



THE CONTRIBUTION OF HOHÓ ORAL LITERATURE TO NATIONAL CULTURAL RESILIENCE AND SOVEREIGNTY: A STUDY OF SOUTHERN NIAS CULTURE

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KEYWORD

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ABSTRACT

The oral literature of *Hohó* in South Nias constitutes a concrete representation of the rich cosmology and local historiography of the ethnic Nias, which is deeply imbued with the transmission of ancestral values. This study aims to analyze the urgency of preserving oral traditions as a fundamental pillar in maintaining national cultural sovereignty amidst the currents of globalization. Through a comparative approach to domestic regulations and international instruments, this analysis asserts that local culture serves as the primary foundation for national cultural identity. The cultural transformation from the Gomo region to South Nias exhibits a pattern of dynamic continuity that preserves collective memory across generations. This study is also aligned with contemporary academic discourses regarding the importance of repatriating historical artifacts and strengthening the national legal framework to revitalize intangible cultural heritage. The synthesis of these elements demonstrates that the active protection of local heritage, such as *Hohó*, is not merely an exercise in nostalgic conservation, but rather a strategic instrument for reinforcing the cultural resilience of the nation on the global stage.

INTRODUCTION

The oral literature of South Nias, specifically the ancestral poetic chants known as *Hohó*, represents a highly sophisticated linguistic and socio-legal archive of the Ono Niha (the ethnic Nias people). As Johannes M. Hämmerle (2010, 2022) eloquently notes, *Hohó* is not merely a form of artistic expression but a living repository of historical memory, customary law (*fondrakö*), and cosmological worldview. Traditionally performed as ornate choral songs utilizing a restricted four-tone scale, *Hohó* serves as the primary vessel for transmitting the historical memories, mythological migrations, and legal codes of a society that historically operated without a written script. Phonetically, the term *Hohó* requires careful articulation, with a distinct stress placed on the final vowel to distinguish it as a highly formalized vocal register (Hämmerle, 2022, p. 2). This oral tradition has historically functioned as a cognitive map, guiding the Nias community through the transition from its spiritual heartland in central Nias to the complex political landscapes of the south (Hämmerle, 2022, p. 4).

From a theoretical perspective, this study is grounded in several interrelated frameworks. First, Walter Ong's (1982) theory of orality and literacy posits that oral cultures develop sophisticated mnemonic techniques to preserve complex knowledge across generations. *Hohó* exemplifies "primary orality," where knowledge is stored and transmitted through rhythmic, repetitive, and formulaic structures rather than written texts. Second, Jan Assmann's (2011) concept of cultural memory (*kulturelles Gedächtnis*) helps explain how *Hohó* functions

as a carrier of collective identity and historical consciousness for the Ono Niha. Through ritual performance, Hohó transforms individual memory into shared, enduring cultural memory that binds the community across time and space. Additionally, a semiotic approach (Fau et al., 2023) is employed to decode the layered meanings embedded in Hohó lyrics, particularly during traditional death ceremonies, revealing how signs and symbols construct social identity and legal legitimacy.

The cosmological and physical origins of the Nias people are structurally linked to the Gomo region, widely regarded as the spiritual birthplace where the first ancestors descended from heaven to earth (Hämmerle, 2022, p. 3). Local etymological hypotheses suggest that the word *Gomo* is phonetically linked to the migration narrative itself, evolving from *Owo* (ship) to *Gomo*, and eventually to *Omo* (house). This evolution symbolically represents the historical shift from seafaring exploration to permanent terrestrial settlement (Hämmerle, 2022, p. 3). As these ancestral lines migrated from the banks of the Gomo River to the southern tip of the island, they established powerful, territory-based clan federations known as *öri* (Hämmerle, 2022, p. 4).

In the southern region, the federation of Mainamölö (now administratively known as Maniamölö) emerged as a dominant socio-political entity (Hämmerle, 2022, pp. 4–6). The naming of Mainamölö carries deep matriarchal significance, derived from *Ma-Ina-Mölö*, which literally translates to “completed and blessed by the Mother of Mölö” (Hämmerle, 2022, pp. 5–6). According to oral records, the maternal ancestor Samihara Luo Gögömi performed a sacred ceremony of blessing (*ifahowu’ö*), priestly prayer (*mo’ere*), and the anointment of water (*ibayagö idanö*) upon the foreheads of the four sons of Mölö at the base of a sacred stone. This ritual serves as the legal charter of Southern Nias nobility, validating the territorial inheritance of the four noble branches: Hondrö, Maha, Fau, and Takhi. Meanwhile, their other five brothers (Boto, Ramö, Zinö, Lalu, and Sebuatendroma) scattered along the migration route and forfeited their claims to the southern ancestral core (Hämmerle, 2022, p. 128).

