

Belis and Women's Dignity: Cultural and Catholic Reflections in Wolosambi

Polikarpus Raga¹, Antonius Denny Firmanto²

^{1,2} Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Teologi Widya Sasana, Malang, Indonesia

Abstract

The belis tradition in Wolosambi society is a cultural institution affirming solidarity, reciprocity, and women's dignity. Historically, it strengthened family bonds and honored women as the center of social life. Yet, contemporary pressures have shifted its meaning toward materialism, creating risks of commodification and reinforcing patriarchy. This study applies a qualitative-descriptive approach with cultural hermeneutics to explore the symbolic values of belis, its effects on women's dignity, and its theological significance. The study was conducted in Wolosambi, Flores, Indonesia. Findings highlight its dual character: while affirming women's vital role, it may also reduce them to economic objects. Through Catholic theological reflection, especially *Mulieris Dignitatem* and inculturation principles, this article proposes a reinterpretation of belis that preserves cultural identity while promoting justice, gender equality, and human dignity. The study contributes theoretically to contextual theology by articulating belis as a culturally embedded locus of moral meaning, and practically by offering pastoral and inculturation-oriented guidelines for safeguarding women's dignity within local marriage practices.

Keywords: belis; women's dignity; contextual Catholic theology; gender justice; inculturation; marriage practice

Introduction

The tradition of *belis* in Wolosambi society, as in the wider Nagekeo cultural context, constitutes a significant socio-cultural institution that functions as a shared social value rather than a mere material exchange. In many kinship-based societies, marriage is not understood primarily as a private contract between two individuals but as a communal event that establishes enduring bonds between extended families and clans. Within this framework, *belis* operates as a symbolic mechanism that affirms solidarity, reciprocity, and collective responsibility, embedding marriage within a shared moral and relational order (Bell, 1992). Its primary significance lies not in the transfer of goods, but in its capacity to sustain social cohesion and to articulate communal values through ritualized exchange.

In recent decades, however, the social value of *belis* has come under increasing pressure. Socio-economic change, cultural monetization, and shifting social expectations have contributed to a gradual redefinition of *belis* in predominantly material terms. What was once a symbolic expression of relational commitment is increasingly measured by the quantity of livestock, valuables, or cash involved. Studies on ritual economies and moral practices indicate that such transformations often generate ethical distortions, particularly when symbolic exchange becomes subordinated to economic calculation (Chvaja et al., 2023). In this context, *belis* risks reinforcing patriarchal norms, increasing economic burdens on families, and fostering forms of commodification that undermine its original social meaning.

These shifts have profound implications for women's dignity. When *belis* is interpreted chiefly through an economic lens, women's worth risks being implicitly associated with the material value exchanged in marriage negotiations rather than with their intrinsic dignity as persons. Contemporary moral-theological scholarship consistently emphasizes that dignity is not derived from social function, economic contribution, or symbolic compensation, but is inherent and relational. The reduction of *belis* to a transactional practice therefore weakens its original ethical function as a bond of reciprocity between families and obscures its role in fostering balance, respect, and shared responsibility. In this sense, *belis* becomes a contested social space where cultural heritage, gender relations, and moral values intersect.

From a scholarly perspective, existing studies on *belis* in Flores, including those conducted in Nagekeo, have predominantly approached the practice from anthropological and sociological perspectives, focusing on kinship systems, ritual exchange, social cohesion, and the effects of socio-economic change. While this body of research has generated valuable descriptive and interpretive insights, it has largely remained at the level of cultural explanation. What has not yet been adequately addressed is a sustained Catholic ethical-theological engagement with *belis* as a moral practice, particularly with regard to questions of women's dignity, gender justice, relational responsibility, and moral formation. In particular, women's lived experiences within *belis* arrangements have rarely been examined as sites of ethical discernment rather than as culturally prescribed roles. This absence constitutes a significant gap in the literature.

The present study addresses this gap by integrating cultural analysis with Catholic theological reflection, drawing particularly on contemporary discussions of human dignity,

moral formation, and inculturation. Rather than treating *belis* solely as an object of cultural description, this study approaches it as a lived moral practice that both shapes and is shaped by ethical norms. In doing so, it repositions *belis* as a critical site for contextual ethical discernment, where faith and culture encounter one another within concrete social relations.

Against this background, the study examines the *belis* tradition as a socio-cultural institution whose meaning is currently being renegotiated within the Wolosambi community. The research does not seek to reject *belis* as cultural heritage, but to critically reinterpret it so that its practice remains faithful to its original social values while responding to contemporary ethical challenges. Situated within a Catholic theological horizon, this analysis contributes to a constructive dialogue between faith and culture, in which customary practices are evaluated not only for cultural continuity but also for their alignment with justice, equality, and respect for human dignity (*Laudato Si*, 139; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyse the *belis* tradition in Wolosambi as a social value embedded in communal life and marital practice. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) examine the social meaning of *belis* as a socio-cultural institution grounded in solidarity and reciprocity; (2) analyse the implications of contemporary *belis* practices for women's dignity, particularly in relation to commodification and patriarchal structures; and (3) offer a Catholic theological reflection informed by inculturation principles that can guide the ethical revitalization of *belis* in ways that affirm human dignity and gender justice.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study approaches the *belis* tradition through an interdisciplinary analytical framework that brings into dialogue cultural anthropology, gender studies, and Catholic theological reflection. Such an approach is not merely methodological but epistemological in nature. *Belis* cannot be adequately understood as a single-layered cultural practice. It is at once a symbolic exchange, a social institution shaped by power relations, and a tradition lived within a Catholic moral horizon in the Wolosambi context. An analysis confined to a single disciplinary lens risks reducing *belis* either to a neutral cultural artifact or to a moral problem detached from its social grammar. Accordingly, this literature review clarifies how existing scholarship has interpreted *belis*, identifies its limits, and situates the present study's theological engagement within a wider academic conversation.

