



The Shifting Meaning of *Bōwō* in Nias Traditional Marriage: A Perspective from Max Weber's Theory of Rational Social Action

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study describes and analyzes how *bōwō*, the customary bridewealth of Nias marriage, is understood in traditional and contemporary settings, and explains the shift between these meanings among the congregation of Banua Niha Keriso Protestan Church, Lotu, using Max Weber's theory of rational social action.

Methodology: This qualitative study, conducted in 2026, used a critical-ethnographic design. Primary data were collected through unstructured in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving seven purposively selected informants: two church leaders, three customary leaders, and two congregation members in Lotu, North Nias Regency. Data were interpreted through Weberian *Verstehen* and coded against Weber's ideal types of social action.

Main Findings: *Bōwō* has shifted from value-rational (*wertrational*) action rooted in love (*masi-masi*) and communal solidarity to instrumental-rational (*zweckrational*) action, its value now calculated from a bride's education, occupation, and family status. *Masi-masi* rhetoric persists even as practice has become calculative, a mismatch linked to elopement, debt-driven poverty, and tension between customary and church authority.

Novelty/Originality of this study: Unlike prior *bōwō* studies grounded in theology or ethnography, this study sustains Weber's typology of social action as a analytical framework across an entire empirical case. Its original contribution is not simply applying the typology to a case, but showing how value-rational language can persist as a legitimating shell around instrumental-rational practice, extending Weberian rationalization theory beyond its usual macro-institutional settings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage constitutes a socially and legally sanctioned relationship between one or more men and one or more women, one that generates normative consequences in the form of rights and obligations binding not only the couple but also the descendants born of the union [1]. In Indonesia, this right is constitutionally guaranteed: Article 28B(1) of the 1945 Constitution states that every person has the right to form a family and to continue their lineage through a legitimate marriage, while Article 18B(2) obliges the state to recognize and respect customary law communities and their traditional rights, insofar as these remain alive and consistent with the development of society and the principles of the unitary state. The coexistence of national marriage law with customary (*adat*)

marriage systems means that marriage practice across Indonesia varies considerably, following the kinship system, whether patrilineal, matrilineal, or parental, of each ethnic group [2].

Marriage payment is one of the most common institutions through which this variation becomes visible. Across many kinship systems, a new marital bond is considered legitimate only once the party obligated by custom, commonly the groom's family, has fulfilled a mahar or bridewealth requirement set by *adat* or law; such a requirement compensates the family that "loses" a member through marriage and formalizes the union in the eyes of the community [3]. Indonesian ethnic groups display this logic in distinct local forms: the Batak of North Sumatra require *sinamot*, the Bugis-Makassar of South Sulawesi require *uang panai*, and the peoples of East Nusa Tenggara observe *belis*, each embedding the payment within a wider architecture of kinship obligation rather than treating it as a simple purchase price. Nias society expresses the same logic through *bōwō*.

Bōwō is an inseparable part of the Nias marriage sequence. The Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia) defines the term (spelled "bowo") narrowly, as bridewealth paid by the groom's side in the form of pigs of a specified girth, native to the island of Nias [4]. This dictionary definition captures *bōwō* only at the level of material transaction. Within Nias society itself, *bōwō* carries a considerably deeper meaning: it is understood as an expression of love (*masi-masi*), exaltation (*famolakhōmi*), and honor (*fasumangeta*), realized through good deeds (*amuata sisōkhi*) that are given sincerely, without coercion, and without expectation of return [5]. Its collective imagination situates *bōwō* within *masi-masi*, the affection and attentiveness of parents toward their children [6], such that determining a fair *bōwō* is, at its root, an act of expressing love and appreciation toward the prospective bride [7].

These philosophical foundations were never left to individual discretion alone. Since well before living memory, the nominal value of *bōwō* has been regulated by *fondrakō*, Nias customary law, according to *bosi*, a person's customary status: the higher a father's *bosi*, the larger the *bōwō* expected for his child's marriage [5]. *Fondrakō* functioned as a socially agreed ceiling as much as a floor, a point developed further in Section 3. Over recent decades, however, *bōwō* has been reported to depart from this normative architecture. Beyond family social status, two additional factors have become decisive in setting a contemporary *bōwō*: the prospective bride's education and her occupation or income. Ndraha's ethnographic study in Sirete Village, Gido District, found that the cost parents have invested in a daughter's education is directly reconstructed into the nominal *bōwō* demanded of her future husband, and that women in relatively well-paid occupations, most prominently civil servants, command a higher *bōwō* irrespective of formal educational attainment [8]. Preliminary observation at the present research site indicates nominal cash requirements reaching hundreds of millions of rupiah for highly educated brides, a figure that does not yet include the customary components of rice, gold, and pigs that remain integral to the exchange.

The social costs of this escalation are well documented. Where a prospective groom's family cannot meet the negotiated *bōwō*, elopement (*moloī*) becomes a recurring, if customarily disapproved, alternative; those who elope are still subject to customary sanction, because elopement is understood to diminish the *lakhōmi* (honor, dignity) of both families involved [9]. Where marriage proceeds on credit, the resulting debt frequently outlives the wedding itself, is inherited by the couple, and in some documented cases is linked to household malnutrition [10]. Other studies converge on the same pattern: rising *bōwō* nominal values are associated with family disharmony and a growing reluctance among some Nias men to marry Nias women at all [11]. The BNKP Church congregation in Lotu, North Nias Regency, offers a particularly instructive site for examining this shift. It is a setting in which *adat*, Christianity, and the pressures of a monetized, education-conscious economy meet directly: *adat* leaders, church leaders, and congregation members continue to negotiate *bōwō* within a community where Christian teaching on unconditional love coexists, not always comfortably, with customary expectations of a proportionate bridewealth.

