



"Barlake" and 'Adl: Discourse Analysis Sakinah Family Education for Muslim Women's Empowerment in Eastern Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The dialectical interplay between the Barlake (dowry) tradition in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Indonesia, and the Islamic concept of 'adl (justice), along with its implications for discourses on family well-being education and the empowerment of Muslim women. Employing a phenomenological qualitative design and critical discourse analysis involving 33 participants, the research reveals a significant commodification of Barlake, transforming it into a financial and psychological burden that contravenes the principles of maqashid al-shari'ah (the higher objectives of Islamic law). The findings indicate both philosophical convergences between the original ethos of Barlake and the values of 'adl, as well as observable societal resistance and negotiation. Non-formal Islamic education utilizing a reconciliatory-adaptive approach proved effective as a conflict mediator. As a key implication, this study formulates a Maqashid-Based Empowerment Policy for Customary Contexts (M-BEPC) framework, integrating educational, regulatory, and economic dimensions to achieve substantive justice. This research contributes to the discourse on locally-grounded Islamic education and contextual public policy innovation.

Keywords: *Indigenous Epistemology, Maqashid al-Shari'ah, Public Policy*



INTRODUCTION

Marriage in society constitutes not merely a sacred religious bond but also a complex socio-cultural institution where local and global values interact, collide, and negotiate (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017). In East Nusa Tenggara Province (NTT), Indonesia, particularly among the indigenous communities of Timor Island, the Barlake tradition (dowry) holds a central position as a social mechanism that transcends two individuals, serving to unite two extensive family clans (Fox, 1991). However, within contemporary socio-economic dynamics, the practice of Barlake has undergone significant commodification and distortion of meaning, frequently transforming from a symbol of respect into a burdensome financial obligation, especially for the bride's family (Zaman et al., 2014). This Timorese matrimonial tradition, known as *Berlaki* in Indonesian, *Barlaque* in Portuguese, or *Barlake* in Tetum, refers to the wedding customs of Timor Island, a region divided between Indonesia and Timor Leste. This transformation generates tension between cultural preservation and principles of justice, rendering it a critical and relevant subject of inquiry.

From an Islamic education perspective, the objective of marriage is to realize a *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* family, fundamentally grounded in the concept of 'adl (justice) as its cornerstone (Wijaya et al., 2025). The concept of 'adl in Islam is comprehensive, encompassing vertical justice towards Allah and horizontal justice in human relations, including specifically the relationship between spouses and their extended families (Maulana et al., 2025). When contemporary Barlake practices create debt burdens, trigger conflicts, or diminish women's dignity, they deviate from the *maqashid al-shari'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law), particularly the preservation of wealth (*hifzh al-mal*), lineage (*hifzh al-nasl*), and honour (*hifzh al-'ird*) (Evrard, 2017). Consequently, the dialectic between Barlake and the concept of 'adl necessitates a transformative educational approach, extending beyond formal settings like madrasahs to non-formal Islamic education institutions such as Islamic boarding schools and *majelis taklim* (community learning groups) that engage directly with society.

The commodification of Barlake has induced serious socio-economic consequences, including increased economic vulnerability and psychological burdens for the bride's family (Jayadi, 2022). Recent studies confirm that financial pressure from high dowries directly correlates with escalated domestic conflict in agrarian communities (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017). This



situation creates a paradox wherein a tradition intended to unite potentially erodes the foundation of the *sakinah* family, a core objective of marriage in Islam (Nawaz & Hassan, 2025). The economic vulnerability of women makes this a pressing public policy issue requiring responsive regulatory approaches (Jayadi, 2022). Research demonstrates that financial pressure from dowry traditions can potentially hinder the achievement of sustainable development goals at the community level. Therefore, evidence-based policy intervention is required to reconstruct *Barlake* practices aligned with principles of justice and family well-being (Nawaz & Hassan, 2025).

