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The Legend of Princess Mandalika: The Spirit of Gender Struggle in the Sasak Tribe Community on Lombok Island, West Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract

This study explores the legend of Princess Mandalika and its significance as a symbol of gender struggle among the Sasak tribe on Lombok Island, West Nusa Tenggara. Data collection methods include observations, interviews, and document analysis. The study also incorporates data from social media platforms such as YouTube, Tik Tok, and Facebook, which feature the legend of Princess Mandalika in Lombok. The analysis employs hermeneutic techniques to interpret the legend's meaning in the context of gender struggle for Sasak women and utilizes semiotic theory to uncover symbols within the legend. This research is driven by the enduring oral traditions within the Sasak farming community, focusing on the folklore surrounding the legend of Princess Mandalika. The findings suggest that the gender struggle for equality, as portrayed in the Legend of Princess Mandalika, still encounters sociocultural barriers. The story highlights the sacrifices made by Mandalika, a king's daughter, as she chose to preserve her honor and kingdom by sacrificing herself in the sea. This act symbolizes the spirit of the Sasak women's gender struggle to maintain harmony and safety. In Sasak culture, the *Merariq* tradition serves as a conflict resolution method for addressing gender bias against Sasak women. The research underscores that Sasak women continue to fight for equal rights, and their struggle reflects the community's perspective that such rights must be earned.

Keywords

Legend, Oral Tradition, Mandalika, Spirit of Gender Struggle, Lombok

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1. Introduction

The *Sasak* tribe has been inhabiting the island of Lombok in West Nusa Tenggara for centuries (Rahayu et al., 2021). At first glance, the *Sasak* tribe appears harmonious due to the deeply religious background of its people. However, beneath this harmony lie unresolved issues. Gender equality has emerged as an intriguing concern amidst the growing feminist movement in the region, inspired by oral traditions, particularly legends. The *Sasak* tribe in West Nusa Tenggara is rich in oral traditions, and one of the most popular among them is the legend of Princess Mandalika. This legend has even been immortalized in the name of the Formula 1 motor racing circuit, known as the Mandalika circuit. The existence of the Mandalika circuit has further elevated the prominence of the Princess Mandalika legend, piquing the curiosity of many to visit the area. The convergence of oral traditions and cultural tourism has the potential to boost tourism development in the region, with the goal of introducing the area to both domestic and international tourists (Smith, 2015; Widiartanto et al., 2022).

Historically, the *Sasak* tribe that inhabited the island of Lombok in the pre-Islamic era practiced a belief system referred to as *Wratsari* (Wacana, 1993:5). *Wratsari* is believed to be synonymous with Hinduism (Wacana, 1993:5). Prior to that, the *Sasak* tribe was believed to have adhered to Buddhism, as suggested by the discovery of four bronze statues in the Batu Pandang area of Sapit Village, Pringgalaya District, East Lombok, dating back to the 1960s. Following the introduction of Islam to Lombok, which some scholars attribute to Sunan Prapen around the mid-16th century AD (Wacana, 1993:6), most of the Lombok's population today is Muslim. However, their religious beliefs vary considerably. Some groups, despite identifying as Muslims, do not strictly adhere to Islamic teachings.

This group is known as the Islamic Time Telu group or Islam Wetu Telu (Budiwanti, 2000: 248), while the group that strictly adheres to Islamic teachings is called the Islamic Time Lima group or Islam Wetu Lima. The Tim Telu Islamic group believes that matters of worship are the responsibility of the *Kyai* (Islamic religious leaders), and, as such, they delegate the matters of worship to them. Members of the community who are not *kyai* are not obligated to perform prayers, fast, give zakat, or go on Hajj. The *Tim Telu* Islamic group strongly upholds customs and is reluctant to abandon them for fear of adverse consequences (Wacana, 1993: 10).

