



Lyrics Of *Towi-Towi* As Social Criticism In Nias Society

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Abstract

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This study explores the meaning of the song *Towi-Towi*, composed by Piet Harefa, as a form of social criticism against the customary marriage law (*fondrakö*) of the Nias people. Written in the 1960s and later popularized by Ayu Zega in 2014, the song reflects the social struggles of Nias women who face difficulties in marriage due to the high *böwö* (bridewealth) determined by *bosi* (social status) within the traditional system. The research adopts a qualitative descriptive method supported by discographic study, literature review, and observation. Schleiermacher's hermeneutic theory serves as the analytical framework to interpret the composer's intention and to uncover the symbolic meanings embedded in the lyrics. The use of personification through the *towi-towi* bird, a local symbol of good news, becomes a poetic device through which Piet Harefa expresses the anxiety, hope, and criticism toward rigid customary norms. The findings reveal that *Towi-Towi* functions not merely as entertainment but as a medium of reflection and social protest that exposes gender inequality, materialism, and the moral burden imposed by the *fondrakö* system. The song also portrays the paradox between cultural pride and socio-economic suffering, especially among men who must comply with the demanding expectations of the traditional marriage structure. As a cultural text, *Towi-Towi* represents a form of musical resistance that questions the moral and ethical relevance of traditional values in a changing modern context. Thus, the song embodies both aesthetic and socio-political significance in the collective consciousness of Nias society.

INTRODUCTION

Music is one of many aspects that can serve as a medium to convey and express the emotions of the heart and soul (Sinaga, 2019). This view is reinforced by Bahari, who explains that music is both a science and an art of rhythmic combinations of tones whether vocal or instrumental – comprising melody and harmony as an expression of all that one wishes to communicate, particularly emotional aspects (Khoiriyah, 2017). Similarly, (Widyanta, 2019) argues that music functions as a medium for delivering messages, complaints, invitations, and aspirations, with social criticism being one of the forms of such expression.

The substance of this study is to analyze the meaning contained in the lyrics of the song *Towi-Towi*. The song was composed by the late Piet Harefa around the 1960s and was later published on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/-6beZRAG0qg?si=qUzZwg29TO9kdzC3>) in 2014, performed by Ayu Zega. Judging from its lyrics, *Towi-Towi* contains social criticism directed at the customary marriage law practiced within Nias society. The lyrics narrate the story of a Nias woman who remains unmarried due to her social status, which affects the amount of *böwö* (bridewealth) that must be borne by the groom's family and presented to the bride's family as part of the traditional requirements for a marriage ceremony.

In discussing customary law, the Nias people recognize the concept of *fondrakö*, a system of customary law believed to embody the ancestral teachings of the Nias tribe. All

provisions governing how the Nias people interact with their ancestors, with one another, and with nature are stipulated within *fondrakö*. For the Nias community, adhering to *fondrakö* means honoring the ancestors' message; in doing so, they will receive *lakhömi* (dignity or spiritual authority) from their forebears (Waruwu, 2019). This raises several questions: To what extent does *fondrakö* play a role in the customary marriage ceremonies of the Nias people? What must and must not be done when conducting such ceremonies?

In general, through the lyrics of *Towi-Towi*, Piet indirectly conveys a critique of customary laws that create problems for Nias women. How Piet articulates this social criticism through the lyrics of *Towi-Towi* will be examined in this study. A hermeneutic theoretical approach will be employed to analyze the lyrics and to uncover the underlying meanings that the composer, Piet Harefa, intended to convey through his song. Furthermore, this study aims to identify the role of Nias customary law as an inseparable part of the local community's social and cultural life.

METHOD

The method used in this study is a qualitative descriptive. Qualitative research is descriptive and tends to use analysis. Qualitative research often emphasizes the perspective of the subject, process, and meaning of the research, using theoretical foundations as an umbrella and/or support to align with the facts on the field (Fiantika & Maharani, 2022). This study aims to analyze the song *Towi-Towi* in terms of its lyrical meaning and the songwriter's interpretation of

social criticism toward the customary marriage law of the Nias people, as expressed through its lyrics.

