

Interpreting the Hidden Messages in Nias Traditional Clothing: A Study of Symbols and Cultural Values

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pesan tersembunyi dan nilai-nilai budaya yang tertanam dalam pakaian adat Nias, khususnya Baru Oholu untuk pria dan Öroba Si'öli untuk wanita. Menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan semiotika berdasarkan teori Roland Barthes dan Charles Sanders Peirce, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana warna, motif, dan aksesoris berfungsi sebagai kode budaya yang mengkomunikasikan hirarki sosial, kepercayaan spiritual, dan identitas kolektif. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa palet warna emas, merah, dan hitam masing-masing mewakili kebangsawanan, keberanian, dan perlindungan spiritual, sementara ornamen seperti Kalabubu dan Tolo-tolo berfungsi sebagai penanda visual status sosial dan pencapaian. Pola geometris seperti adu dan laro mempertahankan hubungan dengan tradisi leluhur dan kepercayaan kosmologis. Penelitian ini juga mendokumentasikan bagaimana pakaian tradisional ini telah berhasil beradaptasi dengan modernitas melalui inovasi material dan perluasan fungsional sambil mempertahankan esensi simbolisnya. Transformasi ini menunjukkan sifat dinamis dari warisan budaya Nias, di mana pakaian tradisional terus berfungsi sebagai penanda identitas etnis dan artefak hidup yang mempertahankan relevansi dalam konteks kontemporer. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pakaian tradisional Nias mewakili sistem komunikasi visual yang canggih yang mewujudkan struktur sosial, nilai-nilai, dan pandangan dunia masyarakat sambil beradaptasi dengan pengaruh global.

Kata Kunci: keti Pakaian Tradisional Nias, Simbol Budaya, Identitas Budaya, Makna Simbolik, Pakaian Tradisional

Abstract

This study examines the hidden messages and cultural values embedded in Nias traditional clothing, specifically Baru Oholu for men and Öroba Si'öli for women. Using a qualitative method with a semiotic approach based on Roland Barthes' and Charles Sanders Peirce's theories, this research analyzes how colors, motifs, and accessories function as cultural codes that communicate social hierarchy, spiritual beliefs, and collective identity. The findings reveal that the color palette of gold, red, and black represents nobility, courage, and spiritual protection respectively, while ornaments like Kalabubu and Tolo-tolo serve as visual markers of social status and achievement. Geometric patterns such as adu and laro maintain connections to ancestral traditions and cosmological beliefs. The research also documents how these traditional garments have successfully adapted to modernity through material innovations and functional expansions while preserving their symbolic essence. This transformation demonstrates the dynamic nature of Nias cultural heritage, where traditional clothing continues to function as both

a marker of ethnic identity and a living artifact that maintains relevance in contemporary contexts. The study concludes that Nias traditional clothing represents a sophisticated system of visual communication that embodies the community's social structure, values, and worldview while adapting to global influences.

Keywords: *Nias Traditional Clothing, Cultural Symbols, Cultural Identity, Symbolic Meaning, Traditional Attire*

Introduction

Culture is widely understood as a dynamic system of shared meanings, values, symbols, and practices that shape how communities see themselves and interpret the world around them. Rather than being a static inheritance, culture evolves continuously through collective experiences, social interactions, and symbolic expressions that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Pezzini (2025) emphasizes that culture functions as a system of symbolic meanings distributed socially, enabling members of a community to maintain a coherent understanding of identity, tradition, and worldview. Recent cultural studies also highlight that traditional material objects play a crucial role in mediating cultural knowledge and identity formation; for example, Sinha (2015) argues that cultural artifacts function as communicative tools that convey social values and group identity across generations. Within this broader cultural framework, material objects such as traditional clothing hold important communicative roles. They operate not only as practical coverings but also as symbolic texts that encode philosophical ideas, historical memory, and moral expectations within their physical features. Every choice of color, motif, or ornament reflects a long cultural process that shapes identity and embeds the wearer in a wider narrative of ancestry, social hierarchy, and communal belonging. Thus, traditional clothing serves as a living archive that integrates the past with the present, expressing the continuity of cultural identity even as societies change.

