Proceedings Borneo International Islamic Conference; Vol. 17. 2026; 335-345
Published by Majmuah Enterprise
eISSN: 2948-5045

From *Kerisit Kerunum* to *Mereya*: Sarawak Malay Pre-Marital Customs in Relation to Islamic *Ta'āruf* and *Khiṭbah*

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Abstract

Marriage in Islam is expected to be preceded by a process of assessment that preserves dignity, involves family and observes religious boundaries, and ta'aruf is widely promoted today as one such process. Little attention has been given to whether Sarawak Malay customs performed comparable functions. This conceptual paper examines pre-marital customs documented in Maimunah Daud's *Glimpses of Malay Life in Sarawak* (1999), a heritage-oriented account by a Sarawak Malay journalist, and considers how their social functions relate to Islamic ta'aruf and, at the boundary, khiṭbah. Using qualitative document analysis supported by Islamic sources and comparative literature, the paper analyses pre-decision practices (*kerisit kerunum*, *bertanya-tanya*, the assessment visit and family consultation) as the main case for ta'aruf. It then identifies the betrothal stages (*bejarum-jarum*, *betekul*, *mereya*) as the point where assessment gives way to khiṭbah, and notes customs that raise questions of conduct, such as the post-engagement visits *nyeruk tunang* and *berambeh rumah tunang* and the customs that followed breaches of modesty. The analysis suggests that family-mediated inquiry and consultation correspond to the information-gathering and consultative aims of ta'aruf, while the couple's own participation, consent and the conduct of some practices require separate Islamic evaluation. The paper argues for reading adat and syariah through function and ethical boundary rather than equivalence.

Keywords: Islamic Ta'aruf, Khiṭbah, Sarawak Malays, Adat and Syariah, Pre-Marital Customs, Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

In Islamic law, religious commitment and character play a big role in choosing a spouse. In Islam, marriage is a legal union that keeps families and communities together. To get married, there needs to be more than just a romantic interest. Good intentions and behaviour between men and women are also important, and a *wali* or other trusted third party may be involved if necessary (see Section 2.1). The word *ta'aruf* comes from the root word *lita'ārafū* in Qur'an 49:13. However, that verse is about people getting to know each other, not courtship, so its use for getting to know someone before getting married is a more modern development. In today's discussion in Malaysia, ta'aruf is generally known to the Malay-Muslims as the process of getting to know a prospective spouse with a serious intention to marry, within Islamic boundaries (Jabatan Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan [JMWP], 2024), while fatwa discussion elsewhere takes a stricter view of direct pre-marital contact (Al-Majlis al-Islāmī lil-Iftā', 2025). It is distinguished from *khiṭbah*, the proposal or expression of intent to marry, which customarily follows it. Because ta'aruf in this sense is a modern organising term and not a classical fiqh category, its relationship to older customary practice needs careful handling. Sarawak Malay society had its own elaborate pre-marital sequence. Daud (1999) records customs ranging from the assessment of a prospective bride, through four betrothal stages (*kerisit kerunum* or informal inquiry, *bejarum-jarum*, *betekul* and *mereya*), to post-engagement visits (*nyeruk tunang*, *berambeh rumah tunang*). She notes that arranged marriage was the norm until about the mid-1950s (Daud, 1999, p. 1), and she also records customs, such as *nikah salah* and *ngekot*, that arose when the code of modesty was breached (Daud, 1999, pp. 2–4). Her account is a heritage-oriented description and does not use the language of ta'aruf.

There is a finding in other region on Malay customary marriage by Asri & Nelli, 2025; Hafizh et al., 2026; Saiin et al., 2023, which have related customs such as *merisik* to Islamic principles, but, to the authors' knowledge, the Sarawak Malay customs documented by Daud have not been examined in this way. This paper asks: how can the pre-marital customs documented by Daud (1999) be understood in relation to Islamic ta'aruf and khiṭbah? Ta'aruf is the main lens, applied to the pre-decision practices. Khiṭbah is treated as a boundary: the betrothal stages are examined as the point at which assessment gives way to proposal, and post-engagement customs are noted only for the questions of conduct they raise. The paper does not claim that the customs were historically understood as ta'aruf or that every practice conforms to Islamic teaching. Its contribution is a stage-based framework showing where function and ethical boundary correspond, where they diverge, and where further evaluation is needed. Section 2 reviews Islamic guidance and the literature on custom and syariah. Section 3 develops the framework, Section 4 describes the method and its limits, Section 5 analyses the practices by stage, and Section 6 concludes with limitations and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Islamic guidance on spouse selection, ta'aruf and khiṭbah

