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Oral tradition and the discourse of poverty in pre-colonial South Nias: An interpretative study with a Foucaultian approach

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Abstract

This research examines the meaning of poverty in pre-colonial South Nias and its contrast with modern understandings of poverty. Adopting a qualitative-interpretative approach based on the paradigms of social constructivism and post-structural theories, it was applied to deconstruct two pre-colonial oral literature texts through the lens of Foucault's discourse analysis. Enriched by key informant interviews and related literature, the research uncovers two traditional Nias poverty terminologies that emphasize psychological well-being, attributing poverty more to a lack of happiness than material deprivation. The research also identifies three features of pre-colonial Nias poverty and the implicit cultural rules or epistemes that influence its construction. These results open up new perspectives on understanding the phenomenon of poverty in South Nias and emphasize the importance of policies that consider local wisdom such as collectivity, reciprocity, social exchange, and happiness in poverty reduction strategies. This research also highlights the importance of research into the social construction of local meanings of poverty as a foundation for the design of inclusive and culturally sensitive poverty reduction policies.

Keywords: culture, discourse, Nias, poverty

Public Interest Statement

This study delves into the nuanced concept of poverty in pre-colonial South Nias, contrasting it with contemporary interpretations. Through qualitative analysis and Foucault's discourse analysis, it uncovers traditional Nias poverty terminologies emphasizing psychological well-being over material lack. The research identifies cultural nuances shaping poverty perceptions, emphasizing collectivity, reciprocity, and happiness. By shedding light on local understandings, it advocates for culturally sensitive poverty reduction policies, stressing the significance of integrating indigenous wisdom into policy frameworks. This study underscores the imperative of exploring local constructs of poverty to foster inclusive and effective poverty alleviation strategies, resonating with broader efforts toward socio-cultural equity and well-being.

Introduction

During President Joko Widodo's administration, the Nias islands have twice been included in the list of disadvantaged regions through Presidential Regulation No. 131/2015 (2015-2019) and Presidential Regulation No. 63/2020 (2020-2024). According to North Sumatra Provincial Data in Figures (Badan Pusat Statistik Sumatra Utara, 2023), districts and municipalities in the Nias islands have the highest percentage of poor people in North Sumatra: West Nias Regency (24.75%), North Nias (23.40%), Gunung Sitoli Municipality (14.81%), Nias Regency (16%), and South Nias (16.48%). Nias Islands are considered underdeveloped and poor according to the official government definition. In this official definition, poverty is seen as an economic problem whose solution is infrastructure development, job creation and income generation (Ekayanta, 2019; Pangestu, 2020; Syukri, 2022). The Indonesian government's official definition of poverty itself, is part of the framework of an international development project influenced by the policies of dominant actors, such as the IMF, World Bank, WTO, and the UN and its agencies (McEwan, 2019; McMichael & Weber, 2022), which emphasize aspects of economic growth through the market economy system (Esteva, 2010:14; Johnson, 2009:9; Rahnema, 1991:17-18); homo economicus and consumption society (Johnson, 2009:9; Rist, 2019:94-95); industrialization (Escobar, 1995:38; Esteva, 2010:8; Johnson, 2009:17; Rahnema, 1991:29; Ziai, 2007:221-222); infrastructure development (Escobar, 1995:38-40; Ziai, 2007:163); and modernization of villages into cities (Escobar, 1995:40; Johnson, 2009:89-90; Sachs, 1990:25-26).

Not all cultures direct their energies to the economic sphere; not everything that is seen as economic activity is necessarily part of the formal economy (market economy); not all societies are built on the drive to accumulate material wealth; elsewhere, different rules apply and other models dominate (Sachs, 1990:2, 19-20). Esteva (2010:14-16) adds that only in European societies is the economy seen as an entity autonomous from wider society and culture; it is considered to have its own rules and logic separate from other social and cultural aspects. In this logic, the economy transcends other realities, so that the laws of the economy rule society and not the rules of society rule the economy. In contrast to Europe, Sachs (1990:2) points out that in many non-Western cultures, economic activity is often more integrated with social and spiritual values. According to McMichael & Weber (2022:75), this approach is particularly evident in the context of pre-colonial societies, where each had its own methods of meeting material needs embedded in their spiritual, social, and political systems. Various terms have been used to describe this phenomenon, including "pre-colonial economy" (McMichael & Weber, 2022), "traditional economy" (Rahnema, 1991), "vernacular economy" (Esteva, 2010; McEwan, 2019), and "subsistence economy" (Shiva, 2010).