Belis in Anthropological Perspective

From classical anthropological scholarship, *belis* is commonly interpreted through alliance and exchange theories, which emphasize that marriage functions as a mechanism for establishing durable relations between kinship groups rather than as a private union between individuals (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Sahlins, 1972). In this perspective, the reciprocal exchange of livestock, valuables, and ritual goods cannot be reduced to economic calculation. It constitutes a symbolic act that binds families into a moral network of obligations, mutual recognition, and social continuity. Anthropological studies thus frame *belis* as a form of social contract that

regulates relationships, stabilizes alliances, and sustains communal cohesion (Mauss, 1990; Schneider, 2022).

This interpretation is deepened by symbolic anthropology, which understands culture as a system of meanings enacted through ritualized practices (Bell, 1992; Watts, 2024). Within this framework, *belis* appears as a “cultural text” that communicates values of responsibility, honor, reciprocity, and social balance. The ritual exchange of animals, textiles, and other goods encodes moral expectations concerning marriage, family roles, and collective identity. In this sense, anthropological literature consistently shows that *belis* functions as a social value structuring communal life, rather than as a mere economic transaction (Mauss, 1990; Akurugu, 2022).

More recent studies in Flores and Nagekeo emphasize the role of *belis* as symbolic capital. The amount and form of *belis* often signal family prestige and social standing, situating marriage within broader hierarchies of recognition (Apu, 2021). While this perspective enriches understanding of *belis* as a dynamic cultural system, it also reveals a tension. Symbolic affirmation may slide into social competition and economic pressure, particularly in contexts of cultural monetization. At this point, anthropological analysis reaches its interpretive limit, as it tends to describe persistence and change without fully interrogating ethical implications, especially regarding women’s dignity and gendered power relations (Akurugu et al., 2022; Lau, 2024).

Belis and Gender Analysis

Gender-oriented scholarship brings this tension into sharper focus. From this perspective, *belis* appears as an ambivalent practice. Normatively, it is often interpreted as a sign of respect for women as bearers of life and continuity. In lived practice, however, women are frequently excluded from formal negotiations and decision-making processes, appearing instead as symbolic figures whose value is mediated by male representatives. This gap between symbolic affirmation and social participation exposes patriarchal structures embedded within the practice (Bourdieu, 1990).

Critical feminist analyses describe this dynamic as a form of commodification, in which a woman’s social worth risks being implicitly measured by the material value of *belis* (Nussbaum, 2001; Wan, 2024). When cultural monetization intensifies, this tendency becomes more pronounced. Economic burdens increase, negotiations become competitive, and women’s agency may be further constrained. Recent gender-focused studies on ritual economies indicate that such dynamics do not merely reflect economic change, but reshape moral perceptions of personhood and value (Akurugu et al., 2022; Orphanopoulos, 2025; Gudeman & Hann, 2015). Gender scholarship thus reframes *belis* as a site where power, economic logic, and gender hierarchy intersect.

At the same time, gender studies complicate a purely critical reading. Several studies point to women’s active, albeit informal, roles in shaping *belis* practices. Through negotiations over form, timing, and distribution, women may exercise forms of interpretive agency, albeit within culturally defined constraints that continue to structure gendered power relations

(Akurugu et.al., 2022; Bourdieu, 1990). This reveals *belis* as a contested and dynamic arena rather than a static patriarchal structure. What remains underdeveloped in this literature, however, is a normative framework capable of evaluating these gendered dynamics beyond sociological description. Questions of dignity, justice, and moral responsibility largely remain unanswered at the anthropological and gender-theoretical levels (Lau, 2024; Orphanopoulos, 2025).

Catholic Theological Framework: Dignity, Inculturation, and Marriage

Catholic theology offers a distinct normative horizon for engaging these unresolved questions. Grounded in the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the affirmation of human dignity establishes a critical criterion for evaluating cultural practices, such that no tradition, however deeply rooted, stands outside ethical discernment when it touches upon the worth and agency of the human person (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12). Within this framework, *belis* raises a fundamental theological question: does it function as a sign of relational responsibility, or does it risk reducing women to objects within a system of exchange?

The teaching of Pope John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* provides an important lens for this discernment. The document insists on the equal dignity and personal vocation of women, rejecting all forms of instrumentalization and subordination (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10). When *belis* is reduced to an economic measure or a marker of male prestige, it stands in tension with this theological vision. Conversely, when critically reinterpreted, *belis* may become a site where dignity, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility are reaffirmed within marriage and family life.