Islamic sources give weight to religious commitment and character in choosing a spouse (Sahih al-Bukhari 5090; Sahih Muslim 1466), commend looking at the intended spouse before the proposal (Sahih Muslim 1424), and regulate interaction between the sexes, including the prohibition of seclusion (Qur'an 24:30–31; Sahih al-Bukhari 5233; Sahih Muslim 1341). They also emphasise that the woman's consent be sought (Sahih al-Bukhari 5136; Sahih Muslim 1419). Classical Shafi'i discussions of marriage take up these concerns through concepts such as *naẓar* (looking at the intended spouse), *khiṭbah*, *kafa'ah* and the role of the *wali* (Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, 1938, vol. 7, pp. 182–437; see also Ibrahim, 1963, pp. 314–315, 318–322, 328–329). The limits of *khalwah* turn on whether a gathering is free of suspicion by custom (al-Sharwānī, n.d., vol. 8, pp. 269–270, as cited in JMWP, 2024). The Shafi'i school is the one most widely followed in Malaysia (Ibrahim, 1963, p. 313). *Ta'aruf,* in the sense of getting to know a prospective spouse with a view to marriage, is a contemporary term. The Federal Territories Mufti's guidance describes acquaintance as customarily preceding the proposal (*peminangan*) but continuing through the engagement and into marriage, since not everything can be known beforehand. It recommends consultation (*istisharah*) with trusted persons, followed by *istikharah*, as one of the best ways of knowing a prospective spouse. Its guidelines for direct meetings include meeting with the woman's *wali* or *maḥram*, using a trusted intermediary, holding a serious intention to marry, avoiding seclusion, covering the *awrah*, lowering the gaze, and avoiding touch and soft or alluring speech (JMWP, 2024). A fatwa of the Islamic Council for Iftā', published on Fatawah.net, takes a stricter view. It prohibits a direct relationship before the proposal even under the label of ta'aruf, and treats genuine ta'aruf as inquiry into the person's character and conduct through trusted people close to them and their families (Al-Majlis al-Islāmī lil-Iftā', 2025). These sources show that the term is a modern organising concept for pre-marital assessment, not a classical technical category, and that its scope is debated. Both stress inquiry through trusted intermediaries, which is the aspect most relevant to the customs examined here. In this paper, *ta'aruf* refers to the process of getting to know a prospective spouse with a serious intention to marry, chiefly through inquiry and consultation, within Islamic limits.

Khiṭbah, by contrast, is a man's request for a woman in marriage by means known among people (al-Zuḥaylī, 1991, vol. 2, p. 376, as cited in JMWP, 2024), with a Qur'anic basis in 2:235. It is not a marriage contract, and the parties remain non-*mahram* and bound by the same limits on interaction (JMWP, 2024). Islam rules protect an accepted proposal from competing proposals (Ibrahim, 1963, p. 315), and contemporary fiqh writing recognises that the suitor may send relatives, usually women, to learn about the woman and her family (Zaydan, 1993, vol. 6, p. 59, as cited in JMWP, 2024).

2.2 Ta'aruf, khiṭbah and the reference guidance used

Ta'aruf is when the man and woman are getting to know each other, at the same time assessing the prospective spouse. Khitbah on the other hand is the proposal itself. Ta'aruf and khitbah are two different but related stages before marriage. The Federal Territories guidance treats acquaintance as customarily preceding the proposal but continuing through the engagement, always within the same limits (JMWP, 2024). This is important for this study because Sarawak customs cover all of these areas: the preliminary inquiry fits the role of evaluating, the stages of engagement fit the role of khi□bah, and the visits after the engagement fit the role of continuing to get to know each other within certain limits that the guidance recognises. The paper draws on guidance issued for the Federal Territories as a reference point rather than as an authority binding in Sarawak. Under the Ninth Schedule, List II (State List), Item 1 of the Federal Constitution, Islamic law and the personal and family law of Muslims, including betrothal and marriage, fall within the legislative competence of the states, with the Federal Territories excepted (Federal Constitution, 2010, Art. 74(2); Ninth Schedule, List II, Item 1). In Sarawak, these matters are administered under the Majlis Islam Sarawak Ordinance, 2001 [Cap. 41], which provides for the Mufti (s. 35), the Lembaga Fatwa (s. 36) and the Majlis's power to issue fatwa (s. 37), and under the Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001 [Cap. 43]. The latter defines Islamic Law by reference to the Shafi'i school, or another school as the Majlis may determine (s. 2(1)); provides that a party to a betrothal made in accordance with Islamic Law who refuses without lawful reason to marry is liable to return betrothal gifts and expenses incurred in good faith (s. 13); requires the consent of both parties to a marriage (s. 11); and makes it an offence to compel a person to marry by force or threat (s. 35). Section 13 gives the khiṭbah boundary in this paper a Sarawak legal anchor. Federal Territories guidance is therefore used here as an articulation of widely shared principles within the Shafi'i tradition, not as a ruling applicable in Sarawak, and Sarawak-specific guidance, such as fatwa issued under Cap. 41, should be consulted in application.

2.3 Custom and Islam in studies of Malay marriage

The relationship between adat and Islamic principles in Malay marriage has been examined in several Malay communities. In Riau, Saiin et al. (2023) relate customary procedures, including merisik, to Islamic values, while Asri and Nelli (2025) read engagement and *kafa'ah* through *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. Purnama (2021), studying Malay marriage in Pekanbaru, argues that adat, Islamic law and state law can be read as non-conflicting orders, with Islamic law bearing on validity, adat on the conduct of the procession and state law on administration. Hafizh et al. (2026) identify religious (*kafā'ah*), personal (trustworthiness and honesty) and social (consultation, and etiquette in visiting and hosting) values in the merisik tradition

of the Malay of Medan. Work in Malaysia has been more legal than ethnographic. Tajuddin and Gunardi (2024) discuss breach of betrothal under syariah and civil law, noting that engagement is not a legal precondition to marriage but is customary, is treated in Malay tradition as a first step towards marriage, and may give the couple a chance to get to know one another. For Sarawak, Ibrahim (1963) records the staged sequence of the Sarawak Malay customary code, from the parents' approach through *tekol* and betrothal to marriage (p. 317), and notes that Sarawak then had no statutory provision on the bride's consent (p. 321). Barwi (2023) reports a field study of *njaum-njaum*, a proposal custom among the Kedayan of Bekenu, read against the Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001, in which the informants regard the custom as consistent with Islam. Taken together, these studies suggest that customs can be analysed through their social functions and their relationship to Islamic principles, and that custom, religion and state law may play different roles. However, most concern Indonesian Malay communities or Malaysian practice in general, and the Sarawak studies either predate the current ta'aruf discourse (Ibrahim, 1963) or concern a single community whose own assessment is reported (Barwi, 2023). They therefore serve here as comparative perspectives, not as evidence about the practices Daud (1999) documents.