To make sense of why the same institution, still described by its practitioners in the language of love, now operates through calculations of education, occupation, and status, this study turns to Max Weber's theory of social action. Weber argued that sociology must interpretively understand (*verstehen*) the subjective meaning individuals attach to their conduct, and, on that basis, causally explain its course and consequences [12]. For Weber, social reality is not an autonomous system standing apart from individuals; it is the accumulated product of social actions, and a society's way of life is a consequence of choices driven by the meaning-orientations of its members [12], [13]. Individuals act because they consciously set a goal, assess the situation before them, and select the means judged most rational to realize that goal [13]. Weber classified the meaningful orientations underlying social action into an "ideal type" typology comprising, on the rational side, value-rational action (*wertrational*) and instrumental-rational action (*zweckrational*), and, on the non-rational side, affectual action and traditional action [14]. *Wertrational* action is undertaken from a conscious belief in the intrinsic value, ethical, aesthetic, or religious, of a course of conduct, independent of its prospects for success; *zweckrational* action, by contrast, is governed by a calculated weighing of ends, means, and foreseeable side-effects, in which alternative courses are assessed for the return they offer relative to their cost [14], [15]. Because these are ideal types rather than descriptions of any actual act, Weber cautioned that real conduct rarely instantiates a single type in pure form; most social action is a blend, and what changes historically is which orientation predominates [12].

Table 1. Weber's Four Ideal Types of Social Action

Type	Orientation	Defining Feature
Instrumental-rational (<i>zweckrational</i>)	Calculated pursuit of a defined goal	Actor weighs ends, means, and foreseeable side-effects; selects the most efficient available means
Value-rational (<i>wertrational</i>)	Commitment to an intrinsic value	Conduct pursued for its own sake (ethical, religious, aesthetic), independent of its prospects for success
Affectual	Emotional state of the actor	Driven by feeling (e.g., anger, love, devotion) rather than deliberate calculation
Traditional	Ingrained habit	Conduct performed because "it has always been done," with little conscious reflection

Source: Synthesized by the author from [12], [14], [15].

The choice of a church congregation as the research site makes this framework doubly apt: Weber's broader body of work, most famously his study of how ascetic Protestant ethics shaped the rise of modern economic rationality, was itself sustained inquiry into how religious value-commitments interact with, and are sometimes overtaken by, economic calculation [16], precisely the dynamic this study traces within a single customary institution embedded in the life of a Christian congregation. This typology gives the present study its analytical purchase. If *bōwō*, as articulated by its own practitioners, was originally *wertrational*, a value-committed expression of *masi-masi* bounded by *fondrakō*, then its contemporary form, calculated from education, occupation, and status, reads as a shift toward *zweckrational* action. The persistence of *masi-masi* as the language in which *bōwō* continues to be justified, even as its operative logic has become calculative, is itself a Weberian puzzle worth explaining rather than an inconsistency to explain away.

Several prior studies inform this inquiry without resolving it through a single, sustained sociological lens. Gulö's ethnography of *bōwō* in Öri Moro'ö, West Nias, documents the social costs of high *bōwō* and proposes pastoral-theological remedies from a Catholic standpoint [5]. Gulo and Telaumbanua interrogate whether *bōwō* wangowalu, an especially burdensome customary category, requires transformation, and answer affirmatively on welfare grounds [11]. Ndraha's ethnographic thesis on Sirete Village demonstrates how *bōwō* nominal value functions as a proxy for constructed female "quality," with material consequences for family access to education and welfare [8]. These three studies converge in documenting that *bōwō* has changed and that the change carries real social cost; none of them, however, examines the specific type of social action *bōwō* instantiates at each stage, or identifies the mechanism driving the shift from one orientation to another, precisely the gap this study addresses. Complementary research broadens the picture without adopting a Weberian lens: Zaluchu documents the anthropological and religious structure of the Nias marriage sequence itself [17]; Mendrofa examines *bōwō* against the sacramental foundation of Catholic marriage [18]; Amajihono considers how the consequences of *bōwō* marriage bear on the legal protection of women and widows in South Nias [2]; Waruwu and colleagues trace *bōwō*'s influence across generations of Nias youth [19]; and Harefa, writing from a feminist standpoint, calls for a re-examination of Nias bride price altogether [20]. The present study addresses the remaining gap by applying Weber's typology as the single organizing framework throughout, from the traditional institution to its contemporary practice and social consequences, contributing both a case-specific account of *bōwō* and a transferable analytical model for studying the rationalization of customary economic obligations elsewhere in Indonesia and beyond.

This contribution matters for two adjacent conversations. Within interpretive sociology, the case shows that Weber's own methodological commitment to *Verstehen*, understanding the subjective meaning actors attach to their conduct, need not be set aside when tracing large-scale rationalization: the two work together here, since it is only by taking practitioners' own *wertrational* self-description seriously that its growing distance from *zweckrational* practice becomes visible at all. Within economic anthropology, the case adds a documented instance of bridewealth capitalization, in which a customary payment absorbs new, individually achieved criteria of value, to a comparative literature so far dominated by cases from Africa and continental Asia, extending its geographic and institutional range to island Southeast Asia. Accordingly, this study is guided by two research questions:

1. How is *bōwō* understood in the traditional Nias context, and in the contemporary context, by members of BNKP Church, Lotu Congregation?
2. How can the shift in the meaning of *bōwō* in Nias traditional marriage at BNKP Church, Lotu Congregation, be explained through Weber's theory of rational social action?

The purpose of the study follows directly: to describe and analyze the traditional and contemporary meanings of *böwö*, and to examine the shift between them through Weber's typology of social action. The discussion in Section 3 pursues these questions in turn. Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study carries practical relevance for the actors who negotiate *böwö* in practice. For the BNKP church, the findings offer an evidence base for strengthening premarital pastoral guidance that engages the tension between customary expectation and Christian teaching directly, rather than only at the point of negotiation. For customary leaders, they suggest a concrete role for a revitalized, jointly endorsed ceiling on *böwö*'s nominal escalation, in the spirit of *fondrakö*'s original, largely lost function. For local government, they point toward economic-empowerment programs targeted at young families, aimed at reducing reliance on informal, interest-bearing debt to meet customary obligations. Together these findings offer a shared, evidence-based starting point for the three institutions, adat, church, and state, that currently address *böwö*'s social costs largely in isolation from one another.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a critical-ethnographic design. Creswell defines the qualitative approach as a research process aimed at understanding social or human problems by building a holistic picture, developed through descriptive accounts of informants' views and experiences and analyzed within their natural setting [21]. In qualitative inquiry, the researcher functions as the key instrument, data collection typically proceeds through triangulation, analysis is inductive, and findings emphasize the meaning of social phenomena over statistical generalization [22]. Because the object of inquiry, the practice of *böwö*, is a lived cultural phenomenon rather than a bounded variable, an ethnographic design was chosen; specifically, critical ethnography, which directs attention to social issues such as economic change, community empowerment, and questions of justice, power, and authority within a community's way of life [22]. This design suits a study that seeks not only to describe *böwö* as practiced but to critically interrogate the social and cultural change embedded in that practice.

