

RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATION AND GENDERED SUBJUGATION: NARRATIVE POLYGAMY THROUGH BANJAR WOMEN'S

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Abstract

This study explores the voices of Banjar migrant women who experienced polygamy, focusing on their lived experiences and the socio-cultural mechanisms that legitimize this practice. Employing a life history method, the research draws on in-depth interviews with Banjar women subjected to polygamous marriages in Serdang Bedagai, Indonesia. Data were analyzed through a systematic process involving data reduction, narrative presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that polygamy within Banjar society is deeply embedded in religious interpretations, cultural traditions, and social norms, all of which are reinforced by the authority of Tuan Guru (religious leaders) who frame the role of polygamous wives as spiritually honorable. However, beneath this constructed legitimacy lies a system of male domination that operates through three interrelated forms of power: material power, manifested in male control over economic resources; symbolic power, which enhances male social status through polygamy; and normative power, which restricts women's resistance through religious and cultural justification. Together, these forms of power constitute a cohesive structure of gendered subjugation, wherein polygamy functions not only as a personal or cultural practice but as an institutionalized mechanism of oppression.

Keywords: Patriarchal Power, Polygamous, Banjar Women, Serdang Bedagai

Abstrak

Studi ini mengeksplorasi suara perempuan migran Banjar yang mengalami poligami, dengan fokus pada pengalaman hidup mereka dan mekanisme sosial-budaya yang melegitimasi praktik ini. Dengan menggunakan metode riwayat hidup, penelitian ini menggunakan wawancara mendalam dengan perempuan Banjar yang menjadi korban perkawinan poligami di Serdang Bedagai, Indonesia. Data dianalisis melalui proses sistematis yang melibatkan reduksi data, penyajian naratif, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa poligami dalam masyarakat Banjar sangat tertanam dalam interpretasi agama, tradisi budaya, dan norma sosial, yang semuanya diperkuat oleh otoritas tuan guru (pemimpin agama) yang membingkai peran istri yang berpoligami sebagai sesuatu yang terhormat secara spiritual. Namun, di balik legitimasi yang dibangun ini terdapat sistem dominasi laki-laki yang beroperasi melalui tiga bentuk kekuasaan yang saling terkait: kekuasaan material, yang terwujud dalam kendali laki-laki atas sumber daya ekonomi; kekuasaan simbolis, yang meningkatkan status sosial laki-laki melalui poligami; dan kekuasaan normatif, yang membatasi perlawanan perempuan melalui pembenaran agama dan budaya. Bersama-sama, bentuk-bentuk kekuasaan ini membentuk suatu struktur kohesif dari penindasan gender, yang di dalamnya poligami berfungsi bukan hanya sebagai praktik personal atau budaya tetapi juga sebagai suatu mekanisme penindasan yang dilembagakan.

Kata Kunci: Kuasa Patriarki, Poligami, Perempuan Banjar, Serdang Bedagai



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INTRODUCTION

Polygamy, in practice, is often associated with patriarchal domination, where men hold greater authority in marital relationships,¹ while women frequently find themselves in a subordinate position.² In various studies, both in Islamic and Western literature, polygamy remains a subject of complex debate.³ Some reject it on the grounds of gender injustice and potential violations of women's rights,⁴ while others view it as a negotiable practice, provided it adheres to principles of fairness and compliance with applicable legal provisions.⁵ Polygamy has also spread widely through online advocacy, receiving both acceptance and rejection.^{6,7} Nevertheless, it is often justified as a means of fulfilling shared needs, including efforts to secure a better future for children.⁸

Polygamy has diverse backgrounds within social contexts influenced by cultural, religious, and social status factors.⁹ Its practitioners come from various social strata, ranging from kings and religious leaders to ordinary people, each with different motives and justifications based on the values and beliefs upheld by their respective communities.¹⁰ In Java, particularly within the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environment, polygamy often serves as a symbol of a *kyai's* authority. The owner of a large *pesantren* is perceived as having stronger legitimacy if he has more than one wife, reflecting his status as an influential spiritual leader.¹¹ Meanwhile, in Batak society,

¹ Mariana Gonçalves Farias et al., "Structural Patriarchy and Male Dominance Hierarchies," in *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence* (Springer International Publishing, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85493-5_2152-1.

² Awinaba Amoah Adongo et al., "Gender and Leadership Positions: Understanding Women's Experiences and Challenges in Patriarchal Societies in Northern Ghana," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 43, no. 11/12 (2023): 1114–37, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-02-2023-0028>.

³ Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "Between Polygyny and Monogamy: Marriage in Saudi Arabia and Beyond," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 60, no. 1 (2022): 29–62, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2022.601.29-62>.

⁴ Theresia Dyah Wirastri and Stijn Cornelis van Huis, "The Second Wife: Ambivalences towards State Regulation of Polygamy in Indonesia," *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 53, no. 2 (2021): 246–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.2021.1912579>.

⁵ Rohmadi et al., "Positive and Negative Impacts of Poligamy in the Life of Muslim Family," *Madania: Jurnal Kajian Keislaman* 26, no. 1 (2022): 75, <https://doi.org/10.29300/madania.v26i1.3797>.

⁶ Rika Astari et al., "Indonesian Muslim Society's Reception of Sensation Language and Invitation to Polygamy on Social Media," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 13, no. 2 (2023): 369–97, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v13i2.369-397>.

⁷ Muhammad Noval Abdul Rozak et al., "Mononormativity Sentiment Towards Polygamous Ustadz on Social Media," *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, no. 2 (2024): 195–214, <https://doi.org/10.22515/dinika.v9i2.9927>.

