

NIAS TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE CUSTOMS:

Reflections on Austronesian Cultural Roots and Their Dynamics in a Contemporary Context (Ethnolinguistic Perspective)

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Introduction

- The Nias people (*Ono Niha*) are one of the ethnic communities on the island of Sumatra, rich in meaningful cultural traditions, including ritual traditions and traditional marriage.
- Nias traditional marriage is rich in cultural symbols. It reflects cultural continuity as a reflection of Austronesian culture, and constitutes a local identity that is the object of this study.
- From a socio-ethnolinguistic perspective, this study focuses on linguistic aspects and explores Austronesian cultural roots through linguistic and non-linguistic forms, the associated cultural value system, and its transformation over time.
- The aim is to understand how Austronesian cultural roots shape and express Nias ethnic identity in relation to marriage rituals.



Ethnolinguistics

- The study of language in its cultural and social context.
- Analyzes how language reflects identity, cultural practices, and social structure.
- Also known as linguistic anthropology.
- Focuses on vocabulary, discourse, and language in rituals, folklore, and cultural events.

Research Methods

1. Descriptive–qualitative: examining the relationship between the Nias language and culture within marriage rituals.
2. **Data collection:**
 - **Observation**
 - **Interviews**
 - **Written sources**
3. Inductive analysis: from concrete data toward ethnolinguistic concepts.
4. Main focus: transcription of the language used in Nias marriage rituals..



Discussion: Overview of Nias Traditional Marriage Ceremony (Pre-marriage)

1) Pre-marriage stage

1. Initial approach (*Suro 'i/Marsuro 'i*): the man's family visits the woman's family.
2. Bridewealth negotiation (*Böwö*): determining the amount of bridewealth as a customary requirement. *Böwö* = a “bride-price” in the form of gold, pigs, money, or heirlooms. The value of *böwö* is adjusted to the social status of the woman's family.
3. Engagement (*Famatu 'a*): carried out after *Böwö* (bridewealth) is agreed upon.



Implementation Stage of Marriage (*falöwa*)

2) Marriage implementation stage (*falöwa*)

1. Arrival of the groom's party: welcomed with a traditional dance (Tari Ya'ahowu) and the offering of betel (*Fame'e Afo*).
2. The customary procession is held in the omo ada (traditional house): the bride and groom wear red-and-gold traditional attire.
3. Presentation of bridewealth (*Böwö*): accompanied by customary singing (*sinunö falöwa*); the procession is led by customary leaders with prayers and advice.
4. The bride is escorted in procession (*Mamahea Ni'owalu*): the bride is taken to the groom's house as a symbol of entering a new family.



Post-marriage Stage

3) Post-marriage stage

(1) *Fanunu Mbawi* (Pig-giving & community feast)

- A large feast as an expression of joy.
- Slaughtering pigs and distributing the meat to the community.
- Symbolizes blessing and the “cleansing” of a new life.

(2) *Fa'öfaö* (Return visit)

- The bride's side visits the husband's family.
- Sometimes brings a return böwö as a sign of respect.



Note: Each region (North, South, West, East Nias) has variations, but the core of the ceremony remains bridewealth negotiation and the customary procession. The marriage procession is expressed verbally (spoken expressions) and non-verbally (material/ritual actions).

Examples of Verbal/Spoken Ritual Expressions:

Ba no tatema nafo, “We have already accepted the betel (“Ind”:sirih).”

Moroi ba danga numono, “the betel is a gift from the in-law (“Ind”:mantu).”

Tawuso sini, tawuo lano, “cooling betel, lano betel.”

Nifallo faendronga tano, “that which was brought down together with the earth.”



Meanings (English translation)

1. *“Ba no tatema nafo”* (“We have already accepted the betel”).

Meaning: *Accepting* betel symbolizes acceptance with an open heart. In many Indonesian archipelago traditions, offering betel symbolizes asking permission, showing respect, and forming a bond of good relations. This sentence signals that the receiving party sincerely accepts what is brought as a sign of good intention.