The concept of a traditional or vernacular economy is appropriate in the context of precolonial Nias society. In contrast to the principle of individual accumulation in Western economics, in precolonial

Nias society, the various surpluses generated were partly redistributed to the community through social exchanges that took place in cycles of status parties (Scarduelli, 1990:461). Through these party cycles, each person socially performs his or her obligation to give—and therefore earns the right to receive—and then is obligated to give back with a value equal to what he or she has received (Viaro & Ziegler, 2017:23), thus the flow of resources cycles over and over again. According to Yamamoto (1986:119), a person is not considered prosperous unless the resources he owns are shared for communal enjoyment, especially among villagers. Similarly, Beatty (1991:219) states that what one has is essentially what one has given or lent to others. The prestige of a person or family is not measured by the wealth they have accumulated, but by their capacity to produce and then redistribute it to the community (Viaro & Ziegler, 2017:24).

In the context of pre-colonial Nias society, well-being was measured through the ability to participate in social exchange practices, particularly through status parties, rather than by the fulfillment of personal or family needs (Beatty, 1991:219; Yamamoto, 1986:119). Individuals were required to generate an economic surplus to take part in "*ovasa*" , or status parties, which occupied a central position in the lives of pre-colonial South Nias people. Status parties were considered the most significant activity, serving as an arena for public displays of achievement (Yamamoto, 1986:127). Only the "poorest", who are unable to provide for themselves for reasons such as chronic illness, disability, or mental illness, are exempt from this obligation (Beatty, 1991:216). However, there are spiritual consequences for those who do not observe or only marginally observe this festival, namely the belief in punishment in the afterlife (Loeb, 1935:153; Rappard, 1909:578). This shows that the hard work ethic in Nias society is influenced not only by economic factors but also by spiritual and social beliefs, which are characterized by the inability to participate in spiritual and social rites. Based on this complex social and cultural context, this research aims to understand the definition and experience of poverty in pre-colonial South Nias, in contrast to modern economic paradigms. This supports post-development theories that highlight the failure of reductionist economic determinism to recognize the complexity of poverty, especially in traditional societies (Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 2010; Rahnema, 1991; Sachs, 1990). Rist (2019:230-231) reveals that development researchers who visit villages in Third World countries often say, "These people have nothing", simply because they are actually "blind" to forms of wealth that are not part of their conceptual universe.

This research focuses on a cultural perspective to offer an alternative explanation of poverty in South Nias while avoiding the concept of conventional cultural theories of poverty (Lewis, 2010), which often blame the victims of poverty themselves. Through analysis of traditional economic practices and social exchanges in South Nias, this research provides unique insights into social values and perceptions of poverty that differ from contemporary economic definitions. This research shows that the people of South Nias understand poverty not just as material deprivation, but as part of a broader social and value structure (Beatty, 1991:219; Viaro & Ziegler, 2017:24; Yamamoto, 1986:119). This research will answer the question: *How does an understanding of poverty and welfare in pre-colonial South Nias society provide an alternative perspective to understand the concept of poverty more broadly?* By focusing on the historical, social, and cultural context of pre-colonial South Nias, this research offers a more holistic and in-depth view of poverty, going beyond the boundaries of modern economic understanding and challenging dominant narratives around poverty and development. The subsequent literature review will examine related theory and research to support and extend this understanding, focusing on the interconnections between economics, culture, and social structures in a pre-colonial context.

Literature Review

Economic determinism is reflected in the approach of various studies on poverty that have been conducted on Nias. For example, research conducted by Rivai (1989:53) on poverty in nine villages on Nias Island

emphasized the economic aspect as the determinant of the level of community welfare. Research conducted by Gulo et al. (2005:30) in Nias Regency saw poverty as a feature of the economic life of the Nias community. Waruwu (2007) also emphasized aspects of economic growth in efforts to reduce poverty in Nias Regency. Likewise, research conducted by Gowasa & Ritonga (2015:98) in Batu Islands, South Nias, believes that poverty is an economic challenge, especially in terms of income deprivation. Most, if not all, poverty research in Nias follows the dominant perspective in poverty research. This perspective tends to simplify the complexity of poverty on Nias into a purely economic issue, characterized by low income and limited purchasing power. Although this reductionist approach has been widely criticized by dependency theory scholars since the 1950s and 1960s (Conway & Heynen, 2014:560-561; McMichael & Weber, 2022:56; Saul & Leys, 2006:111; Veltmeyer & Bowles, 2018:4-5) and declared impasse since the 1980s (Cowen & Shenton, 2005:438; Pieterse, 2010:46; Sumner & Tribe, 2008:87), its influence seems to be still dominant today.