2.4 The Sarawak source and the gap

The main documentary source for Sarawak Malay pre-marital customs is Daud (1999), a heritage-oriented account by a Sarawak Malay journalist (see Section 4). It gives thorough, locally called descriptions but it is not systematic fieldwork and doesn't incorporate the wording of ta'aruf. The order of the stages is generally supported by Ibrahim's (1963) description of the Sarawak Malay customary code, albeit they differ in particulars such as the length of the waiting period between tekol and the official engagement. The authors observe that Daud (1999) did not study the Sarawak Malay pre-marital rituals within the framework of ta'aruf and khiṭbah. The closest Sarawak book, Barwi (2023), analyses a Kedayan proposed tradition against the Ordinance, but does not address ta'aruf or the Sarawak Malay sequence Daud records.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Logic of the framework

This paper proposes a framework to interpret the pre-marital traditions recorded by Daud (1999) within the framework of the Islamic ta'aruf and the khiṭbah. The framework is an interpretative sequence, not a causal model. "It goes from documented practice to social function to Islamic evaluation, and it maintains the separation of these three steps. A custom could be related to ta'aruf yet not be permissable in its behaviour, or the contrary. The social functions are based on Daud's description, whereas the criteria for Islamic appraisal are based on sources other than Daud (Section 3.4). This division allows the framework to differentiate practices that do not correspond to ta'aruf or khiṭbah.

3.2 Dimension 1: Documented practices and their temporal frame

The first dimension identifies the practices documented by Daud (1999) in the sections on *Begerek* and *Betunang*, up to the section on marriage. Daud places arranged marriage as the rule until about the mid-1950s (p. 1) and describes the full four-stage betrothal as characteristic of more than forty years before her writing (pp. 5–6), while noting that many traditions were already observed less closely (p. 6). Daud counts *kerisit kerunum* as the first betrothal stage; it is treated here as pre-decision inquiry because it precedes any commitment. The practices are therefore treated as historical customs of roughly the mid-twentieth century, not as current practice. Ibrahim's (1963) account of the Sarawak Malay customary code, which sets out the sequence of the parents' approach, *tekol*, betrothal and marriage (p. 317), broadly corroborates the staged sequence. Terms need care. In this paper, "assessment visit" labels the practice in which a trusted female relative visits the girl's house on a pretext to assess her suitability (Daud, 1999, p. 7). Daud's "dowry (adat)" is a customary payment fixed under the Official Customary Law of Sarawak Malays (p. 8) and is not assumed to be identical to the *mas kahwin*, which Ibrahim (1963, pp. 329–331) distinguishes from customary gifts such as *hantaran*.

3.3 Dimension 2: Social functions

The second dimension groups the practices by the social function that Daud's descriptions indicate. Four functions are used:

1. **Acquaintance and information gathering:** practices through which prospective spouses or their families obtain information about each other.
2. **Family participation and consultation:** practices through which parents, relatives or representatives take part in discussing and deciding a marriage.
3. **Communication and formalisation of intention:** practices that convey a proposal, progress towards engagement or publicly acknowledge a commitment.
4. **Family familiarisation and preparation:** practices that introduce the prospective spouse to the other family and its household.

These are analytical groupings developed for this paper and are not classifications made by Daud.

3.4 Dimension 3: Islamic reference points and evaluation criteria

The third dimension supplies the Islamic reference points, as set out in Section 2:

- **Ta'aruf**, the process of getting to know a prospective spouse with serious intent, chiefly through inquiry and consultation within Islamic limits (JMWP, 2024; Al-Majlis al-Islāmī lil-Iftā', 2025).
- **Khiṭbah**, the proposal, which is not a marriage contract and leaves the parties bound by the same limits (JMWP, 2024).
- **Continuing acquaintance during engagement**, which the Federal Territories guidance recognises within the same limits (JMWP, 2024).

Six criteria are used to evaluate conduct, each drawn from sources independent of Daud:

- **C1. Serious intention** towards marriage (JMWP, 2024).
- **C2. Involvement of a *wali*, *mahram* or trusted intermediary** (JMWP, 2024; Al-Majlis al-Islāmī lil-Iftā', 2025).
- **C3. Avoidance of seclusion and observance of modesty** (JMWP, 2024; Qur'an 24:30–31; Sahih al-Bukhari 5233; Sahih Muslim 1341).
- **C4. Emphasis on religion and character** over wealth or looks (Sahih al-Bukhari 5090; Sahih Muslim 1466; JMWP, 2024).
- **C5. The woman's consent** (Sahih al-Bukhari 5136; Sahih Muslim 1419; Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001, ss. 11, 35).
- **C6. Betrothal obligations**, including liability for refusal to marry without lawful reason (Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001, s. 13).

Each practice is assigned one of four evaluation categories in Section 5:

- Functional correspondence
- Conditional functional correspondence
- Further evaluation required
- Potential tension with the selected criteria

3.5 The stage-based model

Table 1 sets out the practices by stage with the criteria each engages. It carries no verdicts, which are given in Section 5. Page numbers follow Daud (1999).

