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The Vicious Cycle of Poverty in Small-Scale Fisheries Community, Sri Lanka: An Anthropological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Poverty remains a persistent and challenging problem in many parts of the world, with fisheries community often disproportionately affected. This study addresses the complex and persistent cycle of poverty in fisheries community in Sri Lanka, using an anthropological perspective to comprehensively examine the underlying factors, consequences and possible solutions. The general objective is to formulate context-specific strategies to break the cycle of poverty and promote sustainable development. Specific objectives of the research are to identify the cultural diversity of poverty as well as the social and cultural variables that influence it, determining whether all factors have affected the poverty problem of these people from the existing factors of the vicious cycle of poverty. And determining how the culture of poverty operates inside the people's socio-cultural domain. This study explores the vicious cycle of poverty in small-scale fishing communities in Sri Lanka, specifically in the Mathara district. Data collection was conducted through a judgmental sampling technique, focusing on family units engaged in fishing activities. The study aims to understand the dynamics of poverty in these communities, highlighting the importance of addressing issues such as lack of capital, limited investment, low productivity, and insufficient savings. The research also considers development projects and proposals to address these challenges. The study employs a mix method for data analysis, focusing on the Mathara district and its fisheries community. The research reveals that the fisheries community in Matara district exhibits cultural poverty, with factors such as unplanned economy, high debt, short childhood, lack of attention to learning, and broken families contributing to the issue. The community faces severe economic crises due to the large number of extended families living in one house. The culture of poverty is intertwined with the fishing community, with beliefs and behaviors perpetuating economic deprivation and valuing traditional fishing activities over alternative options. Poverty appeared to be deeply rooted in the culture of this community, with few individuals striving for self-improvement. Applied anthropologists can play a critical role in this, and sharing anthropological insights with government and officials is essential. Future state-level interventions to address this solvable social problem are expected in the future.

KEYWORDS: *Culture, Culture of poverty, Poverty, The Vicious Cycle of Poverty*

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Introduction

Poverty and economic inequality are among the most important issues of all human societies (Mohammadpur et al, 2012). Poverty is one of the defining challenges of the 21st Century facing the world (Gweshengwe et al. 2020). Poverty, despite economic development around the world, has not decreased, but is actually increasing (Schech & Haggis, 2002). The term 'poverty' is mostly used as if its meaning is clear, but this is not the case Poverty is a vague and value-loaded term, which differs in denotation in agreement with the culture and economic development. Poverty as an entity is brought into being through the institutions established to describe, quantify and locate it (Escobar,1995). Poverty remains a persistent and challenging problem in many parts of the world, with fisheries community often disproportionately affected. This study addresses the complex and persistent cycle of poverty in fisheries community in Sri Lanka, using an anthropological perspective to comprehensively examine the underlying factors, consequences and possible solutions. Sri Lanka, a country known for its fertile soils and rich marine resources, has a vibrant fishing sector that is essential to its economy and food security. Paradoxically, however, these communities are often trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty. The origins of this cycle are diverse and deeply rooted in historical, socioeconomic and environmental factors. Ongoing challenges include limited access to education and healthcare, insecure land tenure systems, fluctuating market conditions, impacts of climate change and lack of financial inclusion. Furthermore, cultural norms and traditional practices can sometimes hinder rather than facilitate economic progress.

The fisheries sector holds a significant role within Sri Lanka's socio-economic framework, consisting of three principal subsectors: coastal, offshore (deep-sea), and interior (aquaculture). As reported by the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources data, these subsectors collectively provide employment to approximately 2.5 million active fishermen, serving a population of an estimated 6.1 million households (DCS, 2020/2021). Notably, Matara emerges as one of the regions boasting a substantial fishing community in Sri Lanka, with a population of around 6 million fishermen. In the context of an anthropological study focused on Sri Lanka's fishing communities, *Matara* district serves as a pertinent reference point for examination and analysis.

Sri Lankan fisheries community is disproportionately affected by a persistent vicious cycle of poverty, despite their significant contribution to food security and economic sustainability. This research intentions to comprehensively examine the root causes, ongoing factors and socio-cultural dynamics behind this persistent cycle of poverty from an anthropological perspective, with the ultimate the general objective of formulating context-specific strategies to break this cycle and promote sustainable development within these marginalized community. Not only that specific objectives of the research are to identify the cultural diversity of poverty as well as the social and cultural variables that influence it, determining whether all factors have affected the poverty problem of these people from the

existing factors of the vicious cycle of poverty. and determining how the culture of poverty operates inside the people's socio-cultural domain.

