

Shifts in Endogamy Tradition within Arab-Indonesian Populations: A Study on an Alawiyyin Family in Bekasi, West Java

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Abstract

Ethnicity-based endogamous marriage is often related to the cultures of Arab descent in Indonesia. These past decades, sociocultural changes affected several cultures across Indonesia, mainly due to the rapid growth of information access and scientific knowledge. These changes also occurred within the Arab-descent communities in Indonesia, including changes in value and practice in their marriage tradition. This ethnographic research attempted to reexplore, redefine, and reinterpret the current perspectives of endogamous marriage through the minds of an Alawiyyin family in Bekasi, West Java. The informants mentioned that endogamous marriage was deemed irrelevant since 30-40 years ago, and what was once the norm changed into a simple preference. This change happened because of the elders' and family patriarchs' open-mindedness, and thus, nurtured a more welcoming attitude toward non-Arabs and non-Alawiyyins. They also realized that forced endogamy oftentimes caused feelings of solitude and discomfort to those affected. To prevent such discrimination from happening again, the informants mentioned that they grant more freedom to their offspring to select their own life partner, even though parental approval is still important to the couple's marriage.

Keywords

Arab-Indonesian Diaspora; Cultural Change; Endogamy; Marriage; Matchmaking

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a social institution that is important in maintaining and expanding the relations between families, communities, and ethnicities. In several ethnic groups in Indonesia, the practice of endogamous marriage can still be found. One example of the ethnic group that still performs endogamy is Arab-Indonesian communities, namely the Alawiyyins, due to their profound social status within their community (Haryono, 2012; Koentjaraningrat, 1990; Rustinsyah, 2015).

Alawiyyin is a term used to refer to several families who are believed to be the direct descendants of Prophet Muhammad,

hence securing their social status within the community. Members of the Alawiyyin include Alathas, Assegaf, and Alaydrus, among many other families. The social upbringing of the Alawiyyin does not necessarily mean that they bathe in riches, many of them turned to charity and public service instead. As an ethnoreligious group, Islam does not believe in castes and demands equality to access public resources (de Jonge, 2019; Saefullah, 2013a, 2013b).

Most of the current Arab-Indonesian communities in Indonesia originated from Hadhramaut, Yemen—also known as the Hadhrami Arabs. They migrated to the Nusantara archipelago in the 17th century

and with them, they brought their religion, cultures, and traditions. Their frequent contact and communication intensity impacted the widespread of Islam in Nusantara. In return, the Hadrami Arabs also adapted to the archipelago's local culture, but they still maintained their cultural identity (Baharun, 2013; de Jonge, 2019).

Ethnicity-based endogamy within the Alawiyyin is caused by multiple factors, namely to maintain the purity of their ethnoreligious group. By keeping the marriage between their own group, they are more likely to maintain their cultural and religious heritage, thus, guaranteeing the sustainability of their familial and communal legacy. Aside from that, endogamous marriage increases the social solidarity of the involved clans. Through endogamy, Alawiyyin families can sustain their already tight relationship and solidify their kinship. Besides, endogamous marriage can be seen as a way to pertain to the social unity and harmony of an ethnic group. Many cultures also see endogamous marriage as an alternative method to avoid potential social conflicts that might occur from inter-ethnic marriage, possibly due to cultural misunderstandings and religious differences (Asis, 2017; Azhari et al., 2013; Pratiwi & Prasetyo, 2018).

Endogamous marriage, however, also has unfavorable impacts on the human body. An example of this is an increased risk of hereditary diseases, defects, and mutations due to the lack of diversity within the gene pool. This mutated defect is then inherited by the offspring, and it might lead to a family or a culture's demise. Take the House of Habsburg, for example. Their traditional way of inbreeding leads to the deterioration of both the physical and mental health of their offspring. Their bloodline got so endogamous, to the point where the final Habsburg ruler, Charles II,

was best remembered for his mental incapability and many forms of physical disabilities—all of which attributed to the decline of the Kingdom of Spain under the Habsburgs (Bittles, 2002; Cela-Conde & Ayala, 2007; Stanford et al., 2013; Zimmer, 2018).

The impact of endogamy is also culturally significant. Racial and ethnic discrimination toward potential spouses is often found in many endogamous cultures. Moreover, the spouses often feel some sense of solitude due to the apparent cultural differences between them and their spouses. Without the proper support, these actions might contribute to the estranged spouses' mental health, even risking them to cultural maladaptation (Rosenfeld, 2008; van Leeuwen & Maas, 2005). Hence, it is important that the Alawiyyin Arab-Indonesians wisely rethink the practice of this strict tradition.