The principle of inculturation further deepens this theological engagement. As articulated in *Ecclesia in Asia*, cultural traditions may be embraced insofar as they resonate with the values of the Gospel. Inculturation does not imply uncritical acceptance, but reflective integration (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 20). Within this horizon, *belis* can be affirmed as cultural heritage while simultaneously subjected to ethical transformation. Its symbolic elements may be retained, yet reoriented so that they support rather than undermine human dignity and gender justice (*Laudato Si*, 139).

Catholic theology of marriage provides an additional normative reference point. Marriage is understood as a sacramental covenant grounded in love and mutual self-giving, not in exchange or compensation (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48; *Familiaris Consortio*, 11). Cultural symbols may enrich this covenant only insofar as they remain subordinate to its ethical and spiritual meaning. When *belis* distorts this orientation, pastoral discernment and cultural reinterpretation become necessary—not as acts of rejection, but as expressions of fidelity to both faith and culture (*Laudato Si*, 139; *Ecclesia in Asia*, 20; *Familiaris Consortio*, 11).

Synthesis and Conceptual Orientation

Taken together, the literature reveals a clear pattern. Anthropological and sociological studies illuminate the symbolic, social, and historical dimensions of *belis*, while gender studies expose its ambivalence and embedded power relations. What has largely been absent—and

what this study deliberately introduces—is a sustained Catholic ethical-theological engagement that integrates these insights into a normative framework oriented toward dignity, justice, and inculturation (Keenan, 2010; *Gaudium et Spes*, 12; *Ecclesia in Asia*, 20).

This interdisciplinary synthesis does not treat theology as an external moral judge, but as a reflective partner capable of interpreting cultural practices from within their social grammar while offering criteria for transformation. In this sense, *belis* is approached not merely as an object of analysis, but as a lived tradition open to ethical renewal.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative–descriptive approach combined with cultural hermeneutic analysis to examine the meanings, symbolism, and ethical–theological implications of the *belis* tradition in the Wolosambi community, Flores. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for exploring lived social practices and interpreting culturally embedded symbols within concrete communal contexts (Creswell ; Poth, 2018). Rather than treating *belis* as a static cultural artifact, the study approaches it as a lived moral practice that calls for interpretive engagement and normative reflection within a Catholic theological horizon, drawing on hermeneutic theory (Ricouer, 1976).

Population and Inclusion Criteria

The research population consists of members of the Wolosambi community who are directly involved in, or have experiential knowledge of, the *belis* tradition. The study does not treat the community as a homogeneous unit, but focuses on social actors who occupy distinct roles in the negotiation, interpretation, and implementation of *belis*.

Inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (1) customary leaders (*mosalaki*) who possess customary authority and knowledge of *belis* norms and ritual procedures; (2) church leaders (parish priests and pastoral workers) involved in marriage preparation and pastoral accompaniment related to customary practices; (3) women who have undergone *belis* within marriage and thus have direct lived experience of its social and symbolic implications; and (4) family members involved in *belis* negotiations, such as parents or maternal uncles, who represent kinship perspectives and decision-making roles.

These criteria ensured that participants were not selected based on representativeness in a statistical sense, but on their relevance to the research questions and their capacity to provide rich, experience-based insights into the practice of *belis*.

Sampling Strategy and Number of Informants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who met the inclusion criteria and possessed interpretive and experiential knowledge of the *belis* tradition. Initial informants were selected based on their recognized social roles within the community. Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional participants, particularly women and family members whose perspectives are often less visible in formal customary

structures but are crucial for understanding lived experiences and gendered dynamics (Patton, 2015).

In total, 21 informants participated in the study, comprising 5 customary leaders, 3 church leaders, 9 women who had undergone belis, and 4 family members involved in marriage negotiations. To ensure analytical clarity and protect participants' anonymity, informants are identified in the Results section through role-based codes. Customary leaders are referred to as CL (CL1–CL5), church leaders as CH (CH1–CH3), women who had undergone belis as W (W1–W9), and family members involved in marriage negotiations as F (F1–F4). These codes indicate the participant's social role rather than personal identity and are used consistently throughout the Results to distinguish perspectives while preserving confidentiality. The sample size was not determined by numerical targets in advance but guided by the principle of thematic saturation. Data collection was concluded when interviews no longer generated substantially new themes and when interpretive patterns became recurrent across participant groups. Qualitative research has consistently shown that saturation, rather than sample size *per se*, is the appropriate criterion for adequacy in in-depth qualitative inquiry (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). The sample size was not determined by numerical targets in advance, but guided by the principle of thematic saturation. Data collection was concluded when interviews no longer generated substantially new themes and when interpretive patterns became recurrent across participant groups. Recent qualitative research confirms that saturation, rather than sample size *per se*, is the appropriate criterion for adequacy in in-depth qualitative inquiry, as analytic sufficiency is reached when additional data no longer yield substantively new themes and interpretive patterns stabilize across cases (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018).

Data Collection

Data were collected through three primary sources: (1) participant observation during belis ceremonies, enabling documentation of ritual practices, symbolic distributions, and social interactions; (2) semi-structured interviews with the informants described above, focusing on their interpretations of belis, experiences of negotiation, and perceptions of its implications for women's dignity; and (3) documentary and scholarly literature review in anthropology, gender studies, and Catholic theology, which supported theoretical framing, interpretive depth, and triangulation.

