COUSIN MARRIAGE AMONG KADAZANDUSUN COMMUNITY IN SABAH: ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL CULTURAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS

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Abstract. Cousin marriage remains a sensitive issue in many societies as it involves the transgression of social norms, customary practices, and kinship regulations. Among the Kadazandusun community in Sabah, Malaysia, marriages between close relatives are traditionally regarded as a violation of customary law and are commonly addressed through the implementation of adat sogit as a mechanism of social control. Nevertheless, such marriages continue to occur, raising questions about the factors that contribute to their occurrence. This study aims to examine the factors contributing to cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community in Sabah. A qualitative approach employing a Phenomenological Life History design contextualised within an ethnographic approach was adopted. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and life history interviews, and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that cousin marriage is influenced by a combination of social, cultural, and personal factors, including individual autonomy in partner selection, the weakening of family-based social control, social pressures such as premarital pregnancy, and declining knowledge of family genealogy among younger generations. This study contributes to the anthropological literature on kinship systems and social change by demonstrating how shifting social values and transformations in family structure have influenced the occurrence of cousin marriage within the contemporary Kadazandusun community.
Keywords: *cousin marriage, Kadazandusun, kinship system, customary law, social control*

Introduction

Marriage is a social institution regulated by kinship systems, cultural beliefs, and social norms that vary across societies. Among the Kadazandusun community in Sabah, Malaysia, marriages between close relatives, particularly first cousins and other prohibited kinship categories, are regarded as sumbang because they violate customary kinship boundaries established under traditional law. Such violations are not merely viewed as breaches of family relationships but are also believed to disrupt social harmony, communal balance, and the cultural order of the community. To address these transgressions, the Kadazandusun community practises adat sogit, a customary mechanism intended to restore relationships among individuals, families, and the wider community. Despite the continued practice of this customary institution, cases of cousin marriage continue to occur, raising questions about the factors that influence individuals to marry close relatives despite their awareness of customary prohibitions. Previous studies on prohibited marriages have primarily focused on legal perspectives and the regulation of prohibited kinship relationships, particularly from the perspectives of civil law, Syariah law, and customary law (Ahmad and Sulaiman, 2017). Within the Kadazandusun context, existing research has largely examined kinship systems, marriage prohibitions, and the implementation of adat sogit as components of the customary legal system and cultural institutions (Darimbang et al., 2023; Miyamoto, 2008). These studies have contributed significantly to understanding the structure of customary law, the social functions of adat sogit, and the kinship boundaries that define

prohibited marriages. However, relatively little attention has been given to the social, cultural, and personal factors that contribute to the occurrence of cousin marriage in contemporary Kadazandusun society.

Contemporary social changes, including increasing individual autonomy, social mobility, transformations in family structure, and declining knowledge of family genealogy, are likely to influence partner selection and marriage decisions. Nevertheless, these factors remain insufficiently explored through empirical research within the Kadazandusun community. Consequently, there is a significant gap in understanding how ongoing social and cultural transformations shape the occurrence of cousin marriage in this indigenous community. Therefore, this article aims to examine the factors contributing to cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community in Sabah. The study adopts a qualitative approach employing a Phenomenological Life History research design contextualised within an ethnographic approach to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and the socio-cultural contexts surrounding the phenomenon. The findings contribute to the literature on social anthropology, particularly in relation to kinship systems, social change, and Indigenous communities, while providing a deeper understanding of the factors influencing cousin marriage in contemporary Kadazandusun society. The continuing relevance of customary institutions in Sabah provides an important context for understanding cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community. Customary practices are not limited to the regulation of individual behaviour but are embedded within wider systems of social relationships, cultural values, and community governance. Studies concerning Native Courts and customary practices in Sabah demonstrate the continuing importance of customary institutions in regulating community affairs and maintaining harmonious social relationships (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). Within this cultural environment, adat sogit occupies a particularly important position. Research on the Dusun and Kadazandusun communities indicates that sogit remains an established customary practice and continues to have social and cultural significance in contemporary communities (Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022). Its persistence illustrates how customary mechanisms can continue to operate even when communities experience changes in lifestyles, values, and social relationships. Historical examination of sogit among the Dusun Liwan further demonstrates the cultural continuity of the practice within Sabah (Sabilin, 2024). At the same time, the ritual foundations of native law suggest that customary rules and practices are closely connected to the cultural worldview of Indigenous communities rather than functioning solely as formal mechanisms of regulation (Darimbang et al., 2023). Consequently, the occurrence of cousin marriage within the Kadazandusun community needs to be situated within this broader customary environment. The issue involves not only the personal decision of individuals to select a marriage partner but also the relationship between individual choices and established community expectations. When marriage decisions conflict with customary expectations, mechanisms such as adat sogit may become significant in negotiating the consequences of such violations and maintaining relationships within the community. Examining cousin marriage from this perspective therefore allows the study to consider the interaction between personal agency, kinship obligations, customary regulation, and the continuing importance of Indigenous cultural institutions in contemporary Sabah.

Changes in marriage practices should also be considered within the wider transformation of family and social relationships occurring in contemporary Sabah.

