

The Presentation of Betel Leaves (Fame'e Mbola Numono) as a Sign of Respect in the Relationship Between In-Laws: A Study of the Existence of Tradition Using Social Exchange Theory

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Abstract

The traditional marriage system of the Nias ethnic group, particularly the lagara custom, is inseparable from the ritual of betel presentation (fame'e mbola numono) as a symbolic gesture of honor in the relationship between a son-in-law and his parents-in-law. This tradition reflects respect, acknowledgment, and the reinforcement of kinship ties between the groom and the bride's family. This study aims to analyze the social meaning of betel presentation within the son-in-law and parent-in-law relationship through George C. Homans's Social Exchange Theory. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of traditional lagara wedding stages in Gunungsitoli City, North Sumatra Province. Data were analyzed through stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results reveal that the fame'e mbola numono ritual functions not merely as a symbolic act but also as a form of non-verbal social exchange embodying moral values, kinship, and mutual respect. The act of offering betel leaves by the son-in-law represents a symbolic exchange that reinforces social harmony and familial cohesion. This study contributes to understanding how traditional cultural practices serve as a medium for maintaining and transmitting social values within local communities.

Keywords: offering, betel, relationship, son-in-law, mother-in-law, existence, customary law

INTRODUCTION

Modern human social life is never entirely detached from traditional roots and values passed down through generations. In Indonesia's indigenous communities, especially those that still uphold strong kinship systems, interactions among individuals and families are regulated by a series of norms, rituals, and symbolic exchanges that define status and honor. Indonesia, as an archipelagic country rich in cultural heritage, offers a fertile ground for diverse customs, many of which have persisted amid globalization, modernization, and social change (Nuranisa et al., 2022).

One of the regions that continues to maintain its traditional values and cultural customs is Nias. Among these preserved customs is the practice of marriage. The Nias marriage process, particularly in communities that adhere to the Laraga tradition, consists of three stages: the search for a prospective spouse (*famaigi ono alawe*), engagement (*fanunu manu*), and the

wedding ceremony itself (*falōwa*) (Zalukhu, 2020). Among these stages, one of the most sacred traditional processes is the presentation of betel leaves by the groom to his in-laws (*fame'e mbola numono*).

This betel-leaf presentation occurs during the third stage, the wedding ceremony (*falowa*). The ritual involves offering a package of betel containing several items: betel leaves (*tawuo*), areca nut (*fino*), lime (*betua*), gambier (*gambe*), and tobacco (*bago*), collectively known as the "five-ingredient betel" (*afo si lima endronga*). The presentation of betel is the focal point of welcoming honored guests and is interpreted as *sia'a mböwö* (the first act of respect). Maru'ao (2014) states that if this ritual is not performed during the wedding feast, a person may be considered ignorant of traditional customs (*niha silö mangila huku*).

Betel quid (betel leaves, areca nut, lime/gambier) has long been recognized as one of the oldest and most widespread cultural substrates in Southeast Asia and Oceania. Cultural studies suggest that the practice of betel chewing goes beyond a mere physical habit; it carries symbolic meanings that signify social status and serve as a form of non-verbal communication in traditional societies (Murphy & Lucero, 2015; Norton, 1998). Socially, betel functions as a tool for initiating conversation, resolving disputes, and affirming social intentions and harmony among individuals (Peshcherova, 2023).

In various Nias traditional ceremonies, betel holds meaning in each of its components, embodying philosophical values such as unity, devotion, and eternity (Gulo, 2024). Beyond these three meanings, the presentation of betel also has symbolic significance, including a religious aspect in Nias traditional marriage. Thus, betel is not merely a ceremonial symbol but carries specific social significance in the community.

In the Nias wedding process, one of the customary rituals is the presentation of betel by the groom to the mother-in-law. This activity embodies the relationship between in-laws: the in-laws represent authority and family lineage, while the groom represents a new member who must integrate into the family. This integration is manifested through the ritual of betel presentation (*Fame'e Mbola Numono*). The ritual reflects a hierarchy aimed at ensuring social harmony and, importantly, reaffirming the existence of kinship norms in daily life (Firmando, 2023).