The architectural grandeur of South Nias further reinforces this cultural richness. During his historic visit, the late Vice President Adam Malik expressed profound admiration for the massive scale and engineering of the traditional noble houses (*omo hada sebua*) in Bawömataluo. He stated that these regional masterpieces are foundational to Indonesia’s national culture and warned that the nation’s identity would suffer severe depletion if local heritages were allowed to perish (Hämmerle, 2022, pp. iii–iv).

In the contemporary era of rapid globalization, digital assimilation, and modernization, Hohó faces an existential threat of extinction. Younger generations are increasingly detached from traditional customs and *fondrakö*, while master singers (*Ere Hohó*) have nearly all passed away, taking their immense unwritten libraries of ancestral knowledge with them (Hämmerle, 2010; Wau & Saragih, 2017; Fau et al., 2023). This situation mirrors broader challenges in preserving oral traditions across Indonesia and Southeast Asia (Ilham, 2025; Ismail et al., 2025).

This study addresses this critical gap by analyzing Hohó oral literature not merely as a relic of regional folklore, but as a dynamic legal, linguistic, and educational instrument. By preserving the ancestral narratives of South Nias through documentation, semiotic interpretation, and cultural mapping, this research contributes to the broader discourse of cultural sovereignty, intangible cultural heritage protection, and national resilience. Ultimately, local oral traditions such as Hohó are vital diplomatic and security assets for the state on the global stage, strengthening Indonesia’s cultural diversity in the face of homogenization.

METHOD

This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive-historical research design to systematically evaluate the structure, linguistic variations, and sociopolitical implications of the *Hohó* oral tradition of South Nias. The research was conducted in the highly preserved megalithic villages of Hilinawalö Fau and Onohondrö, located in the Fanayama District of South Nias Regency, North Sumatra (Hämmerle, 2022 : i-ii, 5). These villages are historically and culturally adjacent, preserving some of the oldest active customary alliances on the island (Hämmerle, 2022 : ii).

The primary subjects of this study are the recorded, transcribed, and translated *Hohó* epics compiled by the Yayasan Pusaka Nias (Nias Heritage Museum) (Hämmerle, 2022 : i, iv) The primary data source comprises the direct recitations of Mesozokhö Bu'ulölö (also known as Ama Sama) from Hilinawalö Fau, who served as the primary traditional authority for the nine ancestral songs, and Antonius Fasa'a Hondrö (Ama Waigi) from Onohondrö, who provided the specialized theological text of *Silewe Amozua Ere* (Hämmerle, 2022 : i-ii, v)

Data collection was executed through intensive ethnographic fieldwork, direct voice recordings, and verbatim transcription (Hämmerle, 2022 : 1) In most recording sessions, to conserve physical stamina and mental focus, the informant was requested to chant or recite the raw poetic texts (*mendaras*) rather than executing the full choral performance, which normally demands a minimum of five skilled vocalists to construct the overlapping responses (Hämmerle, 2022 : 1) This method required an extraordinary level of cognitive concentration from the informant, who recited thousands of verses from memory without any written prompts (Hämmerle, 2022 : 1)

Data analysis was carried out using a qualitative semiotic and thematic framework, analyzing how local metaphors, animal characters, and mythological structures correspond to the socio-cultural, legal, and historical realities of Nias society¹ The transcribed Nias poetic texts were systematically compared with their Indonesian translations, verified by native speakers, and analyzed alongside prevailing national legal protections under Law No. 28 of 2014 on Copyright

RESULTS

Mythology of Origins: The Creation Epics

The core of Nias ancestral historiography is preserved through two primary, contrasting versions of the creation epic, which explain the origin of the island's population (Hämmerle, 2022 : 7, 11)

