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AN ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLIC MEANINGS IN TRADITIONAL WEDDING CEREMONIES IN THE COMMUNITY OF DESA UMBUBALODANO KECAMATAN SITOLU ORI KABUPATEN NIAS UTARA

ANALISIS MAKNA SIMBOLIK DALAM UPACARA ADAT PERKAWINAN DI MASYARAKAT DESA UMBUBALODANO KECAMATAN SITOLU ORI KABUPATEN NIAS UTARA

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the symbolic meanings in the traditional marriage ceremonies of the Northern Nias community, identify the factors contributing to the erosion of the sacred essence of these marriages, and formulate appropriate solutions to restore the sacred essence of marriage among the Northern Nias community. This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. The research subjects comprised village heads, community leaders, and traditional leaders in the village of Umbubalodano, Sitolu Ori Subdistrict, North Nias Regency. The results of the study indicate that: First, in a marriage within the Umbubalodano community, several traditional symbols are recognized, including böwö (dowry or jujuran), money (kefe), ana'a (jewelry), mbawi (pig), nukha hada (traditional attire), afo (betel nut), and maena (traditional dance). Second, the erosion of the sacred essence of several traditional wedding ceremony symbols in the Umbubalodano community is caused by the community's tendency to view these symbols merely as formalities required by custom; indeed, it is not uncommon for traditional symbols to be replaced with modern elements without prior agreement through fondrako (Nias Customary Law). Third, to preserve the sacred essence of these traditions and prevent it from being eroded by the changing times, it is necessary for traditional leaders, the community, youth, and the government to work together to maintain a balance between honoring traditional marriage customs and adapting them functionally without sacrificing their philosophical values.

Keywords : Analysis, Symbolic Meaning, Marriage Customs, Umbubalodano, North Nias Regency, North Nias Community.

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan makna simbolik dalam upacara adat perkawinan masyarakat Nias Utara, serta mengidentifikasi faktor penyebab terjadinya degradasi esensi kesakralan terhadap makna dari perkawinan tersebut dan merumuskan solusi yang tepat guna mengembalikan esensi dari sakralnya sebuah perkawinan di kalangan masyarakat nias utara. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Subjek penelitian meliputi kepala desa, tokoh masyarakat dan tokoh adat di desa umbubalodano, kecamatan sitolu ori, kabupaten nias utara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa: Pertama, dalam sebuah perkawinan di masyarakat umbubalodano dikenal beberapa simbol-simbol adat diantaranya yakni, *böwö* (mahar atau jujuran), uang (*kefe*), *ana'a* (perhiasan), *mbawi* (babi), *nukha hada* (busana adat), *afo* (sirih), dan *maena* (tarian adat). Kedua, terjadinya degradasi esensi kesakralan beberapa simbol upacara adat perkawinan masyarakat umbubalodano disebabkan oleh pemahaman masyarakat yang cenderung menganggap simbol tersebut sebagai formalitas syarat adat, bahkan tidak jarang terjadi penggantian simbol tradisional tanpa adanya kesepakatan melalui fondrako (Hukum Adat Nias) menggunakan elemen modern. Ketiga, untuk mempertahankan esensi kesakralan agar tidak tergerus oleh perubahan zaman maka diperlukan keterlibatan tokoh adat, masyarakat, pemuda dan pemerintah untuk terus memperhatikan keseimbangan antara kehormatan terhadap tradisi adat perkawinan pada adaptasi fungsional tanpa harus menghilangkan nilai-nilai filosofisnya.

Kata Kunci : Analisis, Makna Simbolik, Adat Perkawinan, Umbubalodano, Kabupaten Nias Utara, Masyarakat Nias Utara.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is renowned for its rich cultural diversity, encompassing numerous ethnic groups, local traditions, and indigenous practices that extend from Sabang to Merauke. This diversity constitutes a unique social mosaic and represents one of the nation's greatest cultural assets. Traditional customs are inseparable from community life, as they regulate relationships among individuals, families, and social groups. According to Soerjono Soekanto (2012), customary institutions and traditions function as mechanisms of social control that maintain harmony between social order and peaceful coexistence. Within indigenous communities, traditional values often serve as primary references for conflict resolution, customary law enforcement, and the maintenance of social balance. This perspective is consistent with Koentjaraningrat's (2009) conceptualization of culture as the entire system of ideas, actions, and human creations acquired through learning and shared within society. Within this cultural system, customary traditions occupy an important position as normative frameworks that guide social conduct and preserve collective values.