In many communities across the Indonesian archipelago, betel and areca nut are more than consumable commodities. Betel serves as a metaphor for social life, a symbol of friendship, apology, kinship ties, and even the ratification of agreements. Its significance peaks within hierarchical kinship relations, such as in the *Fame'e Mbola Numono* ritual. This ritual is not merely an act of giving but a declaration of obedience, acknowledgment of status, and a request for acceptance from the in-laws.

The essence of this ritual is honor. In traditional societies, honor is not merely respect; it is social capital closely tied to status, age, and lineage position (Bourdieu, 1986; cited in O'Connell, 2023). The honor conferred to in-laws through *Fame'e Mbola Numono* represents a value exchange: the groom invests symbolic actions and obedience as a "cost" to receive honor and acceptance as a "reward."

Meanwhile, the ritual of betel presentation remains existent despite contemporary social changes. Research by Gulo (2023) on the impact of urbanization on Nias customs indicates that although the frequency of traditional ceremonies declines in urban areas, their core symbolism is often preserved due to its perceived importance for family cohesion and ethnic identity.

Customs that survive are those with clear social exchange functions, providing tangible benefits or rewards (such as social recognition or support) to participants.

This study focuses on a unique and profound cultural manifestation: the ritual of betel presentation as a symbol of honor in one of the most sensitive and significant relationships—between in-laws and the groom. Therefore, this research aims to examine the existence of *Fame'e Mbola Numono* as a ritual of honor through the framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the main objective is to achieve an in-depth understanding of complex cultural and social phenomena, specifically the symbolic meaning and existence of the *Fame'e Mbola Numono* ritual and the dynamics of the relationship between in-laws and the groom (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The case study design was deemed most appropriate as it allows for intensive exploration of a single social unit, such as a ritual, family, or community, within its real-life context, providing insight into how and why such phenomena occur and persist (Yin, 2018; as cited in contemporary literature). This study focuses on analyzing symbolic exchanges and the practical manifestations of Social Exchange Theory (SET) within this traditional ritual.

The research was conducted in Gunungsitoli City, Nias, North Sumatra, specifically at Jl. Desa Sisobahili, Gunungsitoli District, where a Laraga wedding ceremony was taking place during the study period. The informants consisted of one groom who had been married within the last ten years, one groom married approximately one month ago, both sets of in-laws, and a local customary leader who is knowledgeable about the process and meaning of Nias Laraga wedding rituals.

These informants were selected for their ability to provide rich, in-depth information relevant to the study. Choosing informants with these criteria is essential to obtain comprehensive data from various perspectives regarding the costs, represented by the groom's efforts, and the rewards, represented by the honor and recognition given by the in-laws, in social exchanges (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, as discussed in recent qualitative studies).

Data collection involved several complementary methods. The researcher conducted participant observation to directly witness the ritual of betel-leaf presentation in various social contexts, including family visits, formal gatherings, and the wedding ceremony itself. This observation aimed to capture the actual social context of the exchanges, paying attention to non-verbal expressions, body language, the procedures of the betel presentation as a form of effort or cost, and the responses of the in-laws as the reward or acceptance.

Ethnographic studies have shown that participant observation is vital for revealing hidden costs, both material and psychological, and symbolic rewards, such as status and recognition, which are often not fully captured through interviews alone (Tedlock, 1991; Xygalatas et al., 2021; Legare, 2020). In addition to observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including the grooms, in-laws, and the customary leader. These interviews explored the meaning and perception of betel, examining what is exchanged beyond the betel itself, including honor, respect, and social status.

They also focused on understanding the efforts required of the groom, the benefits or acceptance experienced by the in-laws, and how the ritual has persisted or evolved in the

modern era. Complementing these methods, documentation was collected in the form of field notes, photographs of the ritual, family genealogies, and local literature concerning the meaning of *Mbola Numono* and kinship relations, enriching the contextual understanding and validating the findings from the interviews.

