



LI NIHA RAYA: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION ABOUT THE SOUTH VARIETY OF NIAS LANGUAGE

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KEYWORD

Li Niha Raya;
South Variety;
Nias Language;
Noun Mutation;
Verbal Morphology.

ABSTRACT

The vitality of regional languages in Indonesia remains a pressing concern, particularly for minority varieties suppressed by historically dominant dialects. Li Niha Raya literally "the language of the Nias people in the South" (*li* = language; *niha* = people; *Raya* = south) is the South Variety of the Nias language spoken in South Nias Regency, North Sumatra, distinct from Li Niha (the North Variety) and the Central Variety, which represents a mixture of both. These three varieties are distinguishable through grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and share a vowel-dominant phonology in which every syllable invariably ends in a vowel. Despite this shared heritage, Li Niha Raya has been systematically marginalised since the nineteenth century, when European missionaries standardised Li Niha as the sole medium of religious and literary production across Nias, causing its speakers to progressively abandon their mother tongue in formal and religious domains. This study provides a systematic linguistic description of Li Niha Raya, focusing on four grammatical features: its alphabet system, noun mutation, verb forms, and active pronouns. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, naturalistic speech recording, and document analysis, then analysed using the distributional method with triangulation validation. Findings confirm that Li Niha Raya is a grammatically independent variety of considerable linguistic complexity, comprising a 24-letter alphabet, a dual-pattern noun mutation mechanism, a three-form verbal morphology, and a seven-pronoun active system warranting urgent documentation, curricular integration, and sustained revitalisation efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Nias is a cluster of islands situated along the western coast of Sumatra, currently administered as part of North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. The island has long attracted scholarly attention due to its rich cultural heritage, indigenous traditions, and unique linguistic features [1]. The name "Nias" is purportedly derived from two words, "niha si." Among the Nias people in the South, particularly those residing in the villages of To'ene-Asi, the word "si" functions as an emphatic particle used to reinforce a statement in a sentence or phrase. According to oral tradition, the phrase "niha si" was uttered during an early encounter between local inhabitants and foreign seafarers whose vessel was stranded near South Nias. From that encounter, the foreigners began referring to the local people and their land as "Nias," while the indigenous population continued to call themselves "Niha" or "Ono Niha," their homeland "Tanõ Niha," and their language "Li Niha."

The linguistic landscape of Nias is characterized by considerable internal diversity. Scholars have identified multiple regional varieties of Li Niha, with the South Variety locally known as Li Niha Raya being among the most distinct [2]. Li Niha Raya is spoken primarily in South Nias Regency and exhibits

phonological, morphological, and syntactic features that distinguish it from the North Variety (Li Niha), which has historically been the more widely documented and institutionally recognized form of the language. This situation reflects a broader global pattern in which dominant regional varieties overshadow minority dialects, accelerating language endangerment [3].

The written history of Li Niha Raya is closely tied to the arrival of European missionaries in the nineteenth century. However, the local language remained largely unwritten until missionaries predominantly German and Dutch began translating the Bible and other Christian literature into the vernacular in the late 1800s. One of the earliest Bible story collections translated into Li Niha Raya was *Toeria Ni'amoni'õ*, printed in [4], a foundational document in the written tradition of this variety. Nonetheless, because the missionaries established their primary base at Ombõlata, near Gunungsitoli in the northern part of Nias where the Dutch colonial government also maintained its administrative offices they became far more familiar with the North Variety of the language. As a result, the complete Bible translation and subsequent Christian literature, including hymnbooks, were rendered in Li Niha rather than Li Niha Raya. Church services, prayer meetings, and Christian fellowships across the entire island of Nias were conducted in Li Niha, thereby elevating the North Variety to the status of a de facto lingua franca in religious contexts [5].