In debates about poverty, dominant actors, including academics, policy planners, development implementers, financial institutions, donor agencies, and so on, often behave as if poverty is a single pathological phenomenon with universal characteristics (Rahnema, 1991:447-448). In reality, poverty is only a conceptual category that can be labeled by anyone, either others or ourselves (McNeish & Eversole, 2005:1). There is no correct, scientific, or agreed-upon definition of poverty Alcock (1997:3). Poverty is a concept, not a fact, and it should be understood that way (Villemez, 2000:2209-2210). Yet through contrasting examples, Spicker (2006:229) points out that scholars often seek to prove the truth of certain definitions of poverty while rejecting others. As a result, the "truth" about poverty produced by the intellectuals of global capitalism creates barriers through definitions that reduce the depth of reading reality (Santiago-Jimenez, 2017:55). A process that in turn reduces the meaning of poverty to words learned and structured in a foreign language, which is often incomprehensible to the poor. This underscores the importance of exploring the meaning of poverty from a local perspective, particularly through the experiences and perspectives of the poor themselves.

The exploration of meanings in this research departs from the idea that every action or behavior entails a "meaning" (Hall, 2019:155); meanings (*makna*) govern and organize human behavior and practices, helping to establish the rules, norms, and conventions by which social life is organized and controlled (Hall, 2013). At a more complex level, all symbolic behaviors that produce meanings are influenced by discourse (Blommaert, 2005:2-3). Discourse is the production of knowledge through language that gives meaning to reality (Barker, 2014:79). Discourse shapes the way people see themselves and act in everyday life (Saukko, 2003:73-74).

In the context of poverty research, Agusta (2014:21) said: *first*, poverty discourse is a set of statements that construct poverty as objects of knowledge, for example as concepts, behaviors, and arrangements of material objects; *second*, poverty discourse is a set of general rules that categorize how poverty should be interpreted according to the discourse; and *third*, poverty discourse is a reference to a realm of thought and action, which can be used to explain how the meanings of poverty affect people's actions and behavior in responding to poverty.

Discourse and episteme are closely related concepts, especially in Michel Foucault's thought. Discourse refers to the way knowledge is expressed, talked about, and shaped in social practices, texts, and dialogues (Gee, 2008:3), while episteme refers to the deep structures of knowledge and the unwritten rules that determine the limits and forms of legitimate knowledge in a particular historical and cultural period (Foucault, 2005:183). O'Leary & Chia (2009:3) simplify the understanding of Foucault's episteme as a set of unwritten rules that define what is considered valid knowledge in a culture and historical period. This episteme acts as a hidden code that governs aspects of culture such as language, logic, perception, values, and

techniques used. It also influences how we perceive knowledge, connect events, and understand the world collectively. In other words, episteme is the foundation or basic framework that determines how discourse is formed and operates. Episteme governs the principles that determine what can be said and thought, while discourse is the tangible manifestation of those principles in the form of communication, theory, and practice. Discourse is the way knowledge is organized, shared, and defended in social and cultural contexts, based on the rules and structures established by the relevant episteme. In short, episteme can be said to be the regulative aspect of discourse.

In the context of post-structuralist theory, Stokes (2013:36) states that language is the most important technology in human evolution, while Kaelan (2009:160) and Barker (2014) describe language as a means of expression and a shaper of knowledge. Shapiro (2005:5) argues that social reality is a linguistic reality, which implies that understanding the realworld means understanding the linguistic processes behind it. These ideas led this research to investigate the reality of poverty by focusing on how precolonial South Nias society articulated the idea of poverty through language. In this case, pre-colonial Nias society did not recognize a literate culture, so oral tradition was the main medium for transferring knowledge, including history, knowledge, and beliefs, from generation to generation. Hämmerle (2001:47) emphasizes the role of Nias oral tradition, or *hoho*, as the main source describing Nias society. Many researchers, including (Danandjaja, 2020), Hämmerle (2001), and Marschall (2002), have used *hoho* as a primary source to explore the lives of Nias society in the past.

