



The Role And Position of Women in Matrilineal Marriage System of Tetun Tribe, Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara

Maria Philomena Hoar ^{1,*}, Soleman Dapa Taka ², Zantty O. Padahana ³

¹ University of Nusa Cendana, English Education Study Program, kupang, 85001, Indonesia

² University of Nusa Cendana, English Education Study Program, kupang, 85001, Indonesia

³ University of Nusa Cendana, English Education Study Program, kupang, 85001, Indonesia

Email First Author* : onaaklau@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history Received : March, 25th 2026 Revised : April, 26th 2026 Accepted : May, 30th 2026 OPEN ACCESS	This study examines the role and position of women in the matrilineal marriage system of the Tetun tribe in Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. Unlike the predominantly patrilineal societies in the region, the Tetun community practices a matrilineal kinship system that places women at the center of lineage continuity, inheritance, and customary authority. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation involving Tetun women, traditional leaders, and husbands within matrilineal families. The findings reveal that women perform multidimensional roles encompassing domestic management, customary leadership, social participation, and economic activities. Women—particularly those holding the status of <i>feto mak tu uma</i>—occupy a strategic position as heirs of lineage, owners of customary property, and key decision-makers in family and customary affairs. The study also indicates that modernization has influenced community perspectives, particularly regarding the importance of formal education for women. These findings confirm the relevance of role theory and matrilineal kinship system theory in explaining women's authority and social position in Tetun society. This study contributes to the understanding of gender roles in indigenous matrilineal systems and highlights the significance of women's roles in sustaining cultural continuity amid social change.
Keywords:	<i>Women, Matrilineal System, Role, Position, Tetun Tribe, Malaka Regency</i>

1. Introduction

Tourism and development discourse has increasingly recognized the significance of gender roles and local cultural systems in shaping social structures, power relations, and patterns of resource distribution within communities. In contemporary development studies, gender is no longer viewed merely as a social category but as a critical analytical lens through which inequalities, authority, and cultural continuity can be examined. This perspective is particularly relevant in regions where traditional kinship systems remain influential in organizing social life. In eastern Indonesia, kinship structures play a decisive role in determining gender relations, social hierarchy, and access to economic and symbolic resources, thereby influencing both community governance and everyday practices.

East Nusa Tenggara is predominantly characterized by patrilineal kinship systems, in which lineage, inheritance, and authority are transmitted through the male line. Within such systems, men generally occupy dominant positions in family leadership, property ownership, and customary decision-making, while women's roles tend to be confined to domestic and supportive spheres. Against this broader regional backdrop, the Tetun tribe in Malaka Regency represents a distinctive cultural configuration. The Tetun community practices a matrilineal marriage system that places women at the center of lineage continuity, inheritance, and customary authority. In this system, descent is traced through the mother, inherited property is transmitted to female heirs, and husbands typically reside in the wife's family household, reflecting a uxorilocal settlement pattern.

The matrilineal marriage system of the Tetun tribe assigns women primary authority over key aspects of social life, including control of ancestral property, management of traditional houses, and participation in customary decision-making. Women, particularly those holding the status of *feto mak tu uma*, function as custodians of lineage, guardians of tradition, and central figures in maintaining social cohesion within the extended family. Their authority is not merely symbolic but institutionalized within customary norms and practices, granting them legitimacy and influence in both domestic and public spheres. As such, Tetun women occupy a strategic position that challenges dominant assumptions about gender hierarchy in eastern Indonesian societies.

However, the persistence of this matrilineal system does not imply cultural stagnation. Processes of modernization, expanding access to formal education, economic transformation, and increased interaction with external institutions have introduced new dynamics that potentially reshape women's roles and positions within Tetun society. While traditional authority remains influential, women are increasingly expected to navigate multiple roles that combine customary responsibilities with modern social demands. These changes raise important questions regarding the adaptability of matrilineal systems and the ways in which women negotiate continuity and change in contemporary contexts.