Table 1

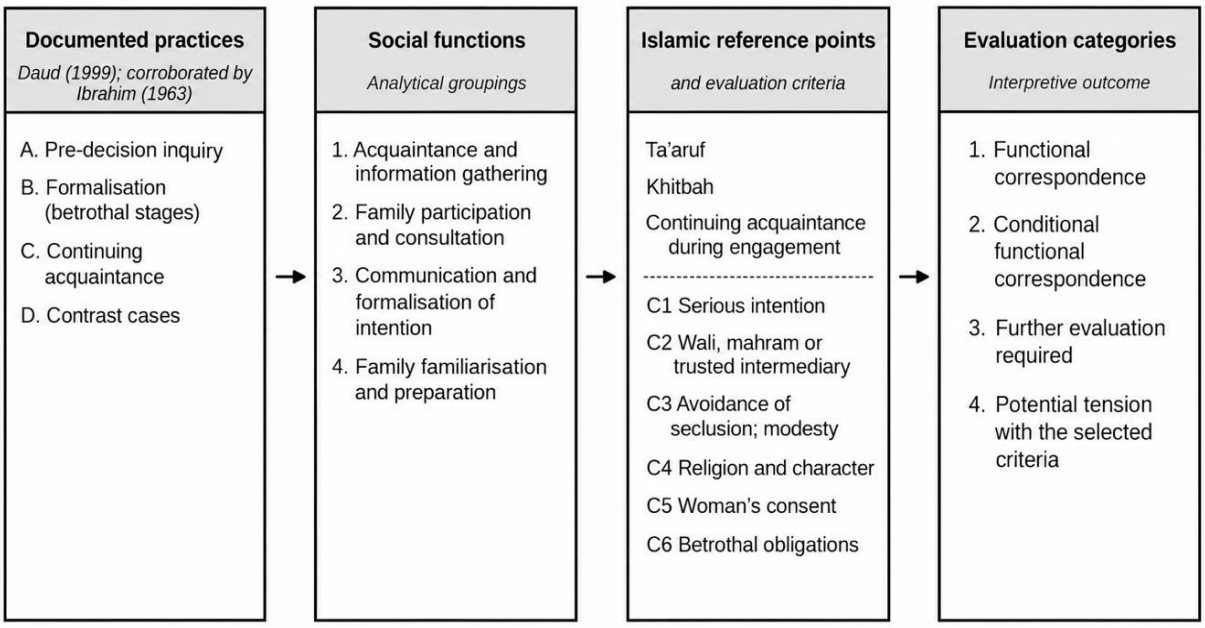
Documented practices, functions and criteria engaged

Stage	Practice (Daud, 1999)	Function	Islamic reference point	Criteria engaged
A. Pre-decision inquiry	Chaperoned outings and *begendang* (pp. 1–2)	1	Initial acquaintance within modesty limits	C2, C3
	Assessment visit (p. 7)	1, 2	Ta'aruf through a trusted intermediary	C2, C4
	Informal inquiry: *kerisit kerunum*, *berangin-angin*, *bertanya-tanya* (pp. 7–8)	1, 3	Ta'aruf; protection of an accepted proposal (Ibrahim, 1963, p. 315)	C1, C2
	Family consultation during the *tempoh* (p. 8)	2	*Istisyarah* (JMWP, 2024)	C2, C5
B. Formalisation	*Bejarum-jarum*: terms and payments (pp. 8–9)	3	Khiṭbah preliminaries	C1, C6
	Betekul (pp. 9–10)	3	Khiṭbah	C1, C6
	Mereya (pp. 10–12)	3	Khiṭbah; public acknowledgement	C1, C3, C6
C. Continuing acquaintance	Chaperoned outing after *mereya* (p. 13)	4	Acquaintance within limits	C2, C3
	Nyeruk tunang (pp. 13–17)	4	Acquaintance within limits	C2, C3
	Berambeh rumah tunang (pp. 17–20)	4	Acquaintance within limits	C2, C3
D. Contrast cases	Letters through intermediaries (p. 2); *nikah salah* (pp. 2–3); *ngekot* (pp. 3–4); *nyerah diri* (pp. 4–5)	none	Responses when limits were breached	C3, C5

Note. Function: 1 = acquaintance and information gathering; 2 = family participation and consultation; 3 = communication and formalisation of intention; 4 = family familiarisation and preparation. Criteria C1–C6 are defined in Section 3.4. Page numbers follow Daud (1999).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Traditional Sarawak Malay Pre-Marital Practices in Relation to Islamic Ta'aruf and Khiṭbah



Note. The framework is an interpretive sequence, not a causal model. It was developed by the authors from Daud (1999), Ibrahim (1963), Jabatan Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan (2024) and the Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001 (Sarawak).

3.6 Propositions

The framework yields five propositions, offered as analytical expectations for Section 5, not as hypotheses to be tested empirically:

P1. The assessment visit, informal inquiry and family consultation correspond to the information-gathering and consultative aims of ta'aruf, because they work through trusted intermediaries and families, not direct contact between the couple (JMWP, 2024; Al-Majlis al-Islāmī lil-Iftā', 2025).

P2. The betrothal stages correspond to khiṭbah rather than ta'aruf, because they formalise intention and create obligations (Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001, s. 13).

P3. The post-engagement visits correspond to the continuing acquaintance recognised in the guidance, but their acceptability depends on conduct (C2, C3), not on their social function.

P4. Nikah salah, ngekot and nyerah diri are not forms of ta'aruf but customary responses to breaches of modesty. They raise questions of consent and compulsion (C5), which Section 5 examines.

P5. In the family-mediated practices, the couple's own participation and consent are largely invisible in Daud's account (for example, the bride's normal obedience to her parents' choice, p. 6, and her absence from her own engagement, p. 13), so they require separate evaluation.

3.7 Scope

The framework identifies functional and conceptual correspondence between documented customs and Islamic reference points. It does not claim that the customs were historically understood as ta'aruf, that every practice conforms to Islamic teaching, or that custom and religion are interchangeable.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

This is a conceptual paper and it uses qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009). It examines one documentary source which is written by Daud and interprets the practices it records against independent Islamic reference points. The study did not collect any new data from informants. Therefore, the author makes no claim about how often a practice occurred, how

it was experienced, or whether it survives today. Its question is interpretive: what did the documented customs do socially, and how do those functions and the conduct they involved relate to ta'aruf and khiṭbah?