Nias, an island in North Sumatra known for its megalithic traditions and resilient cultural heritage, provides a compelling context for understanding how traditional clothing functions as a symbolic medium. As Hulu (2022) notes, the Nias people (Ono Niha) have preserved various cultural practices such as *fahombo* (stone jumping), the *Omo Hada* architectural tradition, ritual performances, and a strong belief system centered on ancestral spirits. In the broader anthropological context, traditional attire serves as a communicative structure for expressing collective identity, as demonstrated by Tajuddin (2018) who show that dress and symbolism function as markers of cultural boundaries and social differentiation. Among these cultural elements, traditional clothing holds a central role in visualizing identity, social position, and cultural pride. The traditional male attire *Baru Oholu* and the female attire *Öröba Si'öli* are not merely ceremonial garments but cultural texts structured through meaningful colors, patterns, and ornaments. Elements such as gold to symbolize nobility and dignity, red to represent courage and vitality, black to embody spiritual protection, and ornaments like *Kalabubu* and *Tolo-tolo* to mark honor and achievement, together create a complex visual language understood deeply by the Nias community (Zebua, 2021). These garments are used in major events such as weddings, *owasa* ceremonies, war dances, and communal festivals, where their visual prominence reinforces communal values and ancestral traditions. Through these visual structures, Nias clothing becomes a vessel for cultural memory that connects the individual to their lineage and to the collective identity of the community.

Baru Oholu

Baru Oholu, the traditional attire of Nias men, is a powerful cultural symbol that expresses courage, honor, and strong social identity. Its main colors yellow, red, and black are chosen with deep meaning. Yellow represents glory and nobility, a color usually worn by respected leaders or men who have completed important traditional achievements. Red stands for courage, strength, and the warrior spirit that has long been valued in Nias culture. Black serves as the base color and symbolizes protection and spiritual force, believed to shield the wearer from negative energies or evil spirits. The presence of gold or brass ornaments on the shoulders further highlights the wearer's status, as only those who hold authority or have participated in major customary ceremonies may wear the full attire. Through these elements, Baru Oholu becomes not just clothing, but a visual declaration of a man's honor, achievements, and responsibilities within society.

This attire also plays an important role in cultural events such as war dances and stone jumping (*Fahombo*), where it helps display agility, strength, and bravery. In these performances, the

bright colors and shining ornaments of Baru Oholu enhance the wearer's movements, making them appear bold, confident, and dignified. The attire serves as a reminder of the heroic values passed down through generations discipline, readiness to protect the community, and respect for ancestral traditions. As a whole, Baru Oholu functions as a living cultural artifact, retelling the history and identity of the Nias people through every stitch, pattern, and symbolic color.

Öröba Si'öli

Öröba Si'öli, the traditional attire of Nias women, is a meaningful symbol of elegance, purity, and dignity, reflecting the high cultural value placed on women as the keepers of harmony and unity within the family. Dominated by red and gold, this attire communicates powerful messages: red represents the spirit of life, warmth, and energy, while gold symbolizes nobility, blessings, and prosperity. When a woman wears Öröba Si'öli, she is not only dressed beautifully but also wrapped in cultural messages that honor her role as a source of stability, wisdom, and emotional strength within the community. The attire often includes additional ornaments such as a small crown (sigaru), layered metal necklaces, heavy bracelets, and richly embroidered cloth that together form a complete expression of respect, identity, and traditional pride. During major ceremonies like weddings, owasa feasts, or welcoming rituals, the appearance of Öröba Si'öli becomes a visual statement of the family's standing and the woman's honored place in the event.

Beyond its aesthetic beauty, every motif, accessory, and metal ornament on the Öröba Si'öli carries deep symbolic meaning. Traditional motifs woven into the cloth may represent fertility, hopes for prosperity, protection from ancestral spirits, or reminders of the woman's lineage. The gold-like jewelry signifies the family's social rank and achievements, while the crown-like headpiece highlights the woman's importance in ceremonial settings. The embroidery techniques used are often passed down from older generations, preserving not only the skill but also the cultural stories attached to each design. Because of this, Öröba Si'öli is more than a ceremonial costume; it acts as a living cultural document, carrying layers of history, values, and identity. Each time it is worn, it retells stories of unity, respect, motherhood, strength, and the cultural journey of Nias women. Through this attire, generations continue to honor the legacy of their ancestors, ensuring that the wisdom and identity of Nias society remain strong, respected, and celebrated.