2.1 Research Setting

Fieldwork was conducted at BNKP (Banua Niha Keriso Protestan) Church, Lotu Congregation, Lotu District, North Nias Regency, North Sumatra, a congregation of 1,243 members under Church Resort 34 [23]. This site was selected for two reasons. First, its members continue to actively practice *böwö* within an ongoing marriage system, so that shifts in meaning can be observed rather than reconstructed solely from memory. Second, it sits at an active meeting point between Nias *adat*, Christianity, and modernization, having entered the Christian mission field in 1865 and remained, ever since, host to an unresolved tension between customary and ecclesiastical authority (Section 3.6.3). A fuller description of the setting is given in Section 3.1.

2.2 Data Sources and Collection Techniques

Both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data were obtained directly from cultural actors through observation and direct engagement in the practices under study; secondary data were drawn from books, journal articles, and other relevant literature [24]. Three techniques were used to collect primary data: unstructured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Unstructured interviews were open and flexible, guided only by a broad outline of issues rather than a fixed sequence of questions, giving room to follow the conversational and social dynamics that emerged during fieldwork [22]. Participatory observation involved the researcher's direct engagement in the daily activities of the community under study, in order to gain a deeper understanding of behavior, social practice, and community dynamics [22]. Document analysis drew on non-human sources, archives, records, and written documents, relevant to the research problem [21].

Informants were selected through purposive, nonprobability sampling, in which participants are chosen for their depth of relevant knowledge and, in some cases, their customary or institutional authority, rather than to represent the population at large [21]. Seven informants were selected from within the Lotu congregation: two church leaders, three customary leaders, and two congregation members. This composition was intended to capture *böwö* from three complementary vantage points, ecclesiastical, customary, and lay, since each occupies a different position in relation to how *böwö* is negotiated and legitimated.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through an interpretive procedure consistent with Weber's own methodological premise that sociology is an interpretive science: understanding (*Verstehen*) the subjective meaning actors attach to their conduct is the necessary first step toward causally explaining its course and consequences [12]. Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, field data, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents, were organized descriptively by period (traditional versus contemporary) and by theme (legitimizing institutions, determinants of nominal value, collective mechanisms, social consequences). Second, each descriptive unit was coded against Weber's ideal types of social action; specifically, statements and practices were examined for whether their stated or observable orientation rested on a conscious commitment to intrinsic value irrespective of consequence

(*wertrational*), on a calculated weighing of means, ends, and side-effects (*zweckrational*), on habitual repetition (traditional), or on emotional expression (affectual) [14]. Each coded unit was additionally classified by evidence status, distinguishing a formal requirement (a rule codified in *fondrakö* or another documented customary or institutional procedure), a reported action (a practice or determinant directly described by informants as something done, observed, or expected), a contextual diagnosis (an interpretive reading of structural or situational conditions drawn by the researcher from converging field evidence), and an authors' inference (an analytical classification, such as the assignment of a Weberian action-type, derived from the pattern of evidence rather than stated in those terms by informants themselves). This classification is reported explicitly in Table 2 to make the evidentiary basis of each finding transparent to the reader. Third, findings were synthesized into an interpretive narrative connecting the traditional and contemporary orientations, with attention to what, following Weber, is expected: that pure types rarely appear in isolation, and that most real cases are blends in which one orientation becomes dominant without the others disappearing entirely [12].

Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation across the three data-collection techniques and across the three informant categories, allowing statements from customary leaders to be checked against those of church leaders and congregation members, and interview data to be checked against documentary and observational material.

2.4 Type of Research and Research Procedure

This study is qualitative research using a critical-ethnographic design, as stated in Section 2 above; Figure 1 summarizes the resulting research procedure as a single sequential flow, from site selection through the triangulation that closes the analysis.