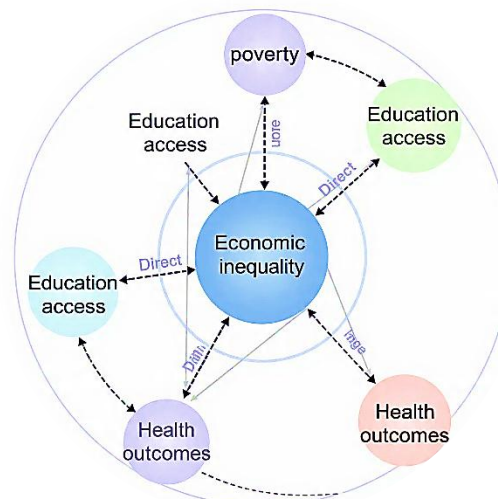


Figure 1.

Problem in the Thematic Network Diagram

(Source: processed by researchers, 2025)

The urgency of this research is reinforced by the limited number of studies integrating critical analysis of local traditions with the *maqashid syari'ah* framework within the context of Islamic Education (Srimulyani, 2007). Dominant literature tends to focus on Javanese-Sumatran contexts, thereby overlooking the unique dynamics of Eastern Indonesia, such as *Barlake* practices in NTT (Wijaya et al., 2025). This study is thus imperative to generate contextual family education models and effective, evidence-based public empowerment policies. The significance of this research lies in its endeavour to bridge Islamic theological-normative discourses with the lived socio-cultural realities of Muslim communities in Eastern Indonesia. This study holds strong relevance to public sector innovation issues, particularly in formulating inclusive and contextual policies for family education and women's empowerment. By deeply understanding *Barlake* dynamics, local governments can design policies that avoid being judgmental or culturally erosive,



but rather empower communities to revitalize their noble cultural values in harmony with the principles of justice and equality espoused by Islamic Education and national development (Sadiqi, 2014).

Based on a review of recent literature, several studies have discussed mahar (dower) in Islam and women's position in Indonesian family law (Nisa, 2018). However, significant research gaps persist. First, most studies on Barlake remain descriptive-anthropological and have not critically engaged with Islamic theological frameworks, particularly the concepts of 'adl and sakinah family education (Zaman et al., 2014). Second, discourse on sakinah family education in Indonesia is still dominated by Javanese-Sumatran perspectives and contexts, consequently neglecting the cultural specificities of Eastern Indonesia, where customary institutions like Barlake remain potent (Lazzarini et al., 2020). Third, despite numerous studies on Muslim women's empowerment, very limited research specifically explores how public policy can be formulated based on analysing conflicts between customary and religious values, particularly in regions with socio-demographic characteristics like NTT (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017).

Based on this identified gap, the research problem formulated in this study is: "How does the dialectic between the Barlake tradition and the concept of 'adl in Islam shape the discourse on sakinah family education, and what are the implications of this dialectic for formulating empowerment policies for Muslim women in NTT?"

To address this problem, the objectives of this research are: first, to empirically and deeply describe the practices, meanings, and socio-economic impacts of Barlake on Muslim families in NTT; second, to critically analyse the alignment and contradictions between the Barlake tradition and the concept of 'adl in Islam through the maqashid al-shari'ah approach; third, to formulate an integrative and contextual policy model related to the sakinah family for Timorese society, based on a synthesis of local wisdom and Islamic values, yielding strategic and operational policy recommendations for public sector stakeholders to support the empowerment of Muslim women in NTT.

Contributions and novel aspects to the fields of Islamic Education and public policy studies. First, regarding substantive knowledge, it enriches the discourse on local wisdom-based Islamic Education by presenting perspectives from Eastern Indonesia, which are still rarely heard, thereby correcting Java-centric discursive dominance. Second, methodologically, it combines a



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critical ethnographic approach with analysis of Islamic texts (tafsir and fiqh), producing a sharp synthesis of empirical data and normative theory. Third, in terms of application and policy innovation, the recommendations generated are not technical and uniform solutions, but rather an adaptive and participatory policy model involving collaborative actors from custom, religion, and the state, a form of governance innovation crucial for managing Indonesia's cultural diversity.