It is also important to note that endogamous marriage is not deemed compulsory for every Alawiyyin family or subfamily. Several families prefer to marry someone outside of their ethnic group due to several reasons, such as love and social networks. Those who left the endogamous marriage tradition view exogamy as a way to introduce cultural understanding and increase their ethnicity's social diversity (Rahmaniah, 2014).

Fully realizing the impact of globalization and modernization, this author is well-informed on how a number of traditions and cultural practices experience a change in some ways—some are no longer practiced, some are deemed immoral, and many other causes. That being so, this study is performed to discover how endogamous marriage traditions are viewed by an Alawiyyin family in the author's hometown—Bekasi City, West Java, Indonesia. This study explored the meaning, value, and impact of endogamous

marriage on their family, while also explaining how this tradition shifted from a compulsion to a preference.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was approached qualitatively using ethnographic methods. Qualitative research is a research approach that is used to comprehend and dive deep into a social phenomenon or human behavior through the native's perspective. This method is highly focused on an individual's interpretation of meanings regarding their life experience according to the existing social context. Qualitative research tends to utilize descriptive and explorative approaches to explain, understand, or depict a certain phenomenon in their natural social setting.

Ethnography is a research method used to study and understand cultures, social groups, or communities through sociological and anthropological perspectives. This method involves field observation, interaction, and the researcher's participation in their research subjects' daily lives. The purpose of ethnography is to describe, interpret, and analyze cultures and human behaviors in their natural social context. This unique method is employed to understand the informant(s)'s perspective, worldview, values, norms, practice, and social interactions that shape an individual or individuals.

In this study, the ethnographic data was collected through in-depth interviews and participative observation. A total of four informants were interviewed about the meaning, purpose, and impact of endogamous marriage in their families. They are also asked to explain their first-hand experience and stories about endogamy in their family. All of the informants are from an Arab-Indonesian

ethnic group and a part of the Alawiyyin subgroup.

After the data collection was completed, the voice recordings of the interviews were typed into a transcript. The transcript was then categorized into three subcategories to be analyzed further based on the existing works of literature. The literature was obtained through online library searches from DOAJ, Academia, and Google Scholar. Journal articles, books, or book chapters are used as means to analyze, compare, and contradict the data found in this study. The utilized sources are primarily from the last ten years (2013-2023), although several works of literature older than the criteria are also used as additional secondary data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kinship Relation of the Informants

All informants are from the same clan: Al (anonymized), a part of the Alawiyyin subgroup. The two of them (Informants 2 and 3), however, are a part of the clan after their marriage to the men of the family. Informant 2 was raised in many places during her childhood, such as Singaraja (Bali) and Surabaya (East Java). After her marriage to an Al man in the 1970s, they lived briefly in Surabaya and Makassar, before settling in Jakarta for several years. Since the 1980s, they permanently settled in Bekasi City, West Java.

Informant 1 is the offspring of Informant 2 and her since-passed husband. As of this moment, Informant 1 lives with his wife and three children just a couple blocks away from his childhood home—where Informant 2 still resides. His wife, Informant 3, also participated in this research to depict her thoughts and experiences about endogamy within her husband's family. Conclusively, Informant 3 is Informant 2's daughter-in-law.

Informant 4 is Informant 1's younger sister, Informant 3's sister-in-law, and

Informant 2's daughter. Even though Informant 4 remains unmarried, she also experienced and observed endogamous marriage traditions in her family. The kinship relation between all informants is expressed in the family tree below (Figure 1).

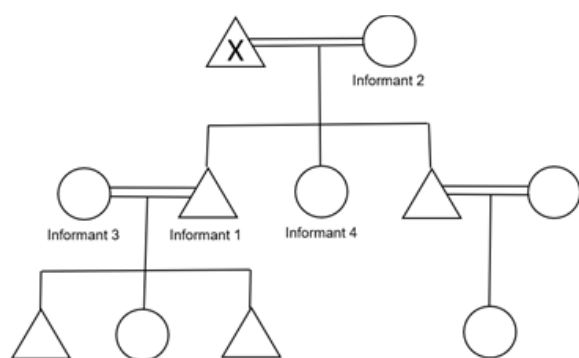


Figure 1. The Informants' Kinship Relation
(Source: The Author, 2022).