Poverty studies that pay attention to meaning and language are influenced by the linguistic movement in social science (Pieterse, 2010:63), particularly post-structuralist theories that interpret social reality as a linguistic construction (Barker & Jane, 2021:28-29). This approach, which adopts a critical stance towards the meaning of language, has also influenced the field of development studies, especially the post-development school of thought (Matthews, 2018:1). In the post-development context, dominant assumptions about poverty are deconstructed and reviewed, and their "truth" is questioned (Escobar, 1995:26; Rahnema, 1991:447). Post-development theory was deemed appropriate for this research, particularly because of its emphasis on local wisdom and indigenous knowledge (Brigg, 2002:421-422). This approach shifts the focus away from the dominant economic aspects of neoliberal theory, political economy, the regulatory school of thought, and other models of mainstream development studies.

Post-development theory, like other branches of development studies, is not a monolithic school of thought but a diverse collection of literature. The unity of the theory is formed through the influence of post-modern and post-structural thought, with a particular focus on the analysis of discourse, knowledge, and power, influenced by the concepts of Michel Foucault (Brigg, 2002; Escobar, 1995:5; Esteva & Prakash, 1998:166; Johnson, 2009:20; Matthews, 2018:3; Parfitt, 2002:4; Ziai, 2007:4). The application of Foucault's method in the study of the meaning of poverty by post-development scholars has been extensive. Among the most notable literatures, for example, are Rahnema's (1991) study on the meaning of poverty and the origins of global pauperization; Sachs' (1990)1990 study on the concept of poverty in Tepito society in Mexico; and Escobar's (1995) study on the discourse and politics of Third World poverty. While post-development studies on poverty discourses are common, similar research on the meaning of poverty and its influence on reduction is still limited in Indonesia. Since Agusta's (2014) study on poverty discourses in rural communities in Java, there has been a void in the Indonesian development literature. This research aims to fill that gap through an investigation of poverty in traditional South Nias communities from the perspective of meaning and discourse.

Method

As mentioned earlier, this research is a qualitative-interpretative study that departs from the assumptions of the social constructivism paradigm and post-structural theories. The main data for this research comes from two pre-colonial oral literature texts, or hoho, namely: Laeru Mbögia *hoho* and Tuha Sinumana *hoho*. The two poems studied explicitly narrate the lives of two characters who experience poverty. Tuha Sinumana is an aristocrat, and Laeru Mbögia is a commoner. The mythical figure of Laeru Mbögia (or Lairu-Bögia) has been recorded since the early 1900s in Schröder (1917), a Dutch colonial controleur and researcher who visited Nias between 1902 and 1905. Although there is no official literature to support this, in analyzing the Laeru Mbögia *hoho* poem itself, there are stanzas that confirm the story and characters in the Tuha Sinumana *hoho* poem. This leads to the suggestion that the Tuha Sinumana *hoho* poem appeared earlier than the Laeru Mbögia *hoho*. Using discourse analysis derived from Michel Foucault's thought, this research deconstructs the two texts to identify the implicit rules or epistemes hidden behind the traditional conception of poverty in South Nias society, which influence local definitions and experiences of poverty and make them contrast with modern economic discourse.

In applying Foucaultian Discourse Analysis (FDA), the authors faced several methodological challenges. First, FDA is more of a research orientation than a structured method (Campbell & Arnold, 2004:31; White, 2004). Second, FDA focuses more on describing processes than providing step-by-step instructions (Crowe, 2005:57). To overcome this, the author refers to other researchers' application of FDA, namely Willig (2013), who outlines six stages in FDA: *discursive constructions, discourse, action orientation, positionings, practice, and subjectivity*. The limited space for discussion makes it impossible for the authors to explain this stage in detail, but in essence, the analysis is carried out by identifying statements about poverty in the two poems that make poverty knowable. This research tries to map the patterns of episteme (formal and informal rules, explicit and implicit) that limit what the subject can "say", "think", or "write" about poverty in the poem. This includes asking critical questions about the processes that occurred so that various discourses of poverty gained the status of authority and truth in the pre-colonial period; asking questions about the practices carried out in institutions related to poverty in the pre-colonial period (e.g., family and village); and especially asking questions about the experiences of the subjects who became the personification of the discourse of poverty itself, namely the experiences of the two characters in the poem.