Marriage is closely connected to cultural identity, family relationships, and the negotiation of different customary expectations, as demonstrated in research concerning marriage and family relationships within the Sino-Kadazan community (Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021). Such perspectives are particularly relevant to the present study because they highlight the importance of understanding marriage as both a personal relationship and a socially embedded institution. In the case of cousin marriage, individual preferences may come into tension with customary expectations concerning appropriate kinship boundaries. Legal discussions of prohibited relationships similarly demonstrate that marriage involving close relatives raises issues extending beyond individual preference to questions of legal and socially accepted boundaries (Ahmad and Sulaiman, 2017). Within Sabah's Indigenous communities, these boundaries are further shaped by customary institutions and Native Court governance (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). The practice of sogit provides an especially relevant example because it remains associated with the customary management of social and cultural transgressions among Indigenous communities in Sabah (Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). These studies collectively provide an important foundation for examining how customary norms continue to interact with changing social circumstances. However, understanding the existence and administration of customary law does not by itself explain why individuals enter cousin marriages despite established kinship restrictions. Greater attention is therefore required to the experiences and decisions of the individuals involved, including the influence of personal choice, family relationships, social pressures, and knowledge of genealogy. By examining these dimensions through participants' lived experiences, the present study moves beyond describing customary regulations and focuses on the social processes through which traditional kinship expectations are negotiated within contemporary Kadazandusun society.

Review of literature

Cousin marriage and kinship systems

From an anthropological perspective, marriage is not merely the union of two individuals but also an integral component of the kinship system that regulates social relationships within a community. Every society establishes its own rules that define which kinship relationships are considered acceptable or prohibited in marriage. Among the Kadazandusun community, marriages between close relatives are regarded as a violation of customary law because they are believed to disrupt social harmony and the cosmological balance of the community. Miyamoto (2008) further explains that violations of these customary prohibitions are addressed through the customary legal system administered by the Native Court. Nevertheless, social change, modern education, and increased population mobility have gradually transformed the role of traditional kinship systems. Kinship relationships that were once collectively monitored by families and the wider community are increasingly influenced by individual autonomy in partner selection. This suggests that the phenomenon of cousin marriage should be understood not only from the perspective of customary law but also within the broader context of contemporary social change. The relationship between marriage, kinship, and customary norms within Indigenous communities in Sabah is particularly important because marriage decisions are embedded within broader systems of cultural identity and social relationships.

Studies concerning native law demonstrate that customary practices have historically provided communities with mechanisms for defining acceptable behaviour and responding to violations of established social norms (Darimbang et al., 2023; Miyamoto, 2008). These mechanisms are particularly relevant to marriage because kinship determines not only family membership but also the social boundaries governing relationships between individuals. At the same time, contemporary marriage practices increasingly reflect interactions between customary expectations and changing social circumstances. Research concerning marriage within the Sino-Kadazan community, for example, illustrates how marriage can involve the negotiation of identity, different customs, and harmonious family relationships (Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021). Such changes are significant when considering cousin marriage because increased mobility, changing family structures, and greater individual autonomy may reduce the influence traditionally exercised by extended families over partner selection. Consequently, individuals may increasingly make marriage decisions according to emotional attachment and personal preferences rather than customary expectations. However, this does not necessarily mean that kinship norms have lost their cultural significance. Instead, customary institutions continue to provide an important framework through which marriage, family relationships, and violations of community expectations are interpreted. The persistence of customary practices among Kadazandusun and other Indigenous communities in Sabah demonstrates that traditional cultural principles continue to coexist with changing social values (Animbok, 2023; Darimbang et al., 2023). Cousin marriage should therefore be examined as part of an evolving relationship between traditional kinship systems and contemporary patterns of individual decision-making rather than being viewed exclusively as a violation of established customary rules.

Customary law as a mechanism of social control

Among the Indigenous communities of Sabah, customary law serves as an important mechanism of social control by regulating individual behaviour and maintaining social harmony within the community. Unlike the formal legal system, which primarily emphasises punishment, customary law focuses on restoring social relationships and resolving conflicts (Miyamoto, 2008)? Hussin et al. (2022, 2021) argue that the Native Court (Mahkamah Anak Negeri) plays a significant role in managing customary violations through approaches centred on reconciliation and social restoration. Within the Kadazandusun community, the implementation of adat sogit represents one of the principal customary mechanisms for addressing violations of social norms. According to Pg Musa et al. (2018), adat sogit functions not only as a customary sanction but also as a means of restoring relationships among individuals, families, and the wider community. This demonstrates that customary law continues to play a significant role in regulating social behaviour despite the social transformations experienced by contemporary Kadazandusun society. The continuing practice of adat sogit demonstrates how customary law operates not only as a system of rules but also as a culturally embedded mechanism for maintaining relationships and social order. Research on sogit among Indigenous communities in Sabah shows that the practice remains closely connected to cultural values, customary obligations, and the regulation of relationships within the community (Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). The historical development of sogit also indicates that the practice has

maintained its relevance across generations, although its application may respond to changing social circumstances within particular communities (Sabilin, 2024).

From this perspective, customary sanctions should not be understood solely in terms of punishment imposed upon individuals who violate traditional norms. They can also perform restorative functions by providing culturally recognised procedures through which conflict can be addressed and relationships can be repaired. This orientation is consistent with the wider role of the Native Court in Sabah, where customary governance remains important in addressing disputes and maintaining relationships within Indigenous communities (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). In cases involving marriage and kinship violations, the importance of restoration becomes especially apparent because the consequences of an individual's behaviour may affect not only the couple but also their families and the broader community. The ritual foundations of native law further demonstrate that customary practices derive their authority and meaning from cultural understandings that extend beyond formal legal regulation (Darimbang et al., 2023). Accordingly, adat sogit can be understood as part of a broader system of social control in which customary rules, community institutions, and cultural values interact to manage violations while preserving social relationships. Its continued practice therefore illustrates the adaptability of customary law within contemporary Kadazandusun society.