The Relevance of Endogamy

Presently, every informant told the author that they are no longer practicing endogamous marriage, and hence, the tradition is irrelevant in their family (see Figure 1). The informants mentioned that it was once relevant several generations ago. However, the tradition is "broken" due to Informant 2 and her husband's marriage to the Al family. As mentioned before, Informant 2 is a non-Arab woman, and her introduction to the traditional Arab-Indonesian family might cause several changes. Consequently, their children (Informants 1 and 4) and daughter-in-law (Informant 3) considered that endogamy bears no significance to them, at least not as much as it used to a couple of generations ago.

Informant 1 told the author that his father, before marrying Informant 2, was offered a betrothal to his brother-in-law's sister. Then, he refused the offer. Personally, the refusal happened because he saw his betrothed as "too close" in terms of blood

relation. He also told Informant 1 that he could not marry her because of the absence of spousal love that he felt. Social and cultural factors might also play a part in his decision. Informant 1's father was a social butterfly, and thus, he had many friends and acquaintances outside of the Arab community. This reality affected his mindset. He realized that there were many options to choose from, and he could add his personal criteria and affections as a criterion to search for his ideal image of a future wife. Informant 1 closed this story with a simple conclusion, that "currently, it [endogamous marriage] is still relevant, especially to those who still live exclusively in the Arab community".

Informant 1 then explained that generally, there are several subgroups in the Arab-Indonesian community. Based on family origin and clan names, there are at least three subgroups: (1) Alawiyyin (Arab descent clans that can trace their origin back to Prophet Muhammad); (2) Ajma'in or Ajam (Arab descent that is not related to Prophet Muhammad); and (3) Ahwal (non-Arab descent). Several families within all three subgroups have their own marriage taboos and ideals. Al families, as a part of the Alawiyyin, are no exception. Some other Al families also prohibit their children from marrying Ajam and Ahwal people to maintain the purity of their bloodlines. However, it is not as relevant, since globalization and modernization encouraged the exposure of Arab-Indonesian communities to freedom of choice, including their spousal choice (Ama, 2017; Bilhaq, 2020; Rizkiati, 2012).

Informant 1 affirmed that most Hadhrami-Arab descendants in Indonesia are Muslims. According to the laws of Islam, marriage between cousins is allowed. In Islam, a male is not his female cousin's *mahram*--a person with whom marriage is prohibited because of their close blood

relationship. Despite so, Informant 3 further explained that Prophet Muhammad once recommended marrying someone outside of their tribe, even though parallel or cross-cousin and intra-ethnic marriage is not prohibited. Additionally, Informant 1 also mentioned a hadith verse that explained how Islam strongly opposed the idea of ethnic and racial discrimination, including as a marriage ideal. For this reason, the Ahwal people are included within the Arab-Indonesian community though they have no blood or ethnic relations whatsoever, where Ahwal itself means “our brothers/sisters” (Baharun, 2013; Darussalam & Lahmuddin, 2017; Rahmaniah, 2014; Ulya, 2021).

Based on the information provided, it is safe to conclude that ethnic endogamy can still be found in several Hadhrami Arab-descent families in Indonesia. Those who still perform this tradition might reason that they do it to maintain their bloodline’s exclusivity and purity. Considering its relevance, however, there are several changes or shifts in its values and practice.

Shifts in Marital Values

All four informants recognized that a certain type of expectation is burdened on Arab-Indonesians, where they are expected to marry fellow Arab-Indonesians—although this is not relevant to all families. The informants disagreed with that expectation since its practice violates basic human rights and has no religious basis. According to the informants, however, such values have experienced significant change in the endogamy tradition. Informant 1 commented on such a change. He mentioned that currently, endogamy is no longer practiced as a norm or law, but just mere expectations or preference (Bilhaq, 2020; Sandi, 2022).

“Girls are generally allowed to marry [non-endogamously], whether she is an Alawiyyin marrying an Ajam or even non-Arabs, because someone is chosen due to his [Islamic] religiosity. The basis of this is the Prophet’s hadith that said ‘There shall be no difference between Arabs and non-Arabs, but instead, choose them by their faith’—more or less. Within the most exclusive Arab community, it is now deemed preferential, not a general consent or norm that dictates the community.” (Informant 1, June 2, 2023).

Informant 4, then, mentioned that currently, an ideal spouse for Arab-descent individuals is no longer fixed on their ethnicity. Instead, the individual qualities of the future spouse are deemed most important. Informants 1 and 2 reaffirmed the previous notion, mentioning that even though ethnic endogamy is a priority no more, religious endogamy still persists. Religious considerations held a major role in contemporary matchmaking and marriage proposals. Future spouses were scored by their religiosity, ethics toward parents (referred to as *adab* in Islam), intelligence, and many other criteria.