This makes anthropology an appropriate discipline to study poverty. As Oscar Lewis (1966) states that: “To understand the culture of the poor, it is necessary to live with them, learn their language and customs, and to identify with their problems and aspirations”. This idea of a culture of poverty was widely accepted in the second half of the twentieth century as the cause for poverty from an anthropological perspective and had great influence on and other academic disciplines as well (Vu, 2010).

According to Oscar Lewis (1966), the Culture of Poverty is defined by: ‘An unplanned economy, loans or mortgages, a lack of focus on learning, a short childhood, a lack of a sense of personal life, and a huge number of broken families. A century later, Lewis issued a definition of culture somewhat consistent with Tylor’s definition - though slanted in a more psychological direction. As Lewis put it: ‘The culture of poverty is not just a matter of deprivation or disorganization, a term signifying the absence of something. It is a culture in the traditional anthropological sense in that it provides human beings with a design for living, with a readymade set of solutions for human problems, and so serves a significant adaptive function’ (Lewis, 1966).

In Sri Lanka, the predominant approach to assessing poverty has involved the establishment of a threshold or poverty line, typically based on selected indicators of well-being. While indicators such as household income or consumption are commonly employed for this purpose, consumption expenditure has emerged as the preferred choice in Sri Lanka, owing to its solid theoretical foundation and practical feasibility (Romeshun, & Mayadunne, 2011). The process involves evaluating individual or household well-being by anchoring definitions of poverty to consumption expenditure. This methodology is grounded in the principles of welfare economics, which posit that the monetary resources required by utility-maximizing individuals or households to attain a specified level of well-being can serve as a basis for comparing different welfare levels through the examination of consumption patterns (Glewwe 1985, Ravallion 1998).

‘Poverty Concepts, Trends in Global Poverty and Sri Lanka’ was done by *Ruwan Jayathilaka* in 2015. This study provided an overview of global trends in poverty and poverty in Sri Lanka. Despite a global drop in the overall rate of poverty, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa saw a rise in the population of the poor. Sri Lanka had superior living circumstances and a falling trend in poverty when compared to the other South Asian nations. But liked the rest of South Asia, Sri Lanka had seen an increase in income disparity in recent years. Additionally, Sri Lanka's overall poverty rate had decreased recently, while inequality has increased (Jayathilaka, 2015).

Chuenpagdee & Jentoft studied ‘Transforming the governance of small-scale fisheries’ in 2018. Small-scale fisheries play a crucial role in poverty eradication and community well-

being, but often face disadvantages in terms of cultural, social, economic, geographical, legal, and political aspects. The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) aim to encourage states and civil society organizations to improve the sustainability and viability of these industries. These guidelines call for broad and complex governance interventions, but transformations at operational, institutional, and meta-levels are also necessary for real change (Chuenpagdee & Jentoft, 2018).

Selvanathan, Fernando, & Rathnayake researched ‘Decoding the nexus between socio economic factors and poverty alleviation in the northern province of Sri Lanka’. The study investigates poverty dynamics in Sri Lanka's developing economy, impacted by the Civil War and the pandemic outbreak. Data from 300 farming households was collected using questionnaires. Results show that land availability, water availability, technological advancements, gender participation, and increased farming expenditure are crucial for poverty alleviation. The study recommends reinstating community development practices, reforming local industries, and involving communal activities in vulnerable areas to rebuild social overhead and improve economic overhead. This will help Sri Lanka achieve its sustainable development goal of No Poverty (Selvanathan et al., 2023).

Sugi conducted, ‘Poverty in Golden Fishing: A Regulatory Impact Assessment of Fishermen Poverty in Indonesia’ in 2023. The study reveals that the government needs to develop quality policies to help fishermen in the Golden Fishing area, Maluku Tengah Regency, Indonesia, escape poverty. The research, using a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) analytical instrument, found that the Fisheries Service of the Maluku Tengah Regency's strategic plan, which should be the spearhead of poverty reduction policies, often does not benefit fishermen. Therefore, the government needs to evaluate the plan's effectiveness to positively impact fishermen (Sugi, 2023).