Data were collected through discographic study, literature review, and observation. According to Stevenson, a discographic study is the activity of analyzing, describing, and interpreting the results of audible sound (Kharisma, 2021). Therefore, the researcher identifies and examines the *Towi-Towi* song video available on the YouTube platform to gain a deeper understanding of its lyrics and musical presentation. Meanwhile, a literature review is a scholarly study aimed at finding appropriate theories to support the resolution of a research problem (Kharisma, 2021). In this context, the researcher collects several academic writings discussing the customs and traditions of the Nias community.

As part of this research, the musical aspects of *Towi-Towi* are also described through transcription. Randel, in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, defines transcription as “the reduction of music from live or recorded sound to written notation” (Randel, 2003). This process helps document the melodic, rhythmic, and structural elements of the song for analytical purposes. Furthermore, the study applies hermeneutic theory as a conceptual framework to analyze and uncover the meanings embedded in the lyrics of *Towi-Towi*.

According to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), hermeneutics is one of the most influential interpretive theories in modern philosophy. Schleiermacher is considered the father of modern hermeneutics because he developed a more systematic and universal approach to understanding texts. He argues that understanding a text involves not only comprehending the literal meaning of the words but also grasping the author’s thoughts and intentions. Therefore, interpretation must

involve “reconstructing the author’s process of thought” (Hardiman, 2015).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The song *Towi-Towi* is one of the most popular songs among the Nias people. It was composed by the late Piet Harefa around the 1960s. Piet Harefa is recognized as one of the Nias artists who made a significant contribution to the history of popular music development among the Nias community. He is regarded as a pioneer in the formation of music groups or bands on Nias Island which was established in 1960.

In addition to *Towi-Towi*, two of his other compositions that remain popular to this day are *He’ahe* and *Howu-Howu Zattoo*. Generally, the lyrics of Piet Harefa’s songs are inspired by the social life of the Nias people, expressed through figurative language and arranged with melodies that are simple, memorable, and easy for the public to learn. For example, the song *He’ahe* belongs to the category of *famolaya iraono* (lullaby songs), usually sung when putting a child to sleep. The lyrics of *He’ahe* describe a young Nias girl who has already been taught to perform various household tasks, including putting her younger sibling to sleep. This reflects how young girls in Nias society are entrusted by their parents with the responsibility of caring for their younger siblings and helping with household duties (E. G. Zebua, 2023).

In 2014, *Towi-Towi* was repopularized by Ayu Zega through the YouTube platform (<https://youtu.be/6beZRAG0qg?si=qUzZwg29TO9kdzC3>), and it has since garnered more than twenty-three thousand views. The lyrics of *Towi-Towi* are written in the Nias language (*li niha*) and consist of four verses. However, the researcher has translated the lyrics into

Indonesian to facilitate understanding. The following section presents the lyrics of *Towi-Towi* along with translation.

Nias (<i>Li Niha</i>)	English
<i>He e ba toŵi-toŵi</i>	Oh Towi-Towi
<i>Hana ōhulō wongi</i>	Why do you come so early in the morning
<i>Manunō-nunō fao susuwongi</i>	Singing together with the <i>susuwongi</i> bird
<i>Te so zolohe lōfō si sōkhi</i>	Do you bring any good news with you?
<i>Ohe duria si sōkhi</i>	Bring me that good news
<i>No ara me ubaloi</i>	I have been waiting for so long
<i>Niha si no irai mame'e li</i>	For someone who once proposed to me
<i>Sondrōi tandra laeduru balaki</i>	The one who gave me a golden ring as a sign of promise
<i>No ae dōfi me fawu'u li</i>	A year has passed since the promise was made
<i>Me mōi ira manofu bongi</i>	Since they came to ask about the wedding day
<i>Na so zamanuzu tōdōmi</i>	Or has something made you withdraw
<i>Ba mbosima salawa sibai</i>	Because of our high social status
<i>Ba alai ndra'o ami</i>	What has happened to you?
<i>Satuagu samaeri</i>	My parents who have raised me
<i>Ba bōi sa mifuli miwōwōsi</i>	Please, do not regret
<i>Na mōi numana zolemba khōmi</i>	If everyone who seeks kinship with you ends up in poverty