The literature on cultural change also highlights how traditional clothing can undergo transformation due to the influence of modernity, tourism, and the global market. In Nias society, although the basic forms of Baru Oholu and Öröba Si'öli are relatively maintained as symbols of cultural identity, several significant modifications are beginning to appear in aspects of materials, manufacturing techniques, and their functions. The replacement of natural materials such as bark with modern textiles, the adoption of machine sewing techniques, and the simplification of ornamentation are some forms of adaptation to practical and economic demands. These transformations do not necessarily indicate the fading of traditional values, but rather reflect a dynamic cultural strategy in responding to changing times. This phenomenon opens up broader research space on the dialectic between continuity and change, particularly in the context of how the Nias people conduct cultural negotiations to maintain their core traditional values while accommodating contemporary influences. Furthermore, such studies can reveal how traditional clothing continues to evolve as a medium for inheriting traditional values that remains relevant, while also becoming a cultural commodity in the creative economy and tourism, which ultimately helps shape the narrative of Nias identity on the global stage.

A number of recent studies have explored the symbolic and cultural significance of traditional clothing in Indonesia, highlighting its role as a medium of identity formation and value transmission. Sudarsana (2024) demonstrates that Balinese women's traditional clothing expresses ethical values, spirituality, and social expectations within ceremonial contexts. Firliyana et al. (2023) examine how traditional Malay clothing in Jambi encodes cultural norms, aesthetic standards, and women's social roles. Mustaina and Nurlala (2023) reveal that Mamasa traditional attire communicates inherited values and aesthetic systems shaped by local beliefs and social practices. Beyond Indonesia, global studies such as those by Ciptandi (2018), who examines symbolic encoding in Ukrainian traditional dress reinforce that local attire communicates collective identity through motifs and color symbolism. Within the Nias context, Zalukhu et al. (2024) focus on the symbolic meanings in women's wedding attire in North Nias, analyzing how colors, jewelry, and weaving patterns convey status and family heritage. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the cultural symbolism of traditional clothing, they often focus on specific attire, specific gender roles, or

particular ceremonial contexts. None offers a comprehensive semiotic analysis that examines the full symbolic system found in both male and female traditional clothing of Nias especially an analysis integrating Barthes' and Peirce's semiotic theories to reveal deeper layers of meaning. This creates a scholarly gap that situates the present study as the state of the art within the field of cultural semiotics and traditional clothing studies.

Based on these considerations, the central research problem of this study is: How do the colors, motifs, and ornaments in Nias traditional clothing function as cultural symbols that communicate social status, values, and collective identity within the Nias community? This single focus is essential because symbolic elements in traditional attire do not operate independently; instead, they form an interconnected system of signs that reflects the worldview, hierarchy, and ancestral philosophies of the Nias people. Understanding how these elements work together through a semiotic lens allows the study to uncover the deeper cultural logic that structures traditional Nias clothing, enabling a more holistic understanding of its significance in both ritualistic and modern contexts. Similar findings on the interconnected symbolic systems in traditional attire are also discussed by Ciptandi (2018), who stresses that clothing symbolism operates in layered structures that cannot be analyzed in isolation.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to describe, interpret, and analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in Nias traditional clothing using a semiotic approach. To achieve this, the research employs Roland Barthes' theory of denotation, connotation, and myth (1964), which enables the identification of literal meanings, cultural associations, and ideological structures embedded in clothing elements. Additionally, Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of signs icons, indices, and symbols (1931) provides a deeper analytical framework for understanding how visual forms function as signs within cultural communication. This approach is aligned with recent semiotic research, such as Xu (2018), who argues that clothing operates as a multimodal sign system shaped by cultural context, ritual function, and historical continuity. Through these theoretical lenses, the study aims to reveal how traditional Nias clothing operates as a dynamic cultural text that articulates identity, embodies ancestral values, and maintains cultural continuity despite modern adaptations. By situating its analysis within contemporary scholarship, this research contributes to the growing understanding of Indonesian traditional clothing as a symbolic and evolving cultural system.

Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a semiotic approach to interpret the symbols and cultural values in Nias traditional clothing, focusing on the meaning of colors, motifs, and ornaments that require in-depth cultural interpretation. The analysis is conducted by identifying visual elements in Baru Oholu and Öroba Si'öli, then interpreted using Roland Barthes' (1964) semiotic theoretical framework through three levels of signification - denotation, connotation, and cultural myth - as well as Charles Sanders Peirce's (1931) triadic model that includes icons, indices, and symbols. To deepen the analysis, this study also applies qualitative content analysis by reviewing literature, cultural documents, and previous research to identify recurring patterns of meaning and complex cultural values. Through the synthesis of this approach, Nias traditional clothing is understood as a living "cultural text" that represents the social structure, collective identity, and philosophy of life of the Nias people.