4.2 Primary source and its justification

The primary source is Chapter I ("Life Cycle") of Maimunah Daud's *Glimpses of Malay Life in Sarawak* (1999), pp. 1–20, from the opening discussion of courtship (*begerek*) to the post-engagement visits (*nyeruk tunang*, *berambeh rumah tunang*). The authors worked from a transcription of the chapter, and page references follow its pagination markers. The source was chosen for three reasons. It describes the sequence from informal inquiry to engagement in locally termed detail. It identifies who took part at each stage and what conduct was expected. In the literature consulted, no other account of Sarawak Malay customs records this sequence in comparable detail, although Ibrahim (1963) sets out its outline.

4.3 Source criticism

Because the paper rests mainly on one text, the source is assessed against four questions commonly asked of documentary evidence: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Scott, 1990). *Authenticity.* The text is a published book by a named author. The authors' transcription is a working copy, and quotations and page numbers should be checked against the printed edition. *Credibility.* According to the author note, Daud was a journalist and editor in the Sarawak Information Department and Radio Malaysia Sarawak, began writing on Sarawak Malay dialect, tradition and custom in the *Sarawak Gazette* in 1985, and is a member of the Sarawak Malay Cultural Foundation (Daud, 1999). She writes with insider familiarity and a heritage-preserving purpose. Her account may therefore present customs favourably, and its frequent reference to "those days" reflects recollection and not observation. *Representativeness.* The book is not systematic fieldwork. It reflects one author's account of Malay customs in roughly the mid-twentieth century, and some of its settings are explicitly Kuching-centred, for example guests "in and around Kuching" at *mereya* (p. 10) and *nyeruk tunang* as a custom of "the Kuching Malays" (p. 13). Sarawak Malay practice was not necessarily uniform, as the different custom recorded for the Kedayan of Bekenu shows (Barwi, 2023). The findings are read as relating to the practices Daud documents, not to all Sarawak Malays. *Meaning.* Daud writes in English and glosses Malay terms. She does not use the language of ta'aruf or khiṭbah, so the paper keeps her terms and states clearly where it applies its own labels, such as "assessment visit" (Section 3.2).

4.4 Triangulation and supporting sources

Three kinds of source support the analysis. Ibrahim's (1963) account of the Sarawak Malay customary code corroborates the staged sequence of parents' approach, *tekol*, betrothal and marriage (p. 317). Barwi's (2023) study of a Kedayan proposal custom serves as a comparative case. The criteria for evaluation come from sources independent of Daud: the guidance of the Jabatan Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan (2024), the fatwa of the Islamic Council for Iftā' (Al-Majlis al-Islāmī lil-Iftā', 2025), the Qur'an and hadith cited in Section 3.4, and the Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001 [Cap. 43]. This triangulation supports the sequence of stages only. It does not confirm the conduct Daud describes, which rests on her account alone.

4.5 Selection and unit of analysis

The unit of analysis is a named practice, such as *kerisit kerunum*, *mereya* or *nyeruk tunang*. All practices in the selected pages that concern the stages from initial inquiry to the period before marriage were included, together with the customs that followed breaches of modesty, which serve as contrast cases. The wedding ceremony itself, post-marriage customs and the book's other chapters were excluded. A practice mentioned without enough detail to identify who took part and how they behaved is noted but not given an evaluation category.

4.6 Analytical procedure

The analysis followed five steps.

1. *Extraction.* Each named practice was recorded with its participants, setting, position in the sequence and page reference.
2. *Staging.* Practices were grouped by their position in the sequence into Stages A to D (Table 1).
3. *Function coding.* Each practice was assigned one or more of the four social functions (Section 3.3) according to what Daud's description indicates. A practice may serve more than one function.
4. *Evaluation.* Each practice was assessed against criteria C1 to C6 (Section 3.4) and assigned one of four categories: functional correspondence; conditional functional correspondence; further evaluation required; or potential tension with the selected criteria.
5. *Testing the propositions.* P1 to P5 (Section 3.6) were compared with the results. Where Daud's account is silent, as with the couple's own consent in family-mediated practices, the silence is reported as a limit of the source and is not treated as evidence that consent was absent.

4.7 Limits of the method

The paper rests mainly on a single, heritage-oriented source, and its coding is interpretive and not statistical. The evaluations are conceptual comparisons with stated criteria. They are not fatwa, legal rulings or judgements on any individual's practice. The Federal Territories guidance is used as an articulation of shared principles, not as authority binding in Sarawak (Section 2.2). The findings concern customs documented for roughly the mid-twentieth century and are not claims about present-day Sarawak Malay practice. Fieldwork with older informants, and a review of Sarawak-specific fatwa, would test these readings more directly (see Section 6).

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 How the practices were evaluated

Each practice in Table 1 was assessed against criteria C1–C6 and given one of four categories (Section 4.6). The two reference sources on direct pre-marital contact differ (Section 2.1). Categories are therefore given under the Federal Territories guidance (JMWP, 2024), and the stricter reading of the fatwa (Al-Majlis al-Islāmī lil-Iftā', 2025) is noted where it would change the result. The evaluations compare documented conduct with stated criteria and are not rulings. Table 2 summarises the results, and the sections that follow give the reasons. The categories indicate the degree of conceptual or functional correspondence between the documented practices and the selected criteria. They do not determine Islamic legal permissibility or impermissibility. Where the account lacks detail, or where the question requires Islamic legal evaluation, the assessment remains provisional.