Thus, this manuscript is expected to substantively contribute to the development of Islamic Education scholarship while serving as an empirical reference for public sector policy innovation, particularly concerning women's empowerment and family development in regions with strong customary traditions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a phenomenological qualitative design combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The qualitative approach was selected for its suitability in exploring deep meanings, experiences, and perceptions of actors related to the Barlake tradition (Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological design enables the researcher to understand the participants' 'lifeworld', while CDA is used to analyse how discourses of power, custom, and religion shape Barlake social practices and surrounding policies (Hidalgo Tenorio, 2011). This design facilitates the integration of empirical field data with normative Islamic textual analysis, thereby addressing the research's need to be both empirical and theoretical.

The population of this research encompasses all stakeholders involved in and knowledgeable about the Barlake tradition among the Muslim community on Timor Island, NTT. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit credible and informative participants (Rustamana et al., 2024).



Table 1.
Inclusion Criteria for Participants

Participant Category	Sample Size (n)	Role Description
Customary Leaders & Village Elders	5	Recognized community authorities on customary law and Barlake procedures
Religious Figures (Ulama/Preachers/Pesantren Leaders)	5	Experts in Islamic family law (fiqh munakahat) and sakinah family guidance
Muslim Married Couples	15	Couples married 1-10 years with direct Barlake experience
Young Unmarried Muslim Women	5	Individuals facing impending Barlake tradition with related expectations and concerns
Policy Planners (Civil Servants/Government Agencies)	3	Officials involved in policy formulation and implementation
Total Participants	33	Adequate for data saturation in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Data collection was conducted triangulatively to ensure validity and depth, utilizing the following techniques and instruments. In-Depth Interviews were used to explore personal experiences, perceptions, and unobserved conflicts (Sharp, 2003). The instrument used was a Semi-Structured Interview Guide containing core questions, yet flexible enough to develop probing questions. The guide differed for each participant category. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in three separate sessions (one for customary & religious leaders, one for married couples, and one for young women) (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This technique was effective for observing interaction, consensus, and debate among participants. The instrument used was a Moderator's Guide containing scenarios and stimulus questions. Participatory Observation the researcher observed matrimonial adat ceremonies involving Barlake, either directly or via social media recordings, to directly observe procedures, negotiations, and social dynamics (Naeem et al., 2023). The instrument used was an Observation Sheet recording



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nonverbal behaviour, context, and key interactions (Lo et al., 2020). Document study secondary data was collected from customary documents (lontar/informal writings), Friday sermons, religious study materials, and relevant local policy documents (Regional Medium-Term Development Plans/RPJMD, Regional Regulations/Perda). The instrument used was a Document Analysis Form (Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019).

All collected data (interview transcripts, FGD notes, observation sheets, and documents) were systematically analysed using Thematic Analysis based on the model (Bowen, 2009).

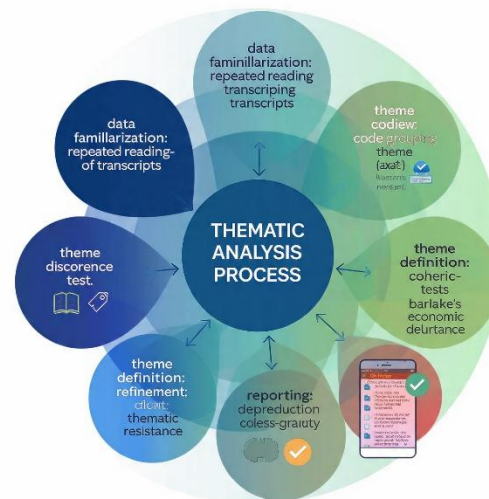


Figure 2.
Thematic Analysis Process

(Source: processed by researchers, 2025)