⁸ Sukiati and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, "Adaptation of Polygamous Couples: The Experiences of Living Indonesian Women," *Asian Women* 39, no. 4 (2023): 59–77, <https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2023.12.39.4.59>; Muhammad Ansor, "Berbagi Suami Atas Nama Tuhan: Pengalaman Keseharian Perempuan Dipoligami Di Langsa," *Ijtihad: Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan* 14, no. 1 (2014): 41, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijtihad.v14i1.41-63>.

⁹ Nur Afni Khafsoh et al., "The Practice of Polygamy in Indonesia within the Perspectives of M. Quraish Shihab, Hussein Muhammad, and Nasaruddin Umar," *Jurnal Sosiologi Reflektif* 16, no. 2 (2022): 475–94, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jsr.v16i2.2307>.

¹⁰ Komnas Perempuan, *Poligami Dan Perselingkuhan* (Komnas Perempuan, 2013).

¹¹ Moh. Afandi et al., "Authority, Culture, and Sexuality in the Polygamy of Madurese Ulama's," *Ahkam: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 24, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.15408/ajis.v24i1.36237>.

polygamy is not merely a matter of authority but is also closely tied to clan inheritance. If the first wife does not bear a son, the husband may marry again to ensure the continuation of the lineage, which is a fundamental aspect of Batak social structure.¹² Thus, the diversity in polygamous practices reflects how cultural and religious factors shape marital relationship patterns within society.¹³

Research on polygamy in Banjar society has been previously examined from various perspectives. Mursalin¹⁴ explored it in a historical context, highlighting that polygamy has existed since the era of the Banjar Sultanate, meanwhile Helim¹⁵ discussed how Banjar scholars have both rejected and accepted polygamy, but only under strict conditions based on considerations of benefit (maslahah) and harm (mafsadah). Additionally, Nadhiroh¹⁶ examined polygamy within the basurung tradition, a practice among Tuan Guru aimed at symbolizing honor and social status. In line with this, polygamy is further reinforced by religious legitimacy and clerical authority.¹⁷ On the other hand Husin¹⁸ emphasized the demand for gender equality for Banjar women within religious traditions.

Based on the above discussion, this paper presents a distinctive perspective on polygamy as a manifestation of male patriarchal domination. It seeks to illustrate how Banjar men leverage patriarchal power relations in practicing polygamy. This power dynamic is depicted through the life history narratives of Banjar women in Serdang Bedagai, portraying polygamy as both a tangible and naturalized phenomenon. In this context, polygamy becomes an integral part of a cultural construct that continues to be maintained, reflecting the interplay between power, culture, and religion—each shaping and influencing one another.

¹² Ulfa Ramadhani Nasution, "Patriarchy Negotiation: Batak Women and the Domination of the Role of Cultural Space," *Al-Ahwal: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 17, no. 1 (2024): 71–92, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ahwal.2024.%x>.

¹³ Komnas Perempuan, *Poligami Dan Perselingkuhan*.

¹⁴ Mursalin, *Perempuan Banjar Dalam Arus Sejarah Gender Dari Masa Klasik Hingga Kontemporer* (Antasari Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Abdul Helim, "Poligami Perspektif Ulama Banjar," *ISLAMICA: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 12, no. 1 (2017): 50–79.

¹⁶ Wardatun Nadhiroh, "Religious and Gender Issues In the Tradition of Basurung and the Polygamy of Banjar Tuan Guru in South Kalimantan," *Al-Albab* 6, no. 2 (2017): 263, <https://doi.org/10.24260/alalbab.v6i2.674>.

¹⁷ Zainal Muttaqin and Masyithah Umar, "Delegitimization of Religious Motives in Polygamy in Banjar Society," *SYARIAH: Jurnal Hukum Dan Pemikiran* 24, no. 1 (2024): 120–35.

¹⁸ Husin and Gt. Muhammad Irhamna, "Equality And Gender Justice In Religious Rituals In Banjar Communities," *INTEGRASI: Jurnal Ilmiah Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 1, no. 01 (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.61590/int.v1i01.1>.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a narrative approach with the life history method as its primary data source, following the works of Ansor and Sukiati¹⁹. His approach was chosen to explore and understand the practice of polygamy among Banjar men through the lived experiences of Banjar women in Serdang Bedagai. As part of the *Urang Banjar* community, the researcher conducted in-depth observations during data collection. The data was obtained through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview technique, where polygamous Banjar women were asked to share their experiences. Interviews were conducted with both the first and second wives to capture diverse perspectives and illustrate the dynamics of polygamy from different viewpoints.

Although the experiences of Banjar women in Serdang Bedagai who participated in this study do not represent the entire *Urang Banjar* community, participant selection was based on the uniqueness of their experiences, which provide deep insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Once the data was collected, a data reduction process was conducted to filter relevant information in alignment with the research focus. The selected data was then presented in a narrative format to naturally reconstruct participants' experiences. This approach allows the study to generate evidence that serves as a foundation for analysis and conclusions regarding the phenomenon of polygamy among *Urang Banjar* in Serdang Bedagai

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Polygamy and *Urang Banjar*

The practice of polygamy within the *Urang Banjar* community has existed since the era of the Banjar Sultanate, where polygamy functioned as a political tool to consolidate power, expand influence, and maintain political stability.²⁰ During the reign of the Banjar Sultanate, wives were not merely companions to the king but also symbols of authority and political legitimacy. Polygamy and concubinage among the royal lineage (*bubuhan tutus*) often involved women from influential families to strengthen political alliances and secure power. Historical records reveal that Prince Antasari had two wives: his first wife, Ratu Antasari, was the daughter of Sultan Adam, while his second wife, Nyai Fatimah, was the sister of Temenggung Surapati. His marriage to Nyai Fatimah was not merely a personal union but also a strategic move to solidify military support and political strength.

