

Widowhood, Ex-Affinal Relationships, and Social Perceptions: A Case Study of Sundanese Muslim Women in Rural West Java, Indonesia

Khansa Mahira^{1*}, Dede Mulyanto² and Budiawati Supangkat Iskandar³

¹ Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia; e-mail: khansa19004@mail.unpad.ac.id

² Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia; e-mail: dede.mulyanto@mail.unpad.ac.id

³ Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia; e-mail: budiawati.supangkat@unpad.ac.id

* Correspondence

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Abstract: This article explores the social perception of widows from an Islamic perspective, the various types of relationships between widows and their ex-affines, and the factors shaping these relationships among Sundanese Muslims in rural West Java. Employing a qualitative research design with a case study approach, the study engaged religious leaders and six widows who had diverse experiences with their ex-affinal kin. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observations. The findings reveal that social perceptions of widows, as informed by Islamic teachings, are rooted in Qur'anic references; however, these teachings are not consistently reflected in actual practices within Cikembang Village. Instead, the findings align with existing literature on Muslim widows in other Southeast Asian contexts. The study identified three types of the widow-ex-affinal relationships: (1) positive—characterised by continued closeness, such as becoming friends or being regarded as a daughter; (2) negative—marked by hostility or estrangement, such as being treated as a hostile neighbour or stranger; and (3) neutral—defined by a distanced yet peaceful coexistence, such as simply being neighbours. Several factors influenced these relationship dynamics: (1) the nature of the previous personal bond, (2) the widow's age and adherence to cultural and religious principles, and (3) the birthplace of the deceased husband and the current residence of the in-laws. The classification of these relationships largely depended on the widow's post-marital situation and her interpretation of Islamic teachings. Overall, the findings offer valuable insights for developing culturally sensitive support systems for Muslim widows and contribute original perspectives to kinship studies in Southeast Asian anthropology. Specifically, this research sheds light on widow-ex-affinal relations within bilateral kinship systems—a context that remains underexplored in Indonesian Muslim communities.

Keywords: Ex-affines; kinship; Muslim; Sundanese; widow

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengeksplorasi persepsi sosial terhadap janda dalam perspektif Islam, berbagai jenis hubungan antara janda dengan kerabat bekas suami (affinal), serta faktor-faktor yang membentuk hubungan tersebut di kalangan Muslim Sunda di pedesaan Jawa Barat. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif melalui pendekatan studi kasus, penelitian ini melibatkan tokoh agama dan enam orang janda yang memiliki pengalaman berbeda-beda dalam menjalin relasi dengan kerabat affinal mereka. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi non-partisipatif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa persepsi sosial terhadap janda, sebagaimana yang diajarkan dalam Islam, merujuk pada ayat-ayat dalam Al-Qur'an; namun, ajaran tersebut tidak selalu tercermin dalam praktik yang ditemukan di Desa Cikembang. Sebaliknya, praktik-praktik tersebut justru sejalan dengan literatur mengenai kehidupan janda Muslim di negara-negara Asia Tenggara lainnya. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tiga jenis hubungan antara janda dan kerabat affinal: (1) hubungan positif—ditandai dengan keakraban yang berlanjut, seperti menjadi teman atau dianggap sebagai anak perempuan; (2) hubungan negatif—ditandai dengan permusuhan atau keterasingan,

seperti dianggap tetangga yang bermusuhan atau orang asing; dan (3) hubungan netral—ditandai dengan keberadaan yang berdampingan secara damai, seperti sekadar menjadi tetangga. Dinamika hubungan ini dipengaruhi oleh beberapa faktor: (1) kedekatan pribadi sebelumnya, (2) usia lanjut dan kepatuhan terhadap prinsip budaya dan agama, serta (3) tempat kelahiran suami yang telah meninggal dan tempat tinggal keluarga mertua. Klasifikasi hubungan ini sangat bergantung pada kondisi khusus yang dialami janda setelah perceraian atau kematian suaminya, serta interpretasi individu terhadap ajaran agama. Secara keseluruhan, temuan ini memberikan wawasan yang berguna bagi pengembangan sistem dukungan yang peka budaya bagi perempuan Muslim yang menjanda, dan sekaligus memberikan kontribusi orisinal terhadap studi kekerabatan dalam antropologi Asia Tenggara. Secara khusus, penelitian ini mengungkap dinamika hubungan janda dan kerabat affinal dalam sistem kekerabatan bilateral—suatu konteks yang masih jarang dikaji dalam komunitas Muslim di Indonesia..

Keywords: Kerabat bekas suami (affinal); kekerabatan; Muslim; Sunda; janda

1. Introduction

The divorce cases in West Java reached 91,146 in 2023 before decreasing slightly to 88,985 in 2024. In contrast, Bandung Regency recorded an increase in divorce cases from 6,916 cases in 2023 to 7,109 in 2024 (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Jawa Barat, 2025). As a province with a predominantly Muslim population, Islamic teachings significantly shape societal norms, particularly in matters of marriage and kinship. These teachings, grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith, regulate marriage, divorce, and inheritance, often reinforcing patrilineal structures that influence post-marital relations (Afghan, 2011; Mahmudulhassan, Waston, & Nirwana AN, 2023). Divorce, for instance, follows the practice of *talak* (to let go or leave), in which a man unilaterally terminates the marital contract, thereby releasing his obligations and rights towards his wife (Adinda, Supangkat, & Mulyanto, 2023; Carolan, Bagherinia, Juhari, Himelright, & Mouton-Sanders, 2000; Chamberlayne, 1968; Nasir & Kalla, 2006).