Ofori-Danson, Sarpong, Sumaila, Nunoo and Asiedu studied ‘Poverty measurements in small-scale fisheries of Ghana: A step towards poverty eradication’ in 2013. Sri Lanka's farming and fishing communities are disproportionately affected by a persistent vicious cycle of poverty, despite their significant contribution to food security and economic sustainability. This research aims to comprehensively examine the root causes, ongoing factors and socio-cultural dynamics behind this persistent cycle of poverty from an anthropological perspective, with the ultimate aim of formulating context-specific strategies to break this cycle and promote sustainable development within these marginalized communities (Ofori-Danson et al., 2013).

Marciniak researched, ‘Vanished prosperity: Poverty and marginalization in a small Polish fishing community’ in 2011. The Vistula Lagoon has played a significant role in the socio-economic and cultural life of a small fishing community. Post-World War II, fisheries provided income and social integration for the locals. However, the introduction of the free

market economy, aquatic ecosystem degradation, and declining fish stocks have diminished their economic power. Strategies to improve socio-economic conditions, prevent overuse of natural resources, and reduce poverty risk are discussed in this study (Marciniak, 2011).

Despite the extensive literature on poverty measurement in different contexts, governance transformations and the culture of poverty, a significant research gap exists in examining the nuanced dynamics of poverty in small fishing communities in Sri Lanka from an anthropological perspective. While *Chuenpagdee* and *Jentoft* (2018) address governance transformations in small-scale fisheries worldwide, their impact on cycles of poverty in Sri Lankan fishing communities is less explored. In addition, the data presented by *Lewis* (1966) and *Mohammadpour* et al. discussed cultural dimensions of poverty are taken into account. (2012) has not yet been thoroughly tested in this specific context. However, a research gap emerges in critically assessing the adequacy and relevance of these data sources in capturing the complexity of the cycle of poverty in Sri Lanka's small-scale fisheries. Addressing these research gaps will significantly contribute to our understanding of how poverty manifests, persists and can be alleviated in the unique socio-cultural context of small-scale fisheries in Sri Lanka.

Materials and Methods

The research design employed in this study adopts an analytical approach to delve into the cultural practices of a specific social group, offering insights into their way of life and the psychological dimensions of poverty within the contemporary fishing community. This applied anthropological research was conducted within the context of Sri Lanka, where local fishers actively participated in data collection. The sample selection process adhered to the guidelines provided by the Statistics unit of the Ministry of Fisheries in Sri Lanka, given the substantial population of 14,840 active fishers and 51,080 fishing households in the *Mathara* district as reported in Fisheries-Statistics (2020). Consequently, the research focused on the *Mathara* district within the Southern Province and employed a judgmental sampling technique, a form of non-probability sampling. This method involved selecting family units engaged in fishing activities, allowing for a nuanced exploration of their experiences. Central to the methodology were the various data collection techniques employed for a comprehensive analysis.

The most important component of the methodology is the data collection methods. Data collection is the process of obtaining data from all relevant sources to achieve the research, and assess outcomes. There can be two types of primary data-gathering methods: quantitative and qualitative. As it is a qualitative study, the methods utilized to collect data in the study, such as model interviews, observations, participatory observations, and case studies are used as data collecting methods in the study.

Table 01: The Study Sample of the Study

Province	District	Selected Divisional Secretariat	Selected <i>Grama Niladari</i> Division	Sample	
Southern Province	Mathara	Akurassa	359/c Malauwa	10	20
			362/a Minipogoda	10	
		Weligama	Mahaweediya	10	20
			Jayakungama	10	
Total Sample Size				40	

Titled “The vicious cycle of poverty in small-scale fishing community of Sri Lanka: an anthropological perspective” the researcher was able to construct a conceptual framework based on “vicious cycle of poverty” theory by American economist *Ragnar Nurkses*. This framework illustrates how his theory can be used to understand the dynamics of poverty in the context of small-scale fishing communities in Sri Lanka.