Despite its cultural significance and analytical value, the Tetun matrilineal marriage system has received limited scholarly attention, particularly in comparison to more widely studied matrilineal societies such as the Minangkabau. Existing research on kinship and gender in eastern Indonesia often emphasizes patrilineal structures, leaving matrilineal communities underrepresented in academic discourse. Consequently, there is a need for in-

depth, context-specific studies that examine how matrilineal principles operate in practice and how women's authority is constructed, maintained, and transformed over time.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role and position of women within the matrilineal marriage system of the Tetun tribe in Malaka Regency. Specifically, it seeks to explore how women exercise social, economic, and customary authority and how traditional structures are sustained and adapted in response to contemporary social change. By doing so, this research contributes to broader discussions on gender, kinship, and cultural resilience in indigenous societies.

2. Research Method

Data in this study were analyzed using a qualitative analysis framework consisting of four main stages: Data coding, Categorization, Theme development, and Interpretation. First, the researcher conducted data coding by identifying important statements from interview transcripts and field notes related to women's roles and positions in the Tetun matrilineal system. Second, the coded data were grouped into categories based on similarities in meaning, such as economic roles, decision-making, inheritance, and social position. Third, these categories were further organized into broader themes that represent the main findings of the study. Finally, the researcher carried out interpretation by connecting the identified themes with relevant theories, particularly role theory and gender role perspectives, in order to explain how women's roles and positions are constructed and maintained within the Tetun matrilineal system. Through this process, theory was not only used as a reference, but also as an analytical tool to understand and interpret the empirical data obtained from the field.

3. Research Findings and Discussion

3.1. Research Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that women in the Tetun matrilineal marriage system occupy a central and strategic position in family life, customary structures, and community organization. Their roles extend beyond domestic responsibilities and encompass customary leadership, social engagement, and household economic management. In the Tetun community of Malaka Regency, women are not only recognized as family members but also as key actors in maintaining lineage continuity and cultural stability.

In domestic life, Tetun women hold primary responsibility for managing household affairs. This includes organizing daily activities, regulating family resources, and ensuring

the welfare of all family members. Women also play a crucial role in educating children, not only in formal schooling but also in transmitting customary values, moral principles, and social norms inherited from previous generations. Through daily interaction and oral tradition, women function as the main agents of cultural transmission within the household, ensuring that Tetun customs and identity remain embedded in family life.

Beyond domestic responsibilities, women occupy a prominent role in the implementation of customary rituals and traditions. Women are responsible for organizing and preparing traditional ceremonies such as marriages, funerals, and ancestral rituals. They determine the appropriate timing of rituals, prepare ceremonial materials, and ensure that each stage of the ceremony is conducted in accordance with customary rules. This role highlights women's authority as custodians of cultural knowledge and ritual order. Their involvement is not ceremonial alone but managerial and directive, reflecting their institutionalized authority within the matrilineal system.

A particularly significant finding concerns the status of *feto mak tu uma*, the woman who holds the highest customary position within the family. Women who occupy this status act as primary heirs of lineage and custodians of ancestral property, including traditional houses (*uma lulik*), inherited land, and symbolic heirlooms. As *feto mak tu uma*, women are entrusted with safeguarding ancestral heritage and regulating the use of inherited property. They are also responsible for leading family deliberations and making final decisions on matters related to inheritance, customary obligations, and family disputes.

Inheritance and property ownership in the Tetun matrilineal system are transmitted exclusively through the maternal line. Land, traditional houses, and ancestral objects are inherited by women, reinforcing their structural authority within the kinship system. Men, including husbands and male relatives, generally do not possess ownership rights over customary property. Instead, they are granted rights of use, allowing them to cultivate land or reside within the wife's family household. These rights are conditional and subject to the authority of the female heir, emphasizing the centrality of women in regulating access to material resources.

In the economic sphere, women play a vital role in managing household finances and economic activities. Although men are often responsible for physically demanding agricultural work, women control the allocation of family income, decide on expenditures, and manage resources generated from farming, livestock, or small-scale trading. Women's

economic authority complements their customary status, further strengthening their position within the family and community.

The findings also reveal changes in community perspectives regarding women's education. While traditional roles emphasize women's responsibility as custodians of lineage and customs, there is increasing recognition that formal education is essential for women to effectively fulfill these roles in contemporary society. Families increasingly support higher education for daughters, particularly those expected to become *feto mak tu uma*, as education is perceived to enhance women's capacity to manage customary responsibilities, interact with external institutions, and adapt to social change.