Although Islam permits divorce, it remains a practice strongly discouraged. It is deemed one of the most detested actions before God. A divorced woman must observe a waiting time (*masa 'iddah*) of three menstrual cycles or three months to determine whether she is pregnant, thus maintaining lineage clarity (QS.4:228). During this period, the husband must still fulfil certain responsibilities towards his former wife (Chamberlayne, 1968; Hammad, 2014; Mohammad & Lehmann, 2011). In contrast, a widow must observe a longer waiting period of four months and ten days (QS.2:234). Islamic law entitles a widow to one-eighth of her deceased husband's estate, which she may use at her discretion (Mahmudulhassan et al., 2023; Mohammad & Lehmann, 2011).

Anthropologically, both divorce and widowhood remain pivotal in discussions surrounding kinship. Kinship constitutes a foundational concept in anthropological theory, classifying relationships through consanguinity or marital bonds (Cabral & Leutloff-Grandits, 2012; Stone & King, 2018). Kinship studies primarily examine how people categorise and organise their relationships with others based on blood ties and marriage connections (Supangkat & Mulyanto, 2022). Most kinship studies in Indonesia often emphasises unilateral kinship—either patrilineal system (Kipp, 1976; Loeb, 1934; Singarimbun, 1975) or matrilineal system (Indrizal, Kreager, & Schröder-Butterfill, 2009; Kato, 1978; Refisrul & Ajisman, 2015)—with limited attention paid to bilateral kinship, especially in Sundanese contexts (Berthe, 1965; Horikoshi, 1976; Mulyanto, 2019). While previous ethnographies have outlined affinal kin relations in Java (Geertz & Geertz, 1975; Koentjaraningrat, 1962; Robson, 1987) and Madura (Casey, 1993; Niehof, 1992), studies focusing on how widowhood affects affinal ties in Sundanese societies remain sparse. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of Indonesia's rich cultural landscape of family relationships, it is essential to include an examination of kinship systems that recognise both parental lineages equally (Forth, 2020; Holý, 1986; Kunto & Bras, 2019; Lowes, 2020; Smedal, 2011; Watson, 2020)—known as bilateral kinship systems—which are prevalent among the Sundanese.

Affinal kin—relatives gained through marriage—often lose formal significance once the marital bond ends due to divorce or death (Daly & Perry, 2021; Power & Ready, 2019; Suryanarayan & Khalil, 2021; Uyanga, 2021; Webster, 2023). This transition reflects the change in marital status, especially when a wife becomes a widow. The term ‘widow’ specifically refers to a woman whose marital relationship has ended through death or divorce. Widows thus form a distinct social category, characterised by the absence of a spouse and a subsequent redefinition of their position within their former husband’s family network (Parker, 2016; Siagian, 2019).

Kinship research has traditionally focused on how widows reconnect with their natal families following marital dissolution. These studies explore transitions, particularly for women who once lived with their husband’s kin and subsequently returned to their birth families. However, several research studies have examined the ongoing ties between widows and their former in-laws. Some scholars argue that widowhood does not necessarily sever ties with former affines, especially when shared grandchildren serve as enduring bonds (Dube, 1997; Holý, 1986; Lopata, 1978; Strathern, 1972). In contrast, Sweetser (Sweetser, 1963) observes that such relationships, particularly between widows and former mothers-in-law, often become strained, leading many widows to withdraw from affinal networks altogether. Despite these opposing viewpoints, little research has thoroughly examined the social processes and consequences resulting from the ongoing transformation of family ties.

This study examines the relational dynamics between widows and their ex-affinal kin among Sundanese Muslim women in rural West Java. The study investigates how women reconstruct their social identities and renegotiate their kinship roles following the dissolution of their marriages. By undertaking this approach, the study fills both empirical and theoretical gaps in the existing literature, particularly in the context of bilateral kinship, which has been insufficiently examined. It posits that widow–affinal relationships are not universally terminated but instead span a continuum—from supportive to conflictual—shaped by emotional history, local Islamic interpretations, cultural expectations, and domestic arrangements. The study hypothesises that rural kinship practices and locally grounded Islamic values mediate whether affinal bonds dissolve, persist, or transform.

This research addresses this empirical and theoretical lacuna by conducting an in-depth ethnographic investigation into the diverse patterns of interaction between widows and their former in-laws, framed within Islamic interpretations and cultural norms in West Java. Fieldwork was conducted during three periods in 2024 (March, May, and September), with a case study focused on Sub-village 1 of Cikembang Village in Bandung Regency—including Cikembang (RW 2, 3, and 4) and Hamerang (RW 1 and 13). The study employed non-participant observation and in-depth interviews with four religious leaders and six widows selected from a population of 71 widows and religious figures in the area. The location was chosen to represent mountain-based agricultural communities, predominantly composed of farming families relocated from other regions. Through this site, the study explores both the continuities and ruptures of widow–ext–affinal relationships, contributing to a renewed discourse on kinship and widowhood within Sundanese Muslim society.

2. Widows in Muslim Families in Southeast Asia: Legal Norms and Social Realities

In Southeast Asia, widows in Muslim communities encounter a complex set of challenges shaped by both religious prescriptions and local cultural traditions. In Indonesia, Islamic jurisprudence significantly influences the dissolution of marriage, particularly through practices such as *talak*, where a husband unilaterally ends the marriage, and *khula*, where a wife must petition a religious court to initiate divorce. In the latter, the court still requires the husband’s consent (Shahab Al Haddar, 1982). Such gendered legal mechanisms illustrate the asymmetrical power dynamics embedded in Islamic marital laws.

Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei have distinct social norms that shape widows’ experiences. Although Islamic teachings—as articulated in the Qur’an and Hadith—emphasise justice, inheritance rights, and dignified treatment for widows their implementation is frequently mediated by local customs and socioeconomic contexts. The Qur’an, for instance, explicitly

mandates a widow's right to a fair share of inheritance and financial maintenance to ensure her post-marital security.