The informants all felt the change in endogamy as both value and practice. As someone who rejected an arranged marriage with a fellow Arab woman, the husband of Informant 2 never forced her children to marry fellow Arab-descents. Throughout his life, he allowed all of their children to choose their own partner and future spouse, regardless of race and ethnicity. Informant 2 and her husband allowed both their sons to marry non-Arab women—Malay and Minangkabau women. They also let their only daughter live spouseless and child-free. This narrative is then confirmed by Informant 4.

“My dad being married to my non-Arab mom never forced the idea on us. My mom was a victim of such discrimination by my dad’s family at the beginning of their marriage. So that was enough pain for him not to ask of us.” (Informant 4, May 31, 2023).

This change in the value and practice of the endogamy tradition is caused by multiple factors. According to Informant 4, this change is caused by education and media exposure. Agreeing with Informant 1, he also added religious and environmental factors that attributed to such a change.

Owing to globalization and the rapid development of information technology, the media can enter houses and influence human minds much faster and more immense. Therefore, issues on human rights and recognition of human diversity are more accepted currently. Social environments are also more prone to acceptance, thus, exposing humans to various options for social interaction and the diverse nature of humanity. Realizing many options for modern sexual selection, individuals have more freedom to experiment and seek unorthodox methods to feel happy under their own selection criteria. This reality is then empowered by a number of highly-publicized exogamous marriages performed by public figures and celebrities. Informant 3 mentioned the marriages of Shireen Sungkar and Zaskia Sungkar, both are Indonesian celebrities of Arab descent who marry non-Arab men (Jatmiko, 2019; Nucci et al., 2014; Wyn & Woodman, 2006).

Through both individual and collective awareness regarding social acceptance and inclusion, more people realized that modern science and knowledge have been utilized to criticize and analyze these traditions and the impacts they might bring. Informant 1

correlated this instance with his own religious knowledge. He opined that if more people realize inclusive and antidiscriminative values promoted by Islam, many Arab-Indonesian families will be more accepting of an individual’s sexual preference. Then, he added that endogamy tradition might be caused and at the same time, is causing the weakening of family control and solidarity within the Arab-Indonesian communities. Unfortunately, no further explanation can be found about this issue, and thus, the author would like to recommend further research on the topic of how endogamy changes the solidarity of Arab-Indonesian communities.

“Speaking of Arab-descent communities, I think it is not as tight as it used to be. Meaning, it is not as exclusive... But now, it is not like that anymore. Many Arab settlements, like Arab Villages in Empang, in Bogor, probably are not even settled by pure Arabs anymore, instead, it is probably settled by people of mixed origins.” (Informant 1, June 2, 2023).

Nevertheless, there are still several families, whether it is an extended or nuclear family, that still practice this endogamy tradition. According to Informant 4, the tradition is still maintained due to the illusionary fear of committing sins against their ancestors. It is also linked with their religion and belief systems, where Informant 4 further explained that a fear-based religion was commonly introduced to maintain the traditions and obsolete rules set by their ancestors. Those who are forced to do this tradition are often filled with fear of disappointing their parents and receiving threats of alienation from the tribe. Informant 4 concluded that the main theme of endogamy tradition sustenance is summarized through one keyword: “fear”

(Landousies, 1999; Pfister, 2020; Zakariya & Wasim, 2020).

Informants 2 and 3 agreed that the main reason to maintain this tradition is to ensure the reproduction of clan names on their bloodline. This is highly relevant, especially for women. Due to its patriarchal and patrilineal rule, Arab women are not allowed to inherit and pass on their clan's name and inheritance (Assagaf, 2000; Muzakki, 2017; Nazwan & Cholil, 2023; Sandi, 2022; Uyun, 2019). Examples are, if an Arab woman from the "Alaydrus" clan marries a Javanese man, she and her children shall not bear the name "Alaydrus" any longer. Oftentimes, Arab descendants in Indonesia, especially the Alawiyyins, are perceived and treated with more respect and honor due to their ancestry. Many even expected certain exemplary behavior and a high rate of religious piety from them, although according to Informant 3, piety and good behavior do not correlate with a certain ethnicity or clan (Hatta, 2020; Suparto et al., 2019).