The Lima Time Islamic group and the Tim Telu Islamic group exhibit distinct worship practices. In the Bayan and Tanjung areas of North Lombok, the Telu Time Islamic group performs prayers only at specific times. *Kyai*, who are religious leaders, lead three specific types of prayers: the midday prayer exclusively on Fridays, funeral prayers when someone passes away, and prayers on Eid al-Fitr. Contrarily, in the Sembalun area and its surrounding regions, the Tim Telu Islamic group conducts prayers only on Thursday afternoons, encompassing the 'Asr prayer, midday prayers exclusively on Fridays, and the Fajr prayer in the morning just before Eid al-Fitr (Wacana, 1993: 11).

The Islamic group Tim Telu in Rembitan and Sapit also follows different worship practices. The *kyai* (religious leaders) there perform Maghrib and Isha' prayers only during the month of Ramadan, Fajr prayers exclusively in the morning before Eid al-Fitr, and midday prayers only on Fridays. A different phenomenon was observed in Pengandangan, Masbagik District, East Lombok. The *kyai* pray five times a day and night but only while serving as mosque administrators, which they do for a week. After their service as administrators concludes, they

are not obligated to perform the five daily prayers but only offer midday prayers on Fridays, engage in sunnah tarawih prayers, and conduct funeral prayers when responsible for burying the deceased (Wacana, 1993: 11).

Historically, the Sasak people have been known as an open society, readily accepting influences from outside cultures. This is evident in their embrace of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, even alongside their ancestral beliefs. However, their acceptance is quite selective, particularly regarding foreign cultures that do not align with the local community's personality. This selectivity has given rise to acculturative practices, particularly between Hindus and Muslims (Zuhdi, 2012: 19-22). Acculturative cultural expressions take various forms, such as in worship, marriage, and other life cycle events. These expressions are also evident in customs that persist to this day. In the realm of worship, the Sasak Islamic community acknowledges the practices of the Islamic Time Telu and Islamic Time Lima groups, as explained earlier.

The explanation provided above sheds light on the significance of gender dynamics for Sasak women. Sasak women are striving for equal rights, as noble men can choose their partners from both nobility and non-noble backgrounds. In contrast, noble women are expected to marry within the nobility, or they risk losing their noble status. This gender struggle is deeply intertwined with local rules and the diverse perspectives of the community's way of life. This research delves into this gender struggle within the context of the Sasak community's lifestyle in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara. The aim of this research is to comprehensively examine this gender struggle within the context of the Sasak community's lifestyle in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, and to explore the impact of historical, cultural, and religious influences on the evolving roles of Sasak women.

2. Results and Discussion

This comprehensive research delves deeply into the legendary tale of Princess Mandalika and the profound gender struggles experienced by Sasak women within the rich cultural tapestry of Lombok Island, West Nusa Tenggara. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive methodology, this study not only provides a meticulous description of the Princess Mandalika legend but also endeavors to illuminate its profound significance as a living embodiment of the enduring gender struggles within the Sasak tribe. The timeless narrative of Princess Mandalika, revered among the Sasak people, serves as a portal to gain a deeper understanding of the Sasak community's perceptions and values regarding women. This research aspires to uncover the multifaceted layers of meaning interwoven within this legendary tale, particularly about the indomitable spirit of gender struggle. Data collection for this endeavor was a multifaceted process that encompassed meticulous field observations, in-depth interviews, and the scrupulous examination of pertinent documents. The utmost care was taken to ensure data validity, following the methodological principles laid out by Moleong (2017).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Gender Struggles and Cultural Traditions Among the Sasak People

In the realm of social dynamics, the Sasak community recognizes a distinctive cultural practice known as Merariq (Suparta, 2020). Merariq is a matrimonial tradition within the Sasak

culture, involving the elopement of a young woman to marry her chosen partner (Yasin, 2008). This tradition is deeply rooted in Sasak heritage, having endured for countless generations. It holds significant social value, serving as a testament to a young woman's love for her prospective husband and a measure of a man's courage, virility, and sense of responsibility toward the woman he loves.