Research gap

Previous studies have primarily examined cousin marriage from legal, public health, and customary law perspectives, while research on adat sogit has largely focused on its institutional structure, ritual practices, and social functions (Hussin et al., 2021). Although these studies have contributed significantly to understanding the customary regulation of marriage and kinship among the Kadazandusun, limited attention has been given to the social, cultural, and personal factors that contribute to the occurrence of cousin marriage in contemporary Kadazandusun society. Furthermore, empirical research examining the relationship between changes in kinship systems, increasing individual autonomy, and the weakening of social control as contributing factors to cousin marriage remains limited. Therefore, this article seeks to address this gap by examining the social, cultural, and personal factors influencing cousin marriage based on the lived experiences of informants within the Kadazandusun community in Sabah. Existing literature provides substantial knowledge concerning customary institutions, adat sogit, marriage, and the administration of native law in Sabah, but these areas of scholarship do not fully explain the personal and social processes that contribute to cousin marriage. Recent studies have documented the historical and cultural significance of sogit and its continuing presence within Indigenous communities (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022).

Other research has examined the ritual foundations of native law and the ways customary traditions continue to influence Indigenous communities in Sabah (Darimbang et al., 2023). At the institutional level, studies of customary rights and the Native Court have provided important insights into governance, social harmony, and mechanisms for managing customary violations (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). Marriage-related research has similarly contributed knowledge concerning the interaction between cultural identity, customary practices, and family relationships (Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021), while legal scholarship has addressed prohibited relationships and the broader legal environment surrounding incestuous relationships in

Malaysia (Ahmad and Sulaiman, 2017). Nevertheless, these strands of literature leave an important empirical gap. They provide considerable information about how customary institutions regulate behaviour and respond to violations, but comparatively less attention is directed towards why individuals enter cousin marriages despite the existence of established kinship restrictions. In particular, the interaction between personal autonomy, emotional relationships, family influence, social pressure, changing lifestyles, mobility, and knowledge of family genealogy requires closer investigation from the perspective of individuals who experience these circumstances directly. A phenomenological life history approach can therefore extend the existing literature by shifting analytical attention from customary structures alone towards the lived experiences through which marriage decisions are formed and negotiated. Such an approach provides an opportunity to understand how traditional kinship expectations interact with contemporary social change within the Kadazandusun community.

Materials and Methods

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine the factors contributing to cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community in Sabah. The research employed a Phenomenological Life History design contextualised within an ethnographic approach. Ethnography was used to understand the cultural context, kinship system, and customary practices of the Kadazandusun community, while the life history method enabled the researcher to explore the participants' life experiences related to cousin marriage over time. Phenomenology served as the primary interpretive lens for understanding the meanings and subjective experiences that participants attached to the phenomenon. The selection of this research design was particularly appropriate because cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community is embedded within a complex cultural environment involving kinship relationships, customary expectations, individual experiences, and community-based mechanisms of social regulation. Existing studies demonstrate that customary practices among Indigenous communities in Sabah cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural meanings attached to native law, ritual practices, and community relationships (Darimbang et al., 2023; Animbok, 2023). Research on adat sogit similarly illustrates that customary practices operate within broader sociocultural systems and are connected to community understandings of appropriate behaviour, social relationships, and cultural obligations (Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018).

Consequently, an approach that emphasises participants' lived experiences provides an appropriate means of examining how individuals understand and negotiate cousin marriage within their own social and cultural environments. The life history component further enables individual experiences to be interpreted within the wider development of family relationships, kinship expectations, and changes occurring across different stages of participants' lives. At the same time, the ethnographic context allows these personal narratives to be understood in relation to the wider Kadazandusun cultural environment rather than being treated as isolated individual experiences. This is particularly important because customary institutions and Native Court structures continue to influence the regulation and interpretation of social relationships within Indigenous communities in Sabah (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). Combining phenomenological interpretation, life history narratives, and ethnographic

contextualisation therefore enables the study to examine both individual experiences and the cultural frameworks within which those experiences acquire meaning, providing a comprehensive qualitative understanding of the factors contributing to cousin marriage.

Study area and participants

Fieldwork was conducted over an eight-month period in four locations on the west coast of Sabah: Penampang, Menggatal (Kota Kinabalu), Papar, and Membakut. These sites were selected through purposive sampling because they continue to practise customary law and are served by the Native Court (Mahkamah Anak Negeri), which plays a significant role in the administration of customary law. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The study involved four categories of participants: (i) customary leaders, including Native Chiefs (Ketua Anak Negeri) and Village Heads (Ketua Kampung), who provided perspectives on the implementation of adat sogit and customary law; (ii) a first-cousin couple who served as the principal life history case; (iii) community members who shared their perceptions of cousin marriage and adat sogit; and (iv) participants in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), comprising Native Chiefs, representatives of Native Chiefs, and Village Heads, who discussed issues relating to cousin marriage and the implementation of adat sogit within the Kadazandusun community. Participants were selected based on their knowledge, experiences, and involvement in matters related to cousin marriage and customary practices.