Tabel 1. Lyrics of *Towi-Towi*

In the lyrics of *Towi-Towi*, Piet Harefa employs personification, using the terms *Towi-Towi* and *Susuwongi*. Personification is a figurative expression that attributes human qualities or characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract ideas (Silaban, 2023). Literally, *Towi-Towi* refers to the name of a bird species native to Nias Island. For the local community, the *Towi-Towi* bird is believed to be a messenger, a bearer of news. Thus, whenever the *Towi-Towi* sings, it immediately draws the attention of those nearby. One of the listeners will usually “speak” to the bird as if conversing with a human, asking about the news it brings. Questions such as “*He towi-towi, hadia zalua? Hadia so domema? Hadia solohe harazaki? Hadia solohe wangabu dōdō?*” translate to: “Hey, *Towi-Towi*, what has happened? Are we expecting guests? Is there a blessing coming? Or is there misfortune approaching?” Interestingly, when the *Towi-Towi* stops singing and flies away, it is interpreted as a sign that the bird agrees with the question asked. Conversely, if it continues to sing, it means disagreement.

However, this study does not focus on the mythological concept of *Towi-Towi* in local belief. Rather, it examines how Piet Harefa uses the *Towi-Towi* metaphor as a critique of the traditional marriage customs practiced within Nias society. Therefore, analyzing the meaning of *Towi-Towi* also entails analyzing the customary laws of marriage among the Nias people.

Fondrakō

The term *fondrakō* refers to two understandings. First, *fondrakō* is a sacred deliberative assembly intended to ratify customary law. Hammele in his book *He'iwisa Ba Danō Neho*, explains a ritual ceremony in Nias society known as *fondrakō*. Hammerle writes that *fondrakō* is a sacred deliberation aimed at

legitimizing the customary laws of the Nias people. All regulations concerning how the Nias community lives its life, the rules for conducting customary ceremonies, and the sanctions imposed when such laws are violated constitute the core decisions made in *fondrakõ* (Hammerle, 1998).

Furthermore, Harefa, in his work *Eksistensi Fondrakõ dalam Hukum Adat Nias*, explains the sacred nature of *fondrakõ* in Nias society. In his writing, Harefa records the origins, roles, and significance of *fondrakõ* within Nias customary law. As Hammerle also explains, Harefa notes that *fondrakõ* is carried out by the Nias community *sanõmba adu*, who believe it to be a revelation from the ancestors to the Nias people through an *ere* (ritual specialist). In *fondrakõ*, a rooster or hen is prepared, along with brittle palm-leaf ribs and tin to be melted in an incense burner. After all the mandatory regulations are proclaimed, the *ere* breaks the palm-leaf ribs or breaks the legs and wings of the chicken, then pours the hot tin into the chicken's mouth until it dies. While doing so, the *ere* proclaims: "Whoever violates anything that has been established in this *fondrakõ*, their life shall be like this brittle rib (easily broken, meaning quickly dead), or like this tortured chicken whose limbs are broken, and all that they consume will be as hot as this tin until they die." Such is the sanction borne by the people of Nias if *fondrakõ* is violated, compelling them to obey customary law (Harefa, 2007).

On the other hand, *fondrakõ* may also be understood as the customary law itself (Waruwu, 2019). To carry out *fondrakõ* means to honor the message of the ancestors. The believed consequence is that if *fondrakõ* is performed earnestly, the Nias people will receive *lakhõmi* (authority) and *howu-howu* (abundant life), and conversely, they will receive curses if they do not. The concept of *howu-howu* refers to all forms of goodness

granted to the Nias people during their earthly life and to their descendants. Fear of the ritual curse for violating customary law made pre-Christian Nias society unwilling to neglect even the smallest detail within *fondrakõ*. Meanwhile, *howu-howu* encompasses *fa'asalawa*, *fa'amokhöta*, *famonga'ötö*, and *fa'amolakhõmi* (leadership, wealth, descendants, and authority) (Waruwu, 2019). The desire to attain *lakhõmi* and *howu-howu* ultimately encouraged the Nias people to strictly adhere to the principles of *fondrakõ*.

Fondrakõ is manifested in various customary ceremonial activities of the Nias community, one of which is *owasa* (customary festivity). Through the *owasa* feast, a person's rights are fulfilled through the portion of pork distributed to them. The higher one's status, the greater the share of pork received. These regulations have been authorized within *fondrakõ*. For this reason, to fulfill the requirements set forth by *fondrakõ*, the host of the ceremony will sacrifice considerable wealth. This is why the Nias people have the proverb *sõkhi mate moroi aila*, meaning "better to die than to bear shame." For the sake of *fondrakõ*, the Nias people persist even when they must fall into debt.