Conceptual Framework: The Vicious Cycle of Poverty in Small Scale Fisheries Community, Sri Lanka

Key Components:

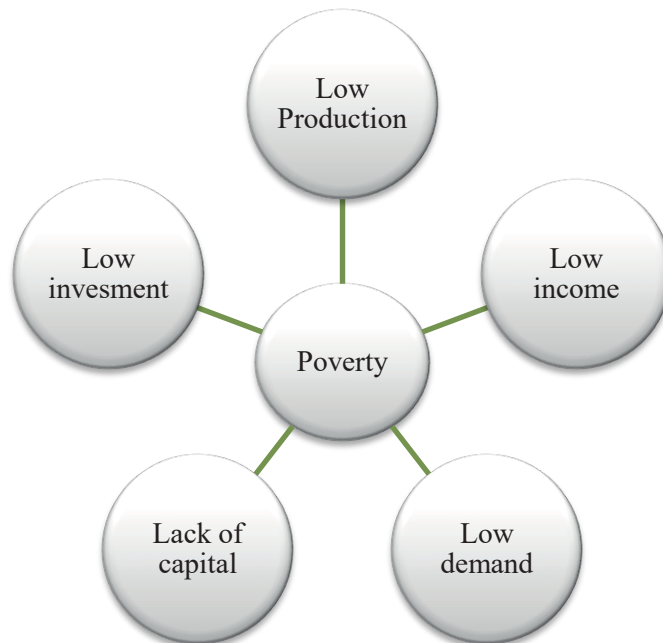


Figure 1: Vicious Cycle of Poverty (Nurkes, 1953)

Small-scale fisheries communities in Sri Lanka face several challenges, including lack of initial capital, limited investment, low productivity, low income, insufficient savings, and inadequate access to credit. These factors contribute to a stagnant economic growth and persistent poverty, hindering the development of modern fishing equipment, infrastructure, and technology. The lack of savings and collateral also hinders access to credit for business investments. The cycle of low productivity, limited investment, and financial constraints further exacerbates the situation, limiting opportunities for upward mobility and perpetuating poverty within these communities.

The dependent variable is poverty, which was correlated with some independent social and economic variables, there are; Poor education, Climate Change, Malnutrition, unemployment, Separate Families, and Poor infrastructures. The research will as well consider various development projects and development proposals that have been in place for decades and are still being implemented to eliminate these conditions as variables. Low production, Low income, Low demand, Lack of capital, and Low investment are independent variables and provide examples of the moreover vicious cycle of poverty. This research especially to study how this circle is working in the fisheries community.

For data analysis in this research, mix method was used. Under quantitative data analysis, the number of members in a family, education level, age group, etc. were analyzed by using statistical tables, graphs, and diagrams in simple statistical methods. As well as computer software like SPSS and Microsoft package used as a quantitative data analysis part. All qualitative data collected by data sources were unable to analyze using statics. In these cases, qualitative data analyzed using data analysis techniques like sketchers, photos, models, etc.

Results and Discussion

Results and discussion include the data analysis and findings from the anthropological research on “The vicious cycle of poverty in small scale fisheries community, Sri Lanka: an anthropological perspective”. As a result, this section contains information about the respondents' demographic profile. A varied group of respondents from various religious and social cultures participated in this applied anthropological study. Twenty-eight of the forty respondents from the *Akurassa* and *Weligama* divisional secretariat divisions identified as a Sinhala-Buddhists. Christians from the *Weligama* Secretariat Division was recognized as the twelve remaining respondents. This portrayal of two distinct religious and societal frameworks was deemed suitable for the research, enabling a valuable examination of the underlying anthropological elements.

The study's sample comprised a total of one-hundred and fifty-six individuals, from which forty respondents were selected. Among these respondents, there were thirty-one males and nineteen females. The family with the largest number of members had a total of seven members. There were two of these families. Its percentage was seven-point one percent. The family with the minimum number of members had a total of one member. Furthermore, there

were fifteen percentage, twenty percentage, seventeen and point five percentage, twenty-two and point five percentage, and twelve and point five percentage of families with two, three, four, five and six members, respectively. There were eight broken families among the fisheries community in the research area.

According to Nurkes's vicious cycle of poverty, low production and low income of small-scale fishing communities were interrelated challenges with significant socio-economic and environmental impacts. The data obtained from the study conducted in the field research is as follows.