Each ethnic group in Indonesia possesses local wisdom that has been transmitted across generations. These cultural values serve not only as normative guidelines but also as markers of collective identity that strengthen social cohesion, solidarity, and a sense of belonging. However, globalization and modernization have increasingly challenged the continuity of traditional practices. The expansion of digital technology, the adoption of modern educational systems, and the influence of contemporary economic structures have contributed to changes in how communities perceive and practice their customs. Rapid social transformations may lead younger generations to regard traditional practices as obstacles to progress rather than as valuable sources of cultural knowledge. Nevertheless, traditions continue to perform important integrative functions by sustaining social relationships, reinforcing shared identities, and transmitting moral principles across generations.

One of the ethnic groups in Indonesia that maintains a distinctive and complex customary system is the Nias people, known locally as Ono Niha, who inhabit the Nias Islands in North Sumatra. Nias society has historically recognized social stratification, commonly referred to as Ondre, and a

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customary legal system known as Fondrakö. Fondrakö represents a body of customary laws, collective agreements, and ancestral principles that regulate social relations and establish ethical standards within Nias society. These customary institutions provide an important foundation for understanding the cultural practices through which the Nias people preserve their identity, social order, and collective values.

Marriage occupies a particularly significant and sacred position in Nias customary life. It is not merely a union between two individuals recognized through biological relationships or state legislation. Rather, it constitutes a social and spiritual commitment involving two extended families and their respective clans, known as Mado. Marriage therefore establishes relationships that extend beyond the couple to encompass kinship networks, customary obligations, and social responsibilities. From the perspective of rites of passage, marriage can also be understood as a transitional process through which individuals move from unmarried status to a socially recognized position associated with new familial and customary responsibilities. Consequently, the marriage ceremony provides an important context in which cultural values, social expectations, and symbolic meanings are expressed and transmitted.

In Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency, North Sumatra, customary marriage ceremonies exhibit distinctive characteristics that reflect the community's cultural heritage. The ceremonies involve a series of customary stages and symbolic practices that communicate respect, kinship, social responsibility, and the continuity of ancestral traditions. Among the important elements associated with these ceremonies are Böwö, Fanika Era-Era Mbowo, Tano Ni'omasi'ö, and Afo. Each element carries meanings that extend beyond its immediate ceremonial function and contributes to the broader cultural framework of Nias marriage traditions.

Böwö, commonly understood as the customary bridewealth or marriage payment, represents more than an economic transfer between families. It may signify respect for the dignity of the bride and her family, recognition of kinship relationships, and the establishment of reciprocal obligations between the two families. In the context of Sitolu Ori, the determination of Böwö may involve extensive negotiations that reflect family considerations, customary expectations, and perceptions of social standing. However, its interpretation requires careful examination because the customary meaning of Böwö may differ from contemporary perceptions that emphasize its financial implications.

Another important element is Fanika Era-Era Mbowo, a customary process involving the presentation of the bride's family genealogy. Through this process, the groom becomes acquainted with the bride's extended family background and the relationships that connect her to her kinship network. It also communicates the moral responsibilities and future obligations associated with entering the marriage relationship. These responsibilities may encompass material and nonmaterial dimensions and are embedded within the broader customary expectations governing relationships between the two families.

Tano Ni'omasi'ö refers to the provision of land or particular assets associated with the bride's future welfare and security within her new family environment. Beyond its material dimension, this practice may symbolize protection, stability, and the family's concern for the bride's future. Meanwhile, Afo, commonly associated with betel-chewing materials, serves as a customary symbol of hospitality and the opening of communication during traditional gatherings and negotiations. Its presence reflects the importance of respect, proper conduct, and established ceremonial procedures in maintaining harmonious relationships among participating families. These elements illustrate how material objects and ceremonial practices can function as symbolic expressions of broader social and moral values.

Traditional clothing worn during Nias marriage ceremonies also conveys cultural meanings through its colors, ornaments, and distinctive forms. The prominent use of yellow, red, and black may be associated with different symbolic interpretations within local cultural understandings. Yellow can signify dignity, honor, or prestige; red may represent courage and strength; and black may be associated with firmness, solemnity, or remembrance of ancestral heritage. These interpretations

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should be understood within their specific cultural context because the meanings attached to colors and ceremonial objects may vary across communities and generations.

Despite their cultural significance, the continuity of these symbolic practices faces challenges amid contemporary social change. Preliminary observations conducted by the researcher in Umbubalodano Village indicate that some community members, particularly younger generations, participate in customary marriage ceremonies without fully understanding the meanings, purposes, and historical reasons underlying each ceremonial stage. This situation raises concerns about the transmission of cultural knowledge and the potential reduction of complex traditions to formal procedures performed without a corresponding understanding of their symbolic significance.

Another issue concerns changing perceptions of Böwö. Although it traditionally carries social and cultural meanings associated with respect, kinship, and reciprocal responsibility, it may increasingly be perceived as a financial burden by the families involved. When economic considerations dominate its interpretation, the symbolic and relational dimensions of the practice risk being overshadowed by material concerns. Such a shift does not necessarily indicate the disappearance of the tradition itself; rather, it suggests that the meanings attributed to customary practices may be renegotiated in response to changing social and economic circumstances.