Parameter of Comparison	Ibu Simadulo Hösi (Version 1)	Sibowo Döfi Madala (Version 2)
Linguistic Length	Concise; 27 verses (Hämmerle, 2022 : 7)	Expanded; 137 verses (Hämmerle, 2022 : 11)
Origin of Matriarch	"Danö Saefo" / Tanah Asia (Hämmerle, 2022 : 7, 19)	"Danö Asia" (Asia Land) (Hämmerle, 2022 : 11, 23)
Mode of Migration	Copper and iron boats (nowo tambago/nowo tambana) (Hämmerle, 2022 : 8, 20)	Small vessel (nata owo) drifting across the sea (Hämmerle, 2022 : 12, 23)
Accompaniment	Solitary; accompanied only by a Dutch dog (asu Hulandro) (Hämmerle, 2022 : 8, 20)	Solitary; pregnant and cast out by her father (Hämmerle, 2022 : 11, 23)
Landing Site	Mbörönadu, at the base of the sacred fösi tree (Hämmerle, 2022 : 8, 20)	Muara Susua (Susua River Mouth) (Hämmerle, 2022 : 12, 23)
Lineage Development	Birth of Hia Walani Azu and Hia Walani Luo (Hämmerle, 2022 : 10, 22)	Marriage of Mother to son (Ho-me-mobörö), producing twins Sadaŵa Mölö and Soraizösöma (Hämmerle, 2022 : 11-15)

The first version, Ibu Simadulo Hösi, portrays a dramatic, solitary flight of a pregnant matriarch who is cast out of Asia, sailing in an metallic boat with only a foreign dog to guide her, landing in Gomo to give birth to the twin deities Hia Walani Azu and Hia Walani Luo (Hämmerle, 2022 : 7-10, 19-22) The second version, Sibowo Döfi Madala, introduces a highly complex mythological framework (Hämmerle, 2022 : 11) The maternal figure, Samihara Luo, gives her son Ho-me-mobörö a sacred gold ring (laeduru Hara Masö) and instructs him to search the island for a woman whose finger fits the ring, as "there are no other people left in

the land" (Hämmerle, 2022 : 13, 25-26) The ring fits only Samihara herself, necessitating an incestuous union to preserve the human line (Hämmerle, 2022 : 14, 26).

This union produces the primordial twins: a boy, Sadaŵa Mölö, placed at the river mouth (luaha), and a girl, Soraizösöma (also called Siraso), hidden at the dry headwaters (ulu) (Hämmerle, 2022 : 15, 27) Sadaŵa Mölö discovers his sister's existence when her shed hair and a sacred flower (rai zömbua) drift down the Susua River to the ocean (Hämmerle, 2022 : 15, 27-28) He tracks her to the headwaters, resulting in their marriage and the birth of the nine male ancestors who founded the primary clans of South Nias: Sebuatendroma, Takhi Laŵa, Hondrö, Fau, Maha, Zinö, Lalu, Ramö, and Boto Sesolo (Hämmerle, 2022 : 16, 28)

Socio-Politicalcustomary Laws: The Bawi Tuho Division

The Hohó of South Nias provides a detailed legal map of the division of territory and political authority among the descendants of Sadaŵa Mölö (Hämmerle, 2022 : 125) Following the maternal blessing by Samihara Luo, the four sibling clans who settled the southern core—Hondrö, Maha, Fau, and Takhi—established a permanent covenant centered around the Bawi Tuho (the prime ceremonial pig of alliance) (Hämmerle, 2022 : 128)

1. The division of the sacrificial Bawi Tuho was strictly codified to represent the specific rights and administrative domains of each clan:
2. Right Side of the Head (Telau ba gambolö): Allocated to the house of Takhi, signifying executive primacy and structural leadership (Hämmerle, 2022 : 129)
3. Left Side of the Head (Telau ba gambera): Allocated to the house of Hondrö, representing the judicial authority and the custody of customary law (Hämmerle, 2022 : 129)
4. The Jawbones (Simbi): Collectively disputed and split between the houses of Fau and Maha, representing legislative mediation and territorial defense (Hämmerle, 2022 : 129)

According to the oral text, this division was not peaceful; the brothers engaged in violent clashes (ma fabözi) at the Gomo parting site over the possession of the jawbone, until Takhi intervened to restore order: "E-e-e-e my brothers, do not fight, let us remain calm!" (Hämmerle, 2022 : 129) This resolution led them to settle the fertile hills of South Nias, where they established the 27 traditional villages of the Maniamölö alliance, ranging from the mouth of the Menawa River to the mountain boundaries (Hämmerle, 2022 : 129, 144-145).

Performative Grammar and overlapping Techniques

The execution of Hohó relies on a rigid structural hierarchy and specialized group dynamics (Hämmerle, 2022 : 145-146) The performance is strictly divided into functional registers known as Töla Hohó (Hämmerle, 2022 : 145).