Fangowalu

One type of *owasa* in Nias society is *owasa fangowalu* (the traditional wedding ceremony). There are several stages in the implementation of *owasa fangowalu*, namely: *famaigi niha* (seeking a partner), *fame'e li* (proposal), *fame'e laeduru* (engagement/the giving of a ring as a sign of commitment), *fanunu manu* (determination of the bridewealth/*bõwõ*), *femanga bawi ni sila hulu* (agreement on the date of the ceremony), *famoto/fame'e* (giving advice to the couple), *folau bawi* (handover of the traditional bridewealth), *falõwa* (wedding feast), *fame'e gõ* (the bride's family visiting the groom's house), and *femanga*

gahe (the groom's family visiting the bride's house).

In each of these stages, *fondrakõ* plays an important role as the guiding principle that must be obeyed by the Nias people. The determination of various requirements to be fulfilled by the groom referred to as *bõwõ* (bridewealth) is based on *fondrakõ*. Thus, rejecting *bõwõ* means rejecting *fondrakõ*. For this reason, Nias men who intend to marry are compelled to fulfill the *bõwõ*, even if it means going into debt. Consequently, it is not surprising that many Nias men remain burdened with debt after marriage. As a result, a significant number of Nias men prefer to marry women outside their ethnic group rather than marry women from within their own community. The high *bõwõ* demanded for Nias women has generated various pro and contra perspectives among Nias society itself. Nevertheless, the existence of *bõwõ* remains integral to *falõwa* and cannot be removed.

The Social Critique in Song Of Towi-Towi

The lyrics of the *towi-towi* song tell the story of a Nias girl who is waiting for confirmation regarding her wedding ceremony with a man who has already come to propose to her. However, the awaited news never arrives, causing the young woman to lament the various obstacles hindering the realization of the *owasa fangowalu*.

The *towi-towi* lyrics employ personification by using the symbol of the *towi-towi* bird, which is depicted as a bearer of good news. This is expressed in the following lyrics: *He e ba toûi-toûi, Hana õhulõ wongi, Manunõ-nunõ fao susuwongi, Te so zolohe lõfõ si sõkhi, Ohe duria si sõkhi, No ara me ubaloi, Niha si no irai mame'e li, Sondrõi tandra laeduru balaki* ("Oh Towi-Towi, why do you come so early, singing together with the *susuwongi* bird, is there good news that

you bring? Bring me that good news, for I have long been waiting for someone who once proposed, someone who gave me a gold ring as a sign of commitment").

The longing of a Nias woman who has yet to receive certainty about the day of her wedding is conveyed in these lyrics. *Laeduru balaki* (a gold ring) as a sign of commitment symbolizes that a Nias woman is already bound and thus cannot accept proposals from other men. The opening lines of *Towi-Towi* reveal the dilemma faced by a Nias woman as she awaits the auspicious day when she will receive a new social status and *howu-howu* through *owasa fangowalu*.

In the subsequent verse, Piet Harefa places *bosi* (social status) as one of the reasons why a Nias man may delay his intention to continue his marriage proposal to the woman he desires. The term *bosi* in Nias society can be understood from two different perspectives: *bosi* as the social structure of Nias society, and *bosi* as the hierarchical stages of life for the Nias people from conception to the afterlife representing the cycle of life (H. . Zebua, 1984). In relation to the *Towi-Towi* lyrics, the author assumes that the concept of *bosi* referred to by Piet Harefa, as the songwriter, corresponds to *bosi* as the social structure of Nias society. The Nias people live in groups forming a community known as *banua*, led by a figure called *salawa* (North Nias) or *si'ulu* (South Nias) (Wiradnyana, n.d.).

The social structure of Nias society determines the rights and obligations of each individual within the customary system. The higher a person's position or *bosi*, the greater the rights they possess in various aspects of customary life. At the same time, *bosi* also functions to regulate interpersonal behavior, ensuring harmonious social interaction among the Nias people.