2. *“Moroi ba danga numono”* (“the betel is a gift from the in-law”).

Meaning: It indicates that the betel comes from the in-law’s side, thus carrying respect and deference from the younger side (the in-law) toward the extended family. The betel is not an ordinary object, but an official offering that carries kinship meaning and the continuation of relations.

3. *“Tawuso sini, tawuo lano”* (“cooling betel, lano betel”).

Meaning: This depicts betel as a bearer of coolness, calm, and peace. “Cooling” conveys that the giver’s purpose is peaceable, with no bad intent, and aims to soothe any tension or differences that might exist.

4. *“Nifallo faendronga tano”* (“that which was brought down together with the earth”).

Meaning: This is highly philosophical. It suggests that the offering (betel) has a noble, sacred value inherited from ancestors, as if it was “brought down together with the earth.” In other words, this is not merely a social ritual, but part of a cultural heritage that must be maintained.

Overall, the expressions convey that the acceptance of the in-law’s betel is welcomed wholeheartedly as a sign of respect and good faith that brings calm. This is an ancestral tradition, typically used to affirm good relations, acceptance into the family, and respect for custom.

Ethnolinguistic perspective (overview)

In verbal terms, Nias ritual marriage language has distinctive ethnolinguistic characteristics—especially oral literature in the form of stylized poetry using figurative and symbolic expressions. The register is formal, with frequent use of archaic lexical elements carrying deep cultural meaning, e.g. *sara gumi-gumi nucha ba nasi* (“a thread of cloth in the sea”), meaning ‘humility’.

Word / expression	Archaic features (older form)	Literal meaning	Ethnolinguistic note
bō'ō	The vowel ö and the glottal consonant /' / are now rare in modern Nias.	love, affection, feeling	In everyday speech often replaced by bōi or dodo. bō'ō is characteristic of ceremonial/customary language.
dōdō	Vowel/consonant reduplication with a dental consonant is typical of older forms.	heart; feeling; inner self	Also occurs in old prayers. In modern speech may appear as dodo.
ga'ō	The /' / (glottal stop) is archaic.	hand; strength; action	In modern Nias sometimes shortened to gao.
bōwō	A classic customary term; broader in meaning than merely “bridewealth”.	gift; honour; sign of affection	The root is linked to Proto-Austronesian *bubu? (‘gift’).
fa'amei	The prefix fa- (older productive causative) is less used in urban dialects.	mutual help; communal cooperation	In modern Nias often replaced by sa'amai (North) or foamei.
nifadoro	The prefix ni- (passive or result) is archaic and mainly appears in ritual.	has been united	In modern speech ni- is often replaced by ta- or omitted.
nifalōwa / nifalowa	Verb with ni- prefix and root lōwa (‘blessing; sacred’).	blessed / united in blessing	The root lōwa is rare outside customary and church contexts.
ono nihalo	Classical compound: ono (‘child’) + nihalo (‘new bride/groom; new person’).	newlyweds / a ‘new person’	Archaic genitive-like structure; rare in everyday speech today.

Examples of Nias (South) ritual chants (bilingual)