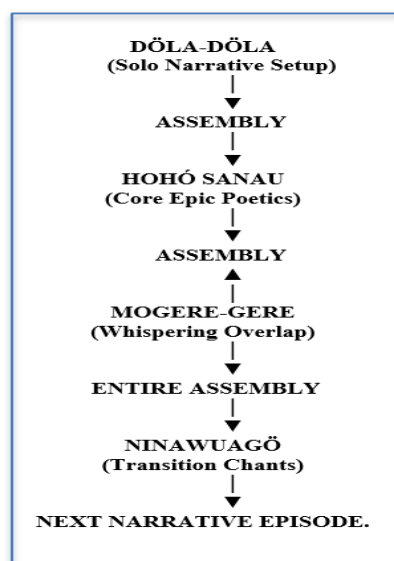


Figure 1. Functional registers known as *Töla Hohó*

The performative core is the overlapping vocal technique of Mogere-gere or Mogözö-gözö (Hämmerle, 2022 : 146) In this mode, the main orator (Balö Hohó) recites a line, and before he finishes the final words, a sub-group of two to four responders (Sanema Hohó) immediately enters, overlapping and repeating the phrase with subtle, microtonal harmonies (Hämmerle, 2022 : 146) This continuous, dense vocal cycling creates an aesthetic effect described by the masters as mae si fagohi ira ("like hunters running in a tight, unbroken pack"), ensuring that the sacred genealogical and legal words never drop into silence (Hämmerle, 2022 : 146).

Mythological Dualism: Silewe Amozua Ere

The theological foundation of Southern Nias Hohó is preserved in the epic of Silewe Amozua Ere (Hämmerle, 2022 : 137) Silewe Amozua is the patron deity of the Ere (priests), possessing the cosmic power to rejoin severed human necks (ifadou mbagi si no aetu) and restore life to the fallen (Hämmerle, 2022 : 137) Her younger sister, Silewe Fasi, representing jealousy and structural disorder, attempted to usurp this priestly authority, shouting: "I am also Silewe, I am also a priest!" (Hämmerle, 2022 : 138)

Silewe Fasi gathered the village children, severed their necks, and mixed their blood, but was completely unable to rejoin their bones or reanimate their corpses (Hämmerle, 2022 : 138) When Silewe Amozua returned, she beat her sacred fondrahi drum and successfully rejoined the severed heads (Hämmerle, 2022 : 138) However, because of Silewe Fasi's chaotic intervention, the reanimation was structurally jumbled: the head of a boy was permanently fused to the body of a girl, and the head of a girl was attached to the body of a boy (Hämmerle, 2022 : 138) This myth is vital to the Nias worldview, explaining both the origin of gender dualism and the dangerous consequences of unauthorized actors attempting to administer sacred laws or perform customary rituals (Hämmerle, 2022 : 139)

DISCUSSION

The Gender Contradiction: Divine Archetypes vs. Patriarchal Domination

A deep structural analysis of Hohó reveals a stark contradiction between the elevated status of female deities in Nias cosmology and the historical subordination of women in daily life In the mythological narratives of Gomo and South Nias, women occupy the highest spiritual and administrative tiers:

1. Samihara Luo Gögömi: Possesses the ultimate authority to divide the island's land, bless the lineage, and determine customary alliances (Hämmerle, 2022 : 125-130)
2. Silewe Amozua: Functions as the cosmic mediator, supreme priestess, and the sole restorer of physical and social life (Hämmerle, 2022 : 137-138)

Yet, on the physical plane, the customary laws (fondrakö) recorded in Hohó codify a rigid, patriarchal structure that severely disadvantages women In traditional assemblies, women are completely barred from speaking or participating in the decision-making processes of the öri, a privilege reserved exclusively for men The Hohó texts explicitly define men as beings of supreme physical strength and wisdom, while women are described as samatohu fangerangera ("companions in thought") and samaföfö khônia samasahe ("helpers in organization"), structurally locking them into supportive, non-strategic roles

This cosmological-physical divergence has severe modern implications for rural Nias communities Young girls in rural villages are frequently denied access to secondary education, as they are viewed primarily as future laborers for their husbands' family lands This cultural expectation translates into heavy, unpaid physical work; pregnant Nias women routinely cross steep hills and wild rivers to cultivate sweet potato fields to feed livestock This severe workload, combined with the traditional behavioral code that praises women for working quietly and forbids them from complaining, directly contributes to poor maternal and child health outcomes Thus, while Hohó serves as a vehicle of cultural pride, it also perpetuates historical gender inequalities that must be critically examined in modern educational frameworks.