"There is no blame on you if ye divorce women before consummation or the fixation of their dower; but bestow on them (a suitable gift) the wealthy according to his means and the poor according to his means; a gift of a reasonable amount is due from those who wish to do the right thing. And if ye divorce them before consummation but after the fixation of a dower for them then the half of the dower (is due to them) unless they remit it. Or (the man's half) is remitted by him in whose hands is the marriage tie; and the remission (of the man's half) is the nearest to righteousness. And do not forget liberality between yourselves. For God sees well all that ye do" (Q.2:236 – 237).¹

The concept of *iddah* (the waiting period following the husband's death or divorce) serves multiple functions: it allows time for mourning, ensures paternity clarity in the event of pregnancy, and deters impulsive remarriage. For widows, this period typically lasts four months and ten days or, in some interpretations, three menstrual cycles (Dahlan, Fthinuddin, Yunus, Aliyeva, & Ali, 2023). The enforcement of religious obligations across Southeast Asia demonstrates regional disparities due to decentralised governance allowing subnational religious bylaws in specific areas. For example, in Malaysia, widows must file formal applications to receive *iddah* and *mut'ah* maintenance, and failure to do so results in forfeiture of those rights (Dahlan et al., 2023).

Economically, widows face considerable adversity. Many rely on inheritance, support from natal families, or state assistance, especially as most had previously depended on their husbands' income (Mehta, 2014; Parker, Riyani, & Nolan, 2016; Vignato, 2012). Some widows live with extended family members and contribute by managing the household or caring for grandchildren (Mehta, 2014; Parker et al., 2016; Vignato, 2012). Others generate income through employment, savings, insurance, or support from religious and community organisations (Mehta, 2014). The diversity of these strategies reflects a range of widowhood experiences, with younger and healthier widows often achieving financial independence, while elderly or infirm widows tend to depend on familial or external support mechanisms (Mehta, 2014; Parker et al., 2016; Vignato, 2012).

A study by Mehta (Mehta, 2014) on widows in Singapore further illustrates this diversity. Many Singaporean widows continue to rely on their families to meet their daily needs, particularly those whose husbands have passed away. Some reside with adult children or other relatives, fulfilling caregiving roles such as managing the household or looking after grandchildren. This intergenerational support network highlights the social embeddedness of widowhood and the continued expectations placed on women to fulfil familial responsibilities, even after the loss of a spouse. It also highlights the crucial role of informal family structures when government assistance is inadequate or unavailable.

Social perceptions of widows also vary significantly. In some Southeast Asian contexts, widows gain recognition for their resilience and continued family contributions. In others, widowhood is accompanied by social marginalisation or suspicion, especially for younger widows who are perceived as morally ambiguous or sexually vulnerable. These perceptions often complicate opportunities for remarriage, with factors such as having children or advanced age acting as deterrents (Dube, 1994; Ofstedal, Reidy, & Knodel, 2004; Parker et al., 2016). In Aceh and Malaysia, bureaucratic hurdles associated with legal marriage registration sometimes prompt widows to pursue religiously sanctioned but unregistered unions within their local communities (Vignato, 2012).

In extreme cases, widows are stigmatised as having lost moral propriety simply because they have experienced sexual relations but are no longer married. This stigma disproportionately affects younger widows, who may become targets of exploitation, while older widows may be unjustly viewed as failed wives or deficient mothers environment (Parker et al., 2016). Such prejudices reinforce gendered expectations of female chastity, familial duty, and social conformity.

¹ All translations are derived from <https://quranyusufali.com/> by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1937)

Despite growing scholarship on kinship and widowhood, little research focuses on post-marital affinal ties. Existing studies rarely investigate whether and how widows sustain relationships with former in-laws, nor do they account for the broader cultural and religious narratives that frame these interactions. This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating widow–ext–affinal kin relationships within a Muslim community context, specifically examining the roles of Islamic doctrine, cultural interpretations, and local social norms in shaping the lived realities of widows.

3. Cikembang Village: Religious Heritage, Kinship Structure, and Social Organisation

The findings of this research must be contextualised within a robust socio-cultural framework and supported by adequate empirical data, as they are intended to address the hypotheses and objectives outlined in the introduction.

Cikembang Village is an entirely Muslim community, where Islam—particularly in the tradition of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—functions as a central cultural identity marker. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is one of Indonesia's leading Islamic organizations, known for its moderate interpretation of Sunni Islam. It mainly follows the Shafi'i school of Islamic law as its doctrinal basis. The organisation's historical development is closely linked to the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) system. Consequently, education has become a major emphasis within NU's mission, exemplified by building numerous pesantren that combine religious and secular instruction. While other Islamic organisations, such as Persis (Persatuan Islam) and Muhammadiyah, are present in the broader region, neither maintains formal branches within Cikembang Village.

Local oral history traces the arrival of Islam in Cikembang Village to the 1960s when a santri from a pesantren in another region was dispatched to undertake a da'wah mission. This individual played a transformative role in the community's religious life. At the time, the village's agrarian society commonly engaged in pastimes such as dice gambling (*koclok*) and *ronggeng* dance performances. Viewing these activities as incompatible with Islamic values, the santri initiated an educational approach, inviting villagers to study Islamic teachings. Over time, the da'wah mission flourished, aided by the growth of the santri's family and the establishment of a pesantren. As the Muslim population increased, the community expanded by cultivating previously forested areas into farmland. This expansion yielded economic benefits and simultaneously enabled the continued development of pesantren infrastructure.

Today, the pesantren founded by this pioneering santri remains highly influential. Now managed by his descendants, it has become the largest educational institution in the village. The founding family serves as a social institution in its own right, wielding broad influence across multiple aspects of village life. Their pesantren enjoy widespread community trust, with most families opting to enrol their children there. Through its educational role, the pesantren serves as the primary vehicle for the intergenerational transmission of NU Islamic values, greatly enhancing religious identity and communal cohesion. In this way, the pesantren serves as an educational institution and a fundamental pillar of the village's cultural values and moral framework.