In relation to the use of *bosi* in the lyrics of the *Towi-Towi* song, *bosi* appears as one of the factors hindering a man from fulfilling the *bōwō* (bridewealth) required for *owasa fangowalu*.

For the Nias community, *bōwō* can be understood as any benevolent act done for others without expecting anything in return; hence, *bōwō* is often equated with *masi-masi*, both of which share a similar meaning (Gulo, Tri Intan & Telaumbanua, 2021). Meanwhile, according to Hans Daeng in Mendrofa, *bōwō* is understood as bridewealth namely the entire set of procedures for the transfer of goods that customary law requires the man's family to provide to the woman's family, based on their respective social rank and standing, before a man may formally take a woman as his wife (Mendrofa, 2024). *Bōwō* (bridewealth) in *owasa fangowalu* consists of a number of pigs, rice, gold, and silver (Gulo, Tri Intan & Telaumbanua, 2021). (Mendrofa, 2024) in *Bōwō Perkawinan Adat Suku Nias Dengan Dasar Perkawinan Gereja Katolik*, states that *bōwō* is not only a tradition but also a strong marker of cultural identity. In Nias customary marriage, *bōwō* signifies: (a) the social status of the Nias community; (b) acknowledgment, respect, and appreciation for the dignity of women; (c) a symbol of honor and respect (in the cultural context); and (d) a mechanism to prevent divorce (Gowasa, 2019).

The meaning of *bōwō* as a symbol of social status (*bosi*) in the *fangowalu* ceremony affirms the lyrics written by Piet in *Towi-Towi*. Both statements indicate how *bosi* influences the determination of *bōwō* (bridewealth). The determination of *bōwō* in a *fangowalu* ceremony is usually decided by the bride's family, as the *sowatō* (wife-giving party), and imposed upon the *tome* (the husband-taking party).

However, in contemporary times, *bōwō* has undergone a shift in meaning. Today, *bōwō* is

increasingly associated with *bōli niha*, which contrasts with the original meaning of *bōwō* as a gift. *Bōli niha* is understood as payment or a price that can be bargained (Gulo, Tri Intan & Telaumbanua, 2021). Lafau and Fitriani also note that the education level and social status of the bride-to-be have now become key determinants in setting the value of *bōwō* (Lafau & Fitriani, 2023).

Despite this shift in meaning, *bōwō* remains a dilemma for those intending to marry in Nias. This is emphasized by Mendrofa, who argues that the increasingly material-oriented *bōwō* in Nias customary marriage creates hardship for many families. They often become burdened by debt, preventing them from achieving household well-being (Mendrofa, 2024). The Nias principle "*sokhi mate moroi aila*" ("better to die than to bear shame") continues to be firmly upheld today, including in the context of customary practices.

Piet Harefa criticizes this situation through the lyrics of *Towi-Towi*. This is clearly reflected in the final part of the song: *ba alai ndra'o ami* (what is wrong with you), *satuagu samaeri* (my parents who raised me), *ba boi sa mifuli miwowosi* (and do not regret later), *na moi numana zolemba khomi* (if your son-in-law one day falls into poverty).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of *Towi-Towi* demonstrates that Piet Harefa uses song as a powerful medium of social critique, particularly toward the customary marriage system of the Nias people. Through figurative language, especially personification, the lyrics portray the emotional struggle of a young Nias woman whose marriage is delayed due to the heavy social and economic burdens imposed by *bōwō* (bridewealth). By embedding the symbols of *towi-towi* and *susuwongi*, Piet subtly brings attention to the

tension between *fondrakö*—understood as a sacred, ancestral law that governs all aspects of social life—and the contemporary realities in which adherence to this law creates significant difficulties for families, especially men who must fulfill high bridewealth demands based on social status (*bosi*).

The song reveals how deeply entrenched customary structures continue to shape social interactions, obligations, and hierarchies, while also exposing the socioeconomic consequences of such systems, including debt, delayed marriages, and gendered vulnerability. Ultimately, *Towi-Towi* stands not only as a cultural artifact but also as a reflective critique that calls the Nias community to reconsider the rigidity of customary practices that may no longer serve the well-being of its people. Through hermeneutic interpretation, this study confirms that Piet Harefa's composition is both an artistic expression and a sociocultural commentary rooted in the lived experiences of the Nias community.

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