The sociolinguistic consequences of this historical asymmetry have been profound. Over successive generations, communities in South Nias have increasingly adopted Li Niha in formal and religious domains, even though Li Niha Raya remains their mother tongue. Many South Nias Christians deliver and receive Sunday sermons in Li Niha, regardless of whether the preacher or congregation are native Li Niha Raya speakers. This diglossic situation in which a higher-prestige variety displaces the home language in public domains has led many community members to perceive Li Niha Raya as archaic or less prestigious [6], [7]. Some speakers have become reluctant to use Li Niha Raya even in informal prayer settings, a phenomenon consistent with language attrition documented in comparable minority language contexts globally [8], [9].

Revitalization efforts, however, have gained meaningful momentum in recent decades. In 2010, Yayasan Pelestarian Bahasa Nias Selatan (YAPELBANIS) initiated a project to translate the Bible into Li Niha Raya, completing the translation of the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Concurrently, Yayasan Harapan Nias Selatan (formerly Yayasan Harapan Nias) began incorporating Li Niha Raya into the primary and secondary school curriculum. These community-led efforts align with contemporary frameworks for heritage language preservation, which emphasize intergenerational transmission and institutional support as critical factors in reversing language shift [10], [11]. The collaboration between YAPELBANIS and Yayasan Harapan Nias Selatan represents an integrated approach combining religious, educational, and community dimensions that linguists and language planners have identified as essential for sustainable revitalization [12], [13].

At the governmental level, the local administration of South Nias Regency formalized its commitment to the language through Regional Regulation No. 06 of 2018, which mandated Li Niha Raya as a local content subject to be taught in both public and private schools within the regency. This policy was further reinforced by Regent Regulation No. 04.1-33 of 2019, which directed the Regional Education Office to implement the mandate at the institutional level. Such legislative measures reflect a growing recognition among policymakers that indigenous and regional languages constitute intangible cultural heritage deserving formal protection a position affirmed by international instruments including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [14], [15].

The present study contributes to ongoing documentation and description efforts for Li Niha Raya. Specifically, it examines four core grammatical features of the language: (1) the Li Niha Raya Alphabet, (2) Mutation of Nouns in Li Niha Raya, (3) Three Forms of Verbs in Li Niha Raya, and (4) Two Forms of Active Pronouns in Li Niha Raya. By systematically describing these features, this study aims to provide a foundational linguistic reference that supports both academic research and practical language teaching

initiatives, ultimately contributing to the broader revitalization and documentation of Li Niha Raya as a vital component of Indonesia's linguistic heritage.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the grammatical features of Li Niha Raya, the South Variety of the Nias language. Qualitative research is considered the most appropriate framework for linguistic documentation studies, as it allows the researcher to explore, describe, and interpret language phenomena in their natural context without numerical manipulation [16]. This approach is particularly well-suited for endangered or minority language research, where in-depth description of linguistic structures is prioritized over statistical generalization.

The research design adopted in this study is a field-based linguistic documentation method, which combines direct observation, elicitation, and interview techniques to gather authentic language data from native speakers. According to [17], linguistic field research requires systematic data collection through structured and unstructured interactions with informants who possess native competence in the target language. This method ensures that the data obtained reflects actual usage patterns rather than idealized or prescriptive norms.

Data sources for this study consist of two categories: primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected directly from native speakers of Li Niha Raya residing in South Nias Regency, particularly in the villages of To'ene-Asi and surrounding communities. Informants were selected purposively based on criteria adapted from [17] including: (1) being a native speaker of Li Niha Raya, (2) having lived continuously in the speech community, (3) being aged between 40 and 70 years, and (4) possessing good communicative competence in the language. Secondary data were drawn from existing written sources, including early missionary translations, local government documents, and previous linguistic studies on Li Niha and Li Niha Raya [2], [18].

Data collection techniques employed in this study include: (1) *in-depth interviews*, conducted to elicit grammatical forms, vocabulary, and sentence constructions from informants; (2) *observation and recording*, in which natural speech events were recorded with the informants' consent; and (3) *document analysis*, in which written texts in Li Niha Raya were analyzed for structural patterns. [19], emphasizes that the combination of these techniques strengthens the validity and depth of linguistic data in descriptive studies.