This combination of data sources ensured that the research remained empirically grounded, contextually sensitive, and theoretically informed through methodological triangulation (Flick, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in three interconnected stages. First, a descriptive analysis reconstructed the practice of belis as a lived social practice, attending to its symbolic meanings, forms of reciprocity, and role in sustaining communal cohesion. Second, a gender-focused analysis examined how belis structures women's participation and agency, while also rendering them vulnerable to forms of symbolic and material commodification within marital and kinship

relations. Third, a Catholic theological reflection interpreted these empirical findings within a normative horizon shaped by the Church's teachings on human dignity, the vocation of women, and the sacramental meaning of marriage. This multi-layered analytical process enabled the study to move beyond sociological description toward a critical and normative ethical-theological discernment, integrating lived practice with moral evaluation (Ricouer, 1976; Keenan, 2010; *Gaudium et Spes* 12; *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through source triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and ongoing reflexive evaluation by the researcher. These procedures follow established qualitative research standards emphasizing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, 1985). In addition, ethical considerations were rigorously observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained through anonymization, and particular care was taken to respect the sensitivity of rituals and cultural values. These measures are consistent with contemporary guidelines on ethical rigor in qualitative research, particularly in culturally embedded fieldwork contexts (Tracy, 2019).

Through this methodological design, the study generates an interdisciplinary and reflective understanding of *belis* by integrating cultural anthropology, gender analysis, and Catholic theology. The approach enables not only a comprehensive interpretation of the tradition, but also a critical and transformative discourse oriented toward the revitalization of *belis* in ways that uphold human dignity, gender justice, and social responsibility within the local context.

Result

The Meaning of Belis in Wolosambi: Honor, Life, and Relational Belonging

In Wolosambi, *belis* is consistently narrated as an expression of honor rather than a mechanism of valuation. Informants repeatedly rejected the idea that *belis* constitutes a "price" for a woman. Instead, it is framed as a public gesture of recognition offered by the groom's family to the bride and her kin. As one customary leader stated unequivocally: "The animals brought in the *belis* procession represent respect for the woman and her family as the source of life. It is not a commercial transaction" (Interview with customary leader [CL1], Wolosambi, June 2025; see also CL3; W6).

The symbolic vocabulary surrounding *belis* is deeply gendered but not, in its ideal form, reductive. Women are described as *ine sao*, "mother of life," a term that locates them at the center of biological continuity, social reproduction, and cultural memory. In this idiom, the woman is not exchanged but honored; *belis* functions as a language through which the community acknowledges dependence on her generative and relational role.

Field observations confirm that this meaning is enacted ritually. The presentation of buffaloes, horses, goats, gold, palm wine (*sopi*), and betel nut is accompanied by speech acts

emphasizing gratitude, responsibility, and continuity rather than ownership. The ritual sequence repeatedly situates the woman not as an object of negotiation but as the reason the negotiation matters at all.

Beyond its gendered symbolism, belis also operates as a mechanism of inter-family bonding. The exchange is explicitly reciprocal. The bride's family responds with pigs, woven textiles, rice, and household goods, which are interpreted as gestures of respect and shared responsibility. As one family member involved in marriage negotiations explained: "These gifts are not repayment. They show that both families commit themselves to the future life of the couple" (Interview with family member [F2], Wolosambi, June 2025; see also F1; W7).

Through this reciprocity, belis embeds marriage within a wider moral economy of obligation and care. Marriage is not reduced to the couple; it becomes a collective undertaking. Observational data indicate that a woman who receives belis is incorporated not only into her husband's household but into the moral expectations of his extended kin. Belis thus functions as a rite of incorporation, binding persons into communal life rather than isolating them as private actors.

From Symbolic Recognition to Material Anxiety: Shifting Orientations of Belis

Despite its normative symbolic meaning, contemporary practices of belis reveal a growing dissonance. Many informants spoke of anxiety, pressure, and fear surrounding belis negotiations. Economic hardship, rising social expectations, and the public visibility of wealth have increasingly reshaped how belis is discussed and evaluated. As one woman who had undergone belis remarked: "Now people calculate belis. They think about profit and loss, not about respect" (Interview with woman who had undergone belis [W4], Wolosambi, July 2025; see also family members [F1, F3] and customary leaders [CL2]).

In this context, the scale of belis increasingly functions as a marker of prestige. Larger offerings are associated with honor and success, while modest ones may be interpreted as signs of failure or disrespect. This introduces competitive dynamics into what was once a primarily relational practice. Families with limited resources often feel compelled to incur debt or delay marriage in order to meet rising expectations.

Several informants described how this shift produces social tension rather than cohesion. Belis negotiations increasingly become sites of conflict, suspicion, and comparison. While the ritual remains outwardly intact, its internal logic has changed. What once unified families now risks dividing them along economic lines. As one customary leader observed: "Belis today often causes quarrels between families. People compare wealth, calculate losses, and feel offended when expectations are not met" (Interview with customary leader [CL4], Wolosambi, July 2025; see also family members [F1, F4]).

Field observations suggest that this transformation is rarely articulated as a conscious rejection of tradition. Rather, it emerges as an unintended consequence of broader social change. Belis is preserved as a ritual form, yet its meaning is increasingly overshadowed by pragmatic concerns. This disjunction generates moral unease within the community, as

participants themselves recognize that the practice no longer reliably expresses the values it claims to embody (Field observation, Wolosambi, June–July 2025).

