regarding the Maturity of Marriage Age (PUP). Article 22 of Marriage Law No. 16 of 2019 states that a marriage can be annulled if the parties do not meet the requirements to marry, one of which is that the marriage age must be over 19 years old (Rosamali, 2022).

This GAMAK movement is expected to serve as a solution to the widespread early marriage issue. It also aims to educate the community to change their mindset about the dangers of early marriage and its consequences. The Anti Merarik Kodeq Movement (GAMAK) focuses on three key aspects: prevention, early detection, and rapid response. The implementation of the GAMAK program in West Lombok is facilitated by the Yes I Do Alliance. Coordination activities and evaluation meetings are funded by Bappeda, DP2KBP3A, the Health Office, DIKPORA, the Subdistrict Government, KUA, Village Government, and NGOs/LSMs. GAMAK services include capacity building for midwives and field monitoring and evaluation funded by the Health Office, while socialization activities on the maturity of marriage age (PUP), family planning campaigns, and target mobilization are funded by DP2KBP3A and ADD (Rosamali, 2022).

The general objective of the GAMAK program is to prevent child marriage in West Lombok Regency. The specific objectives are:

1. Increase knowledge about the ideal age for marriage.
2. Change the attitudes of related stakeholders regarding the ideal age for marriage.
3. Improve the behavior of stakeholders related to making ideal marriage decisions.
4. Increase the average age at first marriage.
5. Reduce the rate of child marriage.

To achieve these goals, the Regent of West Lombok issued regulations related to the GAMAK program, including:

1. Regent of West Lombok Decree Number: 4/1C/52/DP2KBP3A/2019 concerning the Establishment of Collaborative Stakeholder Advocacy in West Lombok Regency for Fiscal Year 2019.
2. Regional Regulation of West Lombok Regency Number 9 Year 2019 concerning the Maturation of Marriage Age. To support the GAMAK program, the West Lombok local government, through the DP2KBP3A office, together with NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), as collaborative sectors and cross-sector partners, has initiated the establishment of regulations and other administrative supports in the form of tiered GAMAK implementation decrees from the regency to village level. These regulations are formulated in the form of village regulations (Perdes), planning documents, availability of human resources, documentation, reporting, as well as monitoring and evaluation activities. This was conveyed by informants involved in activities in two sub-districts of West Lombok Regency (Rosamali, 2022).

The GAMAK movement has not fully run effectively. Based on interviews conducted with informants who have experienced early marriage, it was found that none of them were aware of the dangers of early pregnancy. This issue needs attention from the government and related institutions. Socialization and education about sex in schools have not been evenly distributed, resulting in ignorance about the risks associated with early pregnancy. Efforts to reduce early

marriage through GAMAK have also not succeeded in lowering the rate of early marriage, as evidenced by the increase in early marriages from 2021 to 2022.

## CONCLUSION

*Merarik Kodeq*, or early marriage, remains an issue that continues to receive attention from various institutions. This is due to the many negative impacts caused by early marriage. Early marriage has negative physical, mental, and economic effects on the couples involved. From an ethnobiological perspective, the biological impacts of early marriage include miscarriage, maternal death, and birth defects in babies caused by the fact that the reproductive organs of pregnant adolescents are not yet fully developed. The physical condition of adolescents in their growth phase is not recommended for pregnancy because their bodies are still developing. The government's effort to prevent the increasing rate of early marriage is by establishing the Anti *Merarik Kodeq* Movement (GAMAK). GAMAK focuses on reducing the rate of early marriage in West Lombok. GAMAK's services include increasing the capacity of midwives and monitoring and evaluation activities in the field funded by the Health Office, as well as socialization of marriage age maturation (PUP) and family planning campaigns. However, the implementation of GAMAK is considered not fully successful due to the increase in early marriages from 2021 to 2022. This contradicts the goals of establishing GAMAK itself. Preventing early marriage in West Lombok needs to be optimized. Socialization efforts should reach even the most remote areas to break the chain of early marriage in West Lombok. For couples who have already entered into early marriage, guidance is also needed regarding household management and parenting to prevent conflicts and breakdowns in their marital relationships.

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