Result and Discussion

Nias traditional clothing serves as a woven code of conduct and a visual "birth certificate" carried by the wearer, transcending mere clothing to become a symbol of authentic social status and spiritual attainment achieved through the owasa customary system. The entire attire, from the headdress symbolizing leadership power (Karabö) to the chest necklace signifying wealth and honor (Kalabubu), reflects the values held dear, particularly the principles of Famaedo (nobility) and Fangindro (pride). With its dominant earthy black, vibrant red, and noble gold, the attire clearly proclaims that the wearer is an integral part of a solid customary structure, where every strand of thread and carved ornament becomes a visual reminder of privileges, obligations, and life journeys shaped by the Nifilifili Adat inherited from the ancestors.

Beyond its outward beauty, this attire also serves as a living archive of cultural wisdom, encapsulating the wearer's readiness to uphold harmony, bravery, generosity, and responsibility within the community. Its patterns and motifs are not merely decorative; they record achievements,

social duties, and moral expectations that guide one's place in society. In ceremonies, the clothing acts as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, affirming the connection between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits. By preserving and wearing this attire, the Nias people maintain continuity with their heritage, ensuring that identity, honor, and tradition remain alive across generations.

1. Colors: Gold, red, and black.

Nias traditional clothing is not just something to cover the body. It is a special cultural canvas that sends messages about a person's social level, achievements, and way of life. Each color used in the clothing has a very important meaning. Gold and yellow are the highest colors of honor. These colors are only worn by nobles (Si Ulu) or by people who have reached a very high level of respect through the owasa ceremony. Gold and yellow show wealth, dignity, and the bright light of the sun, which is seen as the source of all life.

Red, on the other hand, is a strong symbol of masculine power, courage, and a heroic spirit. This color is usually seen in men's clothing, especially in outfits meant to show bravery, strength, and readiness to protect the community, such as the Faluaya costume. Red tells everyone that the wearer has the heart of a warrior and is prepared to face challenges.

Black is often used as the main background color. For the Nias people, black represents a deep connection to the earth, to the ancestors, and to unseen spiritual forces. It is believed that black gives powerful protection from negative or harmful spirits. Because of this, black is not a sad or dark color in Nias culture; instead, it is a color of strength, grounding, and safety.

Together, these three colors gold, red, and black create a complete visual story. They show who the person is, what kind of responsibilities they carry, and what level of spiritual and social status they have. Every outfit becomes a living message that expresses identity, tradition, and the values that the Nias people continue to protect. Through these colors, the clothing communicates respect, pride, bravery, and the rich cultural heritage passed down from their ancestors.

2. Jewelry Symphony: Visual Language of Absolute Social Status

Accessories in traditional Nias clothing are certificates of achievement that go far beyond their role as simple jewelry. They function as important tools of visual communication that help people immediately understand a person's social position, history, and level of honor within the community. Kalabubu, the strong circular necklace worn by men, is a clear example of this. It is not made just to look beautiful. Kalabubu is a badge of bravery that only certain men are allowed to wear. Traditionally, it is linked to acts of courage, such as the famous stone-jumping ritual (Fahombo) or other heroic accomplishments that prove a man's readiness to face danger. When someone wears Kalabubu, it announces to everyone that he is a true warrior, a protector, and a man who has passed difficult tests of strength.

On the head, accessories such as Tolo-tolo, which are made from bird feathers, add another layer of meaning. These feathers symbolize qualities that the Nias people value strongly: agility, alertness, intelligence, and courage. Birds move quickly and freely, and wearing their feathers shows that the wearer has the same admired traits. These head adornments also serve as markers of leadership and honor in community rituals.

For women, accessories speak a different but equally powerful language. The amount, size, and weight of gold jewelry especially large Gari bracelets, extended earrings, and layered necklaces—serve as clear signs of family wealth, noble bloodline, and respected social standing. Each piece of gold is not only decorative but also represents a part of a family's history: their struggles, achievements, alliances, and the status they have earned or inherited.

These accessories together create a living archive of identity. Every metal engraving, every feather, every bracelet carries meaning that helps the community understand who a person is, what their family represents, and what responsibilities they hold. In this way, Nias accessories become chapters of history worn on the body, preserving tradition while also communicating pride, dignity, and ancestral legacy.

3. Motifs and Patterns: Traces of Ancestors and Nature

The motifs and patterns that adorn traditional Nias clothing function as sacred texts written not on paper, but on fabric, where every line, curve, and geometric shape carries the memory of the ancestors and the order of the universe. Patterns such as simplified human figures (adu) represent ancestral spirits and the invisible power that guides and protects the living. Meanwhile, sun motifs (laro), with their radiating lines, symbolize the source of life, brilliance, and the divine light that sustains the world. These symbols are not merely decorative; they are woven with care into beads, textiles, and carved ornaments to affirm the continuous connection between humans, the physical world, and the spiritual realm.