The interpretation of the two texts included insights from other archives, such as myths, legends, proverbs, and folklore, as well as comparisons with historical accounts from relevant literature. The interpretation also took into account information from in-depth interviews with key informants, such as Nias linguists, cultural experts, and local community leaders, who are actors in various traditional activities that are still practiced today. According to Saukko (2003:19-23), constructivist research does not recognize a single validity, so its validity criteria must be seen as a series of at least three forms of validity, namely: *dialogical validity, deconstructive validity,* and *contextual validity. Dialogical validity,* which is assessed by the researcher's ability to capture local perspectives through dialogue, the researcher's awareness of others' views, and the recognition that reality is not singular. *Deconstructive validity,* which is assessed by the researcher's ability to challenge taken-for-granted 'truths' by revealing the history and political agendas behind the binary thinking that influences its adherents. *Contextual validity*, which is assessed by the ability of the research to explain local phenomena in a broader social and political context, such as linking the phenomena to national and global poverty discourses. The combination of these three validities in the triangulation model will provide a more comprehensive and in-depth assessment of the quality of the research.

This research was conducted in strict adherence to the principles of research ethics. This included obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining their confidentiality and anonymity, and ensuring that participation in the research was voluntary and based on a clear understanding of the purpose and procedures of the research. Although the qualitative approach adopted enabled this research to gain in-depth insights, there are limitations in terms of the generalizability of the findings. The results of this research should therefore be interpreted as representative of the context and experiences specific to the people of South Nias, rather than as a comprehensive picture of poverty conditions in all traditional communities.

Results and Discussion

This research revealed the repeated use of the words *"numana"* and *"akao"* in both Nias oral literature texts to refer to the condition of being in poverty. In the Tuha Sinumana *hoho*, *numana* and *akao* appear 32 times each. In the Laeru Mbögia *hoho*, the word *numana*, pronounced as *"lumana,"* is used in verse 10 times, while *akao* is used 16 times. In Zagötö's Nias-Indonesian Dictionary (2021:332), *numana* means poor or "destitute", and *lumana* has the same meaning. The old edition of the Nias-Indonesian Dictionary Zagötö (2021) defines *akao* explicitly as suffering in an emotional and psychological context. Meanwhile, the Big Indonesian Dictionary (Language Center of the Ministry of Education, 2020) shows the difference between "poor" and "destitute". Poor is defined as an economic condition, which is a state of having no wealth or low income. On the other hand, destitute describes poverty in the sense of suffering or hardship, the meaning of which has more to do with psychological conditions than material ones.

These findings lead this research to suggest that the use of the word *akao* as a synonym for *numana/lumana* in both oral literature texts indicates that in the past, the word *numana/lumana* was used to refer to conditions related to psychological rather than economic conditions. The idea was confirmed in an interview with the author of a Nias-Indonesian language dictionary (Zagötö, 2021). Zagötö observed that in South Nias society, *numana* or *lumana* is often used in everyday conversation to express suffering or misery that is not related to economics. For example, consider the hardship experienced by a mother when caring for her baby. According to him, the use of these two words to refer to economic deprivation is a relatively recent phenomenon. Zagötö adds that in pre-colonial times, the words *numana* or *lumana* most likely referred to a different definition of poverty than the modern economic definition. This is because the concept of a money-oriented economy only emerged after colonialism. This opinion is in line with Schröder (1917:202), who noted that barter was the basis of economic activity in pre-colonial Nias. Rappard (1909:556) stated that professional trade on Nias was generally carried out by foreign traders. Telaumbanua and Hümmel (2015:51) add that trade between Nias people was not common at that time.

An investigation of the two Nias oral poetry texts does indicate that the two main characters do not experience "deprivation" in the sense of hunger, lack of clothing, or shelter. Tuha Sinumana is described as having a large and beautiful traditional house, specifically for nobles (lines 151–152), while Laeru Mbögia lives in an *omo tuho* type house, which differs only slightly from the noble house (lines 217–218). Neither Nias poem suggests that the characters experience hunger or food shortages. As hunters and gatherers, Nias people fulfill their basic needs with abundant natural resources. Even if the poem tells how Laeru Mbögia lost rice (lines 231-234), this does not imply starvation. Precolonial Nias people generally consumed yams, corn, taro, sago, and beans as staple foods and vegetables as main meals, while rice and meat were only consumed during parties (Loeb, 1935:132; Peake, 2000:35; Rappard, 1909:516; Schröder, 1917:202). Laeru Mbögia lost the paddy or rice, possibly while cooking rice as part of the harvest ritual or a small celebration (*saho*) to give thanks to the ancestral spirits. Meanwhile, in terms of clothing, although not explicitly mentioned in the poem, the strict Nias customs in terms of decency (Loeb, 1935:144) imply that they are not unclothed. Despite not lacking basic needs, the narratives of both poems clearly categorize these two characters as