Beyond the explicit narratives of anxiety and economic pressure, field observations reveal a quieter, yet no less significant, layer of moral unease surrounding contemporary belis practices. Several informal conversations during communal gatherings indicated that families often experience an internal conflict between fidelity to tradition and fear of social judgment. In private remarks, some elders noted that refusing excessive belis demands may be interpreted as disrespect, even when such demands contradict older moral understandings of belis as an act of relational acknowledgment rather than competitive display (Field observation, Wolosambi, June–July 2025). This tension illustrates that the shift toward material orientation is not simply an economic adaptation, but a moral struggle embedded in everyday decision-making.

Importantly, this anxiety does not only affect the groom's family. Members of the bride's kin group also expressed discomfort when belis becomes excessive, noting that inflated demands can damage long-term relations between families. As one maternal uncle involved in marriage negotiations observed, "If belis becomes too heavy, it creates shame on both sides. The marriage begins with fear, not joy" (Interview with maternal uncle [F2], Wolosambi, June 2025; see also women who had undergone belis [W4, W8] and customary leaders [CL3]). Such remarks suggest that the materialization of belis undermines its integrative social function, replacing mutual trust with calculation and apprehension. In this sense, the transformation of belis reshapes not only economic expectations but also the moral tone with which marriage is entered and remembered.

Church leaders also acknowledged this growing dissonance, describing it not merely as an economic difficulty but as a pastoral concern that increasingly shapes the moral climate of marriage. They observed that escalating belis demands often enter premarital conversations as a source of anxiety rather than joy, burdening couples with fear of indebtedness, delayed marriages, and unresolved tensions between families. From a pastoral perspective, such pressures were said to weaken the formative meaning of marriage, as relationships begin under the weight of calculation and obligation rather than mutual trust, freedom, and commitment. In this sense, church leaders noted that the material intensification of belis subtly but decisively affects marital stability, familial harmony, and the ethical tone with which marriages are entered and remembered (Interviews with church leaders [CH1, CH2, CH3], Wolosambi, June–July 2025).

Women's Lived Experiences: Recognition, Silence, and Moral Ambivalence

Women's narratives reveal the deepest ambivalence of belis. On the one hand, receiving belis provides social legitimacy and public recognition. Several women spoke with pride about belis as a sign that they and their families were honored. As one woman who had undergone belis stated: "We feel valued when belis is given. It shows that our family is respected" (Interview with woman who had undergone belis [W3], Wolosambi, July 2025; see also W1, W7).

This recognition is not merely symbolic. Women who receive belis often experience enhanced visibility within kinship networks. They are publicly acknowledged as central figures in the continuity of family and clan. In this sense, belis confers a form of symbolic standing that situates women at the heart of communal life.

At the same time, women frequently described their exclusion from decision-making processes. Negotiations over the amount and form of belis are conducted almost entirely by men, leaving women with little formal voice in decisions that directly affect their lives. As one woman who had undergone belis observed: “Men decide everything about belis. Women are expected to accept” (Interview with woman who had undergone belis [W5], Wolosambi, July 2025; see also W2, W8; corroborated by family members involved in negotiations [F1]).

When belis demands are high, women may experience additional burdens that extend beyond the ritual itself. Several participants described heightened expectations of obedience, service, and endurance within their husband’s extended family. As one woman who had undergone belis explained: “Because many people contributed to the belis, I must serve all of them. I cannot refuse” (Interview with woman who had undergone belis [W6], Wolosambi, July 2025; see also W2, W9; corroborated by family members involved in negotiations [F3]).

These accounts reveal belis as a site of moral ambivalence. It simultaneously affirms women’s worth and constrains their agency. Women are honored, yet silenced; recognized, yet burdened. This ambivalence does not appear as an abstract contradiction, but as a lived tension shaping everyday relationships.

Several women further articulated that their silence during belis negotiations should not be misread as consent or agreement. Rather, it often reflects an internalized expectation that speaking openly may disrupt familial harmony. Questioning belis arrangements can be interpreted as arrogance or ingratitude, especially toward elders who claim to act “for the good of the family.” As one woman who had undergone belis explained, remaining silent was often perceived as the only way to preserve relational peace (Interview with woman who had undergone belis [W8], Wolosambi, July 2025; see also W3, W6; corroborated by family members involved in negotiations [F2]). This dynamic reveals how moral expectations of obedience and harmony shape women’s self-positioning within customary processes, even when those processes directly affect their future obligations.

These accounts also indicate that women’s moral labor extends beyond the ritual moment itself. After marriage, women frequently assume responsibility for mediating tensions created by belis, particularly when economic burdens persist. Field observations suggest that women often become informal negotiators, seeking to soften resentment between families and to manage expectations arising from belis contributions (Field observation, Wolosambi, June–July 2025). Such practices remain largely invisible in formal customary discourse, yet they constitute a significant dimension of women’s lived experience. Belis thus produces not only symbolic recognition but also an enduring moral workload that disproportionately falls upon women.