The influence of popular culture and modern entertainment has also contributed to changes in the presentation of customary marriage ceremonies. The incorporation of contemporary music and external cultural practices may alter the prominence of traditional performances and forms of oral expression, including Maena and Bola Nafo. These practices have traditionally provided opportunities for communal participation, the expression of cultural identity, and the transmission of moral and social messages. Changes in their use therefore raise questions about how customary symbols and performances continue to communicate cultural knowledge in contemporary settings.

Preliminary information obtained from Bezisokhi Zega, a customary leader in Umbubalodano Village, further indicates that the community continues to uphold important elements of its customary structure while experiencing increasing exposure to modern influences. According to this account, certain symbolic elements of the traditional marriage ceremony have reportedly become less frequently practiced over approximately the past twenty years. However, the specific reasons for these changes have not been systematically documented. This situation highlights the need to investigate not only which customary practices have changed but also how community members understand and interpret these transformations.

One example concerns Fanika Era-Era Mbowo. According to Bezisokhi Zega, this practice has sometimes been perceived as placing excessive expectations on the groom because the obligations communicated during the process may be interpreted as debts or responsibilities that must be fulfilled in the future. In response to this concern, the term Fangaetu Huhuo has reportedly been used as a substitute for Fanika Era-Era Mbowo to preserve the essential customary communication while reducing the impression that the groom is being subjected to an indefinite financial obligation. According to the customary leader's explanation, this terminological change is not intended to eliminate the original symbolic meaning but to modify how the customary message is communicated and understood. This example illustrates how customary traditions may undergo reinterpretation and adaptation in response to changing social expectations.

Nevertheless, the relationship between terminology, ceremonial practice, and symbolic meaning requires further investigation. A change in terminology does not automatically establish whether the underlying cultural meaning has remained intact, been modified, or gradually transformed. It is therefore necessary to examine how community members explain the relationship between Fanika Era-Era Mbowo and Fangaetu Huhuo, what values they associate with these practices, and how such interpretations influence the continuity of customary marriage traditions.

From a symbolic perspective, customary marriage ceremonies can be examined as systems of meaning through which communities communicate social identities, moral expectations, kinship relationships, and cultural continuity. Objects, colors, verbal expressions, and ceremonial actions

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acquire significance through shared cultural understandings. When these meanings are no longer understood or transmitted effectively, customary practices may continue to exist formally while losing some of their significance as vehicles of collective memory and social integration. Conversely, changes in customary practices may also represent efforts by communities to adapt inherited traditions to contemporary circumstances without necessarily abandoning their cultural identities.

The present study is therefore important for documenting and interpreting the symbolic meanings embedded in the traditional marriage ceremony of the Nias community in Umbubalodano Village. By examining the meanings attributed to customary symbols and the changes occurring in their use, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how local cultural knowledge is maintained, negotiated, and transmitted across generations. Rather than treating tradition solely as a legacy of the past, the study approaches it as a dynamic cultural resource that continues to shape social relationships and moral understandings in contemporary society.

Specifically, this study aims to analyze the symbolic meanings of the principal elements of customary marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village, examine the cultural and social values associated with these symbols, and investigate the factors contributing to the persistence, reinterpretation, or reduced use of particular customary practices. Particular attention is given to the relationship between Fanika Era-Era Mbowo and Fangaetu Huhuo as an example of how customary terminology and practice may change in response to contemporary concerns.

Based on these considerations, the study is entitled "An Analysis of Symbolic Meanings in Traditional Marriage Ceremonies among the Community of Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency." Through this investigation, the study is expected to contribute to the documentation of Nias cultural heritage and provide insights into the relationship between symbolic meaning, customary continuity, and social change in the contemporary Nias community.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design to analyze the symbolic meanings of traditional marriage ceremonies among the community of Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore cultural meanings, customary practices, and community perspectives within their natural social context. Qualitative research generates descriptive data in the form of spoken or written accounts and observable behaviors rather than numerical measurements. The data may include interview transcripts, field notes, photographs, videos, and relevant documents (Nazar, 2019). The descriptive design was considered appropriate because this study aimed to describe and interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in customary marriage practices without manipulating the cultural phenomena under investigation. The research focused on the meanings attributed to customary symbols, their cultural and social significance, and the ways in which these traditions are maintained, reinterpreted, or transformed within contemporary community life.