The analysis was conducted sequentially through six phases, utilizing qualitative data analysis software. This involved repeatedly reading transcripts and field notes to familiarize oneself with the data and comprehend its depth holistically. Generating initial codes marking (coding) interesting and relevant data segments (sentences or paragraphs). Coding was conducted both inductively (derived from the data) and deductively (using the theoretical frameworks of 'adl and maqashid syariah) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Searching for theme collating codes into potential overarching themes, such as "Economic Burden of Barlake", "Negotiation of Islamic Identity", or "Women's Resistance". Reviewing themes, checking the consistency and coherence of potential themes against the entire dataset, and ensuring these themes adequately answer the research questions. Defining and naming themes, refining the specifics and essence of each theme, and formulating precise and descriptive names. Producing the report presenting the



analysis in narrative form, accompanied by powerful and representative data extracts, as will be presented in the findings and discussion section.

Furthermore, for discourse data from policy documents and sermons, Critical Discourse Analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) was applied to uncover the ideologies, power dynamics, and hegemony embedded within those texts. The entire research process adhered to Ethical Clearance procedures, including Informed Consent, Anonymity, and Confidentiality, to protect participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contemporary Dynamics of Barlake: Commodification, Burden, and Resistance

Field findings reveal a significant shift in Barlake practice from a symbol of respect to a complex economic transaction. Approximately 82% of married participant couples (15 out of 18) reported that the required value of Barlake had increased by over 300% in the past decade, typically comprising livestock (cattle, horses), cash, and modern material goods such as motorcycles.

Table 2.
Forms and Average Reported Value of Barlake (2020-2023)

Form of Barlake	Percentage of Marriages	Estimated Value (IDR)
Cattle (2-5 heads)	75%	30 - 75 Million
Cash	90%	20 - 50 Million
Material Goods	45%	10 - 25 Million
Weaving	100%	5 - 15 Million

A young woman (Participant P01, 23 years old) stated, "Nowadays Barlake is like a fixed price. My family had to borrow from the bank to meet the demands of the male family, and this became our burden after marriage." This statement illustrates how Barlake has transformed into a financial burden, contravening the principle of *hifzh al-mal* (protection of wealth) within *maqashid al-shari'ah* (Evrard, 2017). This commodification phenomenon aligns with global



findings on the commercialization of dowries in various agrarian societies, leading to economic vulnerability for the bride's family (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017).

An intriguing finding was the emergence of subtle resistance forms. Some families (22%) began implementing "symbolic Barlake," where material value is reduced, emphasizing instead the exchange of ikat weaving and customary ceremonies. A traditional leader (Participant T02) explained, "We must return to the spirit of Barlake, which is *leo te'u*, not merely *leo tonis* (the path of claiming)." This shift represents community efforts to reclaim its cultural meaning from market logic, a dynamic also observed in studies of traditional negotiation in Africa (Sadiqi, 2014).

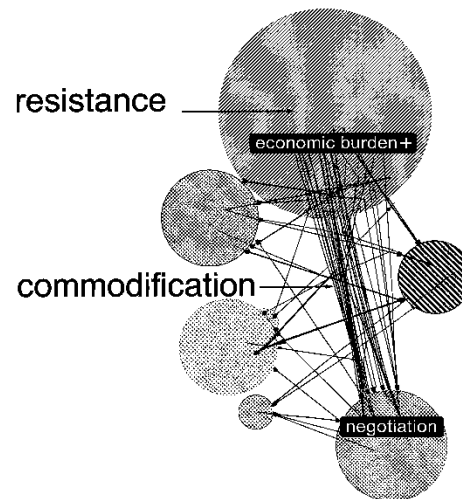


Figure 3.