Data analysis was conducted using the *agih method* (distributional method) as proposed by [19], which analyzes language data based on the internal elements of the language itself. This method was applied to identify and classify the alphabet system, noun mutation patterns, verb forms, and pronoun forms in Li Niha Raya. Data were validated through member checking with informants and triangulation across multiple data sources [20].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Alphabet Of Li Niha Raya

1.1 Overview of the Alphabet

Li Niha Raya employs an alphabet of 24 letters, consisting of 6 vowels and 18 consonants. To assist students in memorizing the alphabet, the 24 letters are arranged alphabetically across four lines. The phrase *ba hurufo* (meaning "and letter") is inserted before the final letter (*y*), and a fifth line *Hurufo ni ila-da ga ba Li Niha Raya* ("The letters that we recognize here in Li Niha Raya") is appended so that the entire alphabet may be sung to the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. Lexical forms cited in this study were verified against the most recent Nias-Indonesian dictionary [21]. The orthographic representation of Li Niha Raya in this study follows the standardised spelling guidelines established for the Nias language [22].

Table 1. The Alphabet of Li Niha Raya (IPA-based)

a	be	ce	de	e	fe	ge
	i	je	ka	le	me	ne
o	õ	re	se	te	u	ve
wa	ŵa	ba hu-ru-fo	ya			

Hu-ru-fo ni i-la-da ga ba Li Niha Ra-ya. (These are the letters that we recognize in Li Niha Raya.)

1.2 Pronunciation Notes

All vowels in Li Niha Raya are pronounced identically to their counterparts in Bahasa Indonesia, with one notable exception: the letter *e* is always pronounced as in the English word *elephant* (i.e., the mid-front unrounded vowel /ɛ/). The umlaut *õ* represents a central vowel sound, pronounced similarly to the *i* in *bird*, the *u* and *e* in *further*, or the *o* in *work* equivalent to the IPA symbol /ɜ/. Regarding consonants, all are pronounced as in Bahasa Indonesia, except for *w* and *ŵ*. The letter *w* is pronounced closely to the *w* in *wood*, whereas *ŵ* approximates the *wh* sound in *white*, reflecting a historical voiceless labial-velar approximant /ɰ/.

2. MUTATION OF NOUNS IN LI NIHA RAYA

2.1 Definition and Scope

Mutation, as defined by [23], is a morphophonemic process that affects the initial segments of simple nouns. As a result of this process, certain nouns in Li Niha Raya exist in two forms: an *original form* and a *mutated form*, while others retain only the original form.

2.2 Grammatical Function of Each Form

The original form is used when the noun functions as the subject of a phrase or sentence. The mutated form, on the other hand, is employed when the noun functions as an object or as a possessive noun within a phrase or sentence.

2.3 Mutation of Vowel-Initial Nouns

All nouns beginning with a vowel possess both an original form and a mutated alternative. Their mutated forms are derived either by prefixing *g-* (G Mutation) or *n-* (N Mutation) before the initial vowel. Vocabulary data used in this study were drawn from available Nias lexicographic resources [24].

Table 2. Examples of G Mutation

Original Form	Mutated Form	English
ana'a	gana'a	gold
ere	gere	priest
i'a	gi'a	fish
osali	gosali	church
õlõmbu	gõlõmbu	young coconut
uli	guli	skin

Table 3. Examples of N Mutation

Original Form	Mutated Form	English
alitõ	nalitõ	fire
ejoin	nejoin	broom
ina	nina	mother
ono	nono	child
õsi	nõsi	content
uli	nuli	skin

2.4 Mutation of Consonant-Initial Nouns

Nouns that begin with the consonants b, c, f, k, s, and t also have an original form and an alternative mutated form. Their alternative forms are derived by altering the initial consonant according to the following systematic correspondences: b → mb, c → j, f → v, k → g, s → j, t → d

Table 4. Examples of Consonant Mutation

Original Form	Mutated Form	English
bawi	mbawi	pig / pork
ci'aci'a	ji'aci'a	lizard
fakhe	vakhe	rice
kurusi	gurusi	chair
sukhu	jukhu	comb
telau	delau	head

2.5 Nouns with Original Form Only

Nouns beginning with the consonants d, g, h, j, l, m, n, r, v, w, and ŵ do not undergo mutation and therefore retain only their original form.