The research was conducted in Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. According to Rukin (2019, p. 39), a research location is the setting in which a study is conducted to investigate and address a particular research problem. Umbubalodano Village was selected because the community maintains distinctive customary marriage traditions that provide an appropriate context for examining the symbolic meanings of Nias cultural practices. The research was planned for the 2025/2026 academic year and included proposal preparation and revision, a research proposal seminar, research permit administration, data collection, data analysis, and the completion of the research report. The research schedule was initially planned from December 2025 to April 2026, although the actual implementation dates should be confirmed in accordance with the research activities undertaken.

The data consisted of primary and secondary sources. According to Nazar (2019, p. 117), primary data are obtained directly by researchers from the original sources, whereas secondary data

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are derived from existing materials collected or documented by other individuals or institutions. Primary data in this study were obtained through direct observation and interviews with individuals possessing relevant knowledge of traditional marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village. These data focused on participants' interpretations of customary symbols, the cultural and social values associated with marriage practices, and their perspectives on changes in the implementation and interpretation of particular traditions. Secondary data were obtained from relevant books, scholarly journal articles, research reports, customary documents, and other available materials that supported the interpretation of the primary findings.

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary research instrument. Hardani (2020, p. 117) explains that the researcher, as a human instrument, is responsible for determining the research focus, selecting informants, collecting data, assessing data quality, analyzing and interpreting information, and drawing conclusions. Accordingly, the researcher played a central role in collecting and interpreting information concerning the symbolic meanings of traditional marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village. Supporting instruments included observation guidelines, a semi-structured interview guide, field notes, and documentation tools, such as a mobile phone for recording photographs, videos, and audio when appropriate and permitted. These instruments helped organize the data collection process while allowing flexibility to explore cultural meanings that emerged during fieldwork.

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to examine customary marriage practices, ceremonial activities, interactions among participants, and the use of traditional objects and symbols within their natural cultural context. Through direct observation, the researcher sought to obtain contextual information about how customary practices were performed and understood by the community. Relevant observations were recorded in field notes and, where appropriate, supplemented with photographs and video recordings, subject to participants' consent and respect for customary restrictions. Interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth information about participants' knowledge, experiences, and interpretations of customary marriage traditions. Rifa'i (2020, p. 67) describes an interview as a purposeful conversation between an interviewer who asks questions and an interviewee who provides responses. Following the general principles of qualitative interviewing discussed by Sugiyono (2019), the interview process involved selecting appropriate participants, preparing interview topics, conducting interviews, asking follow-up questions, confirming key information, recording findings, and identifying the need for further clarification. Referring to Esterberg (2002, p. 146), interviews can be classified into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured forms. This study used semi-structured interviews because they allowed the researcher to follow a prepared interview guide while providing opportunities for participants to explain their perspectives and elaborate on issues relevant to the research objectives. Documentation was also employed to collect and examine relevant written records, photographs, videos, and other available materials related to traditional marriage ceremonies. Sugiyono (2013) identifies documentation as a technique for collecting relevant written materials, activity records, photographs, and audiovisual information. In this study, documentary materials served as supplementary evidence for observations and interviews and helped the researcher contextualize and compare the information obtained from different sources.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, following the analytical framework associated with Miles and Huberman. Data reduction involved selecting, organizing, simplifying, and categorizing information relevant to the research objectives. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were examined to identify information concerning the symbolic meanings of customary marriage elements, the cultural and social values associated with these symbols, and the factors contributing to changes in customary practices. Data display involved organizing the reduced information into descriptive narratives and, where appropriate, tables or interview excerpts to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships among the emerging themes. The findings were organized around the principal

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research concerns, including the meanings of customary symbols, their cultural significance, and changes in their use and interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting recurring themes and comparing information obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation. The conclusions were reviewed against the available evidence to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the collected data. Where necessary, the researcher revisited field notes, documentary materials, or participants' explanations to clarify ambiguous information. Through this process, the study sought to develop a contextualized understanding of the symbolic meanings of traditional marriage ceremonies and the ways in which these meanings are maintained, reinterpreted, or transformed within the community of Umbubalodano Village.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

During the researchers' fieldwork at the research site, namely Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency, data were collected through interviews with the customary leader and traditional figures, community leaders, and the Village Head of Umbubalodano. The interviews were conducted by asking open-ended questions. The research findings are as follows.

1. What customary symbols are used in marriage ceremonies in the community of Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency?

Based on the interview with Mr. Bezisokhi Zega (Customary Leader/Satua Mbanua), who stated:

"In customary marriage ceremonies among the Nias people, especially in Umbubalodano Village, there are several customary symbols that carry social meaning, respect, and several symbols in general: bowo (bride price or dowry), which is a gift from the male side to the female's family, usually in the form of gold, money, pigs, or other valuable items. Pigs (bawi) are often made a requirement in customary marriage events, as they symbolize prosperity, honor toward guests, and family togetherness. Furthermore, there is also jewelry, which is likewise a symbol of the marriage event, representing honor, family, and each person's social standing."