The selection of participants from different social positions was intended to capture multiple perspectives concerning cousin marriage, kinship relationships, and the implementation of customary practices within the Kadazandusun community. Customary leaders were particularly important because the Native Court and traditional leadership structures continue to play significant roles in the administration and interpretation of customary law in Sabah (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). Their participation therefore provided institutional and community-level perspectives concerning customary violations and the application of adat sogit. Community members, in contrast, provided perspectives grounded in everyday social interactions and local understandings of marriage, family relationships, and customary expectations. The inclusion of the first-cousin couple was central to the life history component because their experiences enabled the research to examine how personal decisions, emotional relationships, family responses, and customary expectations interacted throughout the development of their relationship and marriage. This combination of participants was particularly relevant because previous studies indicate that marriage and customary practices in Sabah involve interactions among individual preferences, family relationships, cultural identity, and community expectations (Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021). Furthermore, the inclusion of customary leaders and community members allowed the couple's personal experiences to be considered alongside broader community interpretations of cousin marriage. The use of purposive and snowball sampling was therefore aligned with the study's emphasis on obtaining information from individuals possessing direct knowledge or experience of the phenomenon. Rather than seeking statistical representation, participant selection focused on obtaining culturally relevant and experience-based perspectives that could illuminate the social, cultural, and personal dimensions associated with cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, life history interviews, and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). In-depth interviews were conducted to explore participants' perspectives and experiences, while the life history approach enabled the researcher to understand the chronological development of the couple's lived experiences. In addition, one FGD involving customary leaders was conducted to obtain collective perspectives on the implementation of adat sogit and the changing values within the Kadazandusun community. The combination of these data collection methods enabled the study to obtain information at individual, interpersonal, and community levels. In-depth interviews provided participants with opportunities to describe their experiences, interpretations, and perceptions concerning cousin marriage, family relationships, customary restrictions, and adat sogit. The life history interviews complemented these accounts by allowing the principal couple to describe their experiences chronologically, including the development of their relationship, family reactions, marriage decisions, and encounters with customary expectations.

This chronological perspective was particularly relevant because the study sought to understand cousin marriage as a process shaped by experiences and relationships over time rather than as a single isolated event. The FGD provided a different form of evidence by bringing together customary leaders who possessed knowledge and practical experience concerning customary rules and community practices. This was important because previous research demonstrates that adat sogit remains embedded within the social and cultural practices of Indigenous communities in Sabah (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022). The perspectives of customary leaders also provided contextual understanding of the Native Court and community mechanisms through which customary violations are interpreted and addressed (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). Using multiple methods consequently enabled the researcher to examine similarities and differences between personal experiences and collective interpretations. The interview data provided detailed accounts of individual and family experiences, whereas the FGD generated discussion concerning shared norms, changing community values, and the contemporary application of customary practices. Together, these forms of data provided a rich qualitative foundation for examining how individual autonomy, social relationships, family expectations, customary knowledge, and community mechanisms interact in shaping experiences of cousin marriage within contemporary Kadazandusun society.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis. The analytical process involved data coding, categorising similar codes, and developing themes that explained the social, cultural, and personal factors contributing to cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community. The analysis focused on identifying recurring meanings and patterns across the accounts provided by the first-cousin couple, community members, customary leaders, and FGD participants. Following transcription, the interview materials were examined closely to identify statements associated with marriage decisions, kinship relationships, family responses, customary expectations, social pressures, knowledge of genealogy, and experiences involving adat sogit. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories

according to similarities in participants' experiences and interpretations. These categories were then examined in relation to the central research objective of understanding the social, cultural, and personal factors contributing to cousin marriage. Particular attention was given to the relationship between individual experiences and the broader customary environment because previous literature demonstrates that adat sogit and customary law continue to have important social and cultural functions among Indigenous communities in Sabah (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Darimbang et al., 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022).

The interpretation of participants' accounts also considered the role of customary institutions and Native Court governance in regulating social relationships and responding to customary violations (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). Rather than treating participants' statements independently from their cultural context, the analysis therefore considered how personal experiences reflected, challenged, or negotiated established community expectations. Themes were developed when recurring patterns demonstrated meaningful relationships between participants' experiences and the phenomenon under investigation. The resulting thematic structure provided a systematic means of organising the qualitative evidence while retaining the participants' perspectives and the sociocultural context in which their experiences occurred. Through this analytical process, the study was able to identify patterns concerning individual autonomy, weakening social control, social pressure, family genealogy, and the changing functions of adat sogit within contemporary Kadazandusun society.

Results and Discussion

Individual autonomy in partner selection

The findings indicate that individual autonomy is one of the primary factors contributing to cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community. The interviewed couple acknowledged that their decision to marry was based on mutual love and personal consent, despite being fully aware that their relationship violated customary prohibitions. In this context, emotional attachment and personal compatibility were found to outweigh the influence of customary norms. This finding reflects broader social changes within the contemporary Kadazandusun community, where individuals are increasingly exercising greater autonomy in choosing their life partners. One participant explained that the decision to marry was made voluntarily by the couple, although it initially faced strong opposition from their families:

> "*We knew that our relationship was prohibited by customary law, but we chose to marry because we loved each other.*" (Rose, female, 75 years old, Penampang; translated from Malay).

Following a process of negotiation and the implementation of adat sogit, the marriage was eventually accepted by both the family and the wider community. This finding suggests that increasing individual autonomy has become an important factor influencing the occurrence of cousin marriage among the contemporary Kadazandusun community. The participants' experiences further indicate that individual autonomy does not necessarily result in the complete rejection of customary values. Instead, personal choice appears to operate alongside continuing awareness of customary

expectations and kinship boundaries. In the case described by the interviewed couple, their decision to continue the relationship despite family opposition demonstrates the increasing importance of personal preference in determining marriage choices. Nevertheless, the subsequent process of negotiation with family members and the implementation of adat sogit suggest that customary institutions continue to influence how such personal decisions are socially recognised and accepted. This reflects a process of negotiation between individual agency and collective cultural expectations rather than a straightforward replacement of traditional values by individual preferences. Studies concerning marriage and customary practices in Sabah similarly indicate that marriage decisions can involve negotiations between personal relationships, family expectations, cultural identity, and established customary practices (Darimbang et al., 2023; Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021). In this study, the couple's willingness to proceed with marriage illustrates the growing significance of emotional attachment and personal consent, while their eventual participation in customary processes demonstrates the continuing influence of the community. Individual autonomy therefore appears to operate within, rather than completely outside, the customary framework. This interaction is important because it demonstrates how contemporary Kadazandusun individuals may exercise greater control over partner selection while continuing to recognise the social significance of customary institutions. The findings consequently suggest that cousin marriage can emerge when personal relationships become sufficiently important to individuals that customary restrictions are negotiated rather than automatically determining the outcome of the relationship.