Table 2

Evaluation of the Documented Practices

Stage	Practice	Category	Main basis
A	Chaperoned outings and *begendang*	Conditional functional correspondence	Family chaperone and distance (C2, C3); serious intention (C1) not stated
A	Assessment visit	Conditional functional correspondence	Trusted female relative (C2); religion not among the qualities assessed (C4)
A	Informal inquiry	Functional correspondence	Stated intention and intermediary (C1, C2)
A	Family consultation (*tempoh*)	Conditional functional correspondence	*Istisyarah* (C2); woman's view not recorded (C5)
B	*Bejarum-jarum*	Conditional functional correspondence	Terms agreed between families (C1, C6); status under s. 13 unclear
B	*Betekul*	Functional correspondence	Agreement and gift through families (C1, C6); status under s. 13 not established
B	*Mereya*	Functional correspondence	Public, family-mediated, bride at a distance (C1, C3, C6); bride's consent not recorded
C	Chaperoned outing after *mereya*	Conditional functional correspondence	Chaperone's identity not stated (C2, C3)
C	*Nyeruk tunang*	Further evaluation required	Overnight stay of a non-mahram fiancé (C2, C3)
C	*Berambeh rumah tunang*	Further evaluation required	Stay of several nights; escort on return only (C2, C3)
D	Letters through intermediaries	Further evaluation required	Contested scope of ta'aruf (C1, C2)
D	*Nikah salah*	Further evaluation required	Consent and compulsion (C5); the triggering meeting is in tension with C3
D	*Ngekot*	Potential tension with the selected criteria	Wali bypassed; night stay in a man's house (C2, C3)
D	*Nyerah diri*	Further evaluation required	Consent not recorded (C5)

Note. Categories follow the scheme in Section 3.4. Page references for each practice are given in Table 1 and follow Daud (1999).

5.2 Stage A: Pre-decision inquiry (P1)

In the assessment visit, a mother sent a trusted relative, "a sister or an aunt", to the girl's house on the pretext of selling jewellery, clothing or cakes. The relative assessed the girl on "physical beauty, personality, character and so on" and reported back (Daud, 1999, p. 7). This is inquiry through a trusted intermediary, which is the pattern the Federal Territories guidance recommends and the stricter fatwa treats as genuine ta'aruf (JMWP, 2024; Al-Majlis al-Islāmī lil-Iftā', 2025). It also resembles the recognised practice of a suitor sending female relatives to learn about the woman and her family

(Zaydan, 1993, vol. 6, p. 59, as cited in JMWP, 2024). Two conditions apply. The qualities Daud lists do not include religion, whereas C4 places religion and character above looks. The sources used here also do not address the pretext of the visit. The informal inquiry (*kerisit kerunum*, *berangin-angin*, *bertanya-tanya*) was carried out by the same representative. She asked the girl's mother, in the poetic language of betrothal, whether the "flower" in her garden was already reserved. If it was not, she named the young man and his parents, and the mother gave no answer and asked for time (Daud, 1999, pp. 7–8). Intention is stated (C1), an intermediary is used (C2), and the couple have no direct contact. The question of whether the girl was already spoken for also parallels the Shafi'i protection of an accepted proposal (Ibrahim, 1963, p. 315). The practice therefore shows functional correspondence with inquiry-based ta'aruf. It is also where assessment begins to shade into proposal, because Daud counts it as the first betrothal stage (p. 7) and the suitor is named here (p. 8). During the *tempoh*, the girl's mother consulted her husband and immediate family, and about a week to ten days was allowed for informing close relatives (Daud, 1999, p. 8). This corresponds to *istisyarah*, consultation with trusted persons (JMWP, 2024). The condition is C5. Daud does not record that the girl was consulted, and she states that the young woman "normally obeyed her parents' wishes" (p. 6).

The chaperoned outings and *begendang* are the weakest case. Girls were "strictly chaperoned" at the Museum ground, parks and cinemas (Daud, 1999, p. 1), and the *begendang* offered only "distance introduction" (p. 2). These satisfy C2 and C3 in form. Daud describes them as leading to "love" (p. 1), not to a stated intention to marry (C1). Under the stricter fatwa, direct acquaintance before a proposal would be in tension with the criteria. They are better read as social acquaintance than as ta'aruf proper. P1 is supported, with qualifications. The assessment visit, informal inquiry and family consultation show functional correspondence with the information-gathering and consultative aims of ta'aruf, because each works through trusted relatives and families. The informal inquiry corresponds most fully. The assessment visit and the family consultation correspond conditionally, because the qualities assessed did not include religion (C4) and the woman's own view was not recorded (C5). These three practices fit both reference views. The chaperoned outings and *begendang* are different. Their status depends on which view is taken, because they involve direct acquaintance.

5.3 Stage B: Formalisation (P2)

In *bejarum-jarum*, the girl's parents listed the customary dowry (*adat*), *tanda betunang*, *pembuka mulut* and *belanja dapur*, and the young man agreed, "to save face", even when the amount was steep (Daud, 1999, pp. 8–9). The negotiation takes place entirely between families (C1, C6). Two conditions apply. The *adat* is a customary sum fixed under the Official Customary Law of Sarawak Malays (p. 8) and is not assumed to be the *mas kahwin* (Ibrahim, 1963, pp. 329–331). Daud also does not show whether this stage already created a betrothal made in accordance with Islamic Law, which is the kind of betrothal s. 13 of the Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001, protects. *Betekul* finalised the agreement "pending the *mereya*" with a gift of cash or a ring, for an interim of one or two months, before family members and near relatives (Daud, 1999, pp. 9–10). Daud's own summary calls it the "formal betrothal of the couple", with a ring marking her as "spoken for" (p. 11). The practice shows functional correspondence with the formalisation of khiṭbah. However, the precise legal status of the customary agreement under Section 13 of the Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001, cannot be established from Daud's account alone. *Mereya* was a public ceremony at which senior relatives carried the *hantaran* and dowry, announced the purpose, counted the money, exchanged *pantun* and said a prayer (Daud, 1999, pp. 10–11). The engagement then became "public knowledge" (p. 11), while the bride did not normally appear at her own engagement party (p. 13). The public ceremony shows functional correspondence with the formalisation and acknowledgement of khiṭbah. The bride's own consent is not established by the account (see Section 5.6). The display of gifts as signs of the young man's financial status (p. 12) falls outside C1–C6 and is not assessed. P2 is supported, and the boundary between ta'aruf and khiṭbah can be located. The informal inquiry names the suitor but commits nobody. Commitment begins when terms are agreed (*bejarum-jarum*) and a gift is exchanged (*betekul*), and *mereya* acknowledges it publicly. This explains why *kerisit kerunum* is treated here as pre-decision inquiry although Daud counts it as the first of her four betrothal stages.