Traditionally, customs play a pivotal role in guiding such practices, but deviations sometimes occur. This is particularly evident in the Merariq tradition, where the customary rules dictate that a woman should willingly choose to elope. Yet, in practice, violations of this rule are not uncommon. For instance, elopements may involve individuals who are underage, or they might occur while the individuals are attending school or working in the rice fields. Such deviations can have legal ramifications, especially if the woman objects, and can trigger conflicts within families, between community groups, or even among different villages. It is essential to preserve the practice of the Merariq tradition to prevent violations that could lead to societal conflicts.

Another critical issue related to marriage within Sasak society pertains to the differences in social strata among potential brides and grooms. Sasak society exhibits a well-defined social stratification system, dividing it into three distinct tiers: *Ningrat*, *Pruangse*, and *Bulu Ketujur*, each with its own set of customs and norms. The Ningrat class occupies the highest position, signifying nobility and privilege, followed by the Pruangse, who hold a middle-tier status, and finally, the Bulu Ketujur class, representing those at the lowest tier in terms of social standing (Rahman, 2013: 108-109). This social stratification deeply influences interactions within Sasak society, governing marital unions and determining the expectations and obligations of each class.

Alternatively, there is another version of this stratification, categorizing Sasak society into 1) Perwangsa, Raden, and Denda; 2) Triwangsa, Lalu, and Baiq; 3) Jajar Karang Amaq/Loq and Le (Zuhdi, 2012: 35). The division of society into three social strata significantly influences social interactions among them. Interactions between these social strata are governed by strict customary rules referred to as *Awig-awig*. Violating these customary rules results in the offender receiving traditional sanctions commensurate with their transgression. For instance, if a woman from the noble class (Ningrat) marries a man from a lower social class, she risks losing her noble status and being ostracized from her extended family. To compensate, the man must pay a substantial bride price, which includes multiple fines, such as *Ngampah-Ngampah Ilen Pati* (disgracing the family), *Terlambat Salabar* (delaying the announcement to the bride's family), *Dosan Jeruman* (employing intermediaries during elopement), *Ajin Gubug* (a request from the surrounding community), and *Lain Keliang* (originating from different regions) (Budiwanti, 2000: 252-254).

These social constraints do not apply to men from the noble class (Wangsa Ningrat). They enjoy the freedom to select their partners from any social class and are not subject to customary sanctions in the form of fines. This is because the Sasak people adhere to a patrilineal kinship system, known as 'mama' (Zuhdi, 2012: 34), which prioritizes men. This patrilineal lineage is the root cause behind women's limited agency in choosing their future spouses. Noble women must marry within their own class to avoid exorbitant *ajikrama* payments, whereas noble men face no such restrictions. Observers have criticized this as gender bias that disproportionately affects women. As a result, many noble women remain unmarried and become *Dedare Toaq* (old

maids), residing with their parents or brothers. This gender bias further disempowers women within a culture that already imposes these constraints. Women are an oppressed group bound by certain regulations, a situation that urgently needs change and addressal to secure gender equality.

The prevalence of deeply ingrained gender bias within the Sasak community of Central Lombok has sparked a resilient and unwavering spirit of gender struggle among Sasak women. This enduring spirit, inspired by the legendary tale of Princess Mandalika and the challenges she faced, has ignited a powerful movement. Countless Sasak women, driven by a shared commitment to change, have taken up the mantle of advocating for gender equality within the Sasak tribal community in West Nusa Tenggara. Their collective efforts aim not only to challenge existing norms but also to empower women and create a more inclusive society where gender bias no longer hinders the aspirations and potential of Sasak women.