The findings also reveal that family opposition did not immediately terminate the relationship, indicating that the authority traditionally exercised by family members over partner selection may have become less decisive. Although family approval remained important to the participants, the couple's decision was ultimately grounded in their own emotional attachment and willingness to marry. This pattern illustrates how changing social values may alter the balance between collective family authority and individual decision-making. Existing research concerning marriage in Sabah has demonstrated that marriage can involve complex negotiations surrounding cultural expectations, family relationships, and individual identity (Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021). Within Indigenous communities, these negotiations also occur in an environment where customary law continues to influence social relationships and community expectations (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). The present findings extend this understanding by showing how such negotiations operate when the selected partner falls within a traditionally prohibited kinship category. Rather than abandoning the relationship in response to customary restrictions, the couple prioritised their personal commitment and subsequently negotiated acceptance through the family and customary system. The implementation of adat sogit therefore became an important bridge between individual choice and collective acceptance. Previous research has identified sogit as an established customary practice with continuing social and cultural significance in Sabah (Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). In the present case, its implementation enabled the couple's personal decision to be accommodated within a wider customary framework. Individual autonomy can therefore be understood as an increasingly influential factor in partner selection, while customary practices continue to provide mechanisms for managing the consequences of decisions that conflict with established kinship norms.

Weakening of social control within the community

The findings also reveal that the weakening of social control within families and the wider community is another factor contributing to cousin marriage. Informants explained that close interactions between cousins from childhood, unrestricted socialisation, and reduced parental supervision created opportunities for romantic relationships to develop. One traditional leader explained that unrestricted interaction among cousins from childhood often created emotional closeness that eventually developed into romantic relationships:

> "*Some families allow their children to stay overnight at their cousins' houses. As they spend more time together, they become very close, often going out together, and from there feelings of love can develop*." (Michael, 57, Male; translated from Malay).

Furthermore, changes in family structure, parental work commitments, and contemporary lifestyles have weakened the collective mechanisms of social control that traditionally regulated kinship relationships. Consequently, relationships that initially developed within the context of family interactions gradually evolved into romantic relationships without being recognised as violations of customary norms. These findings suggest that the weakening of traditional social control has reduced the effectiveness of customary practices in preventing cousin marriage. The participants' accounts suggest that social control within the traditional family structure previously depended heavily on continuous interaction between younger family members, parents, extended relatives, and community leaders. Such interactions allowed families to monitor relationships while transmitting knowledge concerning appropriate kinship boundaries. The weakening of these interactions may consequently reduce opportunities for older family members to intervene before emotional relationships develop between relatives. This issue becomes particularly important when cousins interact regularly from childhood and perceive one another primarily as companions rather than as relatives belonging to prohibited marriage categories. The findings indicate that reduced parental supervision and changing patterns of family interaction can create social spaces in which such relationships develop with limited intervention. This transformation does not necessarily indicate that customary norms have disappeared. Instead, it suggests that the everyday social mechanisms through which these norms were traditionally communicated and enforced have become less influential. Research concerning customary institutions in Sabah has demonstrated that community relationships and customary governance remain important for maintaining social order and regulating behaviour (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). Similarly, the continued practice of sogit demonstrates the persistence of customary mechanisms despite broader social transformations (Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022). The present findings, however, suggest a distinction between the continued existence of customary rules and their preventive effectiveness in everyday family life. Customary expectations may remain culturally recognised, yet their capacity to prevent prohibited relationships can diminish when family monitoring and intergenerational communication weaken. This helps explain why cousin marriage may occur despite continuing community recognition of traditional kinship restrictions.

The weakening of social control also appears to be connected to broader transformations in contemporary family life. Informants associated reduced supervision with parental work commitments, changing lifestyles, and less intensive involvement of extended family members in younger people's social relationships. Under these

circumstances, responsibility for regulating relationships increasingly shifts from collective family supervision towards individual decision-making. Such changes may be particularly significant in communities where knowledge concerning kinship relationships was historically transmitted through regular family interaction and participation in customary life. The findings therefore suggest that social control should not be understood solely in terms of formal customary sanctions. It also operates informally through parental guidance, family communication, community observation, and shared knowledge concerning acceptable relationships. Studies of customary law and social relationships in Sabah demonstrate the continuing significance of collective norms and community-based mechanisms in maintaining social harmony (Darimbang et al., 2023; Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). However, the present findings indicate that these collective mechanisms may become less effective when everyday patterns of interaction change. Importantly, the continued existence of the Native Court and adat sogit does not necessarily prevent relationships from developing before customary intervention occurs. Instead, formal or customary mechanisms may become relevant only after the relationship has progressed to a stage where separation is difficult. This suggests a transition in the operation of social control: family and community mechanisms that once functioned preventively may increasingly be replaced by restorative responses after violations have occurred. The weakening of informal social control therefore provides an important social explanation for the persistence of cousin marriage despite the continued cultural recognition of customary prohibitions.