Complementing the other three informants, Informant 1 mentioned that he noticed a lack of knowledge and understanding of humanity. Knowledge of human rights is important to tackle the societal and ancestral pressure caused by this specific tradition. Even though both Arab and Indonesian cultures highly regard the elders of the household, parents should respect their children's choices as long as they are not hurtful to them and other people. Regarding marital choices, an individual should be granted the freedom to choose their own path to physical and spiritual happiness through their life partners. Therefore, all four informants believe that parents are encouraged to give considerations and criteria, while at the same time, learning to support and appreciate their child's spousal choices (Murdiyatomoko et al., 2016; Santrock, 2017)

Impacts of Endogamy as an Ideal

As mentioned by the informants, the endogamous marriage tradition has stopped being relevant since Informant 2's generation. This tradition lost its relevance in the next generation due to several factors. Informant 2 told the author that she and her husband were impacted psychologically by breaking the tradition. They felt hurt, disappointed, and traumatized owing to both direct and indirect discrimination from the rest of the clan. Ever since their marriage, they have been committed to raising their children and grandchildren with the opportunity to choose and have more options to do certain things.

Informant 2 revisited her past. She mentioned the discrimination she experienced from her husband's side of the family—though not all of them acted with microaggressions. Informant 2 shared a disheartening fact that during her wedding, a once-in-a-lifetime moment, only a number of her husband's family were present. Informant 3 confirmed the validity of this story, further mentioning that "...back then, she [Informant 2] was despised by her [husband's] family just because she is not Arab".

On the other side, Informant 1 as the first child retold the challenges her mother received during her early marriage years. He explained that the AI family considered Informant 2 as "an outsider" who was brought into a brand-new sociocultural environment. Informant 1 perceived this phenomenon as a product of cultural differences between her mother's family and her father's family. To add more gasoline to the fire, Informant 2 was introduced to her husband's family moments after the matchmaking happened. She was seen as "the interrupter" and "the other girl", hence the microaggression and discrimination committed by her husband's family.

In addition, Informant 2 also professed that she often felt lonely and alienated in the new environment that she was in. She also had an extra challenge to adapt, considering that during the early years of her marriage, she and her husband led a transient lifestyle. They lived from town to town, such as Surabaya, Makassar, Jakarta, and their current permanent home in Bekasi. That sense of solitude and alienation was experienced by Informant 2, especially during her stay in Jakarta and Makassar—both are new environments for her. However, she and her husband's kindness and resilience caused them to be well-received by their surroundings, including by their neighbors and family members. Slowly yet surely, Informant 2 was no longer haunted by fears of receiving discrimination and aggression from her in-laws. Informant 2 stated that perhaps, their families realized that their intentions to marry were simply pure love.

This change in mindsets, according to Informant 4, impacted the change of the endogamy tradition's significance. Informants 1, 3, and 4, as the children and daughter-in-law of Informant 2, respectively, were the evidence that proved how endogamy as a value and practice has changed in their family. What was once the norm, changed into mere parental expectation and or personal preference. Informants 1 and 3 even liberated their children to choose their own partner and future spouse. They only provided general criteria as a consideration, even though the final decision is still taken by their children.

Informant 4 also felt the positive of this change. Currently, she decided to remain spouseless, which is very taboo for Arab-Indonesian women. Although Informant 2 still expected her daughter to marry someone someday, she respected the choice that her daughter made. Again, what was once a norm (to marry endogamous), turned

into a preference. This means that further research is required to explore whether the marriage and family system itself changed through the times, as experienced by Informant 4 as a child-free woman (Asis, 2017; Assagaf, 2000; Subchi, 2020; Uyun, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Currently, ethnic-based endogamous marriage that was often discovered in the Arab diasporas in Indonesia is, in fact, not as common. The family involved in this research showed that this tradition is no longer relevant to them, and thus, several changes were also found in the marriage system itself. All informants considered that endogamy is more of an individual preference instead of a norm like it used to be. The criteria of prospective life partners also changed, where one is judged upon their individual qualities—for example, general knowledge, religiosity, ethics, and personality—instead of a certain race and ethnicity. The informants also mentioned that these cultural changes in their marriage system occurred due to the open-mindedness of a certain individual(s) within the Arab-descent community. This shift in mindset, then, exposed the family or community to progressiveness and gradually changed how they do or perceive things. The author believes that mutual understanding is required to build bridges between the families that perform this tradition and those that do not. It is important to do so since it might maintain the social solidarity between the families and minimize mental health instability due to discrimination and alienation by members of the family.

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