The collected data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative model as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019), which involves a continuous process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming the raw data from field notes and interview transcripts, with particular attention to key categories such as acts of giving, receiving responses, and changes in practice or persistence of the tradition.

The data were then presented in descriptive narratives, supported by matrices and diagrams that illustrated the relationships among these categories. For instance, a social exchange matrix was developed to map the types of efforts made by the groom against the types of honor or acceptance provided by the in-laws. Finally, the study drew conclusions by interpreting the patterns and relationships observed in the data, highlighting how symbolic exchanges and ritualized behaviors reinforce social cohesion, kinship norms, and the enduring existence of the *Fame'e Mbola Numono* ritual within the Nias community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study begins with an explanation of Social Exchange Theory, which serves to provide a strong conceptual and theoretical foundation for analyzing the phenomenon of betel-leaf presentation (*Fame'e Mbola Numono*) as a symbol of honor in the relationship between in-laws and the groom, as well as examining the existence of this tradition through the lens of social exchange. In many Southeast Asian cultures, betel quid transcends its function as a consumable commodity. Theoretically, betel functions as a symbolic medium that communicates intentions, status, and social bonds. In the context of symbolic anthropology, this object represents a material embodiment of abstract values (Turner, 1967).

Contemporary international studies confirm the role of betel as a powerful social marker. Burton and Watson (2019) found that in various communities, the presentation of betel is a ritual affirmation that establishes boundaries and reinforces hierarchy. They state that “the act of offering or accepting betel quid is a non-verbal affirmation of social standing and mutual agreement, often symbolizing peace and mutual respect.” Therefore, betel presentation should be understood not as an exchange of goods, but as an exchange of valuable symbolic meaning.

Honor (*Numono* in the local context) is a central concept in this study. Sociologically, honor is a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) or a highly sought-after symbolic resource, especially in hierarchical societies. The act of presenting betel is a way for the groom to explicitly confer honor upon the in-laws. O'Connell (2023), analyzing honor as currency within modern kinship networks, emphasizes that gifting or offering to senior members is a strategic investment by the socially subordinate party. The honor given (the groom's investment) can yield rewards in the form of support, recognition, and full integration into the in-laws' family.

The relationship between in-laws and the groom is one of the most complex kinship relations, often characterized by tension between authority (in-laws) and integration (groom). In strong kinship systems, this relationship is tightly regulated by customary norms. In-laws represent lineage, the past, and authority over household rules, while incoming grooms or brides must negotiate to secure space and legitimacy. The betel presentation ritual serves as a symbolic

arena for this negotiation. Sinaga (2021) notes that kinship relations and customary symbols in Lampung function socially to maintain balance, prevent conflict, and strengthen solidarity across ethnic groups in multicultural societies. Kinship relations are thus positioned not only as cultural heritage but also as social mechanisms that ensure harmony and structural stability amid diversity.

The persistence of this tradition serves as a vital indicator of cultural vitality. The continuity of the *Fame'e Mbola Numono* practice shows that the values of social exchange it embodies are still recognized and required by participants, even if adjustments have been made to its form or frequency. Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides an analytical framework for explaining why individuals and groups engage in social interactions, including non-economic and symbolic exchanges.

SET conceptualizes social interaction as transactions involving rewards and costs. George Homans (1974) explained that behavior is repeated if it yields the expected reward, while Peter Blau (1964) expanded this concept to non-material social exchanges, such as approval, respect, and honor. Rewards encompass anything of value to individuals, such as honor, acceptance, approval, and enhanced status. Costs include anything that must be expended or foregone, such as physical effort, time, compliance, or surrender of personal will. Reciprocity refers to the expectation that exchanges will be mutual, fostering bonds and interdependence.