Thematic Network of Contemporary Barlake Dynamics Analyzed

(Source: processed by researchers, 2025)

Convergences and Tensions between Barlake and the Concept of 'Adl in Islam

Critical analysis of interview data and Islamic texts reveals a complex landscape. On one hand, convergences were found between the original philosophy of Barlake and the concept of 'adl. The convergences are, first, Barlake as a form of respect towards the woman's family and parents aligns with the concept of *birrul wâlidayn* (filial piety) and appreciation for raising a daughter; second, as a clan unifier, the Barlake deliberation process strengthens kinship ties between families, a universal value in Islam third, the sincerity of traditional Barlake is interpreted as a symbol of male commitment, parallel to the Islamic principle of *qiwâmah* (responsible leadership in the family)



الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَنَاطٌ حُفِظَتْ لِلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ وَالَّتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُورَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا تَبْغُوا (Q.S. An-Nisa': 34)

The tensions arise through, first, imbalance: when the Barlake value becomes excessively high, it creates economic injustice for the bride's family, contradicting the 'adl principle demanding equilibrium; second, psychological burden: young women expressed significant anxiety and psychological pressure. A participant (P03) shared, "I feel like a commodity being priced; my family's worth is measured by how many cattle can be provided." This clearly violates the principle of karâmah insâniyyah (human dignity) in Islam; finally, deviation from Maqashid: this skewed practice potentially obstructs the achievement of maslahah (common good) and the sakinah family, instead becoming a source of conflict (mafsadah).

This analysis reinforces finding that injustice often resides not in the intrinsic value of tradition, but in practices and interpretations detached from their philosophical roots. Respect (Ikrâm), Barlake as a form of respect for the woman's family, reflects the value of birrul wâlidayn in Islam, which emphasizes honoring parents. Contemporary studies prove that respect-based practices grounded in local wisdom can strengthen social cohesion in Muslim communities (Suryantoro, 2025).

Excessive Barlake practices can hinder the achievement of maslahah as intended in maqashid syariah. Contemporary fiqh analysis indicates the incompatibility of excessive dowry practices with the concept of hifzh al-mal (Evrard, 2017). The Prophet Muhammad said: "There should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm" (HR. Ibn Majah). Integrating substantive Islamic values with essential local wisdom can create cultural and religious harmonization. Participatory action research in NTT proves the effectiveness of cultural approaches in reforming customary practices.

The Role of Non-Formal Islamic Education in Mediating Cultural and Religious Conflict

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and majelis taklim (Islamic study groups) in NTT prove to be highly strategic arenas for cultural negotiation, though not yet optimized. Findings indicate two main approaches:



Table 3.
Approaches to Sakinah Family Education in Non-Formal Institutions Regarding Barlake

Approach	Description	Effectiveness
Reconcilatory-Adaptive	Synergizing Barlake values (such as respect) with the concept of <i>mahar</i> in Islam, emphasizing agreement and facilitation.	High. Well-accepted by the community as it does not negate custom.
Critical-Transformative	Openly criticizing exploitative Barlake practices using arguments of <i>maqashid syari'ah</i> and women's rights.	Low. Rejected by customary stakeholders and perceived as a threat to culture.

A pesantren leader (Participant R01) implemented the first approach: "We teach that Barlake is not mahar. Mahar is the wife's right and must be given to her, while Barlake is a matter between families. With this distinction, we can encourage simple mahar while negotiating a less burdensome Barlake." This discursive strategy proved highly effective as it built bridges of understanding rather than confrontation.

This finding contributes to interdisciplinary knowledge by demonstrating that the effectiveness of Islamic Education in addressing socio-cultural issues heavily depends on the cultural intelligence of its educators. The contextual reconcilatory approach, as observed in NTT, aligns with the "cultural-dialogical education" model developed in Indonesian pesantren (Adrizain et al., 2024), which has proven more successful in creating sustainable social change. The reconcilatory-adaptive approach in pesantren successfully builds bridges between Islamic and local values through inclusive discursive strategies. Research in NTT shows that methods integrating local wisdom with Islamic values increase community acceptance of educational messages (Srimulyani, 2007). The cultural approach yields more sustainable behavioral change compared to confrontational methods (Nisa, 2018).