5.4 Stage C: Continuing acquaintance (P3)

After *mereya*, custom permitted the young man to take his fiancée to the cinema "with a proper chaperon" or to bring her for a weekend stay (*berambeh*) at his house (Daud, 1999, p. 13). The Federal Territories guidance treats engaged couples as remaining non-mahram under the same limits (JMWP, 2024). The outing therefore shows conditional functional correspondence: the chaperone must be a mahram or other trusted person who actually preserves those limits, and Daud does not say who the chaperone was. *Nyeruk tunang* was a formal dinner given by the girl's parents a few weeks to a month after *mereya*, as an introduction to her family and a sign of parental approval (Daud, 1999, p. 13). The girl's relatives were "out in full force", the young man came with ten to fifteen companions (p. 14), and the girl helped in the kitchen (pp. 14–15). He and two or three friends then stayed overnight in a bedchamber while the girl and her friends slept in another (pp. 15–16), and he left at dawn (p. 16). Her family's presence, the group and the separate rooms are safeguards of the kind the khalwah discussion looks for, where the test is whether a gathering is free of suspicion by custom (al-Sharwānī, n.d., vol. 8, pp. 269–270, as cited in JMWP, 2024). However, an overnight stay of a non-mahram fiancé in the girl's house is not

something the sources used can settle. Daud does not say where the adults slept or how the household supervised the night. The practice therefore falls in the category of further evaluation required. In *berambeh rumah tunang*, the young man's parents invited the fiancée "for a few nights or longer". She was introduced to his family, friends and neighbours and took part in household chores (Daud, 1999, pp. 18–19). When she left, an older relative of his, "an aunt or an elder sister", accompanied her home (p. 20). The escort on return supports C2 at that point, but Daud does not describe the arrangements during the stay, so this practice also falls under further evaluation required. P3 is partly supported. As to function, family familiarisation matches the continuing acquaintance that the guidance recognises within limits. As to conduct, the practices contain safeguards, but Daud's account is not detailed enough to settle whether those safeguards meet the criteria. This is a question for scholars qualified to give rulings, and ideally for Sarawak-specific guidance (Section 2.2). Daud also describes *nyeruk tunang* as once "an important and integral part" of engagement among the Kuching Malays (p. 13), which limits how widely it can be generalised.

5.5 Stage D: Contrast cases (P4)

In the letters through intermediaries, girls who could not write themselves asked siblings, uncles and cousins to write for them. The letters were passed to the admirer through "a network of sympathetic friends and neighbours", and the young man then sometimes asked for a date (Daud, 1999, p. 2). Intermediaries are used (C2), but they carry private declarations of attachment outside the parents' knowledge, not inquiry through the family. Under the Federal Territories guidance the result depends on whether they were trusted intermediaries and the intention serious (C1). Under the stricter fatwa, a pre-proposal relationship would be prohibited. The practice therefore falls under further evaluation required. *Nikah salah* followed from a couple's night-time meeting "in a certain secluded place". They were discovered, reported to the Ketua Kampung, and the parents "had no alternative" but to see them married (Daud, 1999, pp. 2–3). The meeting itself is in potential tension with C3 (Qur'an 24:30–31; Sahih al-Bukhari 5233; Sahih Muslim 1341). The customary response raises a separate question. Daud adds that some couples "simply wanted to talk" but were "declared *bersalah*. They must marry" (p. 3), which suggests the marriage followed a community judgement and not necessarily the couple's own choice. Whether the woman's consent was sought is not recorded (C5; Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001, ss. 11, 35). The Ordinance makes it an offence to compel a person to marry by force or threat. Daud describes social pressure, not force, so her account does not show an offence. In *ngekot*, a girl whose parents had refused the young man's proposal left home at night with a bundle of clothes and went to his house. Her family sent representatives to bring her back, and she was finally asked to decide. When the young man said that he would not marry her if she returned, "she chose to stay" (Daud, 1999, pp. 3–4). The wali is bypassed and an unmarried woman stays overnight in a man's house, which is in potential tension with C2 and C3. Her choice is explicit but was made under an ultimatum, so whether it was freely given is a question under C5.

In *nyerah diri*, a young man who could not afford to propose "surrendered" himself to the girl's family, and her parents "had no alternative but to accept him" (Daud, 1999, pp. 4–5). The parents keep their role and no seclusion is described. The girl's own consent is not mentioned, and the parents' acceptance is framed as having no alternative. The practice therefore falls in the category of further evaluation required, because of C5. P4 is supported. None of the four works through family-mediated inquiry. Each arose after the ordinary route had failed or could not be followed, as with a refused proposal (pp. 2–4) or an unaffordable one (pp. 4–5). All of them raise questions of consent or compulsion.