"poor". This labeling is most evident in the character in the *hoho* poem Tuha Sinumana. The character has two names: Tuha Sinumana (line 1), which literally means "my poor master", and Tuha Nifakao, which literally means "my suffering master". The research found that the "poverty" of the characters in the poems is described by at least three characteristics. *First*, emotional and psychological unwellness, where both characters in the poems constantly cry and wail bitterly (*hoho* Tuha Sinumana lines 5–6, 21–22, etc.; *hoho* Laeru Mbögia lines 23–24, 55–56, etc.). *Secondly*, the feeling of isolation and loneliness—which also means psychological unwellness—as individuals living alone (*hoho* Tuha Sinumana lines 7-8; *hoho* Laeru Mbögia lines 7-8, 9-10, etc.) is the main reason why the two are constantly crying. *Third*, material shortages in the form of the absence of tools and technology for production, such as machetes (*hoho* Tuha Sinumana lines 13-14, 25-26, etc.; *hoho* Laeru Mbögia lines 47-48, 71-72), axes (*hoho* Tuha Sinumana lines 91-92, 93-94; *hoho* Laeru Mbögia lines 89-90, 109-110), lighter stones (*hoho* Tuha Sinumana lines 115-116, 129-130; *hoho* Laeru Mbögia lines 125-126, 145-146), and rice seeds (*hoho* Tuha Sinumana lines 155-156; *hoho* Laeru Mbögia lines 163-164, 187-188). This shows that the characteristics of poverty are significantly different from material deprivation in the modern concept of poverty, where the characteristics of pre-colonial South Nias poverty were related to emotional and psychological well-being, a lack of social network support, and the absence of tools and technology to produce surplus.

The first pre-colonial South Nias poverty traits in the texts studied show emotional and psychological aspects dominating over material aspects. This means that their emotional and psychological well-being became the main focus, while the lack of production tools and technology was only considered a secondary or additional factor. As revealed in the Tuha Sinumana poem: *"Sebagai tambahan kemiskinannya / Sebagai tambahan penderitaannya / Tak ada parang terselip di pinggang / Tak ada perkakas untuk membuat tongkat"* (In addition to his poverty / In addition to his suffering / He had no machete tucked into his waist / No tools to make a stick). This unique perspective is linked to the episteme that influenced how pre-colonial South Nias people viewed the world. Previous research into traditional Nias legends and myths shows that Nias people consider the "heart" to be the center of consciousness, different from Western cultures, which focus on the "head" or "mind". The ancient Nias people believed that there was nothing in human beings that did not originate from the heart (de Zwaan, 1913:160). Sundermann, cited by de Zwaan (1913:161), asserts that in Nias culture, the heart is the center of thought, reason, and feeling. The heart is considered *omuso* (happy) when someone is happy; *abu* (upset) when sad; *afokhö* (sick) when angry; *ebua* (big) when liking someone; and *ide-ide* (small) when disliking someone.

In precolonial Nias culture, the heart, as the center of consciousness, had a significant influence on their view of well-being. They see the main goal of life as achieving happiness in the heart, a condition often referred to as *fa'ohahau dödö*. This concept refers to feeling at peace, secure, and content. In a warrior society like Nias, which has often experienced conflict and violence, the collective aspiration for a peaceful and tranquil life is well-founded and an important ideal. In this sense, *okhöta*, or material resources, are only seen as a means to achieve happiness and not as a goal. Consequently, in pre-colonial South Nias society, if a person could not feel happy despite having various material resources, then that person was still considered "poor" by the surrounding community. This concept of prosperity, which focuses on happiness of the heart, explains why Tuha Sinumana and Laeru Mbögia, although materially well-off, were still considered poor. In the precolonial Nias cultural view, the opposite of "poor" was not "rich" in the material sense, but "happy". The second characteristic of pre-colonial South Nias poverty in the texts studied is the feeling of isolation and loneliness experienced by the two characters as single individuals. This isolation and loneliness are the main reasons why the two characters often cry and feel sad, which in turn makes them considered poor in the context of their society. This unique view also reflects a later episteme in pre-colonial South Nias society. Scarduelli (1990:458) emphasizes that in pre-colonial South Nias, all aspects of communal life, from

settlement construction to child rearing, were aimed at self-protection from enemy attack. In this threatening context of life, individuals' existence depended heavily on their relationship with the community. According to Viaro and Ziegler (2017:25), on Nias, the concept of individualism is not valued; a person's identity is defined more through their role in the family and community. The distinctive culture of South Nias is also characterized by close economic integration with its social structure (Beatty, 1991). The extended family, or *gagambatö sebua*, is an important element in this social structure, functioning not only as a kinship unit but also as an economic unit (Danandjaja, 2020:99; Yamamoto, 1986:82). In pre-colonial South Nias society, access to social networks, both kin and community, was a "basic need" for survival. Thus, a lack of social connections, such as those experienced by the lonely characters in the poem, provided the rationale for the poor category attached to them.