Especially in *Weligama* area, the traditional fishing method called stilt fishing/ '*Ritipanna*' is used. They pointed out that the fishermen have to work hard for this. But this will also not result in large-scale fishing. As such, small-scale fisheries often rely on traditional or artisanal techniques, which may have low catch rates compared to industrial fishing operations. This limited catch may be due to various factors such as outdated gear, inadequate fishing technology and overfishing of local resources. As well, these small-scale fishing communities face seasonal variations in catch due to factors such as weather conditions and migratory patterns of fish species. These fluctuations can lead to periods of abundance followed by periods of scarcity, making it challenging to maintain stable income levels. Due to this, the fish production of these people will be lower.

Due to these factors, the income status of these people was not satisfactory. Apart from the fishing industry, it was revealed that the members of these families were also engaged in other professions. But the main source of income for twenty-seven families out of forty families was fishing. This can therefore contribute to income inequality within the community, with some households struggling to make ends meet. The researcher's attention was drawn to a fact that clearly proved that the members of these families find it very difficult to find money even for their daily consumption. That is, it involves the purchase of consumer goods required for daily life.

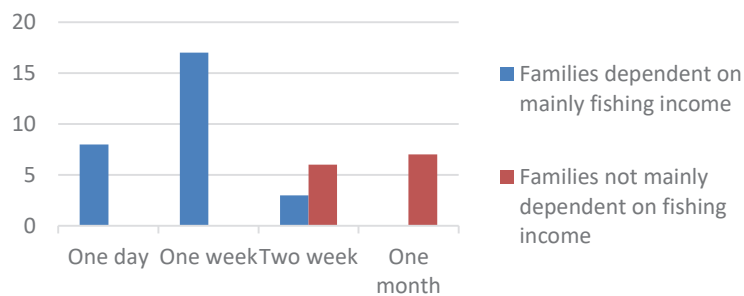


Figure 2: Number of days of purchase consumables

Eight families buy consumables for day by day. Seventeen families said they bought essential items on average once a week. The primary source of income for all these families is fishing. It appears that these people are facing severe economic difficulties, who are doing their daily activities with great difficulty. Out of the families that buy enough consumables for fourteen days (two weeks), three families maintain fishing as their main means of livelihood, while the rest of the families also do land work, but family members also do other occupations. They said that their main source of income is not fishing. Also, it was stated that seven families buy essential items for a month at once and out of these families, fishermen of two families run restaurants near the beach and they indicate that their main source of income is the profit from these restaurants. Another fishing family sells local textiles to foreigners. They indicate that they are getting a satisfactory income from it. In the rest of the three families, the fathers are still engaged in fishing, but the children are doing different jobs, and one of the families has a son who has gone abroad. However, it was revealed that these three families are economically higher than the rest. Thus, it appears that families whose main livelihood is fishing are facing severe economic difficulties. Also, this group did not have a special opinion about financial management, which indicates that even if they have money, they habitually buy essential goods on a daily basis or for a few days. They specifically noted that they often prepared whatever was available and did not plan meals in advance.

In this context, the study area yielded three noteworthy cases of families engaged in the fishing who currently enjoy a favorable economic status. Among these three families, one operates a local ready-made clothing store catering to foreign tourists, while the other two manage food restaurants. According to the data contributors from these families, they initially leveraged income from the fishing industry to establish these businesses on a modest scale, gradually expanding them over time.

The researcher, drawing upon insights from the Narkers' poverty cycle, found it concerning that only these three data contributors had managed to improve their economic standing. In contrast, the majority of the group reported a deteriorating financial situation attributed to a lack of capital and limited investments. However, upon engaging in discussions with these particular data contributors, it became evident that they practiced sound economic management and exhibited a forward-thinking approach. Notably, they prioritized the education of their children. When asked about their perspective on the remaining members of the community, these successful individuals noted a tendency among others to live for the present without considering the future. They also pointed out that the broader group possessed limited financial literacy and management skills, which contributed to their ongoing economic decline.