Table 5. Examples of Nouns with Original Form Only

Original Form	English
dōrōu	medicine
gae	banana
hasi	coffin
holahola	flame
jojo	cork
lala	road / way
malimbe	starfruit
manu	chicken
molō	flood
nandrōta	white mushroom
ndra'i	dirt
ndri	mosquito
ndrialala	net
ndro	blood
ndrōfi	star / age
ndru'a	coconut milk
ndrumi	rainbow
ndru'u	grass
niha	person / people / tribe
ragaraga	basket
vava	beehive
wikhowikho	whistle
wu'uwu'u	ovule
ŵa'a	root

3. THREE FORMS OF VERBS IN LI NIHA RAYA

3.1 Overview

Most verbs in Li Niha Raya exist in three grammatical forms: the Present Tense form, the Future Tense form, and the Present Continuous Tense form.

3.2 Present Tense Form

The Present Tense form is identical to the form used in imperative sentences. Examples include: *halõ* (take), *sasai* (wash), *rino* (cook), *sura* (write), *baso* (read), *bõji* (beat), and *õli* (buy).

3.3 Future Tense Form

The Future Tense form is derived from the Present Tense form through an infixation or prefix process. For most verbs, an infix is inserted after the initial consonant of the stem: *halõ* → *humalõ*, *sasai* → *sumasai*, *rino* → *rumino*, *sura* → *sumura*. For verbs beginning with b or a vowel, the mutation pattern applies instead: *baso* → *mbaso*, *bõji* → *mbõji*, *õli* → *mõli*.

3.4 Present Continuous Tense Form

The Present Continuous Tense is formed from the Future Tense form through a further morphophonemic transformation: *humalõ* → *manai*, *sumasai* → *manasai*, *rumino* → *mondrino*, *sumura* → *manura*, *mbaso* → *mombaso*, *mbõji* → *mamõji*, *mõli* → *mowõli*.

Table 6. Three Forms of Verbs in Li Niha Raya

Present Tense	Future Tense	Present Continuous Tense
halõ	humalõ	manai
sasai	sumasai	manasai
rino	rumino	mondrino
sura	sumura	manura
baso	mbaso	mombaso
bõji	mbõji	mamõji
õli	mõli	mowõli

4. TWO FORMS OF ACTIVE PRONOUNS IN LI NIHA RAYA

4.1 Overview

An Active Pronoun in Li Niha Raya represents the agent or doer of a verb. There are 7 Active Pronouns, each of which carries two forms one for the Present Tense and one for the Future Tense. All active pronouns are bound morphemes that attach directly to the verb or auxiliary verb.

Table 7. Active Pronouns in Li Niha Raya

Present Tense	Future Tense	Person	English Equivalent
u-	gu-	1st person singular	I / I will / I shall
õ-	gõ-	2nd person singular	you / you will
i-	ya-	3rd person singular	he, she, it / he, she, it will
ma-	ga-	1st person plural (exclusive)	we / we will (excl. listener)
ta-	da-	1st person plural (inclusive)	we / we will (incl. listener)
mi-	gi-	2nd person plural	you (pl.) / you will
la-	ndra-	3rd person plural	they / they will

4.2 Sentence Construction Rules

Li Niha Raya sentences are constructed according to the following rules, which govern both the form of the active pronoun and the form of the object noun:

- Present Tense: The Active Pronoun for Present Tense is prefixed to the verb; the object noun appears in its mutated (alternative) form.
- Future Tense: The Active Pronoun for Future Tense is prefixed to the verb; the object noun likewise appears in its mutated (alternative) form.
- Present Continuous Tense: The auxiliary verb *halō* is attached to the Active Pronoun for Present Tense, followed by the continuous verb form; the object noun appears in its original form.