The third characteristic of poverty in pre-colonial South Nias society was material deprivation. But "material" here does not mean "wealth" as in the modern economic sense, but rather essential tools and technologies, such as machetes, axes, firesticks, and rice seeds. The statement about poverty as material deprivation in both poems can be interpreted both literally and socially. Literally, obtaining a machete in pre-colonial Nias was difficult because iron and steel had to be imported. There are no iron mines on Nias. Yamamoto (1986:143) states that iron and steel were the main imports after textiles in the mid-1800s. It is noteworthy, however, that both characters lived in pre-colonial Nias *banua*, or villages, where iron, fire, and seeds were common. Although both characters did not personally own tools, they did have the possibility to "borrow" tools or "ask" for seeds from other villagers who did. Beatty (1991) explains that the practice of borrowing and lending in Nias society reflects the social structure, which not only serves to cover shortages but also strengthens social cohesion. In pre-colonial Nias society, there was little reason to refuse to lend tools of labor, as ultimately the surplus generated by individuals would be enjoyed collectively. Scarduelli (1990:461) explains that surpluses generated by individuals are usually redistributed to the community through social exchange through status parties. Therefore, the two characters' limited access to iron, fire, and seeds, which arises because no one is willing to give or lend them, can be interpreted as a sign of their disconnection with the social environment. This may be a consequence of the social sanctions they receive for certain customary violations.

The practice of borrowing and lending in pre-colonial South Nias society was also governed by a distinctive episteme. Wolff (1999:129) refers to it as "giving without losing"—a principle of social reciprocity that requires a gift, whether of goods or services, to be reciprocated with an equivalent value in the future by the recipient. According to Viaro & Ziegler (2017:23), in Nias culture, asking (or borrowing) is a reciprocal practice; to ask, individuals must also give. If one receives something without the intention or expectation to "give" or reciprocate, it is believed that one is vulnerable to supernatural displeasure (Beatty, 1991:218) and is considered a serious customary offense, or "*horö*". Violations of these customary rules can have negative economic impacts (Telaumbanua & Hummel, 2015:52–53), while adherence to adat is considered to bring blessings, or *lakhömi*, which take the form of good fortune (Laiya, 1983:30). The principle of reciprocity may explain the disconnection between Tuha Sinumana and Laeru Mbögia and their social environment. Their limited access to iron, fire, and seeds could be due to the reluctance of other villagers to give or lend these items, which may be related to the community's doubts about their ability to repay the gifts of equal value in the future. Wolff (1999), based on case examples in contemporary South Nias society, confirmed that people's reluctance to share resources is often related to doubts about an individual's ability to fulfill the principle of reciprocity. Thus, the inability of individuals to return favors or gifts can be seen as a form of poverty in pre-colonial South Nias society.

The concept of poverty as the inability to repay favors or gifts highlights the importance of social exchange practices, mediated through status feasts in pre-colonial South Nias society, to strengthen social

cohesion and encourage social reproduction (Viaro & Ziegler, 2017:24). All adult citizens were obliged to participate in social exchange practices through the celebration of feasts of status (*feast of merrit*) in accordance with procedures and rankings that were strictly defined through the deliberation of customary law, or *fondrakhö* (Scarduelli, 1990:459). According to Schröder (1917:344), status feast celebrations in South Nias had a dominant role in the life of the community, as a person's status as a full member of the community in South Nias was only achieved after the person had completed at least one full cycle of status feasts. Only the "poorest" are exempted from having to observe these festivities (Beatty, 1991:216), but on the other hand, exemption from having to observe these festivities strips one of their dignity as a full member of society, as well as depriving them of opportunities for social mobility and access to higher political power. In pre-colonial South Nias society, the organization of status parties, or *ovasa*, had two main purposes, according to Beatty (1991:217) prestige (social purpose) and blessing (spiritual purpose). Prestige was gained in the public arena and related to a person's position in the social stratification hierarchy. Meanwhile, blessings, or *lakhömi*, meaning sustenance, prestige, and influence, are obtained from ties with the wife giver's family. According to Beatty (1991), at the feast, the organizer must provide dishes and offerings for his guests, such as rice, pigs, and gold, according to the guest's social status. Conversely, participation as a guest in the feast ensnares one in a network of social obligations to "pay" back the offerings he or she receives in the future. Schröder (1917:344) mentions that only after completing the feast stage is one entitled to receive a share in someone else's celebration at a value proportional to what that person has previously offered. Social exchange practices in South Nias society function similar to the traditional banking system, as described by Beatty (1991:219) and Viaro & Ziegler (2017:23). In this system, each person distributes their resources to others as a form of investment for the future and a way of maintaining prosperity. This system operates through the practice of "saving and borrowing", where there is "indebtedness" and "return of favor", similar to saving and borrowing transactions in banking. As such, it was only natural that an individual's inability to repay a "debt of gratitude" was seen as a form of poverty in the context of pre-colonial South Nias society.