Within this context, numerous development initiatives and recommendations have been implemented to alleviate poverty among the populace of Sri Lanka. These encompass a spectrum of programs and projects, including the Matara District Government Institutions,

Decentralized Program, Prosperity Development Program, Matara-Kataragama Railway Development Project, Coastal Park Development, Security Situation of the District, Agriculture, Lands, Roads, Animal Control Activities, Road Development Activities, health services, education development activities, projects overseen by the Central Environment Authority, housing development initiatives administered by the Housing Development Authority, disaster management endeavors in the district, local government initiatives, transportation projects, fisheries development endeavors, and activities related to water supply and electricity development.

Despite the long-standing launch of various projects such as industrial development and postal/telecommunication services, the government has struggled to fortify the economic well-being of the fishing communities and uplift them. Subsidies disbursed by successive governments, land allocations, subsidized loans, and support from the Samurधि program, as well as the periodic provision of various subsidies by politicians, have inadvertently fostered a culture of dependency among the farmers. Consequently, this dependency mindset has contributed to increasing impoverishment, as these individuals have come to anticipate government assistance as a means of sustenance. Notably, forty six percent of this community regard it as the government's duty to provide for their basic needs.

Furthermore, when queried about their aspirations for the future, a substantial forty percent of this community expressed a lack of direction and goals. They did not harbor intentions to augment their income, invest in their children's future, or expand their households. This shared sentiment revolved around the belief that they need not strive for a higher income to secure their livelihoods. However, this prevailing attitude appears to hinder their self-driven economic development efforts. Conversely, only fifty percent of the population demonstrated an awareness of future planning. Nonetheless, the figure of forty-six exemplifies the pervasive characteristics of poverty entrenched within their culture of dependency, suggesting the need for targeted interventions to address this issue.

Conclusion

The above data analysis and discussion completed it clear that the fisheries community of the studied *Mathara* district exhibited cultural traits of poverty. Furthermore, the main objective of the research was to formulate context-specific strategies to break the cycle of poverty and promote sustainable development.

Here the specific objectives are discussed first, and how the general objective has been established through the research is discussed at the end. The first specific objective in the statement of achievement was to identify the cultural diversity of poverty as well as the social and cultural variables that influence it. Unplanned economy, high debt or mortgage, short childhood, lack of attention to learning, broken families were seen in this society. Accordingly, it appears that the cultural characteristics of poverty are depicted among fishermen in Matara district. The research revealed that even at the time of the study, the size

of extended families is high and this community is facing severe economic crises due to the large number of people living in one house.

The study confirms that some people in the society are struggling to make their future successful. Thus, when investigating the poverty of the fishing people from an anthropological perspective, it was revealed that a group of people with a culture of poverty are still living among these fishing people and another group is committed to getting rid of poverty. Accordingly, it should be pointed out that the culture of poverty is intertwined with the fishing community.

The facts revealed by the research in determining whether all factors have affected the poverty problem of these people from the factors existing in the vicious cycle of poverty are as follows. That is, it was revealed that these people have become poor due to low production, low income, low investment and lack of capital, but it was confirmed that only a few people strive to develop and develop capital and investment. Also, it should be noted that the research did not reveal that the low demand in the vicious circle of poverty is a factor that causes the poverty of this group.

In determining how the culture of poverty operates in the socio-cultural domain of the people

In the socio-cultural domain of a fishing community, it was confirmed that the culture of poverty is characterized by a set of intertwined beliefs and behaviors that perpetuate and reinforce economic deprivation. This culture often fosters economic dependence on external aid or subsidies, discourages economic diversification by valuing traditional fishing activities over other alternatives, and downplays the importance of education and long-term prospects. It was also revealed that the generational transmission of poverty-related attitudes by these people, who prioritize immediate consumption over savings or investment, and limited exposure to alternative economic models within social networks contribute to the perpetuation of this cycle.

The general objective is to formulate context-specific strategies to break the cycle of poverty and promote sustainable development. At the end of the research, it became clear that poverty is intertwined with the culture of these people. At present, it was revealed that very few of these people are trying to stand up by their own efforts, and it was revealed that there is a lot of work that applied anthropologists can do to save the remaining people from this situation. Since this problem can only be solved by studying the culture of these people, anthropological knowledge should be given to the government as well as the responsible officials to alleviate this situation by using anthropological knowledge. The researcher will expect to intervene at the state level in the future. Accordingly, it can be pointed out that this situation is a social problem that can be solved.

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