What makes these motifs even more meaningful is the strict rule of transmission from one generation to the next. Craftsmen do not create new patterns carelessly; they follow ancestral guidelines that ensure every design carries the correct meaning and spiritual weight. In this way, the motifs become a record of collective memory, preserving stories, beliefs, and wisdom that have shaped Nias identity for centuries. They remind the wearer of creation myths, the importance of harmony, and the principle of Fakhai Fakhisi maintaining balance between humans, nature, and unseen forces so life can flow in peace and prosperity.

When worn, this traditional attire becomes more than clothing it becomes a living artifact, a moving museum of cultural memory. Each pattern whispers lessons about bravery, respect, responsibility, and unity. It teaches the wearer that they are not alone but are part of an unbroken chain stretching back to the ancestors, who continue to guide and bless their descendants. In this way, motifs and patterns in Nias clothing serve as a powerful statement of identity, spirituality, and cultural pride, ensuring that the values and philosophy of Nias tradition remain alive in every stitch.

4. Clothes Tell the Story of Men and Women

Traditional Nias clothing serves as a sociological script that is worn, explicitly defining and reinforcing ideal gender roles through different designs and accessories: Baru Oholu for men, characterized by stiff cuts, dark colors, and essential accessories such as shields and swords (Tögu Nifatali), affirms the image of a warrior (satua) and a strong, steadfast, and responsible protector as the head of the family (Si Ulu) and the backbone of the community who is ready to defend its honor; in contrast, Öröba Si'öli for women, adorned with intricate beadwork, fine weaving, and elegant gold jewelry, symbolizes elegance, precision, fertility, and the central role of women as guardians of harmony (Si Ina) in the household and community. This stark contrast ensures that traditional clothing not only displays physical beauty, but also visually articulates the desired personality traits firmness and courage in men, and meticulousness and refinement in women while strengthening the social structure regulated by the Nias customary system.

Traditional Nias clothing now stands as a dynamic meeting point between the grand heritage of the past and the practical demands of the present, a smart cultural strategy that allows ancestral values to remain alive and relevant amid the tide of globalization. The significant shift from organic materials such as bark cloth (si'oli) to lighter and easier-to-maintain modern textiles is an essential functional adaptation for comfort, an innovation achieved without compromising key elements such as the tri-color palette (black, red, gold) and the placement of sacred symbols such as the adu and laro motifs. This transformation has expanded the functional scope of traditional clothing; from being merely ritual attire worn in sacred owasa ceremonies that confirm social status, it now also plays a vital role in the realm of cultural diplomacy and public education, becoming a strong visual branding in every cultural festival, modern wedding, and important reception. Thus, Nias traditional clothing serves a dual function as a strong anchor of identity for the Nias diaspora wherever they may be, as well as a proclamation of pride that affirms that their cultural heritage has not been eroded by modernity, but has evolved into a solid and sustainable symbol on the world stage.

Conclusion

Traditional Nias clothing Baru Oholu for men and Öröba Si'öli for women serves not only as body covering or ornamental attire, but as a living, dynamic symbolic system that embodies the social structure, noble values, and worldview of the Nias people. Through a semiotic lens, this study reveals that every element whether the gold-red-black color palette, symbolic ornaments like Kalabubu and Tolo-tolo, or sacred geometric motifs such as adu and laro functions as a cultural code. These codes communicate messages about social hierarchy, ideals of courage and protection, spiritual beliefs rooted in ancestral traditions, and clearly defined gender roles, all operating within a cultural

framework that is both distinctive and deeply authentic. The transformations seen in Nias traditional clothing over time further highlight its cultural strength. Although natural materials such as bark cloth have been replaced by more practical modern textiles, and although the clothing has moved from strictly ritual contexts to festival stages, national events, and even international cultural diplomacy, its symbolic essence remains intact. This adaptation demonstrates not only creativity but also a strong cultural resilience. The attire continues to act as a relevant identity marker that unites the Nias community, a source of collective pride for the younger generations, and a powerful representation of cultural continuity. As a result, Nias traditional clothing stands today as a vibrant cultural heritage one that maintains meaning, relevance, and dignity at the local, national, and global levels, proving that tradition can evolve while still preserving its soul.

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