Social pressure resulting from premarital pregnancy

The findings indicate that premarital pregnancy is another significant factor contributing to cousin marriage. In such situations, the decision to marry is no longer driven solely by emotional attachment but is strongly influenced by social pressure to protect family honour and avoid community stigma. One customary leader explained:

> "*It would be difficult not to allow them to marry, as the woman is already pregnant. So, the solution is for us to carry out the adat sogit before the marriage proceeds.*" (Michael, 57, Male; translated from Malay)

According to the informants, when a premarital pregnancy occurs, families often regard marriage as the most immediate solution, even when the couple are first cousins. Under such circumstances, adat sogit is implemented to restore relationships between the couple, their families, and the wider community. This finding suggests that social pressure may outweigh customary prohibitions, making marriage the preferred means of resolving the resulting social conflict. The accounts provided by informants demonstrate that premarital pregnancy can fundamentally alter the way families and customary leaders respond to prohibited relationships. Before pregnancy occurs, customary expectations may provide a basis for opposing or attempting to prevent a relationship between close relatives. Once pregnancy has occurred, however, the situation becomes more complex because families must consider not only the violation of kinship restrictions but also the social consequences associated with pregnancy outside marriage. The findings indicate that marriage may consequently be viewed as a practical means of resolving competing social concerns. In this context, adat sogit provides a culturally recognised mechanism through which the violation can be acknowledged while allowing the marriage to proceed. This illustrates the flexibility of customary

practices when communities encounter circumstances in which strict enforcement of one social norm may create difficulties in addressing another social concern. Existing research indicates that sogit has important sociocultural functions within Indigenous communities in Sabah and can be associated with restoring relationships and addressing customary violations (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). The present findings demonstrate how this restorative function operates specifically in situations involving cousin marriage and premarital pregnancy. Rather than preventing the marriage altogether, customary intervention may provide a means of managing the consequences of the relationship. This suggests that customary law operates dynamically within the social realities experienced by families. Premarital pregnancy therefore represents more than an individual circumstance; it creates a broader family and community issue in which considerations of honour, stigma, responsibility, customary obligations, and social harmony must be negotiated simultaneously.

The findings further suggest that social pressure associated with premarital pregnancy can transform the priorities involved in family decision-making. Families who might otherwise oppose cousin marriage may perceive marriage as preferable to the continued social consequences associated with an unmarried pregnancy. This demonstrates how different cultural expectations can intersect and potentially conflict. On one hand, customary kinship rules discourage or prohibit particular relationships between close relatives. On the other hand, expectations surrounding family responsibility, social reputation, and the status of pregnancy may encourage families to seek a socially acceptable resolution. In such circumstances, adat sogit appears to provide a mechanism through which these competing concerns can be reconciled. Research concerning customary practices in Sabah indicates that native law is closely connected to maintaining relationships and social harmony within the community (Darimbang et al., 2023; Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). Similarly, studies of sogit demonstrate its continuing relevance within the sociocultural lives of Indigenous communities (Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). The experiences reported in this study suggest that such mechanisms can become particularly significant when families encounter circumstances not easily resolved through simple enforcement of customary prohibitions. The decision to permit marriage following premarital pregnancy therefore should not be interpreted as evidence that kinship restrictions have become irrelevant. Rather, it illustrates how families and customary authorities negotiate different social obligations according to the circumstances confronting them. In this sense, premarital pregnancy functions as a powerful social pressure that can shift the response from preventing a prohibited marriage towards managing its consequences and restoring relationships among the individuals, families, and community involved.

Limited knowledge of family genealogy

The study further found that limited knowledge of family genealogy is an important factor contributing to cousin marriage. Informants explained that urban migration, parental separation, reduced family interactions, and the decline of customary knowledge have made it increasingly difficult for younger generations to recognise their kinship relationships. One village head explained:

"*When young people meet in the city, some of them do not know each other's family background. Once they have been in a relationship for a long time, it becomes very difficult to separate them*." (David, 60, Male; translated from Malay)

Another informant stated:

"*There are no regular family… gatherings and no proper family genealogy records. Families should organise reunions at least once a year*." (Roger, 65, Male; translated from Malay)

As a result, romantic relationships may develop before individuals realise that they are closely related. These findings indicate that family genealogy, which traditionally functioned as an important mechanism of social control, has gradually weakened due to ongoing social changes within the Kadazandusun community. The participants' accounts demonstrate that genealogical knowledge has practical significance in regulating marriage relationships because individuals must first understand their family connections before they can identify whether a potential partner falls within a prohibited kinship category. The decline of such knowledge therefore creates conditions in which relationships may develop unintentionally between relatives. Informants particularly associated this problem with urban migration, reduced family gatherings, and limited communication between generations. When younger individuals live away from extended family networks, opportunities to learn about distant relatives and family histories may become increasingly limited. Consequently, kinship connections that were previously understood through regular interaction and oral transmission may become less visible. This finding is significant because Kadazandusun customary practices operate within broader systems of kinship, community relationships, and culturally defined obligations. Research concerning native law and customary practices in Sabah demonstrate that these systems remain closely connected to collective cultural knowledge and community relationships (Darimbang et al., 2023; Animbok, 2023). Marriage itself can also involve complex interactions between family identity, cultural expectations, and social relationships (Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021). The present findings indicate that maintaining customary marriage boundaries therefore depends not only on the existence of rules but also on individuals possessing sufficient knowledge to apply those rules to their own relationships. Where genealogical knowledge is incomplete, customary prohibitions may have limited preventive capacity because individuals may not initially recognise that they are violating them. The findings consequently identify declining knowledge of family genealogy as an important link between broader social change and the occurrence of cousin marriage in contemporary Kadazandusun society.