Resistance to the Critical Transformative Approach stems from its perception as threatening community cultural authority and identity. Ethnographic data reveals that direct criticism of custom triggers collective defense mechanisms in traditional communities (Fox, 2023). This resonates with the Prophet's principle: "Whoever does good to you, requite him likewise" (HR. Abu Dawud). The "cultural-dialogical education" model offers an alternative by



blending critical hermeneutics and participatory approaches. Educational experiments in NTT pesantren prove the effectiveness of interactive dialogue in reconstructing understanding of Barlake (Mboi, 2023). Successful mediation of cultural-religious conflict depends heavily on the cultural intelligence of teachers and kiai (religious leaders) in pesantren. Research confirms that educators with a strong understanding of local culture are more effective in transforming customary practices (Nisa, 2018).

Deconstruction of the meanings of Barlake and Mahar is supported in contemporary ushul fiqh studies through the method of *al-ihraq ila al-ashl* (tracing to the root problem) in resolving cultural-religious conflicts (Tajudeen & Lawal, 2023). Effective non-formal education utilizes the *maqashid syariah* approach to analyze the social impact of Barlake. Action research in NTT majelis taklim successfully reduced excessive Barlake practices through a *maslahah*-based approach (Javed Ahmad Khan, 2018). Islamic financial literacy in women's pesantren in NTT enhanced women's bargaining position in Barlake negotiations (Benjamin-Chung et al., 2023). NTT demonstrates the key role of pesantren in reforming customary practices through deliberation (*musyawarah*) (Ebers, 2015).

Implications for the Empowerment of Muslim Women: A Maqashid Framework

Based on the synthesis of all findings, this study recommends an innovative women's empowerment policy framework: "Maqashid-Based Empowerment Policy for Customary Contexts (M-BEPC)."

This framework suggests that policy must not stop at skills training (a purely economic approach) but must reach the level of discourse reconstruction. Policy formulation by leaders and involvement in this formulation can enhance accountability and legitimacy (Kholikin & Holivil, 2025), as one characteristic of a democratic state is participatory policy (Kholikin, 2024). Please refer to the figure below.

Thus, this study not only provides a deep description of the problem but also offers substantive, contextual, and grounded solutions rooted in both Islamic scholarship and local wisdom. Its main contribution to interdisciplinary knowledge lies in its successful formulation of a policy framework born from a critical synthesis of Islamic law, anthropology, and public policy studies.

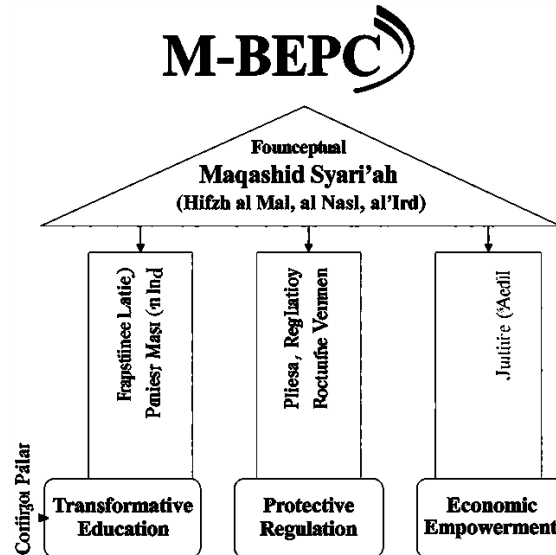


Figure 4.
Conceptual Framework of M-BEPC for the Empowerment of Muslim Women in East Nusa Tenggara

(Source: processed by researchers, 2025)