Overall, the findings indicate that women in the Tetun matrilineal marriage system hold multidimensional roles and authoritative positions that are deeply embedded in cultural structures. Their authority is not symbolic but operational, shaping domestic organization, customary governance, and economic management within the community.

Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the research findings concerning the roles and positions of women in the matrilineal marriage system of the Tetun tribe in Malaka Regency. The discussion is organized into several key aspects, including women's domestic and customary roles, their position in property ownership and inheritance, their involvement in decision-making, their role in social life, their access to formal education, and their participation in economic activities. Each aspect is analyzed based on empirical data obtained from interviews and observations, and is further interpreted using relevant theoretical perspectives, particularly role theory and the matrilineal kinship system theory.

1). Women's Role in Domestic and Customary Life

The findings show that women in the Tetun community play a central role in managing both household and customary responsibilities. Women are responsible for organizing daily domestic activities such as preparing food, maintaining the household, and ensuring the well-being of family members. In addition, they play a crucial role in educating children, particularly in instilling traditional values, manners, and social norms that are essential in Tetun society. This is reflected in the statement of one informant: "As a female heir, I must teach my children about customs and manners."

Furthermore, women are actively involved in organizing traditional ceremonies, including preparing ritual materials and ensuring that all customary processes are conducted according to ancestral rules. This indicates that women are not only responsible for domestic

tasks but also act as guardians of cultural continuity. These findings suggest that women's roles are closely linked to their position within the matrilineal system. In line with Role Theory (Soekanto, 2009), these responsibilities represent the implementation of social roles based on rights and obligations attached to their status. Thus, women's domestic and customary roles reflect their function as central figures in maintaining both family life and traditional values.

2). Socian and Economic Roles

These findings indicate that education is now seen as an important tool to support women's roles in both traditional and modern contexts. Women who receive education are considered better prepared to manage family responsibilities, participate in decision-making, and interact with external institutions. This reflects a transformation of women's roles, where traditional responsibilities are combined with modern knowledge. Education strengthens women's capacity to carry out their roles more effectively within the matrilineal system. In addition, women actively participate in social activities such as religious gatherings, community service, and helping in traditional events within the community. Their involvement helps maintain social relationships and strengthens solidarity among community members.

These findings indicate that women's roles in social and economic life complement the roles of men. In line with Role Theory, this reflects a division of roles based on social norms, where each member contributes according to their position. Women's participation in these activities plays an important role in supporting family welfare while maintaining cultural balance within the matrilineal system.

3). Position in Property Ownership and Customary Inheritance

The study reveals that women hold a dominant position in property ownership and customary inheritance within the Tetun matrilineal system. Women, particularly those who hold the status of *feto mak tu uma*, are recognized as the primary heirs of traditional houses, ancestral land, and family heirlooms. This is supported by the statement: "The land and the traditional house belong to the women through the maternal line."

However, the findings also show that men are still given access to use family land, although they do not have full ownership rights. This access is usually granted through family discussions and is intended to maintain balance and harmony among family members. This condition indicates that the inheritance system in Tetun society is structured yet flexible. Women maintain legal ownership, while men are accommodated through usage

rights. This is consistent with the concept of the Matrilineal Kinship System (Morgan, 1871), where lineage and inheritance are traced through the maternal line, placing women in a central and authoritative position within the family structure.

4). Position in Customary Decision-Making

The findings indicate that women play an active role in decision-making processes within the family and customary institutions. Women, especially senior women, are involved in discussions related to important matters such as determining the timing of traditional ceremonies, resolving family conflicts, and managing inheritance. This is reflected in the statement: “When it comes to traditional matters, we women also have a say in the decision-making process.”

These findings show that women are not passive participants but are actively involved in shaping decisions within the family. Their opinions are valued, and their presence is essential in reaching agreements. In line with Role Theory, this demonstrates that women perform strategic roles in influencing decision-making processes. Their authority is not only based on gender but also on their knowledge of customs and their position within the matrilineal lineage.

5). Position in Social Communities and Society

The findings show that women in Tetun society hold a respected position within the broader community. Women, particularly those who hold customary status, are often seen as figures who maintain harmony and provide guidance in social and customary matters. This is reflected in the statement: “If there’s a problem in the village, people usually come to me first.”

In addition, women are involved in mediating conflicts, communicating customary decisions, and maintaining relationships between families. Their role in social life extends beyond the household and contributes to the stability of the community.