Applying SET to *Fame'e Mbola Numono* is highly appropriate. The ritual is a manifestation of symbolic social exchange: the groom invests effort and time to prepare and present the betel properly, following customary rules (cost), while the in-laws receive honor (*Numono*) as a reward. For the groom, the reward is acceptance, legitimacy, and reduced social tension, effectively lowering the "cost of uncertainty" in hierarchical kinship relations.

The act of giving is a powerful social mechanism for reducing uncertainty, minimizing conflict, and expanding social networks (Levine & Ghosal, 2022). The groom strategically uses *Fame'e Mbola Numono* to exchange effort for social acceptance, thereby mitigating the risks of hierarchical kinship interactions. When the perceived reward (honor or acceptance) equals or exceeds the cost (effort and compliance), the tradition is likely to persist and be maintained (Zebua et al., 2023; Laia, 2022).

The existence of the *Fame'e Mbola Numono* tradition can be assessed through the balance of social exchange: the continuation of the tradition, the reward of honor for both in-laws and groom, and the cost of compliance for the groom. If this ratio remains favorable—where rewards outweigh costs—the tradition is considered socially rational and will continue. Conversely, if the symbolic value of honor diminishes in the eyes of participants, the tradition may lose its function and become vulnerable to extinction.

The Presentation of Betel Leaves (*Fame'e Mbola Numono*) in Nias Wedding Customs

In Nias, marriage requires the establishment of a bride price, locally known as *böwö*. This bride price represents an economic obligation of the prospective groom to the bride's family, covering the costs of the wedding ceremony. It can take the form of money, gold, silver, rice, food ingredients for the feast, and notably pigs, which are considered important in solidifying the marital bond (Zalukhu, 2020).

Betel (commonly referred to as *afo* in Nias, or a mixture of betel and areca nut called *manafo*) is a core element of material and practical culture in Nias, North Sumatra. The tradition

of chewing betel is not merely a consumptive habit; it is deeply embedded in social behavior, customary hospitality, rituals, identity symbols, and everyday practices that encode social values. In Nias, betel is specially prepared and often presented in distinctive woven containers known as *bola nafo* or betel pouches during visits, ceremonies, or important gatherings, signifying its integral role in the local cultural repertoire.

According to interviews with the head of the local adat council (A. Lestari Zebua), betel consists of five components: betel leaf (*tawuo*), areca nut (*fino*), lime (*betua*), gambier (*gambe*), and tobacco (*bage*). These ingredients are arranged with specific techniques to be ready for chewing by the recipient. Betel can be served on plates or in *bola nafo* containers, and in certain ceremonies it may also be directly handed to guests.

Based on interview data, betel serves multiple functions. First, it functions as a gesture of welcoming and honoring guests. One of its most prominent roles is to mark respect; when a guest is received into a home or customary space, the host offers betel as a sign of hospitality and respect. Accepting and chewing betel signals social acceptance. From the perspective of symbolic interaction, the act of giving and receiving betel functions as a ritual affirmation of social relationships, indicating that the visitor is deemed worthy of respect and inclusion. The careful presentation of betel in prepared containers demonstrates the host's seriousness in honoring guests.

Second, betel strengthens social relations. Offering betel goes beyond etiquette; it serves to bind social ties. It is used in family gatherings, agreements, or conflict resolution. When betel is offered alongside the phrase "*Yae, nafoda*", it is often interpreted as an attempt to reinforce relationships, soothe tensions, or affirm friendship. The recipient's acceptance of betel signifies recognition of goodwill and openness, making betel a practical medium for close social relations.

Third, betel symbolizes harmony, peace, and reconciliation. In many traditional ceremonies, sharing food or consumables signifies reconciliation. Betel may function as a symbol of peace, particularly in dispute resolution or rituals where conflicting parties are asked to give and receive betel as a sign of the end of conflict and the restoration of harmony. Chewing betel together represents social consent that is difficult to articulate in words but observable in the symbolic actions of the participants, signifying their willingness to reconcile.