No.	Original text (South Nias)	English translation	Symbolic meaning	Verbal / non-verbal aspect	Morphology / phonology notes
1	<i>Mamahea ono nihalō</i>	Respect shown to the bride	Signals appreciation and protection by the family	Verbal: said during the procession entering the house; Non-verbal: the bride is carried with specific ritual movements	Morph: mamahea ‘to pay respect’; <i>nihalō</i> ‘bride’; Phonology: stress on the final syllable
2	<i>Bolanafo niha</i>	A wish for goodness in married life	Represents ancestral prayer and advice	Verbal: sung by the ritual leader; Non-verbal: accompanied by clapping or traditional music	Morph: <i>bolanafo</i> (ritual term), <i>niha</i> ‘Nias person’; Phonology: the long vowel in -afo emphasizes the ritual tone
3	<i>Falōwa wawu</i>	A sacred/official marriage	Legitimizes the marriage according to custom	Verbal: during the customary ijab kabul; Non-verbal: the placing of ornaments/jewelry	Morph: <i>falōwa</i> ‘marriage’; <i>wawu</i> ‘sacred’; Phonology: ö marks ritual intonation
4	<i>Bōwō lu walu</i>	Bridewealth / gift to the bride’s family	Symbol of love and social responsibility	Verbal: mentioned in bridewealth negotiation; Non-verbal: symbolic handover of gold/money	Morph: <i>bōwō</i> ‘bridewealth’; <i>lu walu</i> ‘to the family’; Phonology: ö is typical of South Nias, with a ‘curved’/rounded quality
5	<i>Famotu ono falōwa</i>	Advice to the newlyweds	Provides moral guidance and marital ethics	Verbal: recited by customary leader; Non-verbal: the couple bows respectfully	Morph: famotu ‘advice’; <i>falōwa</i> ‘marriage’; Phonology: vowel repetition (o) gives rhythmic chant-like quality

Ritual language as a reflection of Austronesian roots (lexicon)

Indonesian	Proto-Austronesian (PAN)	Nias (North & South)	Note
mata ‘eye’	*mata	<i>mata</i>	One of the most stable words across the Austronesian family, from Taiwan to Māori.
dua ‘two’	*dusa	<i>dua</i>	Despite minor phonetic variation across Austronesian languages, the root is the same.
langit ‘sky’	*langit	<i>langi / lagi</i>	Commonly found across Indonesia and the Pacific.
rumah ‘house’	*Rumaq	<i>omo</i>	Sound change from *Rumaq to omo, but the root is related.
babi/ternak ‘pig/livestock’	*babuy	<i>bawi</i>	An animal of high importance in Austronesian and Nias cultures.

Cultural reflections (practice)

Ritual element	Nias	Other Austronesian traditions	Meaning / function
Bridewealth	<i>Bowo</i> : pigs, cloth, gold	Samoa, Toraja, Batak	Social and economic legitimization
Ritual dance	<i>Faluaya</i>	War dances in Oceania	Social solidarity and respect for ancestors
Traditional house	<i>Omo Hada / Omo Sebua</i>	Stilt houses; Toraja houses	Ritual center and symbol of hierarchy
Customary authority	<i>Kepala adat / orang tua adat</i>	Tribal chief	Social legitimation and ritual supervision

Nias traditional marriage rituals in the contemporary context

- In the contemporary context, the cultural value system of Nias traditional marriage (*Falöwa*) is largely maintained, but adapted in more flexible and pragmatic ways in line with current social conditions.
- For example, adaptations mainly concern *Böwö* (bridewealth), aligning customary demands with the realities of modern life without abandoning the core values.

Some cultural aspects that continue to be maintained include:

- Traditional attire: the couple still wear distinctive traditional clothing, with added modern design elements.
- Symbols such as rings (representing eternal love) remain highly valued, and betel nut (*sirih pinang*) continues as a form of respect.
- Kinship values: traditional marriage still functions as a social institution strengthening (patrilineal) kin relations and interaction between clans (*marga*), which are crucial in Nias social organization.

Conclusion

- Orally, the language used in Nias marriage ceremonies has a distinctive ethnolinguistic character—especially in stylized oral poetry that uses figurative and symbolic expressions. The register is highly formal, with extensive use of archaic/older lexical elements carrying deep cultural meaning.
- A number of lexical items in this ritual tradition show similarities with other Austronesian languages, while non-linguistic practices such as chewing betel, patrilineal ties, and respect for ancestors also align with broader Austronesian cultural patterns.
- In modern contexts, these cultural values are largely preserved, but have been adapted in a more flexible and realistic manner in accordance with current social circumstances.
- Overall, this study strengthens the view that the Nias community is part of Austronesian migration history, and that their marriage traditions are an important cultural heritage that should be maintained.