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3.2. The Bau Nyale Tradition and the Legend of Princess Mandalika

The Sasak people of Lombok, located in the West Nusa Tenggara region, possess a rich tapestry of oral traditions. Among these cultural treasures, the Bau Nyale tradition stands out as a prominent example. Celebrated annually in Central Lombok, this tradition carries a profound cultural significance. It is cherished as an *Adiluhung* practice, brimming with local wisdom that not only unites the community but also imparts valuable life philosophies. This tradition has earned its place as a core event in West Nusa Tenggara and plays a pivotal role in shaping the local culture and society.

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The Bau Nyale tradition is intricately linked with the legend of Princess Mandalika, a timeless and anonymous oral tale. This tradition, whose author remains unknown, holds within it educational values that guide the everyday actions of the people, fostering religious harmony and emphasizing the importance of gender equality. In the eyes of the Sasak community, the Bau Nyale tradition and the Mandalika legend are inseparable facets of their cultural identity (Rahmawati et al., 2022).

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The annual celebration of the Bau Nyale tradition aligns with the narrative of the Princess Mandalika legend, held nowadays at the Mandalika Circuit, located on the scenic Seger Beach. Yet, within these cherished traditions, issues related to gender bias have surfaced. This research delves into the complexities of these cultural narratives, particularly examining their potential to enhance gender equality. The interwoven themes of the legend of Princess Mandalika and the Bau Nyale tradition offer unique perspectives and cultural avenues to strengthen harmony among the Sasak people and broader Indonesian society.

Central Lombok has a visionary mission—to cultivate a faithful, prosperous, and high-quality society. This vision translates into concrete strategies, including elevating awareness about religious life and social harmony, promoting gender mainstreaming, advancing community health and intelligence, encouraging regional economic growth, fostering entrepreneurship, and ensuring environmental sustainability. The region is committed to improving governance based on transparency and justice while enhancing the implementation of village autonomy, founded on cooperation and social solidarity (Yoniartini, 2021).

The Sasak community in Central Lombok is renowned for striking a delicate balance between religious and cultural values. Their day-to-day interactions emphasize the importance of tradition over religion, and when conflicts arise, they tend to prioritize traditional resolutions to

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maintain harmony among religious communities. In cases where traditional solutions do not suffice, religious institutions come into play. This nuanced relationship between Islamic law and custom can be observed from various perspectives, including antagonistic, critical reciprocal, and accommodative patterns (Yasin, 2008:91).

The legend of Princess Mandalika is not just a captivating folk narrative; it also exists in multiple versions, a common trait of folklore. As with many such tales, its author remains shrouded in mystery. The version most popular among the Sasak people, particularly those in southern Central Lombok, has become a cultural touchstone. This oral tradition continues to be upheld and preserved by cultural figures, traditional leaders, and the local population in regions such as Pujut, Kopang, Praya, and Kuta (Yasin, 2008: 97).

3.3. Text Description of the Legend of Princess Mandalika

In ancient times, on the southern coast of Lombok, there stood a kingdom called Tunjung Bitu. This kingdom was ruled by a wise king named Tonjang Beru, who was accompanied by an empress named Dewi Seranting. King Tonjang Beru ensured the prosperity, security, and peace of his people, who took great pride in having such a sagacious and benevolent ruler. Among his cherished treasures was a beautiful, intelligent, and wise daughter named Sarah Wulan, more famously known as Princess Mandalika. Her friendly, polite demeanor and eloquent speech endeared her to the people of Tunjung Bitu, who held a deep affection for the Princess.

Princess Mandalika's extraordinary beauty and grace were renowned, not only within her own kingdom but also in neighboring lands. Princes from various realms, including Arya Johor from the Johor kingdom, Arya Bumbang from the Bumbang kingdom, and Arya Rembitan from the Rembitan kingdom, had heard tales of her allure. Eager to behold the Princess's countenance, these princes journeyed to the kingdom one by one, each proposing to her. The Princess's compassionate heart led her to accept every proposal.