"The implementation of symbols in customary marriage in Umbubalodano Village serves as the basis for determining the customary bride price in Banua Umbubalodano, involving the understanding and application of the values and norms regulated in customary marriage events, particularly in the process of determining the bride price. Carrying out a wedding involves many stages or procedures that must be undertaken by the man's side if he wishes to marry a woman. Furthermore, customary marriage attire is a symbol representing the woman's personal identity at the time of marriage, with colors distinctive to each region. In addition, there is the customary dance, which symbolizes marriage in Umbubalodano Village, interpreting the bride and groom at the time of marriage as king and queen for a day, where many activities are performed publicly, between dome and sowato."

Similarly, Mr. Yuliaman Zega (Community Figure) stated: "The symbol of marriage is also one of the distinctive features of each region, especially villages in Umbubalodano, where at the time of marriage (moi nihalo/mangowalu) a man first prepares the bride price for the woman's family (kelurga ono alawe) to complete the wedding celebration. The determination of the customary bride price is also an effort to uphold the law, some of which already applies and was established by ancestors in earlier times. In marriage, the most essential symbol is first the amount of bowo that must be followed, especially in determining the initial steps of the marriage."

Mr. Fowa'a Zega (Village Head of Umbubalodano), meanwhile, stated: "In the marriage process there are also symbols that we should know, namely norms, values, and procedures that must be adjusted to what has been determined, namely the bride price given by the man. If the man or his family is able to provide money, for example 100 million (money), silver (firo, 5 pieces), and pigs (bawi, 4 rozi), this is a picture of the symbols of the marriage process in Nias, especially in Umbubalodano Village. This has become the obligation of Nias men when marrying Nias women, or ono alawe ono niha."

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Based on the above, it can be concluded that the symbols used in customary marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village are the bride price (bowo), money (kefe), silver (firo), gold (ana'a), customary attire (nukha hada), pigs (bawi), and the maena or traditional dance. These are the most essential requirements in customary marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency.

2. Has the symbolic meaning in the customary marriage ceremonies of Umbubalodano Village experienced a degradation of its sacred essence?

Based on the interview with Mr. Bezisokhi Zega (Customary Leader/Satua Mbanua) in Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency, who stated:

"The symbolic meaning in customary marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village has experienced a degradation of its sacred essence, in which a shift in the understanding of meaning (cognitive) occurs. Modern society, including in rural areas, often does not understand the profound philosophical meaning of each marriage process. They tend to regard it merely as a customary requirement that must be fulfilled so that the marriage is considered valid by tradition. Furthermore, the large amount of böwö (bride price) is often a complaint among the community, because people with low incomes often struggle to meet the high dowry. This can cause financial difficulty for the prospective bride and groom and their families and place heavy economic pressure on them. Complaints from some people regarding high dowries often reflect social, economic, and cultural problems that need to be reviewed in order to create equality, balance, and justice in the institution of marriage."

Mr. Yuliaman Zega (Community Figure) stated: "The sacredness in the marriage process is often treated as a mere formality, where custom is used only as a regional identity or a formality, no longer as a reflection of spirituality and a profound outlook on life. This may happen due to cost constraints, the bride price demanded in the marriage process, as well as time and energy, which potentially eliminates important symbols that carry sacred meaning."

This is echoed by Mr. Fowa'a Zega (Village Head of Umbubalodano), who stated: "The development of the times has greatly influenced the sacredness of customary marriage processes, where traditional symbols are replaced by modern elements, for example, customary clothing styles that follow modern fashion and decorations that differ greatly from earlier customs. This greatly reduces the sense of value or the complete cultural view."

Based on the interview results from several informants above, it can be concluded that the symbolic meaning in customary marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village has experienced a degradation of its sacredness. As the opinions above indicate, this occurs because of the increasingly modern times and the entry of foreign cultures into Nias customs. This causes the essence of marriage to change, following modern styles and increasingly sophisticated technology, so that custom is often placed second in the marriage process. An example is the use of a keyboard (kibot) during wedding celebrations, whereas in earlier times only traditional instruments were used, with the maena dance or traditional dance as the main entertainment at the wedding. Because of the changing times, which have become increasingly profound, the sacredness of its essence has been greatly affected.

3. What strategies or effective solutions can revitalize the sacred essence of the symbolic meaning in customary marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village?

Based on the interview with Mr. Bezisokhi Zega (Customary Leader/Satua Mbanua) in Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency, who stated:

"The effective strategy or solution for revitalizing the sacred essence of the symbolic meaning in customary marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village is that marriage ceremonies in the modern era require an approach that balances respect for tradition or culture in customary marriage with functional adaptation, without eliminating its philosophical values, involving community leaders without reducing the ritual. One of the closest ways is the application of customs, such as involving the customary authorities during the marriage ceremony, which will remind people of the customary symbols in this region."