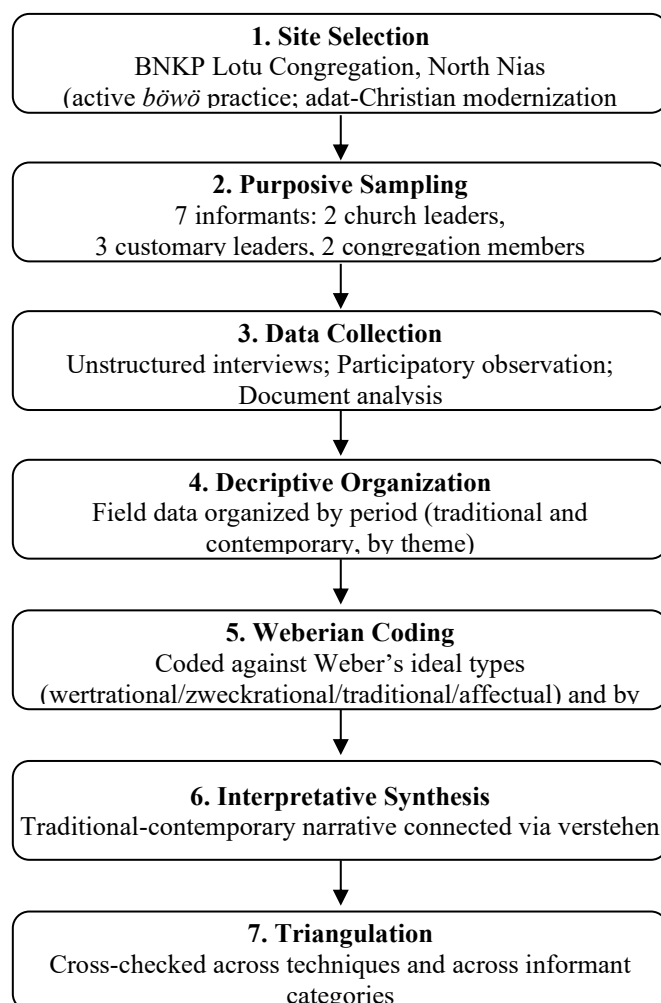


Figure 1. Research Procedure Flowchart

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Setting

The Christian gospel reached Nias Island on 27 September 1865, when the German missionary Denninger, sent under the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG), first set foot on the island; the date is still commemorated annually across the BNKP synod as its mission anniversary [23]. The congregation that would become BNKP Lotu grew from a small fellowship house established in Lawira in 1924, was consolidated at its present site in Lotu through the initiative of local leaders in the following years, survived the destruction of its church building in two separate earthquakes (1967 and 2005), and today serves 1,243 members under Church Resort 34 [23]. Members' education is concentrated at junior and senior secondary level, consistent with rural access patterns, though a growing share of younger members now complete tertiary education [25]. Livelihoods remain dominated by wet-rice and rubber-smallholder agriculture, with a smaller but growing number of households engaged in micro-trade [25]. This is, in short, a congregation experiencing the same monetization and educational expansion documented across Nias more broadly, while still actively practicing *bōwō* as an integral part of its members' marriages, making it a productive site for observing the shift this study investigates.

3.2 *Bōwō* in the Traditional Nias Context: A Value-Rational (Wertrational) Institution

3.2.1 Etymological and Philosophical Foundations

As a noun, *bōwō* is etymologically a gift or offering given out of affection; its adjectival form, *obōwō*, means generous, or inclined to give [26]. This etymology already signals that *bōwō*'s original meaning does not reduce to a transaction. Informants among the customary leaders interviewed for this study consistently described *bōwō*'s deepest meaning as an expression of the love between the two families entering marriage, a means of strengthening kinship ties not only between the couple but between their extended families and, at times, their villages. The recurring formulaic phrase attached to *bōwō*, *masi-masi*, *nibe'e sifao fa'ahēle-hele dōdō*, *tenga nifaso ba tenga siso sulō* ("a proof of love, a gift from the heart, neither demanded nor requiring repayment"), articulates this value commitment directly [5]. Read against Weber's typology, this phrase contains no calculation of cost against benefit; it is a declaration that the gift is given because the value itself, love made concrete, is held to be intrinsically binding, precisely the structure Weber identifies in *wertrational* action: a conscious commitment to the value of a form of conduct, ethical or otherwise, independent of the consequences it produces [14]. A traditional Nias oral poem (*hoho*) associated with *bōwō* reinforces the same orientation, likening *bōwō* to a spring that never runs dry in the dry season and never overflows in the rainy season, an image of proportionality and constancy rather than maximization, closing with the explicit charge to protect the unlearned and help those who have nothing [5], [27]. Nowhere in this formulation does the receiving family's material advantage appear as the point of the exchange; the emphasis falls, instead, on the giver's unconditional obligation to the economically weaker party, the inverse of a calculated bargain.

This *wertrational* self-understanding coexisted, from early on, with a visibly negotiated process, a point worth registering so that the traditional period is not romanticized as one of pure, calculation-free giving. The customary marriage sequence itself, comprising roughly a dozen successive rites from the formal proposal through the ceremonial delivery of betrothal pigs, to the wedding proper (*falōwa*), at which the two families face one another and a spokesperson from each side trades formal, often satirical, verse before the bride is finally released to her husband's family, was itself a protracted process of mutual positioning between two kin groups, not merely a ritual backdrop to a value already settled [17], [28]. Consistent with this, *bōwō* itself carried alternate names that foreground negotiation and exchange: *goi-goila*, denoting the mutual agreement reached only after a process of bargaining between the two families over what the groom's side could realistically provide, and *bōli niha*, literally "the price of a person," a term Nias speakers themselves use uneasily, aware of its transactional overtone even as they insist it does not reduce a wife to a purchased object [5], [29]. That Nias vocabulary already contained a term as blunt as *bōli niha* suggests that the tension this study documents, between a *wertrational* ideal and a more calculative practice, is not an entirely new development grafted onto an once-pure institution, but a tension that *fondrakō*, at its institutional height, was comparatively successful at containing within proportionate bounds, and that has since become less contained rather than newly created.

3.2.2 *Fondrakō* and *Bosi*: Institutional Legitimation of Value-Rational Action

Traditional *bōwō* was never left to private sentiment alone; the customary law *fondrakō* formalized it, tying nominal value to *bosi*, a graded system of customary standing historically comprising twelve levels, of which the first six were held by children, the seventh was attained upon marriage, and levels eight through twelve required sponsoring an *owasa*, a large customary feast [28]. Only from the seventh *bosi* did the material specification of *bōwō* begin to apply, and the higher a father's *bosi*, the larger the *bōwō* expected of his child's marriage [5]. *Fondrakō* was believed to carry a spiritual sanction of its own: compliance brought *howu-howu* (blessing), while violation invited customary curse and penalty [30]. *Fondrakō*'s concern for proportionality extended beyond the wedding day itself: one recorded customary provision held that a married man's continued display of proper respect toward his wife's family, extended at appropriate moments such as a good harvest or a successful hunt, could offset

part of the *bōwō*-related obligation still outstanding, while its absence increased that obligation, indicating that *fondrakō* treated ongoing relational conduct, not material payment alone, as a valid form of settlement [5]. *Fondrakō* is, in Weberian terms, an institution that gave *wertrational* commitment an enforceable, socially agreed form, without converting that commitment into an open-ended instrumental calculation, since its explicit purpose, as the *hoho* verse states, was that *bōwō* should never become a source of suffering.

3.2.3 Collective Responsibility as Value-Rational Solidarity

The burden of fulfilling *bōwō* was, in the traditional setting, distributed across a wide kin network rather than resting on the groom alone: parents (*Ama-Ina sangowalu*), his father's brothers and male cousins (*talifusō*), affinal kin (*fadono*), fellow customary-law members (*sihasara hada*), and fellow villagers (*banua*) all shared responsibility for assembling the required amount [5]. On the receiving side, the payment was similarly redistributed outward to a comparably wide set of kin, so that no single household captured the full material benefit [5]. Because nominal *bōwō* values in the traditional period were, by informants' accounts, considerably smaller than today, this collective structure functioned to lighten an already moderate burden, consistent with a *wertrational* orientation in which mutual aid among kin was itself part of the value being enacted, not merely a coping mechanism for an otherwise unsustainable demand.