¹⁹ Sukiati and Nor, "Adaptation of Polygamous Couples: The Experiences of Living Indonesian Women"; Ansor, "Berbagi Suami Atas Nama Tuhan: Pengalaman Keseharian Perempuan Dipoligami Di Langsa."

²⁰ Mursalin Mursalin, "Perempuan Banjar: Kajian Awal Tentang Sejarah Gender Abad XVIII – XX," *Yupa: Historical Studies Journal* 3, no. 2 (2020): 49–58, <https://doi.org/10.30872/yupa.v3i2.165>.

Beyond the aristocracy, polygamy was also practiced among the *jaba* (common people).²¹ For instance, the case of Nyai Aminah, who conceived a child out of wedlock from her relationship with Prince Abdul Rakhman. Marrying a woman from the common class was considered a violation of the strict regulations of the Sultanate, which required that heirs to the throne come from noble lineage. To preserve the royal bloodline, Prince Abdul Rakhman later married Ratu Siti, a woman of noble descent who met the criteria to bear a legitimate heir for the Sultanate.²²

Religious scholars have also played a significant role in the practice of polygamy.²³ One of the most prominent Islamic scholars in Kalimantan was Syaikh Arsyad Al-Banjari, who was highly revered as a *Tuan Guru* among the Banjar people. Historical records indicate that Syaikh Arsyad had eleven wives: Tuan Bajut, Tuan Bidur, Tuan Lipur, Tuan Guwat (Goh Hwat), Turiyah, Ratu Aminah binti Pangeran Thaha bin Sultan Tamjidillah, Tuan Palung, Tuan Kadarmanik, Tuan Markidah, Tuan Liyuh, and Tuan Dai.²⁴ Although various interpretations exist regarding the rationale behind polygamy such as ensuring justice, addressing the inability of the first wife to conceive, or responding to specific circumstances deemed urgent polygamy among *Tuan Guru* reflects the authoritative position of men in legitimizing the practice as part of Islamic teachings.²⁵

Polygamy tends to confine women to the domestic-reproductive sphere, where their roles are limited to household duties, particularly childbearing and child-rearing. This role is often regarded as an inherent aspect of womanhood, especially in societies that continue to uphold patriarchal structures within the family.²⁶ or instance, Ratu Siti was relegated to a subordinate position despite being the wife of a king. In royal marriages (*tutus raja-raja*), women from influential families were frequently integrated into diplomatic strategies aimed at strengthening inter-family ties among the nobility and expanding political influence.²⁷ Nevertheless, some scholars have opposed such practices, arguing that they reflect authoritarian tendencies.²⁸

²¹ Mursalin, *Perempuan Banjar Dalam Arus Sejarah Gender Dari Masa Klasik Hingga Kontemporer*.

²² Mursalin, *Perempuan Banjar Dalam Arus Sejarah Gender Dari Masa Klasik Hingga Kontemporer*.

²³ Mursalin, *Perempuan Banjar Dalam Arus Sejarah Gender Dari Masa Klasik Hingga Kontemporer*.

²⁴ Mursalin, *Perempuan Banjar Dalam Arus Sejarah Gender Dari Masa Klasik Hingga Kontemporer*.

²⁵ Helim, "Poligami Perspektif Ulama Banjar."

²⁶ Sam'ani Sam'ani et al., "Pragmatism of Polygamous Family In Muslim Society: Beyond Islamic Law," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 7, no. 1 (2023): 321, <https://doi.org/10.22373/sjhk.v7i1.15874>.

²⁷ Mursalin, *Perempuan Banjar Dalam Arus Sejarah Gender Dari Masa Klasik Hingga Kontemporer*.

²⁸ Supriansyah Supriansyah and Alfin Nor Hasan, "Persinggungan Agama, Pengasuhan Anak, Dan Media Sosial: Penelusuran Dunia Digital Perempuan Muda," *Muadalah* 12, no. 1 (2024): 51–64, <https://doi.org/10.18592/muadalah.v12i1.12741>.

Polygamy among the Banjar people derives its legitimacy from religious perspectives. As Islam spread across South Kalimantan, this practice increasingly became regarded as an integral part of religious teachings, rooted in Quranic injunctions and the precedents set by Islamic scholars, despite varying interpretations in its implementation.²⁹ *Tuan Guru* (Islamic scholars) played a crucial role in shaping societal understanding of polygamy's legal status, ensuring its persistence as a normative aspect of Banjar social life. These scholars often emphasized that marrying multiple wives was not merely a personal choice but also a form of religious observance, provided that justice among wives was upheld.³⁰ Consequently, polygamy among the Banjar people not only reflects social stratification and power dynamics but also gains legitimacy from religious norms embedded within the community.³¹

Interestingly, the legitimacy of polygamy among the *Urang Banjar* has become deeply intertwined with local traditions, as reflected in oral culture, particularly in a well-known syair (traditional verse) that states:

Babini satu adalah wajar

Babini dua hanyar belajar

Babini tiga itu kurang ajar

Babini empat hanyar Urang Banjar

This syair is not only widely recognized among the *Urang Banjar* community in Kalimantan but has also spread to *Urang Banjar* communities in Serdang Bedagai.³² Although it has undergone cultural adaptations and is expressed in different forms, its core meaning remains consistent. In various contexts, religious scholars (*Tuan Guru*) frequently reference this syair, either explicitly or implicitly, during religious sermons to reinforce the notion that polygamy represents an ideal fulfillment of Islamic teachings. While often delivered in a lighthearted manner, this expression embodies an entrenched ethno-poetic tradition that has shaped the collective consciousness of the *Urang Banjar*.