The growing curiosity among the princes about whom Princess Mandalika would choose led to a fateful decision. They agreed to settle their fate through combat, with the victor earning the right to marry her. However, the Princess, overwhelmed by the difficult choice, realized that selecting one prince would risk bloodshed and great loss of life. Renowned for her beauty and wisdom, she made the extraordinary choice to sacrifice herself to prevent such a calamity.

Subsequently, Princess Mandalika invited all the princes and the people of the kingdom to gather at Seger Beach, located to the south of Lombok Island in the present-day Kuta Village, Pujut District, Central Lombok Regency. As the appointed time arrived, the beach teemed with eager attendees. Everyone anxiously awaited the Princess's message. Soon, Princess Mandalika stood upon the rocky hill known as Bukit Batu Angkus and addressed the assembly with a resolute voice, "Oh, my beloved father, mother, princes, and people of Tunjung Bitu! After much contemplation, I have decided that I belong to all of you. I cannot choose one prince. It is my destiny to belong to all."

With those words, Princess Mandalika leaped into the tumultuous southern sea, where fierce waves churned. Her parents, the princes, and the people of Tunjung Bitu who witnessed this incident were stunned and overcome with shock, as if struck by lightning. Chaos and hysteria enveloped the scene, with cries of "Mandalika, Mandalika!" Nature itself seemed to grieve,

unleashing thunder, torrential rain, and howling winds that intensified the tumultuous atmosphere.

As the rain and wind subsided, the community and onlookers rushed to the spot where Princess Mandalika had entered the sea. Strangely, they found no trace of the Princess herself but instead discovered a multitude of colorful, glowing sea worms, known locally as Nyale. The Sasak people believed that these sea worms, the Nyale, were the reincarnation of Princess Mandalika. This event transpired on the 20th of the 10th month in the Sasak calendar, which corresponds to February or March in the national calendar. Hence, every year, the people of Lombok congregate at Seger Beach to participate in the Bau Nyale procession. The hunt for Nyale serves various purposes, including agriculture, health, and recreation. Some Sasak people in the Pujut area and its vicinity even fear potential disasters if they do not partake in the Bau Nyale tradition (Supriyadi, personal communication, June 11, 2022).

3.4. Version of the Legend of Princess Mandalika

The story within the legend of Princess Mandalika, which has evolved in the Sasak community of West Nusa Tenggara, has been passed down orally, resulting in various versions, a typical characteristic of oral traditions. According to Bayan, a respected figure in West Nusa Tenggara and a cultural authority, the legend of Princess Mandalika has at least three different versions. These versions have flourished within the community without a clear original source. These different versions pertain to significant aspects of the story, such as (1) whether Princess Mandalika committed suicide, (2) whether she transformed into a sea worm named Nyale, and (3) whether she received mystical messages from the heavens. The following are the versions of the Princess Mandalika story according to the Sasak people in Central Lombok, particularly around Seger Beach, Kuta.

The first version suggests that Princess Mandalika intentionally took her own life by throwing herself into the sea. She made this choice to prevent a looming war, believing it to be a noble sacrifice to save her people and kingdom. According to this rendition, Princess Mandalika transformed into a sea worm as a promise made before her self-sacrifice. In this version, the existence of mystical messages from the sky is believed to be true and was received after Princess Mandalika's meditation.

Contrarily, the second version rejects the first's premise. This version contends that Princess Mandalika did not commit suicide but rather slipped and fell while walking near a hill overlooking the sea, known as Seger Hill. The slip was considered an accident, not a deliberate act, as suicide was seen as disgraceful. In this version, the transformation into a sea worm is considered false; the simultaneous appearance of sea worms was seen as a divine act. The account of mystical whispers is dismissed, with the emphasis being on a dream where Princess Mandalika received instructions to gather the princes and the people of Tunjung Bitu on Seger Beach to announce her decision.