Cikembang Village is situated in the Priangan region of West Java, where Sundanese is the dominant language, spoken in the Priangan dialect. Language plays a key role in structuring social relations in the village, reflecting and reinforcing its hierarchical norms. The social landscape is organised through three relational categories: neighbourliness, friendship, and kinship. Notably, the concept of *tatangga* (neighbours) is defined less by administrative boundaries—such as the Rukun Tetangga (RT) system—and more by spatial proximity, resulting in fluid and overlapping notions of neighbourhood.

Friendship is similarly nuanced. The formal term *réréncangan* contrasts with informal terms like *babaturan*, *balad*, and *sobat*, each indicating different levels of closeness or intimacy. These designations are highly subjective, shaped by personal experience and emotional connection rather than institutional definitions. This demonstrates how residents categorise relationships based on affective dimensions rather than formalised criteria. In this manner, the pesantren functions as an educational institution and a vital cornerstone underpinning the village's cultural heritage and ethical foundation.

In keeping with broader Sundanese traditions, Cikembang Village adheres to a bilateral kinship system, in which descent and inheritance are traced through both maternal and paternal lines (Mulyanto, 2022). Within this framework, villagers use precise kinship terminology to navigate and express social roles. The terms *dulur* and *baraya* are particularly salient: while *dulur* refers to both consanguineal and affinal kin, *baraya* is reserved for blood relatives. For non-kin, the term *batur* denotes strangers, whereas *deungeun* identifies individuals who, though not family, maintain social relationships through work, residence, or mutual acquaintance. These categories offer a linguistic blueprint that enables villagers to classify and engage with others according to social proximity and familiarity (Mulyanto, 2022; Robson, 1987).

A constellation of factors including religious compatibility, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and social standing governs marriage in Cikembang. Traditional customs typically place the main responsibility for planning and funding the wedding on the bride's family. Although the groom's family may offer contributions, their role remains secondary. Post-marital living arrangements often follow matrilineal norms, with newlyweds residing temporarily with or near the bride's family. After this transitional period, the couple may establish their household within the village or another locality. This reflects the cultural significance of the bride's lineage in shaping familial and residential patterns (Mulyanto, 2022).

The village's approach to marriage reflects a flexible form of endogamy. Residents generally marry within their community, not because of rigid norms, but due to logistical and social convenience—a pattern anthropologists describe as "involuntary endogamy." This practice fosters strong community ties within the village while allowing occasional marriages with individuals outside the area. This flexibility enables the community to preserve internal solidarity without becoming insular.

In anthropological research, kin categories are often represented using standardised codes to denote relationship types. This study employs such codes to describe the widow's relationships with her former husband (*urut salaki*), former in-laws (*urut mitoha*), and former husband's siblings (*dahuan/adi beuteung*), as summarised in Table 1 below. This additional insight enhances our understanding by linking individual experiences to broader kinship and religious structures.

Table 1. Kin categories in Sundanese

Sundanese Pancakaki Kinship Terms in Sundanese		
<i>Bapa</i>	Father	F
<i>Indung</i>	Mother	M
<i>Aki</i>	Grandfather	MF/FF
<i>Nini</i>	Grandmother	MM/FM
<i>Anak</i>	Children	C
<i>Incu</i>	Grandchildren	SC/DC
<i>Lanceuk</i>	elder brother/sister	eB/eZ
<i>Adi</i>	Younger brother/sister	yB/yZ
<i>Uwa</i>	Father/mother's elder brother/sister	FeB, FeZ / MeB, MeZ
<i>Emang, Mamang</i>	Father/mother's younger brother	FyB/MyB
<i>Bibi</i>	Father/mother's younger sister	FyZ/MyZ
<i>Alo</i>	elder brother/sister's children:	HeBC/HeZC
<i>Suan</i>	younger brother/sister's children	HyBC/HyZC
Sundanese-affinal Family Terms		
<i>Salaki</i>	Husband	H
<i>Pamajikan</i>	Wife	W
<i>Minantu</i>	Daughter/Son-in-law	SW/DH

<i>Mitoha</i>	Parents-in law	HM/HF
<i>Dahuan</i>	Husband or Wife's elder brother/sister	HeB, HeZ / WeB, WeZ
<i>Adi beuteung</i>	Husband or Wife's younger brother/sister	HyB, HyZ / WyB, WyZ

Source: (Eringa, 1984; Rancage, 2021; Rigg, 1862; Supangkat & Mulyanto, 2022b).

4. Demographic and Economic Profiles of Widows in Cikembang Village

The demographic landscape of Cikembang Village includes a significant population of 324 widows across all districts. Focusing specifically on Sub-village 1, recent data from March 2024 collected by the village administrative office shows 71 widows live in this area. These women represent a diverse age range, from young widows in their twenties to elderly women in their late eighties. Their experiences of widowhood vary considerably in duration, ranging from those who lost their spouses just a year ago to those who have lived as widows for more than three decades.

The decision not to remarry among these widows stems from several interconnected factors. A particularly notable influence comes from their children, especially in cases where these offspring have achieved financial independence. These self-sufficient children often support their widowed mothers, both emotionally and financially, and frequently encourage them to remain single. This dynamic reflects a complex interplay of family relationships and economic security. Many widows also express personal reasons for choosing to stay unmarried. Some people are satisfied with their current financial situation and feel confident in managing their responsibilities for themselves. This sentiment is especially pronounced among long-term widows, who have developed a strong sense of personal identity centred around what they define as loyalty – specifically, the conscious choice to refrain from pursuing new romantic relationships after their husband's death. The duration of widowhood among respondents is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Years of being widowed

Years	Frequency
1-2 years	14
3-5 years	16
6-10 years	14
11-15 years	4
16-20 years	5
20-25 years	4
26-30 years	2
31+ years	12

Source: Questionnaire Data, 2024

Akin to the broader population living in highland regions, many widows of productive age in Cikembang Village engage in agricultural work, particularly as farm labourers. However, they have also adopted diverse economic strategies. Some have established small convenience stores, food stalls, or mobile food services. Others are employed in service and educational sectors as Quranic teachers, formal educators, bridal makeup artists, or babysitters.