3.3 *Bōwō* among Contemporary BNKP Lotu Congregation: The Shift toward Instrumental-Rational (Zweckrational) Action

3.3.1 Persistent Rhetoric, Shifting Practice

Both customary and church leaders interviewed for this study affirm, without hesitation, that *bōwō*'s deepest meaning remains an expression of love, from the groom toward the bride and from parents toward their own daughter, and a means of cementing kinship between the two families [31]-[35]. Yet these same leaders acknowledge, equally without hesitation, that *bōwō* as practiced today has drifted far from the spirit of *masi-masi* that is supposed to underwrite it. This gap between a value-commitment that continues to be affirmed verbally and a practice that has moved elsewhere operationally is, read through Weber, the signature of a shift from *wertrational* to *zweckrational* orientation that has not been accompanied by any change in legitimating rhetoric. Society has not abandoned the language of *masi-masi*; that language now covers a form of conduct that has become substantially calculative. This is consistent with Weber's own observation that pure types are rarely found in practice, and that what distinguishes one period from another is not the wholesale disappearance of one orientation but a change in which orientation dominates actual decisions [12].

3.3.2 Education, Occupation, and Family Status as Calculative Variables

Three variables recur, consistently and specifically, as determinants of contemporary *bōwō*: the family's social status, the prospective bride's level of education, and her occupation or economic standing. Where family status in the traditional period was fixed by inherited *bosi*, today it is read off achieved markers, public office, property, financial capacity, and academic credentials, that are, in principle, open to anyone [8]. Education, in particular, has come to function as a new stratifying layer on top of, or in place of, the old caste-like function of *bosi*: the more a family has invested in a daughter's schooling, the higher the *bōwō* her family expects in return, since her educational and economic prospects raise her perceived social value and, correspondingly, her family's expected compensation [8]. Occupation operates through the same logic: women with civil-service employment or comparable income command a higher *bōwō* than the general norm would predict from education alone, because government employment is locally read as the most prestigious and desirable occupational category [8].

Each of these three variables is calculative in a strict technical sense: each can be measured, compared across families, and converted into a nominal figure, precisely the operation Weber locates at the center of *zweckrational* action, in which an actor weighs available means against a defined end and its likely consequences [14], [15]. This is a different calculative logic from the one *fondrakō* encoded through *bosi*. *Bosi* was an inherited status, fixed by descent and adjudicated by collective customary consensus; education and occupation are individually achieved and are assessed, in effect, by a marriage market rather than by a customary forum. That the same underlying architecture, status determining nominal value, persists while its content has been re-filled with individually achieved, market-legible markers illustrates a broader pattern documented in comparative research on bride price: where bride price customs and rising female educational access coincide, a daughter's education becomes an asset that is, in part, capitalized through the marriage payment itself, an incentive structure identified in Indonesia's own historical school-expansion program by economists studying the relationship between bride price and female education [36]. The present findings suggest that this capitalization dynamic, observed by Ashraf and colleagues at the level of household schooling decisions, is also visible, from the inside, as a change in the very rationality that organizes the marriage payment.

3.3.3 The *Simbi* Case: Identical Form, Different Rationality

A single customary element, *simbi*, the ceremonial cut of pig jaw and neck meat served to wedding guests, illustrates how a shift in economic context alone can convert a *wertrational* practice into a *zweckrational* one without any change in its outward form. When pigs were raised extensively, released to forage around the household and in surrounding forest [5], serving *simbi* generously to guests cost the hosting family little beyond the animals' natural growth, and the gesture could be enacted as a relatively pure expression of hospitality and honor toward guests. Today, land constraints require pigs to be raised intensively on purchased feed [34], so that the identical gesture, the same cut of meat offered to the same number of guests, now carries a real, calculable cost that hosting families must plan for as part of the *böwö* nominal figure itself: more invited guests now directly means more *simbi* required, and a larger *böwö* demanded to cover it. Nothing about the practice's surface form changed; what changed was the economic structure of pig production, and that structural change alone was sufficient to convert an act that could be *wertrational*, hospitality given because hospitality is valued, into one that must be *zweckrational*, hospitality budgeted as a cost against a calculated nominal total. Tellingly, informants in this study also noted that when *simbi* is offered chiefly to seek reputation, prestige, or a sense of obligation owed, the gesture is locally perceived as insincere and forced [34], a recognition, from within the community itself, that the same practice can carry two different rationalities depending on the motive behind it.

This finding carries a methodological implication beyond the single case of *simbi*. Because *zweckrational* and *wertrational* action can share an identical outward form, a researcher who reads meaning directly off practice, without also examining the material conditions under which that practice is reproduced, risks misclassifying a calculative act as a value-committed one simply because its ritual vocabulary has not changed. The mechanism identified here, a shift in the economic structure of provisioning an offering that converted what was once a low-cost gesture into a budgeted line item, suggests a more general pathway by which customary institutions are rationalized: not through open confrontation between old and new values, nor through the formal repeal of a customary rule, but through the quiet transformation of the cost structure a given practice presupposes. Where such a transformation occurs, an institution can migrate from *wertrational* to *zweckrational* orientation while its participants, and any observer attending only to its form, continue to describe it in unchanged, *wertrational* terms. This offers one answer to a puzzle in the broader literature on institutional persistence: apparent cultural continuity, the survival of a named practice across a period of rapid economic change, is not by itself evidence that the practice's underlying rationality has also persisted; continuity of form and continuity of meaning are analytically distinct and must be established independently, a distinction the *simbi* case makes unusually visible because its material precondition, the method of raising pigs, changed within the recollection of a single generation of informants.