The findings of this research show a holistic picture of the understanding of poverty in the context of pre-colonial South Nias society, which was realized through "*bank budi*". In-depth analysis of oral literary texts shows that the concept of poverty in South Nias does not only focus on material deprivation but extends to social, economic, and spiritual aspects. Terminology such as *numana*, *lumana*, and *akao*, as well as the features of poverty from a pre-colonial South Nias perspective, which include the need for psychological and emotional well-being and the need for social network support, all suggest that poverty in pre-colonial South Nias went beyond more modern definitions of poverty that center on individual economic deprivation. As such, these findings provide an answer to our research question of how understandings of poverty and well-being in pre-colonial South Nias society provide an alternative perspective for understanding the concept of poverty more broadly. The "*bank budi*" system, governed by epistemes of collectivity and reciprocity, highlights the importance of social exchange for communal cohesion and economic stability. The practices of borrowing and social exchange intertwined in status feasts measure wealth not only materially but also socially, psychologically, and spiritually.

However, our findings also reveal the negative side of this system, where the inability to participate in social exchange or return the favor results in the marginalization of certain individuals, such as people with disabilities and mental disorders, people with chronic diseases, children, and the elderly. They are marginalized from the benefits of the "*bank budi*", because they are considered unable to fulfill the reciprocal principle of paying back what they receive through participation in status parties. The research also observed that the shift from traditional understandings of poverty towards modern poverty, which focuses more on the lack of money, has occurred in tandem with the prohibition of status parties by colonial powers and

the introduction of a money-based economic system. In light of these findings, although the mechanisms are not yet fully known, this research recommends that policymakers consider the revitalization of "*bank budi*" as a poverty reduction strategy. This approach is not only based on cultural heritage but also offers a sustainable solution to strengthen social cohesion and promote economic well-being. Further research is needed to understand the mechanism of "*bank budi*" in a modern context, which can provide new insights into poverty reduction approaches.

Conclusion

This research reveals a deep understanding of the concept of poverty in pre-colonial South Nias society, which differs significantly from the understanding of poverty in modern contexts. In South Nias, poverty was understood not only as material deprivation but also as psychological unwellness, social alienation, and the inability to participate in social exchanges. The concepts of *numana* or *lumana* and *akao*, as well as the principle of "*bank budi*", show how the people of South Nias integrate economic, social, and spiritual aspects of understanding poverty. These findings highlight the importance of considering cultural and social contexts when exploring the concept of poverty. The "*bank budi*" system reflects a sharing economy rooted in cultural and traditional values, promoting social cohesion and social mobility through social exchange. However, this system also has negative implications, especially for those who are unable to fulfill their reciprocity obligations, showing how poverty can be understood as the inability to return the favor.

The shift from traditional understandings of poverty towards modern poverty, which focuses more on lack of money, occurred with the prohibition of status parties by colonial powers and the introduction of a money-based economic system. This change has altered the dynamics of poverty in South Nias, shifting the focus from psychological well-being and social integration to material deprivation. In light of these findings, this research recommends the revitalization of the sharing economy and the local institutions that mediate it as a poverty reduction strategy. This approach not only respects cultural heritage but also offers a sustainable solution to strengthen social cohesion and promote economic well-being. However, more research needs to be done to understand the mechanism of "*bank budi*" in a modern context so that it can be effectively adapted to address today's socio-economic challenges. This research, thus, provides new insights into the understanding of poverty and highlights the importance of approaches rooted in cultural and social understanding to tackle poverty in various contexts.

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