Not all widows participate in the formal workforce. Some maintain their roles as housewives or are unemployed, supporting extended family members in other ways. This variety of occupational activities, shown in Table 3, highlights their adaptive strategies in a changing socioeconomic environment.

Table 3. Widows' sources of livelihood

Sources of Livelihood	Frequency
Farm Worker	27
Housewife	30
Entrepreneur	9
Others	4
Unemployed	1

Source: Questionnaire Data, 2024

Survey data show many marriages in Cikembang Village are between individuals from the same village. This pattern aligns with the anthropological concept of endogamy, which refers to marital practices within the same social group—whether defined by religion, caste, ethnicity, or geography (Anderson & Bidner, 2021). However, what makes Cikembang unique is that this pattern of endogamy arises organically, not through formal rules or prohibitions. Unlike societies that enforce endogamous unions through cultural or religious mandates, the villagers of Cikembang exhibit a form of “involuntary endogamy”—a tendency to marry locally, driven by practical considerations such as geographical proximity, familial familiarity, and community ties.

These patterns significantly influence the post-marital relationships of widows with their former in-laws. Shared cultural and social networks in local marriages often facilitate ongoing connections. Conversely, geographic and cultural differences in mixed-origin marriages may complicate these relationships. The origins of ex-husbands are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4. Ex-husbands origin

Ex-husbands Origin	Frequency
Cikembang Village	48
Tarumajaya Village	5
Cibeureum Village	2
Bandung City	3
Garut Regency	6
Tasikmalaya	1
Majalengka	1
Pengalengan	1
Majalaya	1
Ciparay	1
Bekasi Regency	1
East Java	1

Source: Questionnaire Data, 2024

5. Religious Interpretations and Social Perceptions of Widowhood

Islam has a profound influence in shaping the daily lives of the people of Cikembang Village, given that the entire population adheres to Islam. The teachings of this religion are not only a spiritual guide, but also a foundation that directs the mindset and behaviour of the community through various commands and prohibitions reflected in every aspect of their lives. The strong influence of Islam has shaped the way the community perceives and responds to different social phenomena, including the status of widowhood. The Islamic perspective becomes the main lens for understanding, treating, and interacting with widows in their neighbourhoods (Afghan, 2011; Mahmudulhassan et al., 2023). The local religious leaders often referred to Qur'anic verses and hadith as key resources when asked about widowhood. For example:

“But if their intention is firm for divorce God heareth and knoweth all things..” (QS.2:227)

“Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods nor is it lawful for them to hide what God hath created in their wombs if they have faith in God and the Last Day. And their husbands have the better right to take them back in that period if they wish for reconciliation. And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them and God is Exalted in Power Wise.” (QS.2:228).

“The mothers shall give suck to their offspring for two whole years if the father desires to complete the term. But he shall bear the cost of their food and clothing on equitable terms. No soul shall have a burden laid on it greater than it can bear. No mother shall be treated unfairly on account of her child nor father on account of his child. An heir shall be chargeable in the same way if they both decide on weaning by mutual consent and after due consultation there is no blame on them. If ye decide on a foster-mother for your offspring there is no blame on you provided ye pay (the mother) what ye offered on equitable terms. But fear God and know that God sees well what ye do.” (QS.2:233)

“If any of you die and leave widows behind they shall wait concerning themselves four months and ten days: when they have fulfilled their term there is no blame on you if they dispose of themselves in a just and reasonable manner. And God is well acquainted with what ye do.” (QS.2:234).

From this religious perspective, while divorce is permitted, it is discouraged and should be treated as a last resort following reconciliation efforts. Islamic law further stipulates the iddah period—three menstrual cycles for divorced women and four months and ten days for widows—which serves both spiritual and social functions, such as confirming pregnancy status and allowing emotional adjustment. During this period, men are obligated to provide for their wives. The financial rights of widows are clearly defined within the Islamic inheritance system, entitling them to one-eighth of their husband's estate. These principles grant widows full autonomy over their inheritance (Chamberlayne, 1968; Hammad, 2014; Mahmudulhassan et al., 2023; Mohammad & Lehmann, 2011).

Despite these clearly outlined religious guidelines, their practical implementation in Cikembang Village often diverges from the ideal. The study uncovered several cases where husbands initiated divorce unilaterally and subsequently abandoned their families, leaving the widows in vulnerable socioeconomic positions. Economic hardship frequently triggers such marital dissolution. One widow shared:

“...sekarang nyari duit buat anak mah sendiri aja, bapaknya (mantan suami) gak pernah nyariin, kirim duit gak pernah,”. “... now I just look for money for my children by myself, the father (ex-husband) never looks for them, never sends them money,” (Ida, personal communication, March 8, 2024).

Such behaviours starkly contrast with Islamic teachings, which underscore the necessity of deliberation in resolving marital issues, the husband's obligation to provide financial support during the iddah period, and the importance of maintaining amicable relations post-divorce. These findings reveal a disconnect between Islamic legal principles and their application in daily life. Although Islam forms the foundation of the community's moral values, significant challenges persist in consistently applying these principles—especially regarding divorce and safeguarding women's rights (Chamberlayne, 1968; Hammad, 2014; Marwing, 2016; Mohammad & Lehmann, 2011).