Table 1 synthesizes the key empirical patterns identified across the findings, highlighting the core symbolic meaning of belis alongside the tensions that emerge as economic pressures, gendered experiences, and social effects intersect in contemporary practice.

Analytical Dimension	Empirical Pattern	Underlying Tension
Core meaning	Honor, recognition, relational reciprocity	Symbolic affirmation vs. implicit valuation
Economic orientation	Rising prestige and monetary calculation	Reciprocity vs. competition
Women's experience	Public recognition	Recognition vs. limited agency
Social effect	Collective incorporation	Cohesion vs. anxiety and inequality

Table 1. Empirical Patterns and Tensions in the Practice of Belis

These empirical patterns provide the basis for the following discussion, which interprets the observed tensions through a Catholic ethical–theological framework concerned with human dignity, moral formation, and inculturation.

Discussion

Belis as Gift and Moral Obligation

The empirical findings resonate strongly with classical gift theory, particularly Marcel Mauss's insight that gift exchange establishes enduring moral obligations and social bonds rather than relations of economic equivalence (Mauss, 1990). In Wolosambi, belis functions, at least normatively, as a moral covenant binding families into relations of mutual recognition. The emphasis on reciprocity and obligation reflects what Mauss identified as the ethical surplus of the gift.

Recent scholarship on ritual and moral coordination supports this interpretation. Ritual exchange operates as a mechanism through which communities stabilize norms, coordinate expectations, and transmit values (Zlobina & Celeste, 2022). The findings suggest that belis once fulfilled precisely this function, embedding marriage within a shared moral horizon. However, when practices of gift exchange are increasingly reframed through market-oriented logics of calculation, valuation, and comparison, their symbolic and relational functions are progressively reconfigured. As recent research on the transformation of socio-cultural practices under conditions of marketization demonstrates, economic rationalization tends to displace shared moral coordination by privileging efficiency, visibility, and competitive valuation, thereby weakening the capacity of such practices to sustain collective meaning and normative commitment (Zhang et al., 2025). This dynamic is clearly visible in contemporary belis practices.

Symbolic Capital, Gender, and the Reproduction of Hierarchy

The transformation of belis into a marker of prestige aligns with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Prestige accrues not through moral recognition alone, but through visible

displays of economic capacity. In this process, belis becomes a site where hierarchy is reproduced under the guise of tradition.

Gender analysis sharpens this critique. Recent discussions in moral theology highlight how symbolic affirmations of women's dignity may be accompanied by structural constraints on agency, as reflected in the work of contemporary Catholic ethicists (Curran, 2022; Horgan, 2024). The data confirm this paradox. Women's dignity is affirmed rhetorically, yet undermined structurally through exclusion from decision-making and expectations of submission.

This tension illustrates how recognition can remain superficial when it is reduced to inclusive narratives or symbolic affirmation without altering the conditions that enable equal participation, thereby leaving underlying asymmetries of power intact (Tarasova, 2024). Belis thus emerges not as a neutral tradition, but as a morally charged practice whose meaning depends on how power is distributed within it.

The reproduction of hierarchy through belis must also be understood as a process of moral legitimation, not merely symbolic accumulation. When prestige is attached to the magnitude of belis, social inequality acquires an ethical appearance: wealth is reinterpreted as responsibility, and excess is framed as generosity. This mechanism closely resembles what Bourdieu describes as misrecognition, whereby domination is secured as legitimate and taken-for-granted rather than perceived as domination; recent theorizing specifies how misrecognition varies across fields and can stabilize unequal power relations (Bourdieu, 1990; Parvez, 2022). In the Wolosambi context, such misrecognition allows economic disparity to be ritualized without appearing unjust.

Recent work on ritual economies supports this reading by demonstrating how competitive gift-giving and ritualized exchange dynamics can contribute to the emergence of economic and social disparities, even when such exchanges are couched in a language of respect and obligation (Itao & Kaneko, 2024). The empirical findings suggest that belis, when governed by prestige logic, no longer mediates equality between families but stabilizes asymmetry. Women become particularly vulnerable within this structure, as their symbolic elevation coincides with increased expectations of submission and endurance. The moral problem, therefore, does not lie in belis as such, but in the way symbolic capital is converted into moral authority without corresponding accountability.

Catholic Theological Discernment: Dignity, Covenant, and Inculturation

From a Catholic theological perspective, the findings raise urgent ethical questions. Catholic personalist anthropology insists that the human person possesses an intrinsic dignity that forbids being reduced to a means for achieving social, economic, or symbolic ends (Gaudium et Spes 12). When belis becomes a form of economic leverage or ownership, it contradicts this principle. *Mulieris Dignitatem* further clarifies that women are subjects of equal dignity and vocation, not objects of exchange (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 6, 7,10). Practices that silence women's voices or burden them disproportionately stand in tension with this vision.

At the same time, Catholic theology does not dismiss *belis* as cultural error. Through inculturation, traditions may be purified and elevated so that they express Gospel values rather than undermine them (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 21 & 22). If marriage is approached not as a fixed biblical institution but as a historically and culturally mediated theological construct, as argued by Ernest van Eck (2020), then cultural practices surrounding marriage may be critically reinterpreted in light of their capacity to foster enduring commitment, relational responsibility, and communal solidarity. Within such a framework, *belis* need not be read solely as an economic transaction, but can be theologically assessed according to whether it supports or undermines marital communion.