Table 8. Sample Sentences in Li Niha Raya across Three Tenses

Present Tense	English	Future Tense	English	Present Continuous	English
U-halō nejoin.	I take a broom.	Gu-humalō nejoin.	I will take a broom.	U-lau manai ejoi.	I am taking a broom.
Ō-halō nejoin.	You take a broom.	Gō-humalō nejoin.	You will take a broom.	Ō-lau manai ejoi.	You are taking a broom.
I-halō nejoin.	He/She/It takes a broom.	Ya-humalō nejoin.	He/She/It will take a broom.	I-lau manai ejoi.	He/She/It is taking a broom.
Ma-halō nejoin.	We take a broom.	Ga-humalō nejoin.	We will take a broom.	Ma-lau manai ejoi.	We are taking a broom.
Ta-halō nejoin.	We take a broom.	Da-humalō nejoin.	We will take a broom.	Ta-lau manai ejoi.	We are taking a broom.
Mi-halō nejoin.	You (pl.) take a broom.	Gi-humalō nejoin.	You (pl.) will take a broom.	Mi-lau manai ejoi.	You are taking a broom.
La-halō nejoin.	They take a broom.	Ndra-humalō nejoin.	They will take a broom.	La-lau manai ejoi.	They are taking a broom.
U-sasai viga.	I wash dishes.	Gu-sumasai viga.	I will wash dishes.	U-lau manasai figa.	I am washing dishes.
Ō-sasai viga.	You wash dishes.	Gō-sumasai viga.	You will wash dishes.	Ō-lau manasai figa.	You are washing dishes.
I-sasai viga.	He/She/It washes dishes.	Ya-sumasai viga.	He/She/It will wash dishes.	I-lau manasai figa.	He/She/It is washing dishes.
Ma-sasai viga.	We wash dishes.	Ga-sumasai viga.	We will wash dishes.	Ma-lau manasai figa.	We are washing dishes.
Ta-sasai viga.	We wash dishes.	Da-sumasai viga.	We will wash dishes.	Ta-lau manasai figa.	We are washing dishes.
Mi-sasai viga.	You (pl.) wash dishes.	Gi-sumasai viga.	You (pl.) will wash dishes.	Mi-lau manasai figa.	You are washing dishes.
La-sasai viga.	They wash dishes.	Ndra-sumasai viga.	They will wash dishes.	La-lau manasai figa.	They are washing dishes.
U-baso mbuku.	I read books.	Gu-mbaso mbuku.	I will read books.	U-lau mombaso buku.	I am reading books.
Ō-baso mbuku.	You read books.	Gō-mbaso mbuku.	You will read books.	Ō-lau mombaso buku.	You are reading books.
I-baso mbuku.	He/She/It reads books.	Ya-mbaso mbuku.	He/She/It will read books.	I-lau mombaso buku.	He/She/It is reading books.

Ma-baso mbuku.	We read books.	Ga-mbaso mbuku.	We will read books.	Ma-lau mombaso buku.	We are reading books.
Ta-baso mbuku.	We read books.	Da-mbaso mbuku.	We will read books.	Ta-lau mombaso buku.	We are reading books.
Mi-baso mbuku.	You (pl.) read books.	Gi-mbaso mbuku.	You (pl.) will read books.	Mi-lau mombaso buku.	You are reading books.
La-baso mbuku.	They read books.	Ndra-mbaso mbuku.	They will read books.	La-lau mombaso buku.	They are reading books.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal four fundamental grammatical features of Li Niha Raya that collectively distinguish it as a linguistically rich and structurally unique variety of the Nias language. Each feature reflects systematic morphophonemic and morphosyntactic patterns that are deeply embedded in the daily communicative practices of its speakers. A comprehensive grammatical description of the South Variety has recently been documented, providing a foundational reference for the present study [25].