Fourth, betel serves as part of ritual ceremonies. In Nias wedding ceremonies, welcoming honored guests, and other customary processes, betel is often incorporated as an element of ancestor veneration or respect. In Nias society, betel is presented as a ritualized offering, both in dance and verbal expressions (*fame afo*), and it holds paramount importance in traditional events, particularly weddings. According to local understanding, without betel, a ceremony loses its cultural value.

The Existence of Betel Presentation in Nias Wedding Customs

Within Nias wedding ceremonies, betel presentation constitutes a significant symbolic sequence. Typically, the groom or his representative presents a *bola nafo* containing betel leaves, areca nuts, gambier, lime, and tobacco to the bride's family as part of welcoming, honoring, and reinforcing ties between families. This practice is well documented in ethnographic studies and local cultural guides. The form and quantity of the betel presentation, such as the number of betel leaves or areca nuts, is often regulated according to local customary norms. Other items, such as meat or rings, may also be included as part of the ceremonial gift

package. Culturally, betel is the most important element and is repeated throughout the wedding event. For example, weddings in 2015 and 2025 both highlighted betel as a recurring symbol. Betel is presented at various points: upon receiving the groom's family at the bride's home, during ceremonial addresses in the honorific segment (*fangowai ba fame afo*), and again by the groom to important guests or his mother-in-law (*fame mbola numono*).

The continued existence of betel presentation in Nias society is due to several factors. First, its symbolic function and legitimacy within marriage rituals. The *bola nafa* serves as a symbolic marker indicating that the marriage complies with customary law, and its presentation completes and legitimizes the ceremony according to community norms. Without such symbolic sequences, the process is considered incomplete or culturally meaningless. Ethnographic studies of Nias weddings emphasize the role of symbols, including betel, in establishing ceremony validity.

Second, betel serves as a medium for social relations and respect between families. Giving and receiving betel is an interpersonal act that strengthens bonds and demonstrates respect and goodwill. In marriages, the groom's presentation of betel to the bride's family expresses honor, gratitude, and seriousness regarding the marriage, maintaining community-valued norms of propriety.

Third, betel symbolizes cultural continuity and ethnic identity. Its ceremonial presentation during weddings visibly manifests and perpetuates Nias cultural identity to future generations, signaling "we are a Nias community that preserves tradition." In Nias heritage museums, betel containers themselves are recognized as cultural artifacts.

Fourth, betel has contemporary adaptations and functions, including tourism, documentation, and cultural preservation. Even though some aspects, such as the quantity of betel or the chewing habit, have changed among younger generations, the tradition is maintained due to its role as a tourist attraction and as part of cultural conservation efforts. In some communities, the *bola nafa* has become a cultural product or souvenir, providing economic incentives that support the preservation of the tradition.

Honor Relations between Grooms and In-laws as Symbolic Exchange

In Nias society (*Ono Niha*), the relationship between a groom (*umono*) and his mother-in-law (*ina matua*) is not merely familial but symbolic, governed by norms of propriety, respect, and social recognition. Interviews with in-laws revealed that, in Nias custom, a man marrying does not merely take a wife but joins her family. Therefore, the groom must demonstrate respect, humility, and politeness toward his wife's family, particularly his mother-in-law, who symbolically represents the giver of new life through her daughter.

One of the clearest expressions of this respect is the presentation of betel to the mother-in-law, both during the wedding ceremony and in subsequent interactions. Betel is offered not only during the wedding but also at later family gatherings or casual meetings. If the groom does not bring betel when unexpectedly encountering his mother-in-law, he must verbally express "*lo afoda ma*" as a sign of respect.

Betel presentation from groom to in-law also represents symbolic exchange. First, it signifies respect and recognition. Presenting betel officially acknowledges the in-law as a "new parent" deserving of honor like one's own mother. In Nias custom, giving betel expresses respect, gratitude, and willingness to live within a new social order. By presenting betel, the groom demonstrates deference, accepts guidance, and positions himself as a new family

member rather than a figure of authority. In Nias cultural communication, betel presentation marks a willingness to submit to the elder social order, showing respect and recognition of the new kinship relationship (Telaumbanua, 2020).