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Mr. Yuliaman Zega (Community Figure) stated: "The solution used to maintain symbols in customary marriage is strengthening the role of the community and religion. I say this because the integration of custom and religion often needs to affirm the positive correlation between cultural values and religious teachings, since most Indonesians consider marriage to be an act of worship. Furthermore, students today need to understand that in maintaining the customs or distinctive identity of our region, we should read and study concise guidelines on valid ceremonial procedures from our customary leaders, so that their implementation is in accordance with their sacredness."

This is echoed by Mr. Fowa'a Zega (Village Head of Umbubalodano), who stated: "A fairly effective way to revitalize the sacred essence of the symbolic meaning in customary marriage ceremonies is to always remind the younger generation of the importance of preserving the culture or customs of each region. Ono Niha culture is very important, such as the symbols used in marriage ceremonies, namely aramba, faritia, maena, and all the rest. These symbols are the ancestral heritage passed down from our forebears. Therefore, students today need to know these symbols and always remind others of the symbols of our region."

DISCUSSION

1. What customary symbols are used in marriage ceremonies in the community of Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency?

The customary symbol used in the community's marriage ceremony is fanema li, which literally means fame'e li, that is, giving li (voice, speech, talk). Thus, "fame'e li" is one of the customary symbols in Nias that takes place before the wedding ceremony. The following customary symbols are:

First: the relationship between samatofa I and samatofa II.
Second: the relationship between samatofa II and the bride's mother.
Third: the bride's mother conveys the matter to the bride's father.
Fourth: the bride's parents ask their daughter whether she is ready to marry.
Fifth: samatofa li carries the results of their discussion forward to the extended family.

After the above symbols have been conveyed, what follows is fame'e laeduru (engagement). Fame'e means "to give," and laeduru means "ring," as a sign of famatuasa, or engagement. It is also often called fame'e kola (kola = brass), because in the past rings were made of brass, whereas in present times rings are made of gold as a sign of marriage.

Next, the symbol is **BOWO (BRIDE PRICE)**. The following are the types of names, along with the material values of böwö that serve as the basis for determining the customary bride price, as well as the symbols implemented in Umbubalodano Village:

Note: the column heading of the source table for the bride's family records "5 gana'a, 5 pigs (mbawi), 5 gold bars" and "14 types" for each version.

Table 3. Böwö for the bride's family (so'ono)

Name of Böwö (bride price)	Material value, Version (I)	Material value, Version (II)
siakhi ziwalu	4x4 alisi	5x4 alisi
öba bulundru'u	1.5x4 alisi	1 balaki (4x4 alisi)
sulö mböra	1.5x4 alisi	8 ngaso'e (1x4 alisi)
sangawuli bambanua	1.5x4 alisi	1 balaki (4x4 alisi)
Kola	4x4 alisi	5x4 alisi
su'a mbawi	2x4 alisi	5x4 alisi
töla naya mbanua	2x4 alisi	5x4 alisi
sitatalu ziwalu	3x4 alisi	1 balaki (4x4 alisi)
aya dua	2x4 alisi	5x4 alisi
sia'a mböli niha	12x4 alisi	12x4 alisi
aya nina	10x4 alisi	12x4 alisi
fanunu manu	1.5x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
famoloi manu	4x4 alisi	5x4 alisi
sia'a ziwalu	6x4 alisi	12x4 alisi

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Table 4. Böwö for the father's siblings and the village community (talifuso zatua ira matua and fobanua)

Name of Böwö (bride price)	Material value, Version (I)	Material value, Version (II)
Famatörö	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
öba sebua	3x4 alisi	1 balaki (4x4 alisi)
sanulo ana'a	1.5x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
sanua'a bawi	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
bulu sidua	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
howu-howu zatua	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
fanika era-era	1.5x4 alisi	1 balaki (2x4 alisi)

Table 5. Böwö for the uncle's family (uwu)

Name of Böwö (bride price)	Material value, Version (I)	Material value, Version (II)
tawi naya nuwu	1.5x4 alisi	1 balaki (1.5x4 alisi)
adu ba nuwu	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (2x4 alisi)
töla naya nuwu	8x4 alisi	12x4 alisi

Table 6. Bulu-bulu böwö (supplementary böwö items)