As the syair continues to circulate among the general *Urang Banjar* population, it perpetuates a cultural hegemony that sustains the legitimacy of polygamy within the community. The transmission of such oral traditions not only reflects the embeddedness of polygamy within the Banjar socio-religious framework but also demonstrates how cultural narratives function as tools for reinforcing social norms and power structures. In this way, the practice of polygamy is not

²⁹ Helim, "Poligami Perspektif Ulama Banjar."

³⁰ Muttaqin and Umar, "Delegitimization of Religious Motives in Polygamy in Banjar Society."

³¹ Nadhiroh, "Religious and Gender Issues In the Tradition of Basurung and the Polygamy of Banjar *Tuan Guru* in South Kalimantan."

³² Observasi, "Observasi Di Kampung Banjar Serdang Bedagai," preprint, 2024.

merely an individual choice but is deeply embedded in a broader cultural and religious discourse that legitimizes male authority within the *Urang Banjar* society

Poetic expressions that promote polygamy have evolved into a doctrinal framework that has seamlessly merged with tradition, ultimately being perceived as a practice that enhances a man's social standing. The legitimacy of polygamy is further reinforced through a cultural practice known as *basurung*, in which marriage to a *Tuan Guru* (Islamic scholar) is considered a prestigious achievement. The status of being a *Tuan Guru*'s wife is not only a source of personal pride but is also believed to bring social honor, economic stability, and spiritual blessings. However, this practice is not without controversy, particularly regarding the extent to which women who offer themselves for such marriages make an entirely autonomous decision or are influenced by family pressures seeking to elevate their social status. It is undeniable that *Tuan Guru* occupy esteemed positions as spiritual leaders, possessing charisma, authority, and sufficient economic means to support multiple wives. Many women believe that marrying a religious figure ensures not only worldly happiness but also eternal rewards in the afterlife.³³

Thus, it can be understood that polygamy within the *Urang Banjar* community is deeply rooted in a historical context where women were positioned as political instruments to expand and consolidate power. Over time, polygamy evolved into a customary practice perceived as natural and legitimized by religious teachings, reinforced through the authority of the *Tuan Guru*.³⁴ This practice has not only endured as a religious tradition but has also become institutionalized as a cultural norm. The normalization of this practice has significant implications for Banjar women, as it further restricts their roles and autonomy within both the family and society.

Being a Banjar Woman

The Banjar people in Serdang Bedagai are part of a diaspora originating from Kalimantan, forced to migrate due to warfare and subsequently settling in coastal areas. Their initial arrival was welcomed by the Deli Sultanate, which employed them in the tobacco plantation sector and involved them in the construction of irrigation dams.³⁵ Over time, their presence enriched the local culture, as they retained traditions and identities deeply rooted in their Kalimantan heritage.³⁶

³³ Wardatun Nadhiroh, "Poligami Tuan Guru (Analisis Atas Budaya Perempuan 'Basurung' Di Banjar)," *Institutional Digital Repository UIN Antasari Banjarmasin*, 2016, 1–25.

³⁴ Muttaqin and Umar, "Delegitimization of Religious Motives in Polygamy in Banjar Society."

³⁵ Faisal Riza, "Perilaku Politik Orang Banjar Di Perbaungan," *Jurnal POLITEIA* 3, no. 1 (2011): 1–12.

³⁶ Abu Bakar and Agung Prayogo, "Urang Banjar Dan Tarekat Sammaniyah Di Banua Urang: Sebuah Penelusuran Awal Di Serdang Bedagai, Sumatera Utara," *Hikmah* 20, no. 2 (2023): 345–59, <https://doi.org/10.53802/hikmah.v20i2.331>; Agung Prayogo, "Competing for Spiritual Authority in Majelis Sholawat Al-Banjari (MSB) in Serdang Bedagai," *Jurnal Studi Agama Dan Masyarakat* 20, no. 2 (2024): 121–32, <https://doi.org/10.23971/jsam.v20i2.9053>.

Despite undergoing assimilation through intermarriage with other ethnic groups in Serdang Bedagai, the Banjar people predominantly prefer to marry within their own community. This inclination is guided by the philosophy of *bubuhan*, which underscores the significance of shared cultural values and religious identity in marriage.³⁷

On the other hand, certain stereotypes about the *Urang Banjar* have emerged among other ethnic groups. They are often associated with mystical abilities, physical invulnerability, and a rough, harsh demeanor,³⁸ leading to concerns about the potential for domestic violence when marrying Banjar men. Additionally, the continued practice of polygamy has become another factor that makes women hesitant to marry Banjar men. However, these negative stereotypes have little impact on Banjar women. Both Banjar men and women share the same cultural values and maintain a collective identity as *Urang Banjar*, reinforcing their sense of belonging within the community.

Based on observations conducted within the Banjar community in Serdang Bedagai, the author found that Banjar women who marry Banjar men are often in polygamous marriages.

Table 1: The Profile of Banjar Women in Polygamous Marriages

Name	Age	Residence	Ethnicity	Occupation	Children	Education	Religion
Ayak	50	Serdang Bedagai	Banjar	Housewife	2	Primary School	Islam
Tini	35	Serdang Bedagai	Banjar	Freelance Worker	1	Senior High School	Islam
Andut	33	Serdang Bedagai	Banjar	Freelance Worker	1	Senior High School	Islam

The profiles of Banjar women are written using initials or pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Ayak was married to a Banjar man through an arranged marriage at the age of 15. The arrangement was driven by economic considerations, as her mother hoped that the marriage would improve the family's welfare. Ayak only completed primary school education and was forced to work at the age of 12 due to financial hardship. After ten years of marriage and having two children, Ayak entered a polygamous marriage as the first wife.