3.3.4 Collective Mechanisms Repurposed: From Burden-Sharing to Debt Deferral

The same kin categories that once shared the burden of *böwö* collectively, *Ama-Ina sangowalu*, *talifusö*, *fadono*, *sihasara hada*, and *banua*, still participate in assembling contemporary *böwö*. What has changed is the function this collective structure performs. In the traditional context, collective participation moderated an already proportionate demand; today, it enables the continuation of an escalation that could not otherwise be sustained by any single household. A concrete illustration is the youth cooperative (*kongsi arisan pemuda*), a rotating-fund association whose members contribute only when a fellow member is about to marry [35]; while designed to lighten the immediate financial burden on the groom, this arrangement is, by its own participants' description, still a debt that must eventually be repaid to the group. The same solidaristic form, mutual kin contribution, that once served a *wertrational* function, moderating burden as an expression of solidarity, now operates as an informal credit mechanism that defers rather than reduces the underlying financial pressure, allowing the *zweckrational* escalation of *böwö* to continue by distributing its risk rather than constraining its size.

3.4 Structural Conditions of the Shift from Wertrational to Zweckrational Action

Weber's broader account of rationalization resists a purely materialist reading: long-term rationalization processes, on Weber's own analysis, are rooted as much in values as in interests, and become manifest through multiple, interacting processes rather than a single deterministic cause [37]. Read this way, the shift documented here cannot be attributed to material change alone; it requires attending both to the structural-material conditions that made calculation practically possible, examined in this section, and to the ideational legacy that has itself been reinterpreted in increasingly calculative terms, examined in Section 3.5 through the concept of *lakhömi*. Three structural conditions, evident in the case material, address the first half of this account.

3.4.1 Monetization and the Precondition of Calculability

The material form of *böwö* itself has moved historically from a count of enemy heads taken in intervillage warfare, through labor, rice, and pig quantities measured by traditional units, to gold obtained through barter with outside traders in Barus, Johor, Aceh, and Minangkabau, and finally, after Indonesian independence, to the rupiah [11]. Each material form carried a different capacity for precise comparison. Pigs and rice vary in quality and are

difficult to standardize; gold and, still more, currency can be compared instantly and exactly across families. Monetization is therefore not merely a change in the medium of payment; it is the precondition that makes fine-grained, competitive comparison of *bōwō* nominal values across families practically possible, and it is precisely this comparability that a *zweckrational* calculation of cost against status requires. Where the unit of payment resists standardization, *wertrational*, proportionate giving is easier to sustain in practice; where it does not, the door to escalating, comparative calculation opens.

3.4.2 Educational Expansion and the Reconfiguration of Status Hierarchy

Educational access has expanded markedly among the younger generation of BNKP Lotu members, who increasingly regard tertiary education as central to both quality of life and future contribution to church and community [25]. This is, on its own terms, a positive development. Read alongside the *bōwō* data, however, it also shows how a materially positive change (educational access) interacts with an unresolved ideational legacy (the old status logic of *bosi*) to reproduce, in new form, the very hierarchy it might have been expected to dislodge. Where hierarchy was once ascribed through inherited *bosi*, it is now substantially reconstructed through educational attainment, which, though formally meritocratic and open to all, is in practice reconverted into a new marker of stratification that directly sets bridewealth value [8]. Weber's own account of rationalization is instructive here precisely because it does not treat rationalization as inherently value-neutral or emancipatory: an apparently rational, meritocratic marker can be absorbed into, and made to serve, a status logic that predates it.

3.4.3 The Weakening of *Fondrakō*'s Institutional Authority

Since the Dutch colonial period and through the Indonesian republican era, the authority once vested in *fondrakō* and its customary elders has steadily weakened; village-level customary leaders now largely confirm, rather than determine, a nominal figure that is in practice negotiated bilaterally between the two extended families [5]. Where *fondrakō*'s authority persisted, it functioned as an active ceiling; today, that ceiling still exists as a discursive ideal but has lost its enforceable force, leaving comparative status competition between families as the primary practical constraint on nominal value, a constraint that, unlike *fondrakō*, carries no upper bound. It is the disappearance of an enforceable ceiling, more than the disappearance of the value of *masi-masi* as an ideal, that best explains why nominal *bōwō* values have been able to climb as far as they have.

3.5 *Lakhōmi* as the Pivot: How Value-Rational Language Sustains Instrumental-Rational Practice

If Section 3.4 traced the material half of this rationalization, monetization, education, and the weakening of *fondrakō*'s enforceable authority, the concept of *lakhōmi* supplies its ideational half, the value-side of the "values as much as interests" account of rationalization that Weber's broader oeuvre supports [37]. *Lakhōmi*, honor, dignity, and standing, occupies an ambiguous position that helps explain how *wertrational* and *zweckrational* orientations coexist without registering, to their own practitioners, as a contradiction. Defending a family's *lakhōmi* through a substantial *bōwō* can be experienced, sincerely, as value-rational conduct, since *lakhōmi* is itself a collectively held value, not a private preference. Yet the reasons informants give for why a large *bōwō* defends *lakhōmi* are themselves calculative through and through: a large nominal value is expected to generate prestige and elevate family status; a family is expected to pay whatever is required to secure a partner of equivalent standing [32]; and as one customary leader interviewed for this study put it, the smaller the *bōwō*, the more a family's *lakhōmi* fades in the eyes of the community [31]. Each of these is a statement of proportional exchange, a defined material input yielding a defined social output, the very structure of *zweckrational* calculation, dressed in the language of value. *Lakhōmi* is, in this sense, discursively framed as *wertrational* while operating, functionally, as the object of a *zweckrational* cost-benefit calculation between money spent and prestige gained, a logic of exchange considerably removed from the unconditional giving that *masi-masi*, as an ideal, still claims to describe.

3.6 Social Consequences of the *Zweckrational* Shift

3.6.1 Elopement as Rational Response under Structural Constraint

Elopement (*moloi*) is not best read as an impulsive, affectual act. Customary leaders interviewed for this study report seven to ten elopement cases annually in the research area, and describe couples who, during subsequent customary mediation, openly acknowledge that they could not afford to marry according to full customary procedure. This pattern fits Weber's definition of social action closely: an actor assesses a situation (insufficient means to meet the negotiated *bōwō*), sets a goal (marriage), and selects the course judged most rational to reach that goal once the normative means, full compliance with customary procedure, is judged inaccessible [13]. That elopement carries real cost, still triggering customary sanction and understood to diminish *lakhōmi*, *sumange* (honor), and *toi* (name and standing) for both families [9], only sharpens the point: couples who elope are performing a rational calculation that the social cost of elopement, high as it is, remains lower than the cost of continued indebtedness or forgone marriage altogether. This finding echoes Daeli's documentation of elopement driven by unaffordable bridewealth elsewhere in Nias [9], indicating a structural pattern rather than an isolated

local anomaly, and it marks a functional failure of the very institution, *fondrakö*, whose explicit purpose was to ensure that *böwö* never became a source of suffering.