Second, betel serves as a medium of affection and social intimacy. It conveys hospitality and care. In the groom-in-law context, betel becomes a bridge of love and respect across generations. The mother-in-law's acceptance signifies acknowledgment of the groom's respect, while the groom's offering demonstrates a commitment to maintaining harmony with his wife's family. Chewing betel together can symbolize full social acceptance, signifying that the two families are now united through blood and tradition.

Third, betel symbolizes the bond between the two families. In Nias marriage rituals, each symbol functions as a social adhesive. By offering betel, the groom symbolically declares, "I am no longer an outsider; I am part of this family, and I respect you as a crucial part of my new life." This is vital, as the Nias kinship system highly values family honor and social recognition. Without symbolic acts like betel presentation, inter-family relations are not considered formally valid.

Fourth, betel embodies etiquette and symbolic prohibition. Interactions between groom and mother-in-law are strictly governed; casual or overly familiar behavior is discouraged. Betel presentation regulates appropriate social distance, allowing respect without direct contact that may be deemed improper. Betel functions as a symbolic mediator between two generations and social positions, upholding respect and affection. In Nias social structure, betel serves as a *mediator of respect*, linking individuals or families of different status bound by mutual honor and care (Gulo, 2024).



Figure 1.
Serving Betel

To this day, the tradition of presenting betel leaves remains preserved. It serves as a symbol of maintaining customary values. For the Nias people, *adat* is not merely a set of rules but a core part of their identity. The tradition of offering betel from the son-in-law to the mother-in-law is a way to sustain the continuity of respect and propriety passed down by ancestors. Despite the influx of modern influences, Nias families still consider the presentation of betel an indispensable part of wedding ceremonies.

The Nias Heritage Museum (2019) notes that in nearly all documented traditional weddings across North, West, and South Nias, betel is still present as a symbol of respect between families and as part of the process uniting two clans. Moreover, through the symbol of betel, the younger generation is taught the core values of Nias society: *Rohusi* (humility), *So'oto* (politeness), *Fohalö* (respect for elders), and *Si'ila ba dödö* (loyalty and honesty in social

relationships). The act of presenting betel reminds everyone that every relationship, including family ties, must be grounded in respect and appreciation.

The presentation of betel can also be seen as an adaptation of these values to a modern context. Today, the betel offering is not always accompanied by the traditional act of chewing as in the past. Sometimes it is symbolized merely by presenting the *bola nafo* container. However, the meaning remains unchanged: the son-in-law gives honor to the mother-in-law, and the mother-in-law receives affection in return. This tradition persists because it represents peace and social balance, values that remain highly relevant even in contemporary Nias society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The presentation of betel (*Fame'e Mbola Numono*) in Nias wedding customs holds significant meaning as a symbol of respect, acceptance, and the bond between two families. The act of offering betel by the son-in-law to the mother-in-law signifies politeness, reverence, and a willingness to become part of the wife's family. This tradition also affirms the legitimacy of the marriage according to customary law and serves as a mark of recognition of the union between the two families by the community. Although the method of presentation has begun to adapt to contemporary times, the underlying values—such as respect, loyalty, and harmony—remain preserved. Therefore, the presentation of betel is not merely a ceremonial ritual but also a manifestation of the preservation of Nias cultural identity and values, continuously passed down through generations.

Based on this study, it is recommended that the tradition of presenting betel in Nias weddings be preserved as a symbol of cultural identity and mutual respect between families, while also being documented so that younger generations understand its social and symbolic meanings. Additionally, customary values such as humility, politeness, respect for elders, loyalty, and honesty should be taught through formal education as well as community activities. Finally, the presentation of betel can be leveraged as a cultural tourism attraction and local cultural product, ensuring that this tradition remains relevant while also supporting the local economy.

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