Tini, after completing her senior high school education, immediately entered the workforce as a freelance laborer, following the common practice in her village. Her primary principle in choosing a job was ensuring its halal status, regardless of the type of work involved. She married

³⁷ Arif Rahman Hakim, "Urang Banjar Asli, Urang Banjar Keturunan Jarwo, Terbangunnya Hubungan Sosial Yang 'Baru' Bagi Perantau Banjar Di Yogyakarta," in *Jurnal Antropologi UGM*, vol. 1, no. 2, preprint, Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2016.

³⁸ Nor Irpansyah, *Ilmu Kesaktian Orang Banjar (Analisis Terhadap Kitab Mistik Lokal Tentang Ilmu Kesaktian)* (Banjarmasin, 2019).

at the age of 20 with the hope of receiving financial support from her husband. As the first wife, she lived in a monogamous marriage for five years before her husband decided to practice polygamy. This occurred when he migrated to Kalimantan to work as a construction laborer, leaving Tini behind with their only child.

Similarly, Andut, after finishing senior high school, also began working as a freelance laborer before securing a position at a fish processing factory in Serdang Bedagai. At the age of 22, she decided to marry. For three years, she remained unaware that her husband had already been married and had children. Andut had been deceived into marriage after becoming pregnant out of wedlock. The profiles of Ayak, Tini, and Andut reveal that economic hardship was a key factor in their decision to marry, and they ultimately became victims of polygamy within their marriages.

The Voices of Banjar Women in Polygamous Marriages

Polygamy among the Banjar community in Serdang Bedagai is shaped by various factors, as revealed through the experiences of wives interviewed in this study. Banjar women in polygamous marriages face structural pressures that lead to powerlessness in determining their life choices. While the justifications for polygamy are often unreasonable, these women find themselves trapped within a patriarchal power dynamic imposed by their husbands. As a result, they are left without viable alternatives, whether to endure the marriage or seek divorce.

Having a Daughter

The first case is experienced by Ayak,³⁹ who married a Banjar man and became part of a polygamous marriage because of her husband's wealth. In addition to being physically strong and handsome, he was also a leader of an organization, embodying the ideal masculine image. His first marriage was to a woman from a *Tuan Guru* family, which further convinced Ayak of his worth as a husband. However, marital realities often do not align with expectations. A marriage built on social status and ethnicity rather than compatibility in personality and character frequently leads to conflict. Differences in background and expectations regarding household roles became the primary source of disputes, ultimately resulting in deep regret.

The failure of Ayak's first marriage further highlights the entrenched patriarchal system. Her marriage was arranged, largely influenced by the concept of *bubuhan*—a kinship-based social bond among the Banjar people. Both Ayak and her husband came from Banjar families with interconnected *bubuhan* ties. She was married off at the age of 15, an age widely considered too young and emotionally immature for marriage.⁴⁰ However, this concern was often overlooked due

³⁹ "Wawancara Ayak," preprint, Serdang Bedagai, 2025.

⁴⁰ Javad Yoosefi Lebni et al., "Exploring the Consequences of Early Marriage: A Conventional Content Analysis," *INQUIRY: The Journal of Health Care Organization, Provision, and Financing* 60 (January 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00469580231159963>.

to economic pressures. Her parents prioritized financial survival over age appropriateness in marriage, believing that marrying her off would reduce the family's economic burden. The expectation was that, through marriage, she would be financially supported and assume responsibilities both physically and emotionally.⁴¹ Additionally, arranged marriages within the Banjar community were not merely economic decisions but also reinforced social status. Marrying within the same ethnic group was perceived as a means of maintaining or elevating one's accepted social standing.⁴²

The arranged marriage had direct consequences, ultimately leading to her husband's practice of polygamy. Initially, the matchmaking process did not reveal the common stereotypes often associated with Banjar men. Due to the nature of the arrangement, Ayak had little opportunity to understand her husband's character, temperament, and personal habits before marriage.⁴³ During the matchmaking process, the groom's family consistently portrayed him in a positive light to win the sympathy and approval of the bride's parents. The marriage arrangement was deemed successful once the bride's family consented to a formal meeting and agreed on a wedding date. However, after marriage, Ayak gradually discovered that her husband did not embody the religious values typically associated with Banjar men,⁴⁴ instead, he exhibited abusive behavior, engaged in extramarital affairs, gambled, and indulged in alcohol consumption.⁴⁵

The dominance of patriarchy in the practice of polygamy is also evident in behaviors that emphasize male dominance and physical superiority. Ayak suffered from domestic violence as a result of her husband's gambling and excessive alcohol consumption. Whenever he returned home intoxicated, she became the target of his aggression enduring physical abuse, verbal outbursts, and arbitrary mistreatment. For women married to Banjar men, domestic violence became a recurring ordeal, revealing a harsh reality they had never anticipated before entering marriage. The husband's actions reflected a patriarchal superiority, reinforcing the notion that women were powerless to resist male authority.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Hendra Pratama Sihombing and Cutmetia Cutmetia, "Analisis Subjective Well-Being Pada Pasangan Yang Menikah Pada Usia Dini," *Jurnal EDUCATIO: Jurnal Pendidikan Indonesia* 10, no. 1 (2024): 670–80.

⁴² Hakim, "Urang Banjar Asli, Urang Banjar Keturunan Jarwo, Terbangunnya Hubungan Sosial Yang 'Baru' Bagi Perantau Banjar Di Yogyakarta."