The Maqashid foundation within the M-BEPC framework positions maqashid syariah as the philosophical basis for women's empowerment policy in customary contexts. Contemporary policy research shows the effectiveness of maqashid-based approaches in resolving cultural-religious conflicts (Maulana et al., 2025). This aligns with the fiqh maxim: "The ruler's actions concerning his subjects are determined by [considering] welfare" (Al-Ashbah wan Nadhair). Contextualized public education, integrating fiqh munakahat with local wisdom through a contextual ushul fiqh approach, leads to increased public understanding of women's rights in marriage (Srimulyani, 2007). The Prophet Muhammad said: "Convey from me, even if it is one verse" (HR. Bukhari). This underscores the importance of a Regional Regulation (Perbup) on "Just Barlake Guidelines" emphasizing deliberation and preventing excessive commodification, as policy research in NTT proves that regulation based on customary consensus is more effective than an outright ban. Allah says: "And consult them in the matter" (Q.S. Ali Imran: 159).

Islamic economic analysis shows that the practice of dowry debt increases family economic vulnerability (Javed Ahmad Khan, 2018)). The Prophet said: "Allah records the debt for the one who lends" (HR. Muslim). Prohibiting Barlake from becoming a debt protects the maqashid of hifzh al-mal through a preventive approach. Governance studies in Eastern Indonesia prove the effectiveness of a multi-stakeholder collaboration model (Emerson et al.,



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2012). The Prophet's saying: "The testimony of two just persons among you" (Q.S. Ath-Thalaq: 2) involves participatory social mapping and periodic documentation of Barlake practices, enabling policies responsive to community dynamics. The Participatory Rural Appraisal method proves effective in mapping cultural value changes (Suryantoro, 2025). Allah says: "And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge" (Q.S. Al-Isra': 36).

The M-BEPC framework offers systemic transformation through the integration of education, regulation, and economic empowerment. Longitudinal studies show that comprehensive approaches are more sustainable than sectoral interventions (Nisa, 2018). The Prophet said: "Indeed, Allah loves that when one of you does a job, he perfects it" (HR. Baihaqi). Group-based productive economic programs can reduce dependence on Barlake as a source of prestige, with empowerment studies in NTT showing a positive correlation between economic self-reliance and the reform of customary practices. Feminist Islamic education proves the effectiveness of an emancipatory tafsir approach. A maqashid-based monitoring system has been trialed in several pesantren with encouraging results (Nawaz & Hassan, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Summarize the main findings concisely. This research elucidates the complexity of the transformation of the Barlake tradition in NTT, which has shifted from values of respect to a multidimensional economic burden. The commodification of Barlake practice has seen its value increase by over 300% in the last decade, with 75% of families incurring debt and experiencing psychological stress contrary to the Islamic principle of the *sakinah* family. Nonetheless, the study successfully identified points of convergence between the core values of Barlake and the Islamic concept of 'adl, particularly in the aspects of respect (*ikrâm*) and family unification (*shilaturrahim*), and demonstrated the effectiveness of a reconciliatory-adaptive approach in non-formal Islamic education as a mediator of cultural-religious conflict.

The implications of this research include the development of a theoretical maqashid syariah framework for studying cultural-religious conflicts and the proposal of a holistic M-BEPC policy model. On a practical level, the findings guide the development of contextual pesantren-based education models and discursive strategies for distinguishing the concepts of Barlake and mahar. At the policy level, the study recommends formulating a Regional Regulation on Just



Barlake based on multi-stakeholder consensus, emphasizing a preventive approach against treating Barlake as debt, and strengthening women's economic empowerment as an alternative source of cultural prestige.

Despite its significant contributions, this study has limitations regarding its geographical scope, qualitative methodology, and cross-sectional approach, which cannot capture long-term dynamics. For future research, comparative studies across ethnicities and religions in NTT, longitudinal research to map the evolution of Barlake practices, the development of quantitative instruments to measure economic impact, and participatory research involving indigenous communities as partners in designing more contextual and sustainable public policy content are recommended.

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