The theological tension exposed by the empirical findings does not arise from cultural difference as such, but from competing moral grammars operating within the same practice. On the one hand, *belis* draws upon a relational logic that recognizes persons through reciprocal acknowledgment. On the other hand, when economic calculation dominates, this logic is displaced by a utilitarian grammar that measures worth indirectly through material exchange. Catholic personalist anthropology offers a critical lens precisely at this intersection, since it insists that the human person is never reducible to utility or possession, but finds fulfillment only in self-giving relationality and mutual recognition (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24).

Within this framework, the commodification risk identified in *belis* cannot be dismissed as an accidental distortion. It reflects a deeper moral ambiguity in how authority and obligation are interpreted within kinship systems. When elders claim moral authority on the basis of tradition while simultaneously endorsing excessive material demands, tradition itself becomes morally opaque. Catholic theology responds to this opacity not by negating custom, but by reintroducing discernment as an ethical practice. Discernment, in this sense, involves naming where symbolic practices cease to serve communion and begin to impose silent forms of domination, particularly upon women.

This perspective clarifies why the language of covenant is theologically decisive. Covenant shifts attention away from entitlement and toward responsibility. In a covenantal horizon, *belis* cannot function as leverage over women's bodies, labor, or obedience. It must remain oriented toward mutual commitment between families and the flourishing of the marital bond itself. When *belis* undermines this orientation, theological critique is not optional but required, in fidelity to the Gospel's vision of human dignity and relational freedom, which rejects any reduction of the person to an object of exchange or domination (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10–12).

Toward Transformative Inculturation and Moral Formation

The findings suggest that *belis* constitutes a genuine *locus theologicus*, a site where faith encounters lived culture. Transformative inculturation does not abolish tradition but engages it critically, enabling symbolic practices to be reinterpreted in relationship to justice and human dignity, as reflected in contemporary contextual theological discourse (Ezenwa, I. V., & Nganwuchu, 2025).

Pastorally, this requires dialogue, not prohibition. Women's participation in negotiation processes must be strengthened. Economic burdens must be collectively moderated. Symbolic meaning must be reclaimed through catechesis and communal reflection.

As recent work in moral education stresses, moral capacities are shaped by lived practices and social experiences that cultivate moral imagination prior to abstract doctrinal instruction, grounding ethical development in relational and communal contexts (Narvaez, 2021). Reinterpreting *belis* is therefore not merely a cultural adjustment, but a form of moral education shaping how dignity, responsibility, and solidarity are lived.

Understanding *belis* as a formative practice rather than a fixed rule shifts the focus from compliance to moral education. As contemporary scholars of moral formation argue, social practices shape moral dispositions and perceptual frameworks well before explicit norms or doctrinal articulations emerge, grounding ethical formation in embodied and communal life (Horgan, 2024; Murray, 2023). In this light, *belis* participates in forming moral imagination concerning gender, authority, and obligation. When practiced reflectively, it can cultivate solidarity and mutual responsibility; when distorted, it habituates fear, silence, and inequality.

This insight has direct implications for inculturation. Inculturation cannot be reduced to symbolic adaptation at the liturgical level alone. It requires sustained engagement with the formative power of social practices that structure everyday moral life. Reinterpreting *belis*, therefore, becomes an exercise in moral pedagogy, guiding communities to re-learn how dignity, reciprocity, and responsibility are enacted in concrete relationships. Such a process aligns inculturation not with preservation of form, but with the slow cultivation of ethical sensibility within cultural continuity.

Transformative inculturation also requires attention to the temporal dimension of moral change. The empirical data suggest that shifts in *belis* practice do not occur through formal decisions alone, but through gradual reorientation of expectations across generations. Younger couples, in particular, often find themselves navigating between respect for elders and concern for economic sustainability. Their hesitation to openly challenge *belis* demands reveals that moral formation operates as a slow negotiation rather than a sudden rupture. This temporal fragility underscores the importance of patience in pastoral engagement and cautions against prescriptive interventions detached from lived experience.

In this regard, inculturation must be understood as dialogical rather than corrective. Dialogue does not imply moral relativism, but a willingness to allow ethical insight to emerge from within communal narratives. When women's experiences of burden and silence are taken seriously as theological data, they function as critical signs that demand interpretation. Such signs do not negate tradition; they disclose where tradition calls for renewal. As contemporary theological hermeneutics emphasizes, local theology emerges through sustained engagement with the fractures, interruptions, and ambiguities of lived faith, rather than through idealized representations of cultural coherence (Boeve, 2021).

Seen this way, *belis* becomes a site of moral learning for the Church itself. It challenges ecclesial actors to listen attentively to how dignity is affirmed and compromised in everyday practices. Inculturation, then, is not a one-time adaptation, but an ongoing ethical task that

requires humility, attentiveness, and willingness to revise inherited interpretations in light of concrete human experience.

Conclusion

This study has examined *belis* in the Wolosambi community not as a residual cultural ornament attached to marriage, but as a living social value whose meaning is continuously negotiated through ritual exchange, kinship expectations, and moral interpretation. The findings confirm that, within its normative cultural grammar, *belis* functions primarily as an expression of recognition rather than valuation. Drawing on classic insights from ritual theory and gift exchange, such practices articulate solidarity, reciprocity, and relational belonging, situating marriage within a shared moral order rather than reducing it to a private contractual arrangement (Bell, 1992; Mauss, 1990).