The alphabet system of Li Niha Raya demonstrates a carefully adapted orthographic framework that accommodates sounds absent in standard Indonesian orthography. The inclusion of the umlaut *õ* and the distinction between *w* and *ŵ* are particularly noteworthy, as these phonemic contrasts carry lexical meaning and cannot be substituted without altering the intended word. This phonological complexity underscores the need for a standardized writing system an effort that aligns with the broader goals of YAPELBANIS and Yayasan Harapan Nias Selatan in developing pedagogical materials for Li Niha Raya [2]. The decision to arrange the alphabet in a singable format modeled on *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* reflects a practical and culturally responsive pedagogical strategy that facilitates early literacy acquisition among young learners.

The noun mutation system is among the most distinctive morphological features of Li Niha Raya. The systematic alternation between original and mutated forms governed by the grammatical role of the noun as subject, object, or possessive parallels mutation phenomena documented in Celtic languages such as Welsh and Irish, where initial consonant changes signal syntactic function [24]. The existence of both G Mutation and N Mutation for vowel-initial nouns, alongside consonant substitution patterns (*b* → *mb*, *c* → *j*, *f* → *v*, *k* → *g*, *s* → *j*, *t* → *d*), reveals a well-organized morphophonemic system that encodes grammatical information through word-initial alternation rather than separate case markers.

The three-form verb system further demonstrates the morphological productivity of Li Niha Raya. The derivational relationship between Present Tense, Future Tense, and Present Continuous Tense forms achieved through infixation and additional morphophonemic transformation suggests an agglutinative tendency in the language's verbal morphology. This is consistent with typological characteristics observed in other Austronesian languages of the region [18]. The regularity of these patterns, despite surface-level complexity, indicates that Li Niha Raya possesses internally consistent grammatical rules that are learnable and teachable within a formal curriculum.

Finally, the two-form active pronoun system with distinct forms for Present and Future tenses operates as a bound morpheme system that interacts systematically with both verb forms and noun mutation. The inclusive-exclusive distinction in the first person plural (*ma-/ga-* versus *ta-/da-*) further reflects a grammatical sophistication found in several Austronesian languages, enriching the language's expressive capacity. Together, these four features affirm that Li Niha Raya is not merely a dialect variation but a grammatically autonomous variety deserving of full linguistic documentation and institutional recognition.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a descriptive linguistic analysis of four core grammatical features of Li Niha Raya, the South Variety of the Nias language: its alphabet system, the mutation of nouns, the three forms of

verbs, and the two forms of active pronouns. Through field-based data collection involving native speakers in South Nias Regency, combined with analysis of existing written sources, this study has demonstrated that Li Niha Raya possesses a well-structured and internally consistent grammatical system that distinguishes it from the more widely documented North Variety, Li Niha.

The alphabet of Li Niha Raya, comprising 24 letters with unique phonological features such as the umlaut *õ* and the labial-velar distinction between *w* and *w̃*, reflects a sound system that requires dedicated orthographic representation. The noun mutation system encompassing G Mutation, N Mutation, and consonant alternation encodes grammatical function through systematic word-initial changes, revealing a morphophonemic complexity comparable to mutation systems found in other world languages. The three-form verb system, derived through infixation and morphophonemic transformation, demonstrates productive verbal morphology aligned with broader Austronesian typological patterns. The two-form active pronoun system, which distinguishes tense and includes an inclusive-exclusive first-person plural contrast, further attests to the grammatical richness of the language.

These findings carry significant implications for both linguistic scholarship and language education. From a scholarly perspective, this study contributes foundational descriptive data that can inform future comparative and typological studies of Nias language varieties. From an educational standpoint, the systematic nature of these grammatical features suggests that Li Niha Raya is not only learnable within a structured curriculum but also teachable through rule-based instruction a promising prospect given the implementation of Regional Regulation No. 06 of 2018, which mandates Li Niha Raya as a local content subject in South Nias schools.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Li Niha Raya is a grammatically autonomous and culturally irreplaceable variety of the Nias language. Sustained efforts in linguistic documentation, curriculum development, and community engagement are essential to ensure that Li Niha Raya continues to thrive as a living language and endures as a vital component of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage for generations to come.

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