Name of Böwö (bride price)	Material value, Version (I)	Material value, Version (II)
famokai danga	1.5x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
sigu-sigu nomo	1.5x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
fanaitagö mbalö gömö	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
famalali dawi-dawi guri	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
fameta mbulu nohi safusi	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
diwo nama	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (4x4 alisi) + 8 alisi
diwo nina	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (4x4 alisi) + 8 alisi
diwo gawe	2x4 alisi	Not stated
diwo nono sia'a	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (4x4 alisi) + 8 alisi
diwo nono sitatalu	1.5x4 alisi	1.5x4 alisi
diwo nono siakhi	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (4x4 alisi) + 8 alisi
fali-fali mbalo halöwö	2x4 alisi	1 balaki (3x4 alisi)
balö ndrela	4 alisi	4 alisi
mbolo-mbolo	4 alisi	1 balaki (2x4 alisi)
Bawi wangowalu	1 pig 8 alisi, 1 pig 9 alisi	1 pig 8 alisi, 1 pig 9 alisi

Table 7. Nono mbawi wangowalu

Name of Böwö (bride price)	Material value, Version (I)	Material value, Version (II)
nono ba zo'ono	Not stated	1 balaki (2x4 alisi)
nono ba nuwu	Not stated	1 balaki (2x4 alisi)
nono ba mbanua	Not stated	1 balaki (2x4 alisi)
fanema fesu	Not stated	4 alisi
samaho bawi	Not stated	4 alisi

The material value of böwö commonly applied in the banua, based on Version I, totals 166 x 4 alisi. If converted into money at Rp 1,050,000 each, this amounts to 166 x Rp 1,050,000 = Rp 121,800,000 (one hundred twenty-one million eight hundred thousand rupiah). *Editor's note: 166 x Rp 1,050,000 = Rp 174,300,000, not Rp 121,800,000 as stated in the source. Please verify this figure before submission and delete this note.* Version II totals 188.5 x 4 alisi of pigs, which at Rp 1,050,000 each amounts to 188.5 x Rp 1,050,000 = Rp 197,925,000 (one hundred ninety-seven million nine hundred twenty-five thousand rupiah).

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Based on the interviews with the customary leader, community figure, and Village Head of Umbubalodano, the main symbols of the Nias customary marriage ceremony (especially in Umbubalodano Village) can be concretely summarized as follows:

Material and Social Status Symbols. The bride price (bowo) is the main symbol and the requirement for beginning the marriage process. Its components include pigs (bawi), precious metals (gold/ana'a and silver/firo), and money (kefe).

Identity and Honor Symbols. These are the features that characterize the customary marriage ceremony, consisting of customary attire (nukha hada), betel (afo), and the customary dance (maena).

Customary Value and Law Symbols. The norms and procedures. The implementation of all the symbols above is not merely material; it is a form of enforcing customary law inherited from the ancestors and an expression of Nias men's obedience to cultural values when courting Nias women (ono alawe).

2. Has the symbolic meaning in the customary marriage ceremonies of Umbubalodano Village experienced a degradation of its sacred essence?

One of the symbols in Nias marriage is the determination of the bride price (BOWO). Böwö is a quantity of wealth given by the man's side to the woman's side, carrying the meanings of customary requirement, kinship, respect and/or appreciation, social meaning, and prestige. In fact, böwö is not merely a necessity but also contains lofty meanings and values that are very significant to the Nias people. The values of böwö are practiced in marriage customs in the form of rules established in the Fondrakö. However, in practice, Nias marriage customs have come to emphasize rules and additional festivities that require large costs beyond böwö, rather than its lofty values, so that the implementation of marriage customs has burdened the outer and inner life of the new family. As a result, marriage customs increasingly feel distant from the spirit of the lofty values (böwö) inherited from the Nias ancestors.

Lafau (2023:4) explains in his book that several considerations for the two families in determining böwö include customary position (bosi adat), the family's social class, level of education, profession and personal income, and the needs at the time of the wedding. The Nias marriage process is governed by strict customary law, and each region has different technical procedures and provisions. However, the general scheme of a Nias marriage follows three stages: beginning with the search for a prospective bride by the man's side, conducting the proposal ceremony with betrothal, and carrying out the marriage itself.

Furthermore, understanding the symbols and meanings in a marriage ceremony also means studying its procedures and the symbols contained within it. Here, the symbols referred to are the visible manifestations of the ceremony. At present, ceremonies complete with all their procedures are still practiced, preserved, and regarded as sacred alongside the marriage contract (akad nikah). However, few people know the meanings of the symbols in the sequence of the marriage ceremony. It is not uncommon for the ceremony to become a source of pride in itself, without knowing its deeper meanings or considering its benefits (Alber 2024: 68).

Based on the interview results, it can be simply concluded that a degradation (decline) of the sacred essence in the symbolic meaning of marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village has indeed occurred. The main factors causing this degradation are as follows:

Shift in understanding (cognitive). Modern society tends to regard customary procedures merely as formalities or traditional requirements for validity, without understanding the profound philosophy contained in them.

Economic pressure (bride price/böwö). The heavy material burden or dowry is often a source of complaint and shifts the focus of marriage from spiritual value to a financial burden on the prospective bride and groom.