5.6 The couple's participation and consent (P5)

In the family-mediated sequence, the bride's own voice is not recorded at any stage. Daud states that arranged marriage was the rule until about the mid-1950s (1999, p. 1), that the young woman "normally obeyed her parents' wishes" (p. 6), and that the bride did not normally appear at her own engagement (p. 13). C5 requires the woman's consent (Sahih al-Bukhari 5136; Sahih Muslim 1419). Sarawak law now requires the consent of both parties (Islamic Family Law Ordinance, 2001, s. 11), whereas Ibrahim (1963, p. 321) notes that Sarawak then had no statutory provision. Daud's silence is not evidence that consent was not sought, since her account describes ceremonial and family roles (Section 4.6). It does mean the framework cannot confirm C5 for any of the family-mediated practices. By the time Daud wrote, she observed that sons and daughters had "already taken the role themselves" and that parents "can only protest" (p. 6). P5 is supported. C5 is also the criterion on which Daud gives least evidence, and the one that interviews with older informants would test best (Section 6).

5.7 Discussion

Three points follow from the analysis. First, the practices that correspond most clearly to ta'aruf are the assessment visit, the informal inquiry and the family consultation. They do so on the family-mediated understanding of ta'aruf that both reference sources share, not on the broader understanding that allows chaperoned direct acquaintance. The case for correspondence therefore does not depend on taking sides in the debate described in Section 2.1. Second, function and conduct must be kept apart. *Nyeruk tunang* and *berambeh* serve a function the guidance recognises, family familiarisation, yet their evaluation turns on details of conduct that a heritage-oriented account does not fully supply. In the opposite

direction, *ngekot* is the one practice in which a woman's preference is visible, but it expresses that preference through conduct in potential tension with C2 and C3. This supports the paper's argument that adat and syariah are better read through function and ethical boundary than through equivalence. Third, the boundary between ta'aruf and khiṭbah is gradual and not a single point, as Section 5.3 showed. The findings remain readings of one source about practice in roughly the mid-twentieth century. They identify questions for qualified scholars to answer and are not conclusions about present-day Sarawak Malay practice.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of findings

This paper asked how the pre-marital customs documented by Daud (1999) can be understood in relation to Islamic ta'aruf and khiṭbah. Using a stage-based framework, it grouped the practices by social function and evaluated them against six criteria drawn from sources independent of Daud. Three findings stand out. First, the assessment visit, informal inquiry and family consultation show functional correspondence with selected aims of ta'aruf, particularly information gathering and consultation through trusted relatives and families. The correspondence is fuller for the informal inquiry and conditional for the other two, because the woman's participation and consent are not recorded. These findings are consistent with the inquiry-based approach in both the Federal Territories guidance and the stricter fatwa, so the paper does not need to resolve the debate over direct acquaintance. Second, the betrothal stages (*bejarum-jarum*, *betekul* and *mereya*) show functional correspondence with khiṭbah by progressively formalising and publicly acknowledging marital intentions. The informal inquiry names the suitor but does not itself create a commitment. Commitment develops as terms are agreed and a gift is exchanged, and *mereya* publicly acknowledges the engagement. The legal status of these stages cannot be established from the historical account alone. Third, the acceptability of a practice depends on its conduct as well as its social function. *Nyeruk tunang* and *berambeh rumah tunang* serve a family-familiarisation function recognised in the guidance, but their overnight arrangements raise questions that Daud's account cannot settle. The customs that followed breaches of modesty (*nikah salah*, *ngekot* and *nyerah diri*), together with the letters exchanged through intermediaries, are not classified as forms of ta'aruf in this analysis. They raise questions of consent, conduct and, in some cases, compulsion. In the family-mediated sequence, the study also found that the bride's own consent is hard to see. The one practice in which a woman's preference is plainly visible, *ngekot*, expresses it through conduct in potential tension with the selected criteria. These results back up the main point of the paper. Sarawak Malay customs should be compared with Islamic principles based on their purpose and whether the way they are practised follows Islamic guidelines. A custom may have a good purpose, but how it is practised must still be evaluated separately.

6.2 Limitations

The study includes a number of drawbacks. It is mostly based on one heritage source, written by a journalist from memory rather than thorough fieldwork, and appears to be concentrated around Kuching (Section 4.3). The sequence of steps is supported by Ibrahim (1963) however the behaviour stated is not independently verified. The coding is interpretive and other readers may properly classify some activities differently especially those that are classified as needing additional evaluation. The assessments compare stated criteria to documented behaviour. These are not fatwa, legal rulings or judgements on any individual. The Federal Territories guideline is merely cited as a point of reference and not as an authority binding in Sarawak. "We made no reference to any Sarawak-specific fatwa on these practices. The statutory restrictions listed are current legislation; the customs come from around mid-twentieth century. So the comparison raises issues, rather than violations. Lastly, Daud doesn't use the language of ta'aruf, so the paper claims only functional and conceptual correspondence, not that the customs were understood as ta'aruf.

6.3 Recommendations

There are four recommendations suggested for this paper. First, fieldwork or oral-history interviews with older Sarawak Malay informants, especially women, would help to examine the interpretations offered in this research, especially the topic of consent (C5), which Daud's narrative does not establish. Secondly, comparative work should position Daud's story opposite other Sarawak sources and other communities such as the Kedayan study (Barwi, 2023) to show how much the sequence altered. Thirdly, the practices identified as requiring further evaluation, especially the overnight stays associated with *nyeruk tunang* and *berambeh rumah tunang*, and the legal status of the betrothal stages (*bejarum-jarum, betekul and mereya*), should be examined by scholars competent to evaluate the relevant Islamic legal questions, with reference to any Sarawak-specific guidance issued under the Majlis Islam Sarawak Ordinance, 2001, where available. Fourth, the proposed framework could be applied to other Malaysian customary pre-marital rituals and contribute to discussions on ta'aruf that incorporate local cultural traditions. Discussions should acknowledge the role of family-mediated inquiry, but also give proper consideration to the agreement of the prospective spouses and the manner in which the activities in question are performed.

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