⁴³ Robert Parkin, "Arranged Marriages: Whose Choice and Why? Reflections on the Principles Underlying Spouse Selection Worldwide," *History and Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2021): 271–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2021.1905255>.

⁴⁴ Mutimmatul Faidah et al., "Islamic Values in Banjar Bridal Makeup: Developing Local Wisdom as Character Education," *Humanus* 20, no. 1 (2021): 84, <https://doi.org/10.24036/humanus.v20i1.111417>.

⁴⁵ "Wawancara Ayak."

⁴⁶ Parisa Rahmanian et al., "Prevalence of Mental Health Problems in Women in Polygamous versus Monogamous Marriages: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 24, no. 3 (2021): 339–51, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-020-01070-8>.

Without Ayak's knowledge, her husband had already practiced polygamy and had one child. He also secretly built a house for his second wife, while neglecting to provide financial support to Ayak. Meanwhile, the second wife was granted every financial request she made. Ayak eventually decided to earn a living on her own by running a small waste-collection stall to support herself and her two children. Her husband justified polygamy as a means to have a daughter.⁴⁷

Polygamy further reinforced the dominance of power rooted in economic status and material ownership. As a wealthy man, Ayak's husband exercised full control over the household, unilaterally imposing his will upon his wife. Economic violence became even more pronounced, particularly after the second marriage was revealed and he was blessed with a daughter. Instead of ensuring fair treatment, he increasingly subjected Ayak to physical violence, especially whenever she demanded the financial support he had previously promised while insisting that his second wife remain undisturbed.⁴⁸ The negative impacts of polygamy became more evident over time, particularly when the second wife gave birth to two daughters. As the situation worsened, Ayak eventually filed for divorce as an act of resistance against the injustice she endured. However, her request was denied on the grounds that her husband was still considered capable of providing equal treatment.⁴⁹

Violence against wives reveals the harsh realities faced by women. Wives endure physical abuse as a result of emotional exploitation and excessive domestic burdens. Their suffering is not limited to physical mistreatment; beyond physical and psychological violence, oppression also manifests in economic aspects.⁵⁰ husband, who is supposed to bear financial responsibility, instead neglects his obligations. He deliberately withholds financial support. The persistent differences in behavior and attitude exhibited by the husband serve as an outlet for his fading love toward his wife. This reasoning demonstrates that polygamy is not merely driven by biological needs; rather, it becomes a patriarchal tool to fulfill certain expectations within the family, including the desire to have children of a specific gender.⁵¹

The husband's patriarchal dominance in a polygamous marriage does not end there. With limited options, Ayak chose to stay—not out of love or familial harmony, but primarily to ensure that her children received a proper education.⁵² Education becomes a crucial factor in sustaining a

⁴⁷ "Wawancara Ayak."

⁴⁸ Daniel Seligson and Anne E. C. McCants, "Polygamy, the Commodification of Women, and Underdevelopment," *Social Science History* 46, no. 1 (2022): 1–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2021.23>.

⁴⁹ "Wawancara Ayak."

⁵⁰ Willius Kogoya, "Peran Perempuan Suku Dani Bagi Ketahanan Keluarga Dalam Budaya Patriarki," *Jurnal Lemhannas RI* 9, no. 1 (2023): 55–69, <https://doi.org/10.55960/jlri.v9i1.376>.

⁵¹ Qorir Yunia Sari Qorir Yunia Sari, "Kampanye Poligami Coach Hafidin Dalam Perspektif Feminisme," *Jurnal Kajian Islam Interdisipliner* 7, no. 2 (2022): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jkii.v7i2.1316>.

⁵² "Wawancara Ayak."

polygamous marriage, even as the patriarchal system continues to uphold male dominance over women. Structural constraints make it difficult for women to escape the cycle of polygamy, particularly when economic factors become the primary determinant of household survival.⁵³

The disparity in financial support serves as concrete evidence of polygamous practices. The second wife must struggle to support herself, hoping to secure a better future through her children's education. Despite her husband's abusive behavior and lack of responsibility, Ayak continuously instills moral values in her children. As a result, the relationship between the children of the first and second wives remains peaceful. No conflicts arise; instead, they protect and accept one another as part of the same family. For Ayak, accepting the presence of the second wife is perceived as part of "God's destiny," a means to avoid conflicts by surrendering to polygamy (Interview with Ayak, 2025). This form of acceptance emerges from the physical and psychological pressure she endures, leaving her with no viable alternatives. Submission to fate serves as a moral reinforcement and a spiritual trial that she believes must be endured to bring blessings into her life.⁵⁴

Migrating in Search of Livelihood

The second case of polygamy was experienced by Tini, whose husband married a young woman in Kalimantan. Her husband migrated to Kalimantan, seeking her blessing under the pretext of improving their family's economic situation, as migration was seen as a way to achieve better financial stability. According to Tini, her husband worked as a construction laborer, yet his income was still insufficient to lift their family out of poverty. Upon arriving in the new land, however, her husband became involved in a polygamous relationship, which began through his interactions with the family of the Dayak tribal leader where he was staying. His decision to reside with the tribal leader was based on the belief that living in the interior of Kalimantan, near the construction site where he worked, would provide him with a sense of security. Moreover, his Banjar ethnic ties played a role in helping him integrate more easily into the local community.⁵⁵

This case of polygamy also illustrates the dynamics of power and Banjar masculinity, even in a foreign land. Similar to Ayak's experience, Tini's husband exhibited a pattern of seeking relationships with young women. The wages he was supposed to send home were instead spent indulging in pleasure with Dayak women, who were often described as beautiful and fair-skinned. In this polygamous relationship, marriage was not merely a means to establish social power but also a tool for fulfilling personal desires, without consideration for the well-being of the family left

⁵³ Firdaus Firdaus et al., "The Protection of Islamic Women in Indonesia: Evaluation of Polygamy Sanctions and Its Implications," *KARSA Journal of Social and Islamic Culture* 31, no. 1 (2023): 79–108, <https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v31i1.10611>.