This indicates that women’s roles are not limited to the domestic sphere but also include social responsibilities that strengthen community cohesion. Their social authority is recognized and respected, which further reinforces their important position within Tetun society.

6). Position in Formal Education

The findings show a significant shift in the perception of formal education for women in Tetun society. In the past, women were mainly prepared for domestic and customary roles. However, today there is increasing awareness of the importance of education for girls.

This is supported by the statement: “Now, we want our daughters to go to school so they can lead their families well.” Another informant added: “Girls must pursue higher education.”

These findings indicate that education is now seen as an important tool to support women’s roles in both traditional and modern contexts. Women who receive education are considered better prepared to manage family responsibilities, participate in decision-making, and interact with external institutions. This reflects a transformation of women’s roles, where traditional responsibilities are combined with modern knowledge. Education strengthens women’s capacity to carry out their roles more effectively within the matrilineal system.

In conclusion, the findings and discussion confirm that women in the Tetun matrilineal marriage system occupy a structurally central and authoritative position. Their roles and positions are grounded in kinship structures, legitimized by customary norms, and dynamically adapted through education and social change. This study contributes to anthropological and gender studies by highlighting how matrilineal systems empower women as both custodians of tradition and adaptive leaders in contemporary society.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that women occupy a structurally central and authoritative position within the matrilineal marriage system of the Tetun tribe. As lineage heirs, custodians of property, and key actors in customary decision-making, women’s authority is institutionally embedded rather than merely symbolic. The matrilineal system not only facilitates the preservation of cultural continuity but also enables adaptive responses to contemporary social change, particularly through the increasing role of formal education. These findings contribute to anthropological and gender scholarship by underscoring the resilience and adaptive capacity of indigenous matrilineal systems in negotiating tradition and modernity.

References

- Barnes, S. (2011). *The role of women in Tetun society: A study of gender roles and social change*. Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Blumenfield, T. (2013). *The mosuo: A matrilineal society in China*. Asian Ethnology, 72, 1-25. Nagoya, Jepang: Nanzan University.
- David, K. (2004). *Perempuan dalam Sistem Sosial Masyarakat Timor*. Kupang: Universitas Nusa Cendana Press.
- Fox, J.J. (1980). *The Flow of Life: Essays on Eastern Indonesia*. Harvard University Pres.
- Fox, R. (1967). *Kinship and marriage: An antropological perspective*. London, Inggris:
-

Penguin Books.

- Hicks, D. (2004). *Tetum ghosts and kin: Fertility and gender in East Timor* (2nd ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Kelen, A. (2010). Struktur Sosial dan Sistem Perkawinan Masyarakat Tetun di Timor Barat. *Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia*, 31(2), 142–155.
- Koentjaraningrat. (2009). *Pengantar ilmu antropologi*. Jakarta: Rineka Cipta.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press.
- McWilliam, A. (2002). *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life: A Study of Place and Precedence in Southwest Timor*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Morgan, L. H. (1871). *Systems of consanguinity and affinity of the human family*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Muhammad, H. (2000). *Fiqh perempuan: Refleksi kiai atas wacana agama dan gender*. Yogyakarta: LKiS.
- Nongbri, T. (2003). Gender and power in a matrilineal society: The Khasi of Northeast India. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 10(2), 231–249. New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Oakley, A. (1972). *Sex, gender, and society*. London: Temple Smith. 55
- Raho, B. J. (2007). *Teori sosiologi modern*. Jakarta: Prestasi Pustaka.
- Sanday, P. R. (2002). *Women at the center: Life in a modern matriarchy*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Soekanto, S. (2009). *Sosiologi: Suatu pengantar (Edisi revisi)*. Jakarta, Indonesia: PT RajaGrafindo Persada.
- Sugiyono. (2019). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, dan R&D*. Bandung: Alfabeta.
- Therik, T. (2004). *Wehali: The female land: Traditions of a Timorese ritual centre*. Canberra, Australia: Pandanus Book.
- Willa, M. (2018). Sistem kekerabatan matrilineal suku Tetun di Kabupaten Malaka, Nusa Tenggara Timur. *Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia*, 39(1), 47-58. <https://doi.org/10.7454/jai.v39i1.10345>