The informants' emphasis on family reunions and genealogical records further demonstrates that the transmission of kinship knowledge depends heavily on continued interaction between generations. Older family members may possess extensive knowledge concerning family histories, ancestral relationships, and connections between different branches of the extended family, but this knowledge can become increasingly difficult to transmit when families are geographically dispersed. Urban migration and changing lifestyles may therefore affect more than the frequency of family interaction; they can also influence the continuity of cultural knowledge required to identify kinship relationships. In this respect, the decline of genealogical awareness

may be understood as part of a broader transformation in the relationship between traditional cultural knowledge and contemporary social life. Studies concerning Indigenous customary practices in Sabah demonstrate the continuing importance of cultural knowledge in maintaining customary institutions and community relationships (Sabilin, 2024; Darimbang et al., 2023; Animbok, 2023). At the same time, the present findings show that the continued existence of customary norms does not automatically guarantee that younger generations possess detailed knowledge of the kinship structures to which those norms apply. When individuals meet outside their traditional community or extended family environment, they may develop emotional attachments before discovering their genealogical relationship. At that stage, family intervention can become considerably more difficult because the relationship may already involve strong personal commitment. Genealogical knowledge therefore operates as an important preventive form of social control. The findings suggest that reduced transmission of this knowledge can indirectly contribute to cousin marriage by weakening individuals' ability to recognise prohibited relationships before emotional attachment develops.

Changing functions of Adat Sogit

Although adat sogit continues to be practised within the Kadazandusun community, the findings indicate that its function has evolved over time. While it traditionally served as a preventive mechanism against violations of customary norms, it now primarily functions as a means of restoring social relationships after such violations have occurred. The implementation of adat sogit facilitates the reintegration of couples into their families and the wider community while helping to restore social harmony. These findings demonstrate that adat sogit remains relevant in contemporary Kadazandusun society; however, its role has shifted from emphasising punishment towards promoting reconciliation, family restoration, and community cohesion. The changing function of adat sogit identified in the findings illustrates the adaptability of customary institutions in response to contemporary social conditions. Informants' experiences suggest that adat sogit remains culturally meaningful even when it is no longer sufficient to prevent individuals from entering relationships that conflict with customary expectations. Instead of disappearing as individual autonomy increases and traditional social control weakens, the practice appears to have assumed a stronger restorative role. This observation is consistent with literature demonstrating the historical continuity and contemporary significance of sogit among Indigenous communities in Sabah (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). The findings of the present study add an important dimension by demonstrating how this customary mechanism operates in the specific context of cousin marriage. When a relationship has already developed and separation is no longer regarded as a practical solution, adat sogit enables the consequences of the violation to be addressed through a culturally recognised process. Its implementation allows families and community members to acknowledge the breach of customary expectations while simultaneously facilitating reconciliation and social acceptance. This indicates that the continuing relevance of adat sogit may depend partly on its ability to adapt to changing circumstances rather than on rigid enforcement of traditional prohibitions. The practice therefore provides a mechanism through which customary values can remain meaningful within a social environment increasingly characterised by personal autonomy and changing family relationships. Rather than representing the disappearance of customary authority, the transition towards restoration may reflect an

adaptive transformation in how that authority operates within contemporary Kadazandusun society.

The restorative function identified in this study also demonstrates that adat sogit extends beyond the relationship between the couple and customary authorities. Its consequences involve families and the wider community because violations of customary norms can affect social relationships across these different levels. By providing a recognised process for resolving the violation, adat sogit facilitates the reintegration of individuals and contributes to the restoration of social harmony. This broader social function is particularly important in understanding why the practice continues even as other aspects of community life undergo transformation. Previous research has documented sogit as a significant customary practice within Sabah and has examined its sociocultural and legal dimensions (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). Research on native law and Native Court governance likewise emphasises the importance of customary institutions in maintaining relationships and addressing community disputes (Darimbang et al., 2023; Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021; Miyamoto, 2008). The present findings demonstrate that these restorative principles are directly relevant to cousin marriage. Although the relationship may initially constitute a violation of customary expectations, the implementation of adat sogit creates a pathway through which the couple can be socially accommodated without entirely disregarding customary values. This transformation from prevention towards reconciliation suggests that customary law is capable of responding to changing patterns of individual behaviour while retaining its broader cultural purpose. The continued relevance of adat sogit therefore appears to lie increasingly in its capacity to negotiate conflict, repair relationships, and maintain community cohesion after a customary violation has occurred.

The findings demonstrate that cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community can no longer be understood solely as a violation of customary norms but rather as a manifestation of broader social transformations influenced by increasing individual autonomy, the weakening of family-based social control, social pressures associated with premarital pregnancy, and declining knowledge of family genealogy. From a functionalist perspective, these changes reflect a transition from a society characterised by traditional social cohesion, where collective norms strongly regulate individual behaviour, to one in which greater emphasis is placed on personal choice and individual agency. Within this changing social context, adat sogit continues to be practised; however, its role has shifted from preventing customary violations to restoring social relationships among couples, families, and the wider community after such violations have occurred. These findings support the work of Darimbang et al. (2023) and Miyamoto (2008), who argue that adat sogit functions primarily as a mechanism of social restoration within the Kadazandusun community. However, the present study extends previous research by demonstrating that the changing function of adat sogit is closely associated with broader transformations in social structure and community values. As individual autonomy becomes increasingly prominent, the effectiveness of customary law no longer depends on coercion or punishment but on its capacity to facilitate negotiation, conflict resolution, and social reintegration. Consequently, the sustainability of adat sogit lies not in its ability to prevent cousin marriage, but in its continued role in maintaining social harmony within a society undergoing rapid social change.