⁵⁴ Suaidi Suaidi, "Dinamika Psikologis Perkawinan Poligami (Menyingkap Suasana Batin Isteri Yang Dipoligami)," *Mandub : Jurnal Politik, Sosial, Hukum Dan Humaniora* 1, no. 3 (2023): 159–74, <https://doi.org/10.59059/mandub.v1i3.372>.

⁵⁵ "Wawancara Tini," preprint, Serdang Bedagai, 2025.

behind. The appeal of Banjar men reveals a certain social construction of masculinity. The Dayak woman, in turn, developed an attachment to him, as he frequently provided her with money and attention. This social construct reinforced the perception that she was fortunate and that he was a responsible man.

Marriage in Dayak ethnic traditions is considered sacred, carrying both magical and strong social commitment aspects. A significant cultural prohibition exists: individuals from outside the Dayak community who marry a Dayak person are not allowed to return to their homeland. The Dayak people uphold a cultural belief system that reinforces women's attachment to marriage through customary laws.⁵⁶ Tini's husband secretly married a Dayak woman, which had severe consequences for her well-being. As a result, she no longer received the monthly financial support she had relied on. Their communication also became extremely limited due to long-distance constraints, even with access to mobile phones.⁵⁷ Facing economic hardship, Tini decided to support herself and her child by becoming a singer or (*biduan*), relying on performance wages and audience tips for survival. This case exemplifies how polygamy can push abandoned wives toward desperate measures, leading to behavioral shifts that may be perceived as negative, all due to the husband's failure to fulfill his financial responsibilities.

Banjar men who continue practicing polygamy while migrating exemplify deeply rooted patriarchal dominance. The initial promise of improving the family's social status through migration ultimately results in betrayal, as husbands marry Dayak women and redirect financial support away from their first families. Patriarchy maintains economic control, allowing husbands to dictate financial distribution while depriving the first wife of her rights—an act of economic violence that is often normalized. Polygamous marriage is not solely driven by religious or biological factors but also serves as an expansion of male power over women from different cultural backgrounds.⁵⁸ Women in these marriages are reduced to objects of ownership, reinforcing systemic neglect and legitimizing polygamy as an unquestioned male right. Within this patriarchal framework, polygamy is not merely a personal choice but a strategic tool for sustaining power imbalances.⁵⁹

Fulfillment of Sexual Desires

A similar experience was shared by Andut.⁶⁰ The pattern of polygamous marriages often reveals that Banjar men use wealth and physical attractiveness as key instruments to attract women.

⁵⁶ Maurinus Moris Mahri et al., "Sakralitas Perkawinan Cangkang dalam Adat Manggarai Ditinjau dari Perspektif Kitab Hukum Kanonik," *Dharmasmrti: Jurnal Ilmu Agama Dan Kebudayaan* 22, no. 2 SE-Articles (2022): 25–34, <https://doi.org/10.32795/ds.v22i2.3377>.

⁵⁷ "Wawancara Tini."

⁵⁸ Farooq-e-Azam et al., "Polygamy in Islam: Cultural Pressures and Religious Justifications in Pakistan," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.112.13>.

⁵⁹ Abdu Ihram Prakon et al., "Women and Polygamous in the Construction of East Flores Community Customs," *Mazahibuna* 5, no. 2 (2023): 149–65, <https://doi.org/10.24252/mazahibuna.vi.39903>.

⁶⁰ "Wawancara Andut," preprint, Serdang Bedagai, 2025.

When proposing marriage, they bring religious figures or *Tuan Guru* to testify that the groom is devout, hardworking, and physically appealing. In polygamous unions, economic and physical attributes serve as tools to allure women, primarily to fulfill sexual desires.⁶¹ A common justification for polygamy is the claim that the first wife is unable to satisfy her husband's sexual needs—an excuse often fabricated to legitimize taking a second wife. Andut, the second wife, was known for her strong work ethic, while the first wife was mainly reduced to a sexual object, despite the fact that the husband himself was idle and unwilling to seek employment.⁶² Banjar men, in this case, exploit women like Andut as providers of economic security. She was coerced into marriage after an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, illustrating how beauty is often pursued solely as a means of sexual gratification rather than for building a stable and harmonious family. Men who engage in polygamy under such circumstances tend to select women based purely on physical attractiveness, disregarding family well-being. Meanwhile, the second wife is primarily seen as a financial asset rather than an equal partner in marriage.⁶³

The consequences of polygamy manifest in the unequal treatment of wives based on physical appearance and economic roles within the household. Andut, perceived as less attractive but industrious, often becomes the financial backbone of the family. In contrast, the first wife, chosen primarily for her beauty, is reduced to fulfilling her husband's sexual desires without being given equal household responsibilities. This economic dynamic creates an imbalance in marital relationships, leading to household disharmony.⁶⁴

Such polygamous marriages also have adverse effects on the children born into them. The social status of these children is often negatively impacted, as they experience social stigma and exclusion due to being perceived as products of a dysfunctional family. They frequently face shame and social pressure, with some being bullied and labeled as the children of a "*serial husband*." Consequently, the first wife and Atun filed for divorce upon discovering the deception they had endured. This situation exacerbates the children's distress, as they not only lose their father figure but also receive insufficient attention from their mother.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Muhammad Nasrulloh and Doli Witro, "Poligami Sebagai Perkawinan Abnormal: Kajian Terhadap Syariat Islam," *Musāwa Jurnal Studi Gender Dan Islam* 20, no. 1 (2021): 17–30, <https://doi.org/10.14421/musawa.2021.201.17-30>.