Theological Syncretism and the Metaphor of the Creeping Death Vine

The survival of Hohó is heavily indebted to its cognitive flexibility, particularly its capacity to integrate Christian theology with ancestral cosmology When European missionaries arrived in 1865, they attempted to

eradicate indigenous animism⁴ However, the Ono Niha systematically mapped their existing mythological structures onto Christian concepts to ensure their survival⁴ The supreme Nias deity, Lowalangi, was adopted as the name for the Christian God, and ancestral narratives were reinterpreted through a biblical lens³

This theological syncretism is brilliantly demonstrated in the traditional master-level interpretation of the Maha epic (Wewe Halai Fa'amate) (Hämmerle, 2022 : 106, 111) The epic details a mysterious, unstoppable creeping vine (wewe) that grows silently from a single leaf into an immense, binding net, wrapping around farmers in their fields, bathers at the springs, and nobles in their grand houses, eventually dragging the entire village to its death (Hämmerle, 2022 : 106-110) In pre-Christian times, the wewe was a terrifying symbol of inescapable mortality and unresolved ancestral blood debt (Hämmerle, 2022 : 110)

In the contemporary era, the Ere Hohó have transformed this metaphor into an eloquent Christian allegory: the creeping vine represents the original sin of Adam, which silently bound all of humanity to spiritual death (Hämmerle, 2022 : 111) The ultimate severing of the *wewe* is mapped directly onto the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who defeated death and liberated the villagers from the binding cosmic debt (Hämmerle, 2022 : 111-112) This continuous, linguistic adaptation proves that *Hohó* is not a dead museum artifact, but an active, highly resilient cognitive framework capable of synthesizing disparate religious worldviews to preserve the community's structural identity.

Cultural Sovereignty: Legal Gaps in Communal Intellectual Property

From a legal and political standpoint, the preservation of Hohó is directly tied to the concept of national cultural sovereignty Under Law No. 28 of 2014 on Copyright, the Indonesian state acts as the legal custodian of all Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs) on behalf of indigenous communities² Article 38 explicitly mandates that the state holds the communal copyright over these expressions, charging the government with the task of inventorying, regulating, and protecting them from foreign exploitation² This domestic law is reinforced by the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which obligates signatory states to document living traditions with active community participation²

However, the practical implementation of these legal protections in South Nias is highly deficient² State cultural initiatives remain heavily reactive, focusing primarily on visible physical monuments (such as stone jumping megaliths or noble houses) while ignoring the fragile, oral mediums that give these physical spaces their meaning Because Hohó is collectively owned, lacks a single identifiable author, and exists in multiple oral variations, it does not easily fit into Western-centric individual intellectual property models²

Without systematic digital registration, Hohó is highly vulnerable to cultural extraction and the loss of local ownership Registering Hohó as a communal work within a digital national registry is not merely an academic exercise, but a critical legal strategy to assert Indonesia's symbolic and territorial sovereignty over its ancestral heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Hohó oral literature of South Nias is an invaluable, highly complex cognitive, historical, and legal archive that serves as the foundation of Nias identity The structural transformation of these oral epics—from the mythological origins in Gomo to the complex customary alliances of Mainamölö—highlights the resilience of the Ono Niha in preserving their collective memory across centuries of socio-political disruption (Hämmerle, 2022 : 3, 125) However, the rapid loss of the master singers (Ere Hohó), coupled with patriarchal customary constraints and legal neglect, places this intangible heritage in immediate danger of extinction (Hämmerle, 2022 : 1)

To secure the survival of Hohó and reinforce national cultural sovereignty, the following strategic interventions are proposed:

1. Digital Archiving and Linguistic Documentation: The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, in coordination with the Yayasan Pusaka Nias, must establish a comprehensive, open-access digital database of all remaining Hohó variations⁷ This must include high-fidelity audio recordings of the

Mogere-gere overlapping techniques to preserve the unique phonetics and performance style for future generations (Hämmerle, 2022 : 146)

2. Curricular Integration in Primary Education: Local governments in South Nias must formulate standardized educational materials that integrate Hohó poetics and local history into primary school curriculums Utilizing the Nias language in classroom instruction not only improves cognitive learning outcomes but also preserves the local language as an active medium of thought
3. Critical Gender-Sensitive Pedagogy: Educators must design learning materials that critically examine the gender imbalances recorded in Hohó cosmology By contrasting the elevated status of Silewe Amozua with the physical hardships of rural Nias women, schools can promote gender equality and support maternal health while respecting traditional cultural narratives
4. Communal Copyright Registration: The Indonesian government must proactively register the Hohó epics and their associated ritual divisions (Bawi Tuho, Famadaya Harimao) under the communal copyright database of Law No. 28 of 20142 This legal safeguard will secure the symbolic sovereignty of the Ono Niha and assert Indonesia's rich heritage on the international stage.

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