The findings further demonstrate that the persistence of cousin marriage should be interpreted within the interaction between changing individual behaviour and the continuing influence of customary institutions. Although participants demonstrated awareness of customary restrictions surrounding close-kin marriage, personal relationships, emotional attachment, changing family structures, and social circumstances influenced their marriage decisions. This suggests that knowledge of customary rules alone may not be sufficient to ensure compliance when individuals increasingly prioritise personal choice. At the same time, the continued involvement of families, customary leaders, and adat sogit indicates that individual autonomy has not completely displaced collective cultural expectations. Instead, contemporary marriage decisions appear to involve an ongoing negotiation between individual agency and customary obligations. This interpretation is consistent with research demonstrating that marriage and family relationships in Sabah can involve negotiations between personal relationships, cultural identities, customary practices, and family expectations (Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021). The findings also correspond with studies demonstrating the continuing significance of customary rights and Native Court institutions in maintaining social relationships and regulating community affairs in Sabah (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021). In this sense, social transformation does not necessarily result in the disappearance of customary law. Rather, customary institutions may adapt their functions according to changing social conditions. The persistence of adat sogit is particularly significant because studies have documented its continuing sociocultural importance among Indigenous communities in Sabah (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). The present findings extend this literature by showing that adat sogit can operate as an adaptive mechanism that enables communities to negotiate tensions between traditional kinship expectations and contemporary individual choices. Thus, cousin marriage represents not simply a breakdown of customary regulation but a context in which traditional institutions and changing social values interact and are continuously renegotiated.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of understanding adat sogit as a dynamic cultural institution whose functions may change in response to transformations within the Kadazandusun community. The increasing emphasis on reconciliation identified in this study suggests that customary law retains its relevance by responding to violations after they occur rather than functioning exclusively as a preventive mechanism. This transformation is particularly visible in circumstances involving premarital pregnancy, established emotional relationships, and situations in which individuals become aware of their kinship connections only after a relationship has developed. Under these circumstances, strict enforcement of customary prohibitions may create additional conflict between individuals, families, and the wider community. The restorative application of adat sogit consequently provides a culturally recognised mechanism for acknowledging the violation while facilitating reconciliation and social reintegration. Previous research has demonstrated that sogit remains an important customary practice with historical, cultural, social, and legal significance in Sabah (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). Likewise, research concerning native law demonstrates the continuing importance of customary institutions and community-based approaches to maintaining social relationships among Indigenous communities (Darimbang et al., 2023; Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021; Miyamoto, 2008). The findings of this study therefore suggest that the resilience of adat sogit lies partly in its capacity to accommodate changing social realities while

maintaining its underlying objective of social harmony. Rather than viewing this changing function as evidence of the weakening or disappearance of customary law, it can be understood as an adaptive response to transformations in family structures, individual autonomy, mobility, and community relationships. The continued practice of adat sogit consequently demonstrates how Indigenous customary institutions can remain socially meaningful by balancing cultural continuity with the changing circumstances experienced by contemporary Kadazandusun communities.

Conclusion

This study examined the social, cultural, and personal factors contributing to cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun community in Sabah. The findings demonstrate that cousin marriage is influenced by a combination of increasing individual autonomy in partner selection, the weakening of family-based social control, social pressures associated with premarital pregnancy, and declining knowledge of family genealogy. These findings further reveal that the occurrence of cousin marriage cannot be understood solely as a violation of customary law but should also be viewed within the broader context of social and cultural transformation. The study contributes to the field of social anthropology by extending current understanding of kinship systems, social change, and the evolving role of adat sogit in contemporary Indigenous communities. These findings also provide practical insights for customary institutions and community leaders in strengthening cultural knowledge and family awareness among younger generations. However, this research does not end here. Future studies should examine cousin marriage among other Indigenous communities in Sabah and explore how changing kinship systems continue to influence customary practices and social relationships across different cultural settings. The findings further emphasise that the continuity of customary practices within the Kadazandusun community should not be understood as the preservation of an unchanging cultural system, but rather as an ongoing process of adaptation to contemporary social circumstances. The persistence of adat sogit demonstrates that customary institutions continue to hold social and cultural significance even as individual autonomy, mobility, family structures, and patterns of social interaction undergo transformation.

Existing studies have similarly documented the historical continuity and contemporary relevance of sogit and other forms of customary regulation among Indigenous communities in Sabah (Sabilin, 2024; Animbok, 2023; Darimbang et al., 2023; Marinsah et al., 2022; Pg Musa et al., 2018). At the same time, the continued operation of customary rights and Native Court institutions illustrates the enduring importance of community-based mechanisms in regulating relationships and maintaining social harmony (Hussin et al., 2022; Hussin et al., 2021; Miyamoto, 2008). In relation to marriage, changing cultural identities and family relationships further demonstrate that personal decisions increasingly interact with established customary expectations (Karuppiah and Hussin, 2021). The present study therefore concludes that cousin marriage among the Kadazandusun should be understood through the interaction of individual agency, family relationships, social pressures, genealogical knowledge, and customary regulation. Strengthening intergenerational communication and awareness of family genealogy may consequently help younger generations understand their kinship relationships while allowing customary institutions to remain relevant within changing social environments. More importantly, the evolving restorative

function of adat sogit demonstrates the capacity of customary practices to respond to social change while maintaining their fundamental role in reconciliation and community cohesion. Future research involving different Kadazandusun localities and other Indigenous communities in Sabah would provide a broader understanding of whether similar transformations in kinship, marriage practices, and customary regulation are occurring across different cultural and social settings.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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