This disparity becomes even more pronounced in cases where fathers abandon their families and neglect their responsibilities towards their children. Such neglect constitutes a severe violation of core Islamic tenets regarding parental duties, which emphasise that childcare is a shared responsibility between both parents. Islamic jurisprudence states that if the father is absent, the paternal grandfather

should take on the guardianship of the children (Adinda et al., 2023; Mahmudulhassan et al., 2023; Shofi, 2022). These examples collectively demonstrate the difficulties in translating religious norms into equitable social practices, highlighting the urgent need for community-level mechanisms to uphold the rights of women and children following Islamic ethics.

6. Typologies of Post-Marital Ties in a Bilateral Kinship Society

In the context of Cikembang Village, where kinship networks are largely shaped by involuntary endogamy, the relationships between widows and their ex-affinal kin reveal a range of post-marital dynamics. These relationships can be categorised into three main types: positive, negative, and neutral. Each category is marked by distinct characteristics that reflect the social, emotional, and sometimes economic circumstances in which these widows find themselves after the death or divorce from their spouses. This section explores these relationship types in detail, drawing upon ethnographic data and personal testimonies to illustrate the diverse experiences of widows in maintaining or dissolving ties with their former in-laws.

Positive Relationship

Positive relationships between widows and their ex-affines in Cikembang Village generally take two forms: those built on friendship and those that replicate filial bonds. In the case of friendship, these ties are most commonly observed between widows and their former sisters-in-law. Such friendships are not bound by formal family obligations but are nurtured by genuine affection, shared history, common interests, and mutual responsibilities in child-rearing. Spicer and Hampe (Spicer & Hampe, 1975) noted that these bonds can persist even after the legal dissolution of marriage. Hoyt and Babchuk (Hoyt & Babchuk, 1983) also emphasised that the frequency and quality of interactions are key indicators of the strength of such friendships.

One illustrative case is Sari, a 20-year-old divorcee who maintains a strong emotional bond with her ex-sister-in-law. Despite no longer living together, they remain in regular contact through telephone and digital platforms such as WhatsApp. Their relationship has deep roots, having been established long before Sari's marriage, and continues to thrive regardless of the formal end of the marital tie. Sari shared:

"Hubungannya masih baik sama teteh, kadang masih suka WA-an soalnya udah lama kenal dan saling tau, jadi gak ngaruh (hubungan mereka terhadap perceraian)". "The relationship is still good with teteh (ex-sister-in law), sometimes we still have a chat (through whatsapps) because I've known her for a long time and we know each other, so it doesn't affect (their relationship against divorce)" (Personal communication, March 8, 2024).

The second form of positive relationship is a continued daughter-in-law role. Widows in this category often remain with their former parents-in-law and take on caregiving responsibilities. Sweetser's research (Sweetser, 1963) illuminated an interesting aspect of this dynamic, noting that some parents-in-law persistently refer to their biological offspring and their children through marriage simply as their "children," effectively dissolving the distinction between blood relations and in-law connections. This practice is common in households with no alternative support system or where elderly in-laws prefer familiar caregivers. These arrangements are underpinned by the mutual affection developed during the marriage and the continued interdependence that follows.

A compelling example is Ena, a 39-year-old widow who continues to reside with her former mother-in-law, Mrs Ati (71), even after her husband's death. Their household has become multigenerational: Ena looks after her grandchild, while Mrs Ati helps look after her great-grandchild. Ena balances her responsibilities as a labourer with the support she receives from her mother-in-law. She explained:

"Ya kasihan juga emak sendirian, dari awal tinggalnya juga sama emak, jadi udah kayak ibu sendiri. Sekarang di sini emak bantu-bantu jagain cicit waktu sayanya ke kebon,". "Yes, I feel sorry for my mother, she's been living with me (and my husband) since the beginning, so it's like she's my mother. Now here, she helps to supervise her great-grandchildren while I go to the farm" (Personal communication, March 7, 2024).

These instances strongly support Strathern's theory (Strathern, 1972) that the death of a spouse does not necessarily dissolve affinal ties, especially when children are present to maintain those bonds. Such enduring relationships between widows and their former in-laws challenge the conventional notion that marital dissolution ends familial responsibilities. Abdullah (Abdullah, 2016) further observes that these arrangements embody Islamic ethical principles, particularly regarding elder care. The continuation of these connections demonstrates the strength of local culture and the commitment to religious practices in the community.

Negative Relationship

Negative post-marital relationships identified in this study fall into two categories: "hostile neighbours" and "being a stranger." The term "hostile neighbours" describes a situation where the widow and her former in-laws live nearby but intentionally avoid social interaction. These relationships are often the result of conflictual divorces involving marital infidelity, economic hardship, spousal abandonment, or domestic abuse. The residual emotional tension from such separations frequently extends to former in-laws, creating long-term antagonism.

The case of Yuni, aged 58, vividly illustrates this dynamic. Her marriage, strained by financial difficulties, ultimately ended in divorce. Although she continued living on property belonging to her ex-husband's family, her house was physically divided from that of her former in-laws. Despite this arrangement, emotional estrangement persisted. She recounted:

"...mantan salaki abdi teu masihan artos kangge kaperluan abdi sadidinten sareng putra-putra abdi. Dugi ka anjenna ngantunken abdi teu dipasih nanaon ku keluarga na oge, janten sadayana kangge sadidinten abdi sareng putra abdi nu pang ageungna kedah milarian nyalira,". "My ex-husband did not give me money for my daily needs with my children. Until he died, I was not given anything by his family either, so all daily needs had to be found by myself and with my oldest child," (Personal communication, May 22, 2024)

These findings reflect Sweetser's historical analysis (Sweetser, 1963), which found that widow-in-law conflicts were often more intense with the husband's parents. The Cikembang Village findings further suggest that such hostilities are shaped by structural factors such as inheritance disputes, property access, and unresolved emotional grievances. The continued co-residence despite such tensions demonstrates the constraints experienced by rural women in housing and mobility.