This finding challenges a conventional reading of elopement, in Nias and in the broader Indonesian ethnographic record on comparable customs such as Balinese *ngerod* or Bugis *silariang*, as fundamentally an affectual act: a passion-driven bid by a young couple to escape parental authority or a socially disapproved match. Three features of the present data resist that reading. First, elopement here is not associated with parental opposition to the match itself; informants describe couples whose families accept the union in principle but cannot meet its negotiated price, a structural rather than relational obstacle. Second, the timing of the decision is deliberative rather than impulsive: couples typically elope only after *böwö* negotiations have stalled over an unaffordable figure, meaning the act follows, rather than precedes or bypasses, an attempt at the normative procedure. Third, and most tellingly, the annual case rate is not the erratic scatter one would expect of idiosyncratic romantic crises but a stable pattern, seven to ten cases each year in the research area, that tracks the same structural condition, unaffordable *böwö*, identified throughout this study as driving other, unambiguously calculative responses such as informal debt. A rate this stable is itself evidence against a purely affectual reading: affect varies unpredictably across couples and years, whereas a stable rate implies a population of actors responding similarly to a stable structural constraint, precisely what Weber's concept of *zweckrational* action predicts. Read this way, elopement is not the absence of rational deliberation about *böwö* but one of its possible outcomes, an alternative route to the same goal, marriage, chosen once the culturally preferred route is priced out of reach.

3.6.2 Debt, Structural Poverty, and Malnutrition

Where a family cannot meet a negotiated *böwö* outright, borrowing, from kin or from interest-bearing informal lenders, becomes close to the only available option, and has become sufficiently routine that it functions, in Weberian terms, as something closer to traditional action, conduct repeated because "it is what is done", than as a fresh rational calculation made anew in each case. This routinization is itself consequential: once debt for *böwö* is taken for granted rather than actively reconsidered, the *zweckrational* calculation that drives nominal values upward proceeds unchecked by the kind of case-by-case scrutiny that might otherwise question it. The resulting debt frequently outlasts the wedding itself, constraining new households' ability to meet basic needs, and has been linked, in Nias ethnographic health research, to household malnutrition [10]. That an institution whose stated purpose is to secure a family's future welfare, and originally functioned as a value-rational expression of care, can instead become, in its contemporary form, a structural driver of the very poverty and ill health it was never meant to produce, is among the sharpest ironies documented in this study.

3.6.3 Tension between Customary and Ecclesiastical Authority

Church leaders interviewed for this study affirm that *böwö*'s deepest meaning aligns with Christian love, yet acknowledge that the church cannot meaningfully intervene once a nominal figure has been negotiated between families; its role is largely limited to approving an agreement already settled elsewhere [34]. One informant observed that a *böwö* running into the hundreds of millions of rupiah can no longer be understood as *masi-masi*, and stands in some tension with the unconditional love taught within the Christian faith [34]. This is not a new tension: historical study of Christianity's encounter with Nias and Batu Islands custom between 1865 and 1965 records bridewealth as a longstanding point of friction between church and customary authority [38]. That this tension persists more than a century and a half after Christianity's arrival, without either institution decisively prevailing, indicates the durability of customary kinship structures relative to ecclesiastical authority, and illustrates a broader Weberian point: institutions rooted in kinship and inherited custom can retain considerable practical authority over economic conduct even within a community whose members are, in every other respect, actively and sincerely religious.

3.7 Synthesis: *Böwö* as a Single Vessel of Two Rationalities

Table 2. *Böwö* across Two Periods, Read through Weber's Typology

Dimension	Traditional <i>Böwö</i>	Contemporary <i>Böwö</i>	Evidence Status
Dominant orientation	Value-rational (<i>wertrational</i>)	Instrumental-rational (<i>zweckrational</i>)	Authors' inference for both periods, derived by coding the warranted rows below against Weber's ideal types (Section 2.3)
Legitimizing language	Masi-masi (love), <i>famolakhömi</i> , <i>fasumangeta</i>	Masi-masi (retained rhetorically)	Traditional: formal requirement (<i>fondrakö</i> formula; <i>hoho</i> verse). Contemporary: reported action, affirmed by all three informant categories

Determinant of nominal value	Bosi (inherited customary status)	Education, occupation, and family social status (achieved, market-legible)	Traditional: formal requirement (<i>bosi</i> schedule under <i>fondrakö</i>). Contemporary: reported action, corroborated by [8]
Institutional ceiling	Fondrakö customary law (enforceable)	None enforceable; comparative status competition	Traditional: formal requirement. Contemporary: contextual diagnosis (erosion of enforceable customary authority)
Authority over final figure	Customary elders and <i>fondrakö</i> consensus	Bilateral family negotiation	Traditional: formal requirement. Contemporary: reported action
Function of collective kin support	Moderates an already proportionate burden	Defers and distributes an escalating burden	Traditional: contextual diagnosis. Contemporary: reported action (<i>kongsi arisan pemuda</i>), with the change of function an authors' inference
Material medium	Pigs, rice, labor, later gold	Rupiah currency (readily comparable)	Traditional: contextual diagnosis, documentary-historical. Contemporary: reported action
Typical social consequence	Kinship cohesion, bounded obligation	Elopement, debt, poverty, <i>adat</i> -church tension	Traditional: authors' inference. Contemporary: reported action and contextual diagnosis, corroborated by [9], [10]

Source: Synthesized by the author from the findings reported in Sections 3.2-3.6.