⁶² "Wawancara Andut."

⁶³ Pearl Stewart et al., "Marriage as a Factor in Self-Determination for West African Women," *Journal of African American Studies* 26, no. 2 (2022): 183–202, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-022-09580-8>.

⁶⁴ Almizan Almizan and Mufti Ulil Amri, "Ketimpangan Peran Domestik Rumah Tangga Dalam Cerai Gugat Pada Masyarakat Minangkabau," *Indonesian Journal of Religion and Society* 3, no. 2 (2021): 103–10, <https://doi.org/10.36256/ijrs.v3i2.193>.

⁶⁵ Ismail Shaiful Bahari et al., "Psychological Impact of Polygamous Marriage on Women and Children: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 21, no. 1 (2021): 823, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-021-04301-7>.

The Power of Patriarchy in Urang Banjar's Polygamous Marriages

Polygamous marriages among *Urang Banjar* reflect the dynamics of patriarchy, which operates in three main forms: material power, symbolic power, and normative power. These three aspects reinforce each other, creating a social structure that benefits men while subordinating women. This phenomenon can be analyzed through the lens of structuralist feminist theory, which identifies six structures of patriarchy, including economic dominance, cultural control, and normative legitimacy through religion.

Material Power: economy as a tool of exploitation

Material power in Urang Banjar's polygamy is reflected in men's control over economic resources. Wealth is often used as the primary justification for polygamy, based on the assumption that financially capable men have the right to marry more than one woman. However, research has shown that this economic control leads to the exploitation of women in polygamous households. Women's financial dependence on their husbands exacerbates their vulnerability. Kandiyoti's study on *bargaining with patriarchy* suggests that women in patriarchal systems often accept these inequalities as a form of compromise, given their limited access to resources. In practice, women in polygamous families often lose their rights to economic resources, as men have full control over financial distribution. In some cases, second or third wives are used as economic labor, while the first wife serves as a mere symbol of social status.⁶⁶ Thus, material power in polygamy is not just a form of economic dominance but also a tool of exploitation that legitimizes gender inequality.

Symbolic Power: polygamy as a legitimization of social status

Symbolic power in Urang Banjar's polygamous practices is evident in how society perceives men who engage in polygamy as individuals with higher social status. In this context, polygamy is not merely a marital institution but also a symbol of male power within the community. In deeply patriarchal systems, a man's status is often measured by his ability to "manage" multiple households. Reveals that in communities with hierarchical gender structures, men who practice polygamy are more respected because they are perceived as having the economic and moral capacity to lead multiple families. The prevailing narrative in Banjar society reinforces the idea that men with multiple wives hold greater social value.

Additionally, polygamy functions as an instrument to maintain gender hierarchy within the household. Men have full authority to decide whether they want to marry again, while women are left with no choice but to accept the decision.⁶⁷ The social status disparity between polygamous and

⁶⁶ Farooq-e-Azam et al., "Polygamy in Islam: Cultural Pressures and Religious Justifications in Pakistan."

⁶⁷ Almizan and Amri, "Ketimpangan Peran Domestik Rumah Tangga Dalam Cerai Gugat Pada Masyarakat Minangkabau."

monogamous men further strengthens male dominance and normalizes female subordination within family and societal structures.

Normative Power: cultural and religious legitimacy as a means of control

Normative power in Urang Banjar's polygamy is rooted in cultural and religious legitimacy that reinforces male dominance. Islam is frequently used as a justification for polygamy, even though, in practice, it often deviates from the ideal principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Religious patriarchy highlights how certain religious teachings are used as tools to maintain gender inequality. In Banjar communities, cultural and religious authorities strengthen the legitimacy of polygamy through the role of *Tuan Guru* (Islamic scholars), who provide theological justification for the practice. The prevailing narrative presents polygamy as part of the *sunnah*, despite the fact that, in Islamic legal studies, the requirements for just polygamy are rarely met.⁶⁸

As a result, women in this community face not only economic domination but also social and religious pressures that compel them to accept polygamy as normal and even desirable. Internalized patriarchy causes many women to feel they have no space to resist, as social and religious pressures place them in a passive position. Polygamy is not only permitted but also promoted as a standard of hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing male superiority within the community.

CONCLUSION

The practice of polygamy among Urang Banjar is inseparable from cultural constructions, religious legitimization, and the patriarchal system that reinforces male power. Polygamy has become deeply rooted in Banjar traditions, supported by religious authorities who provide legal justification. The prevailing religious and cultural narratives in Banjar society frame polygamy as an affirmation of masculinity and male dominance. Women in polygamous marriages experience disparities in economic, social, and psychological aspects. The life histories of Ayak, Tini, and Andut illustrate how Banjar women in polygamous marriages are often forced to submit and accept their circumstances. Their powerlessness in this system is exacerbated by economic pressures and social norms that regard polygamy as normal and inevitable. Some women choose divorce as an act of resistance, though it does not necessarily free them from the intricate web of patriarchal power structures. Thus, polygamy among Urang Banjar cannot be separated from the patriarchal structure that positions men as the primary holders of power. It remains an integral part of the broader social mechanism that sustains gender hierarchy within the household

⁶⁸ Shaiful Bahari et al., "Psychological Impact of Polygamous Marriage on Women and Children: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis."

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