Modernization and technology. The entry of modern culture and technology, for example the use of keyboard instruments replacing traditional instruments and the maena dance, causes custom to be placed second.

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Change in physical symbols. The use of decorations and customary attire that follow modern trends has reduced their original value and the complete cultural view.

3. What strategies or effective solutions can revitalize the sacred essence of the symbolic meaning in customary marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village?

According to Rezky (2025:98), the marriage ceremony is a complex form of social rite, rich in symbolic meaning, reflecting the depth of cultural values that remain alive in community life. The sequence of rituals, starting from the proposal stage through to the wedding reception, actively involves all members of both prospective spouses' families, both as a form of social responsibility and as a manifestation of strong kinship ties. Each stage of the ritual is carried out with great care and emotional appreciation, because it is believed to contain lofty values and customary beliefs that must not be violated. The belief in the sacred meaning contained in every element of the procession makes marriage not merely a private ceremony, but a collective expression of culture that functions to strengthen community identity.

Meanwhile, Zharatul (2024:78) states that every region has local cultural characteristics that other regions do not possess, as is the case in customary marriage ceremonies. A customary marriage ceremony must have songs in each session and symbols throughout the procession, drawing on philosophy, religion, society, and traditional understanding in the literal sense. In Nias, constructive exposure to change and globalization has altered the character and lifestyle of people, so that cultural values can gradually begin to be abandoned by the communities that support them. Tradition is a situational process of society with elements of cultural lineage, inherited from generation to generation and continuously passed on to the next. The Nias people pay close attention to the existence of myths and beliefs, and they believe in the phenomena of life.

This is in line with what Zebua (2024:795) stated: in Nias culture, there are three aspects of validation in the marriage ceremony, namely the customary ceremony (adat istiadat), the church blessing (religion), and civil registration (government).

Based on the interview results, several strategies used to revitalize the sacred essence of the symbolic meaning in customary marriage ceremonies can be concluded, namely:

Balanced functional adaptation: integrating tradition with the modern era without eliminating its essence or philosophical values.

Integration of custom and religion: affirming the positive correlation between cultural values and religious teachings, given that the community views marriage as an act of worship.

Empowerment of the community's role: involving community leaders and customary authorities as the main pillars in maintaining the authenticity of the ritual without reducing its value.

Focus on the younger generation: directing attention to students and youth as agents of preservation, so that they are aware of the importance of ancestral heritage.

Furthermore, the practical and concrete solutions proposed to maintain its symbolic meaning are as follows:

Application of custom in the procession: involving customary authorities directly during the wedding ceremony to remind people of the meanings of the regional symbols.

Cultural literacy through concise guidelines: encouraging the younger generation (students) to read and study books or concise guidelines on valid customary procedures from customary leaders, so that implementation conforms to its standard of sacredness.

Consistent use of physical symbols: maintaining the use of distinctive musical instruments and physical symbols such as aramba, faritia, and maena in every marriage ceremony as the cultural identity of Ono Niha.

Continuous education: consistently reminding the younger generation of the historical value of these symbols as ancestral heritage that must not be forgotten.

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4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that traditional marriage ceremonies in Umbubalodano Village, Sitolu Ori District, North Nias Regency, involve several important cultural symbols. These symbols include Böwö (bridewealth), consisting of pigs (Bawi), gold (Ana'a), and money (Kefe), which represent material value and social status. Other symbols include traditional clothing (Nukha Hada), betel materials (Afo), and traditional dance (Maena), which express cultural identity, honor, values, and social norms. The findings also indicate a decline in the sacred significance of symbolic meanings in traditional marriage ceremonies. This change is associated with shifts in cultural understanding, economic pressures, modernization, technological developments, and changes in the physical representation of customary symbols. To preserve the sacred significance of these traditions, this study recommends balanced functional adaptation, integration of customary practices with religious values, stronger community participation, and greater involvement of younger generations. Practical efforts include maintaining customary elements during marriage ceremonies, developing concise cultural guidelines, consistently using traditional symbols, and providing continuous cultural education. These efforts are expected to help preserve the cultural identity and symbolic meanings of traditional Nias marriage ceremonies amid social change.

The community of Umbubalodano is encouraged to preserve traditional marriage symbols and develop a deeper understanding of their cultural and sacred meanings so that these practices remain meaningful rather than becoming merely ceremonial activities. Customary leaders are expected to play an active role in educating younger generations about the significance of each stage of traditional Nias marriage ceremonies. Younger generations should also be encouraged to learn about and participate in preserving their cultural heritage. Furthermore, this study may serve as an initial reference for future researchers examining symbolic changes in Nias marriage traditions, particularly the influence of modernization and effective strategies for cultural preservation.

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