Taken together, these findings resist a simple narrative in which an old, value-rational meaning has been fully replaced by a new, instrumental one. What the evidence supports instead is a more genuinely dialectical picture: two orientations, *wertrational* and *zweckrational*, coexist under a single term, *böwö*, and under a single legitimating vocabulary, *masi-masi*, that has not needed to change even as the practice it describes has moved substantially toward calculation. The traditional institution was *wertrational* in orientation but never free of material specification, since *fondrakö* gave the value of *masi-masi* an enforceable, quantified form; the contemporary institution remains *wertrational* in its stated justification but has become *zweckrational* in its operative determinants. What has been lost is not *masi-masi* as an ideal, which every category of informant in this study continued to affirm, but the institutional mechanism, *fondrakö*'s enforceable ceiling, that once ensured the ideal and the practice moved together. Rhetoric has proven more durable than institution; that mismatch, more than any single structural cause on its own, is what best accounts for the social consequences documented in Section 3.6.

3.8 Positioning Böwö within Indonesia's Wider Bridewealth Landscape

The pattern identified here is not unique to Nias. Comparable Indonesian bridewealth institutions show a structurally similar trajectory. Among the Batak Toba, *sinamot* originally functioned to guarantee a bride's property rights within her new household; research on its contemporary practice finds that this function has been substantially displaced by a use of *sinamot* chiefly to finance the wedding celebration itself, negotiated bilaterally between families rather than fixed by inherited custom [39]. Among the Bugis-Makassar, *uang panai* was historically anchored in lineage; recent ethnographic work finds that wealth, education, and occupation have become significant, in some cases predominant, determinants of its nominal value alongside lineage, closely paralleling the education- and occupation-driven calculation documented for *böwö* in Section 3.3.2 [40]. Beyond Indonesia, bridewealth transformation under conditions of monetization and educational expansion is a broader comparative pattern: research on rural north China similarly documents a shift in bridewealth from a kin-negotiated, redistributive institution toward one increasingly captured by the individual couple and shaped by market-legible criteria [41].

Read alongside these cases, the present study's contribution is not the discovery that Indonesian, or Asian, bridewealth institutions are changing, a finding well established elsewhere, but the demonstration of a specific mechanism, and a specific vocabulary, for describing how that change occurs: not as a wholesale replacement of one institution by another, but as a migration between two Weberian ideal types beneath a legitimating rhetoric that itself remains constant. Where existing *sinamot* and *uang panai* scholarship documents that determinants have shifted from ascribed to achieved criteria, this study's Weberian framework offers an account of why such a shift constitutes a change in the rationality of the action itself, and how the persistence of unchanged legitimating language (*masi-masi*; comparably, *sinamot*'s and *uang panai*'s own enduring vocabularies of respect and honor) can obscure that change from the very participants who reproduce it. This suggests the *wertrational*-to-

zweckrational migration identified here may be a more general feature of customary bridewealth institutions under conditions of monetization and educational expansion across Indonesia, an implication Section 4 returns to as a direction for future comparative research.

This study's scope also invites caution about how far its findings travel. The analysis rests on seven informants within a single congregation in one district of North Nias; it cannot establish how representative the Lotu pattern is of Nias Island as a whole, let alone of Batak or Bugis-Makassar communities, whose own kinship structures, religious compositions, and regional economies differ from Nias in ways this study was not designed to hold constant. The evidence for the traditional period, moreover, is necessarily reconstructed from customary law texts, oral tradition, and the retrospective accounts of living informants rather than from direct historical observation, a limitation common to ethnographic study of custom under change but one that leaves open the possibility that the traditional period was itself less uniformly *wertrational* than *fondrakö*'s own normative record suggests. Finally, because informants were reached primarily through customary and church leadership, the perspective of prospective brides on their own valuation is underrepresented in the data, a gap Section 4 identifies as a priority for future research.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to describe how *böwö* is understood in traditional and contemporary Nias marriage and to explain the shift between these understandings through Max Weber's theory of rational social action. The findings answer both questions directly. Traditionally, *böwö* operated as value-rational (*wertrational*) action: an expression of *masi-masi* legitimated by *fondrakö* customary law and the *bosi* status system, sustained by collective kin responsibility, and explicitly bounded so as not to produce suffering. Among the contemporary BNKP Lotu congregation, *böwö* remains justified in the same value-rational language, yet its operative determination has shifted to instrumental-rational (*zweckrational*) calculation, driven by the prospective bride's education, occupation, and family social status. This shift is best explained not as a simple loss of values but as a dialectical interaction between structural-material change, monetization, educational expansion, and the weakening of *fondrakö*'s enforceable authority, and an ideational legacy, the value of *lakhömi*, that has itself been reinterpreted in increasingly calculative terms. The consequence, documented consistently across the data, is a set of tangible social harms: elopement as a rational response to unaffordable demands, debt that produces structural poverty and is linked to malnutrition, and unresolved tension between customary and ecclesiastical authority.

These findings carry a theoretical implication beyond the Nias case itself. They suggest that customary institutions historically built to hold value-rational commitments within an enforceable, proportionate structure can lose that protective function not because the underlying value is abandoned, but because the institutional mechanism enforcing its proportionality erodes faster than the rhetoric legitimating it. Where that mismatch opens, instrumental-rational calculation can expand into a domain still described, sincerely, in the language of value, with material consequences that fall hardest on those least able to absorb them.

Practically, the findings point toward revitalizing an institutional, rather than purely rhetorical, check on *böwö*'s nominal escalation, potentially through a renewed joint forum of customary elders and church councils empowered to set proportionate, community-endorsed guidance in the spirit of the old *fondrakö*. Churches are similarly positioned to strengthen premarital pastoral guidance that addresses the tension between customary expectation and Christian teaching directly, rather than leaving couples to encounter it only at the point of negotiation, while local government and community institutions could usefully support young families' economic capacity, reducing reliance on informal, interest-bearing debt to meet customary obligations.

Future research might extend this Weberian framework comparatively across Nias regions with differing socioeconomic profiles, to test whether the *wertrational*-to-*zweckrational* pattern identified here holds consistently or varies with local structural conditions; examine more directly the agency, or its absence, of prospective brides themselves within a negotiation from which their own voice is largely absent in the current data; and apply the same typology to bridewealth and dowry customs elsewhere in Indonesia, such as Batak sinamot or Bugis-Makassar uang panai, to assess how generally this pattern of rationalization under persistent value-rational rhetoric extends beyond the Nias case.

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