The second form of a negative relationship, "being a stranger," typically occurs when the widow and her former in-laws are geographically separated and have chosen to sever ties completely. This type of estrangement may stem from the circumstances of divorce or widowhood but is reinforced by a lack of communication and emotional detachment. Anspach (Anspach, 1976) argued that the husband's role as a bridge between the wife and his kin is crucial; once removed, the affinal connection often dissolves.

Two narratives underscore this pattern. First, Ida, a 27-year-old woman, was abruptly divorced online by her husband, who abandoned all familial responsibilities. She has had no contact with his family since. In a different situation, Nani, a 69-year-old widow, explained that she never had a strong relationship with her husband's family, and this detachment continued after his death. She said:

“Pami salaki atos ngantunken janten ayena mah teu wajib kangge tepang sareng keluarga salaki. Dina ayana masalah oge teu kedah dugi ka keluarga salaki terang kumargi ieu masalah keluarga ibu wungkul.”. “My husband has passed away, so now I don't have to meet with my husband's family. If there's a problem, it doesn't have to be known to my husband's family because this is my family's problem,” (Personal communication, May 15, 2024).

Spicer and Hampe (Spicer & Hampe, 1975) provide a useful framework here, suggesting that estrangement arises from interpersonal issues, logistical barriers and a lack of compelling reasons to remain connected. These cases from Cikembang show that social norms in the village accept such estrangement, especially when the initial relationship is weak or conflicted. This additional insight enhances our understanding by linking individual experience to the broader kinship and religious context.

Neutral Relationship

The final category of widow-in-law relationships is called "neutral," locally known as "*tatanggi*" or neighbours. These relationships involve polite, superficial interactions between widows and former in-laws who live nearby, often within the same RT or RW administrative area. Although not emotionally close, these individuals acknowledge each other's presence and engage in social niceties during communal events or emergencies.

Eva, aged 72, exemplifies this category. While she resides near her former in-laws, she does not maintain regular communication with them. Her daughter is the conduit for important family news, and Eva only interacts with her former affines during significant occasions. This additional insight enhances our understanding by linking individual experience to the broader kinship and religious context. She said:

“... aya di kampung sebelah (mantan kerabat afinal). Putrana anu terang pami aya berita ti keluarga titidu, pami aya nu nikahan, atanapi aya anu meninggal nya , mung teu rutin komunkasina.”. “They're (ex-affines) in other sub-village. My daughter knows when there are any news from their families. If there is a wedding, or someone dies, we will come, but we're no longer communicate routinely,” (Personal communication, May 21, 2024).

According to Spicer and Hampe (Spicer & Hampe, 1975), such neutral interactions are common in post-marital settings where neither side feels obliged to deepen ties but prefers to maintain a civil coexistence. This form of relationship enables both parties to share community space without tension or emotional burden, serving as a culturally appropriate resolution to the end of formal kinship. This additional insight enhances our understanding by linking individual experience to the broader kinship and religious context among the residents.

7. Negotiating Widowhood and Kinship: Socio-Religious Dynamics and Affinal Relations in a Sundanese Muslim Village

Quantitative data collected in this study reveals that 48 former husbands originated from the same village as the widows. This finding may explain the emergence of a variety of post-marital relationship types between widows and their ex-affinal kin, including relationships of friendship, surrogate filial ties, neutral cohabitation, and negative or estranged interactions. The typology of these relationships—“being a friend,” “being a daughter,” “being a neighbour,” “hostile neighbour,” and “being a stranger”—is deeply shaped by a combination of geographic proximity, eldercare responsibilities, and the quality of interpersonal bonds before marital dissolution.

The nature of the widow's relationship with her in-laws plays a significant role. Friendships often emerge when same-gender affines maintain frequent and emotionally supportive interactions before and during the marriage. Hoyt and Babchuk (Hoyt & Babchuk, 1983) have noted that interaction frequency and depth are strong indicators of lasting friendships. In the present study, the enduring relationships between widows and ex-sisters-in-law demonstrate how kinship can evolve into emotionally grounded alliances that persist after divorce or death.

Similarly, "being a daughter" often develops in widowhood, particularly when the widow previously cohabited with her parents-in-law. This surrogate filial bond may deepen when the mother-in-law remains alone after the husband's death, relying on the widow for daily care. Mac Rae (Mac Rae, 1992) and Sweetser (Sweetser, 1963) described this fictive kinship as grounded in shared household roles and the absence of competing family support structures.

Neighbourly ties—cordial or hostile—are also influenced by geographic proximity. In Cikembang Village, where local endogamy is prevalent, physical closeness often results in sustained, though varied, interactions. Bott (Bott, 1971), Klatzky (Klatzky, 1968), and Hoyt and Babchuk (Hoyt & Babchuk, 1983) have argued that co-residence creates a social arena where both affection and antagonism can flourish depending on prior emotional history. This is echoed in our findings: some widows maintain "tatanggi" relationships, marked by mutual respect but minimal engagement, while others—like Yuni—endure hostile proximity shaped by unresolved grievances.

The study also sheds light on the impact of elder dependence in shaping widow-in-law dynamics. In rural settings where formal eldercare services are limited, widows may become informal caregivers for elderly ex-affines. This is especially evident when no immediate relatives are available. Fischer, Rogne, and Eustis (Fischer, Rogne, & Eustis, 1990) noted that where institutional eldercare is absent, individuals often turn to close contacts, including former daughters-in-law, for support. Mac Rae (Mac Rae, 1992) similarly observed that such relationships frequently involve fictive kinship arrangements when biological family support is absent.

Despite Cikembang's status as a predominantly Muslim village, the application of Islamic teachings varies significantly. While the principle of eldercare is widely honoured—as enshrined in the Quran (17:23) and emphasised by Abdullah (Abdullah, 2016)—the Islamic obligations surrounding divorce and post-divorce maintenance are often neglected. This discrepancy is evident in cases such as Yuni's, where the absence of *nafkah iddah* and support for children following divorce contradicts Islamic prescriptions (Chamberlayne, 1968; Hammad, 2014; Marwing, 2016; Mohammad & Lehmann, 2011). Failure to care for paternal responsibility also violates core Islamic values of child welfare (Adinda et al., 2023; Mahmudulhassan et al., 2023; Shofi, 2022).