The third version concurs with the first version regarding the events leading to Princess Mandalika's self-sacrifice. However, it differs in that it interprets Princess Mandalika as disappearing or vanishing shortly after throwing herself into the sea, explaining why her body was never recovered. Coincidentally, a significant number of sea worms appeared at the same time, believed to be the reincarnation of Princess Mandalika. This phenomenon, where sea worms

emerge, is considered unique and extends beyond Seger Beach to include Arguling Beach, west of Kuta Beach, Mawun Beach, and Sumbawa Island.

3.5. Interpreting the Legend of Princess Mandalika

The legend of Princess Mandalika is an essential component of Sasak culture in Lombok, where it is commemorated annually during the grand Bau Nyale tradition. This reenactment symbolizes the self-sacrifice of Princess Mandalika for the sake of societal harmony, leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of the Sasak people. Her tale holds deep-rooted cultural significance, serving as a powerful tool for preserving and promoting local traditions. Over time, this legend has gained recognition not only within the boundaries of Lombok but also on the international stage, thanks to the unwavering support of local governments.

From a religious perspective, the legend significantly contributes to the fostering of harmony among diverse religious communities. It imparts the vital lesson of tolerance and understanding among individuals holding varying religious beliefs, creating a platform for interfaith goodwill. Concurrently, the annual reenactment at Bau Nyale is not merely an act of cultural preservation but a vibrant source of entertainment for the local community. It has evolved into a captivating attraction, drawing both domestic and international tourists, thereby bolstering the local economy by creating opportunities for vendors and businesses linked to the event.

In addition to its socio-cultural and economic importance, the legend brings health benefits to the community. Nyale worms, believed to be highly nutritious and even having curative properties, play a vital role in maintaining and testing seawater quality. Furthermore, the legend bears agricultural significance, symbolizing fertility, and agricultural prosperity. The act of distributing Nyale worms onto farmlands is seen as a safeguard for abundant agricultural yields, significantly impacting the lives of Central Lombok's farming community.

The legend's socio-religious importance is further revealed in its contribution to strengthening religious harmony and mutual respect among diverse religious beliefs. The annual reenactment takes on a role of cultural enrichment and enjoyment, providing a vibrant source of entertainment for the local community. It showcases Princess Mandalika's remarkable story, attracting audiences from various backgrounds and adding to its cultural significance.

In recognition of Princess Mandalika's timeless spirit of sacrifice and as a testament to the ongoing gender struggles of Sasak women, her name is now immortalized in the Mandalika Circuit. This Formula 1 racing track has gained international renown, drawing professional racers from around the globe. The legend of Princess Mandalika continues to evolve, taking on new dimensions and meanings, reflecting the dynamic nature of Lombok's cultural heritage. Her story transcends generations, serving as a poignant reminder of the significance of selflessness and unity today.

4. Conclusion

The legend of Princess Mandalika stands as a powerful symbol of resilience and sacrifice within the Sasak culture. Her story encapsulates the ongoing gender struggles faced by Sasak women, particularly those from noble backgrounds, and serves as a source of inspiration for those advocating for gender equality in the Sasak tribal community of West Nusa Tenggara. The legends of Princess Mandalika and the annual Bau Nyale tradition have become intertwined,

fostering cultural preservation, religious harmony, economic opportunities, and even health benefits for the community. As the legend continues to evolve and adapt to contemporary society, it remains a poignant reminder of the importance of selflessness and unity in the face of societal challenges.

The legend's enduring influence extends beyond the boundaries of Lombok, gaining recognition on an international stage, thanks to the support of local governments. Princess Mandalika's legacy has transcended generations, emphasizing the significance of cultural heritage and the lessons it imparts, such as tolerance, understanding, and the preservation of local traditions. The study sheds light on the complexities of the Sasak culture, its traditions, and the gender disparities that persist, all while highlighting the strength of the Sasak women who continue to champion the cause of gender equality inspired by the spirit of Princess Mandalika.

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