At the same time, the study demonstrates that this moral grammar is increasingly under strain. Socio-economic pressures and cultural monetization have contributed to a gradual reorientation of *belis* toward material calculation and symbolic competition. While the ritual form remains publicly affirmed, its internal logic has become fragile. What once coordinated mutual recognition can come to generate anxiety, inequality, and moral unease when ritual practices are increasingly governed by logics of prestige and scale rather than shared responsibility, a dynamic analysed in contemporary work on ritual, institutions, and moral coordination (Herrmann-Pillath, 2024). Read through this lens, the escalation of *belis* risks functioning as a marker of status rather than a practice of relational accountability.

Women's narratives reveal the ethical core of this tension. *Belis* continues to provide recognition and social legitimacy, yet women's participation in negotiation processes is frequently constrained, and high *belis* demands can generate expectations of obedience and endurance. The practice thus embodies a moral ambivalence: women are symbolically honored while structurally marginalized. This ambivalence cannot be resolved at the level of cultural description alone.

Catholic theological reflection provides a necessary horizon for ethical discernment. If human dignity is intrinsic and relational, it cannot be conditioned by economic equivalence or symbolic compensation, but must be grounded in self-giving relationality and mutual recognition (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24; *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10- 12). Seen through a covenantal lens, practices such as *belis* carry meaning only when they nurture mutual self-giving and shared responsibility, rather than reinforcing relations of ownership, pressure, or control. The study therefore argues that *belis* remains viable as cultural heritage precisely when it is critically reinterpreted in light of dignity, justice, and inculturation.

The contribution of this research lies in repositioning *belis* as a locus of contextual ethical discernment. By integrating anthropological insight, gender analysis, and Catholic moral theology, the study shows how local traditions can both shape and be reshaped by moral norms. In doing so, it offers a framework for engaging cultural practices neither through uncritical preservation nor external moral imposition, but through reflective dialogue grounded in lived social relations.

The findings of this study suggest that the moral significance of *belis* cannot be evaluated solely by its symbolic intentions or historical origins. Its ethical meaning emerges in how it is practiced, negotiated, and lived over time. When *belis* sustains reciprocity and shared responsibility, it strengthens communal bonds and affirms women's dignity as relational subjects. When it becomes governed by prestige and calculation, it generates moral dissonance, particularly for women whose recognition is accompanied by increased obligation and silence.

This ambivalence invites a careful rethinking of how cultural practices function as moral educators. *Belis* does not merely reflect values; it shapes dispositions, expectations, and forms of authority. For this reason, any effort to revitalize *belis* must engage not only its symbolic elements but also the social conditions that influence how it is interpreted. Ethical renewal requires attention to economic pressure, gendered authority, and the subtle ways in which silence is normalized as virtue.

By approaching *belis* as a locus theologicus, this study contributes to contextual Catholic theology in Indonesia by demonstrating how local practices can serve as sites of ethical discernment rather than objects of uncritical preservation. Theologically, it affirms that dignity is neither negotiable nor culturally contingent. Pastorally, it underscores the need for dialogical accompaniment that empowers women's voices while respecting communal bonds. Such an approach does not resolve all tensions surrounding *belis*, but it opens a space where tradition may be lived with greater justice, responsibility, and integrity.

Recommendations

Re-centering belis on recognition rather than prestige

Customary leaders and community elders are encouraged to reaffirm *belis* as a symbol of honor and relational responsibility rather than economic capacity. Practical community guidelines, such as proportional limits or collectively agreed norms, can help prevent competitive escalation while preserving the ritual's symbolic integrity. Such measures protect *belis* from moral distortion without negating its cultural significance.

Strengthening women's participation in negotiation processes

The findings indicate that symbolic recognition without participatory agency weakens the ethical credibility of *belis*. A concrete recommendation is to institutionalize women's involvement, especially that of the bride, in agreed stages of negotiation. Making women's voices visible within customary procedures affirms dignity not only in rhetoric but in practice, in line with Catholic teaching on women's equal personal vocation (John Paul II, 1988).

Pastoral accompaniment rooted in local symbols

Marriage preparation and pastoral accompaniment should explicitly address *belis* as a formative moral practice. Rather than treating it as a peripheral custom, pastoral programs can engage its symbols to clarify the distinction between recognition and commodification, and

between covenantal commitment and transactional logic. Such formation supports moral imagination at the communal level (Rossano, 2020).

Creating dialogical spaces for ethical reinterpretation

Sustained dialogue among customary leaders, parish leaders, women representatives, and younger generations is essential. A participatory forum can function as a space for mediation, reflection, and shared learning, enabling the community to reinterpret *belis* proactively before distortions become entrenched. Inculturation is thus lived as a continuous communal process, not a momentary act of adaptation.

Directions for further research

Future studies could adopt comparative and longitudinal approaches to examine how similar dynamics unfold across other Flores communities and how pastoral or customary interventions reshape practice over time. Such research would deepen contextual theology by bringing empirical observation into sustained ethical reflection, thereby enriching both scholarly analysis and pastoral practice.

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