These findings intersect with broader theoretical frameworks concerning widowhood and the social perception of Muslim women. Zahedi (Zahedi, 2006) highlights how widowhood can prompt emotional loss and shifts in identity, status, and role. This is especially pertinent in tightly knit villages such as Cikembang, where changes in family status have direct social consequences. Moreover, psychological distress among widows—manifested as anxiety or alienation—is intensified by cultural expectations and limited opportunities for private grieving (Sutan & Miskam, 2012). The findings in Cikembang mirror this: widows report feelings of exclusion, particularly when severed from affinal support.

Religion—particularly extrinsic religiosity—can be a moderating factor. As shown in studies from Malaysia (Foong, Hamid, Ibrahim, & Bagat, 2023; Momtaz, Ibrahim, Hamid, & Yahaya, 2010), participation in religious networks improves well-being and fosters new social ties among widows. This aligns with our observations in Cikembang, where some widows engaged in communal religious events reported emotional resilience and renewed social belonging. Conversely, when religiosity remains an individual matter rather than a social resource, its protective effects are diminished.

Cultural and societal challenges continue to play a pivotal role. Many widows in Cikembang experience discrimination that reflects broader stereotypes of Muslim women as dependent or marginalised (T. S. Ali, Hussaini, Ali, & Rogers, 2023; Nagra, 2018). These perceptions shape local attitudes toward widow remarriage, household authority, and kinship responsibilities. Widowhood in this context thus becomes a site of both vulnerability and resistance, as women navigate the gap between prescribed religious values and lived social realities.

Importantly, empowerment theory provides an avenue for interpreting how widows reclaim agency. As Ude and Njoku (Ude & Njoku, 2017) argue, widows must navigate socioeconomic marginalisation through structural support and personal resilience. Cases in Cikembang, such as widows returning to natal families or cohabiting with affines, illustrate this adaptive response.

Moreover, culturally competent mental health interventions—such as those outlined by Saherwala et al. (2021) (Saherwala, Bashir, & Gainer, 2021)—are urgently needed in such rural Muslim communities, where stigma around mental illness and modesty norms further hinder widow well-being.

The relational patterns observed in Cikembang Village echo broader trends across Southeast Asia. Mehta (Mehta, 2014) found similar caregiving arrangements in Singapore, where widows—particularly elderly ones—continue to reside with or near relatives for emotional and material support. Our cases—like Sari returning to her family and Ati living with Ena—reflect these patterns. Likewise, the case of Yuni underscores the financial strategies adopted by widows in resource-scarce environments, as discussed by Parker (Parker, 2016) and Ofstedal et al. (Ofstedal et al., 2004). These parallels suggest that while local customs differ, widows across Southeast Asia often share similar structural vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms.

Yuni's case further illustrates how economic hardship intersects with gendered responsibilities within Islamic contexts. According to Islamic law, ex-husbands and their kin must ensure the welfare of former spouses and children during the iddah period. However, as in Yuni's experience, these obligations are frequently unmet. This erosion of support reveals the fragility of affinal bonds in the absence of formal legal enforcement or sustained interpersonal commitment (Mehta, 2014; Ofstedal et al., 2004; Parker, 2016).

These findings suggest that widow-ex-affine relationships are not only shaped by cultural expectations and kinship norms but also by economic realities, gender ideologies, and the uneven application of religious principles. The diverse patterns emerging in Cikembang Village provide a microcosmic glimpse into the complex socio-religious challenges faced by widows across Southeast Asia. This additional insight deepens our understanding by situating individual experiences within the wider framework of kinship and religious structures present in the community.

8. Conclusions

This study identifies three primary relationships between widows and their ex-affines in Cikembang Village: positive, negative, and neutral. Positive relationships include enduring friendships—especially with ex-sisters-in-law—and filial-like caregiving roles, particularly with elderly ex-mothers-in-law. Negative relationships involve hostility, avoidance, or the complete severance of ties, often emerging from unresolved emotional or economic tensions. Neutral relationships, meanwhile, are characterised by minimal social engagement, such as treating ex-affines as ordinary neighbours. These categories reflect the complex interplay between prior emotional bonds, physical proximity, and widowhood status within a social framework informed by kinship customs and Islamic values.

Although the people of Cikembang identify as Muslims and are familiar with Islamic teachings—such as the obligation of nafka iddah, child support, and maintaining family ties—these principles are not always practised. While eldercare, as commanded in the Qur'an, continues to be respected and fulfilled, post-divorce obligations are frequently overlooked, particularly in cases involving widows with children. This inconsistency reveals a disparity between religious knowledge and lived social reality. As a result, widows often face heightened social and economic vulnerability, despite the moral and legal protections outlined in Islamic doctrine.

This research offers twofold contributions: first, it extends the discourse on bilateral kinship and widowhood by presenting ethnographic data from a rural Sundanese context marked by involuntary endogamy; second, it illustrates how Islamic moral frameworks are invoked, interpreted, and variably applied in shaping post-marital relationships. These insights challenge assumptions about uniform religious adherence and reveal the agency widows exercise in reconstructing their social worlds under constrained conditions.

Nevertheless, the study is limited by its localised scope, focusing exclusively on one rural village and excluding the perspectives of male affinal kin. Future research should incorporate comparative analyses across different geographical and cultural settings—urban, coastal, or matrilineal communities—and engage both male and female actors to deepen understanding of affinal dynamics

after widowhood. Moreover, research might further explore how Islamic family law is translated into practice within community-based support systems, potentially informing culturally grounded interventions and social policy.

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