


Virginity, purity and honour: Theology in Luke 1:46-55 and Nias bridal culture

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This article is motivated by the election of Mary, who was unmarried and still a virgin, to be the mother of Jesus the Saviour. This study aims to reveal the reasons for the election of Mary by conducting a theological analysis of the text of Luke 1:46–55 and then implied in the culture of carrying brides of the Nias tribe. This study uses a qualitative method by reading literature, books, journals and relevant references. Based on the study's results, purity is the main requirement, according to culture and theology. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is worthy of being on the path of the incarnation of the holy God. Purity as a prerequisite also applies in the local wisdom of the Nias people, namely carrying brides as a symbol of respect and glory but only for those who maintain their purity until marriage. For that reason, this culture needs to be preserved as a motivation in maintaining the moral values and sanctity of the lives of unmarried women amidst the foreign cultural phenomenon related to premarital sex freedom. The resulting positive impact is that virgin women, when married, are treated with honour and dignity.

Contribution: This study explores the interplay between theology and culture by comparing the Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55) with Nias bridal traditions. While the Magnificat emphasises Mary's purity and honour as divine gifts, the Nias culture upholds virginity as central to family and communal honour. This analysis highlights how biblical values can resonate with or challenge cultural practices, contributing to contextual theology and fostering dialogue between faith and tradition.

Keywords: virginity; purity; Luke 1:46–55; Nias culture; cultural preservation.

Introduction

Women are essential figures in human survival. The continuity of human generations only occurs when there are men and women. God's command to humans to fill the earth would not be realised without women. People were created as men and women to realise an imperative cultural mandate: having children and grandchildren. However, birth cannot occur through a man but through a woman's body. Apart from the biological point of view, there are many functions and roles of women in various dimensions of life, especially the family, to extend social education, development and others. Women are their children's first teachers; thus, the nation benefits economically and socially (Omoniyi & Ikeola 2023). Women in the religious aspect are recognised as co-workers in God's redemptive work, for example Mother Mary.

Mother Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a central figure in Christianity, particularly in the theology of the incarnation. The Gospel of Luke describes her as the one chosen to bear Jesus Christ, emphasising her virginity and purity, which elevates her as the ideal vessel for this divine role. Her selection highlights spiritual and virtuous attributes over social or material status, emphasising value, modesty, devotion and purity (Rule 2008). Maggang (2019) underscores Mary's role as the mother of God, emphasising her significance in the incarnation of Christ. The fact that God became incarnate through a woman affirms both men and women in the divine plan, as the Father is not a man, and the incarnate son chose to be born of a woman (Vale 2023). This implicitly highlights women's value in God's eyes and their role in redemption.

Mary's virginity is both a physical and spiritual concept, deeply symbolic within Christian theology. In Greco-Roman texts, virginity is often linked to purity, and in Greek, the term *parthenos*, used for Mary, signifies both literal virginity and moral-spiritual purity (Croy & Connor 2012). This reinforces a broader Christian view that purity extends beyond the physical, encompassing grace and moral virtues as essential aspects of being in alignment with God.

For this reason, it is necessary to conduct further research on Mary's life from a theological perspective as the foundation of morality for Nias women in particular. This is important because

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the aspect of Mary's virginity correlates with one of the local wisdoms of the Nias people, namely carrying (lifted using a stretcher) the bride, who is still a virgin when she gets married. At the same time, this culture calls on the wider community that women who are stretchered indicate honourable women because they can maintain their virginity so that they are treated properly through the memento attraction. In other words, self-purity determines whether a woman deserves to be treated with honour.

On the other hand, Mary's election certainly has unique characteristics in her life. God used her origin from a humble and even socially backward family as a way for Jesus to come to the world to bring salvation. If we look at Mary's background, she cannot be counted based on her social, intellectual or worldly background. It must be acknowledged that God's sovereignty played a role in her election, but the values of spirituality, character and morality in Mary are worthy of consideration and appreciation. The life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as depicted in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, can be an example for Christian women today (Kateusz 2019; Laurencia & Nassa 2021).

Furthermore, this study was motivated by the researcher's anxiety when observing various phenomena of extramarital sexual freedom in the millennial generation. Survey in Indonesia results prove that in 2017, around 2% of female adolescents (aged 15 years–24 years) who were interviewed admitted to having had sexual relations before marriage (Novrizaldi 2021). The Nias tradition of honouring virgin brides aligns with Christian theological teachings on purity, as exemplified by Mary's life. Ademiluka's (2023) reinterpretation of the biblical emphasis on virginity in the context of modern culture shows that there are parallels between biblical teachings and contemporary cultural practices that continue to emphasise chastity as a social and moral virtue. This relationship between religious teachings and cultural practices underscores the continuing relevance of virginity in shaping societal norms, even in an era where sexual ethics are evolving.

Therefore, the importance of reviving the function of local wisdom that correlates with the theological dimension lies in maintaining constructive cultural values so that global currents, especially foreign cultures, do not erode them. This research examines the literary unit of the Gospel of Luke 1:46–55 regarding the example of the purity of the virgin Mary and its implications for the culture of carrying a bride in the culture of the Nias tribe, Indonesia. This culture requires a prerequisite, namely self-purity, to obtain honour, glory and appropriate treatment in public.

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a comparative methodology. The Gospel of Luke 1:46–55 will be examined through exegesis, drawing interpretations from various sources to explore its theological implications, particularly regarding the purity of the Virgin Mary. Meanwhile, the Nias bridal culture and virginity will be approached using descriptive analysis, where cultural

practices, values and symbolic meanings will be examined and interpreted within their sociocultural context. This comparative method allows for a deeper understanding of how religious values intersect with cultural traditions, highlighting their significance and the ways they can be preserved in a contemporary setting.

Results and discussion

An exegetical analysis of the Magnificat

This section presents the findings from the theological analysis of Luke 1:46–55 (the Magnificat) and the comparative cultural study of the Nias bridal tradition, '*Mamahea Ni'Owalu*'. This analysis focuses on the values of virginity, purity and honour in theological and cultural contexts. The analysis of Luke 1:46–55 reveals that the theme of purity and humility is central to the portrayal of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Latin term 'magnificat' is mentioned in Luke 1:46 from the Greek word 'μεγαλύνω' [magnify], which means to enlarge, praise or glorify (Strong 1997). Many have argued that Mary's song is strongly similar to Hannah's song (1 Sm 2:1–10) in that it acknowledges the fact that God overthrows rulers and the proud, but is kind to the poor (Constable 2015). Therefore, this section will explain the contents of Mary's song through verse-by-verse exposition and then conduct a theological analysis as the basis for the research objectives.

Section one, verse 46–48

Verse 46: 'And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior'. The word 'soul' is often used in the book of Psalms to praise God while proving that this part of the text is a form of song sung by Mary. Here, the soul in Greek 'ψυχή' is interpreted as the breath of life, will, mind and person (Strong 1997). Glorifying God with the soul means praising God with all your heart, thoughts, feelings and the totality of your life. These are not just words or mere lip service. So, Mary glorified God with all her soul and all her life because of the awareness that only God is worthy of such praise. This urge grew more robust when the Holy Spirit had already dwelt in Mary, so she responded to the words of the angel and her relative Elizabeth by praising God. Glorifying God is an aspect of faith, a spiritual dimension and spiritual values that show Mary as a woman who fears God.

Verse 47: 'And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior'. The word 'heart' comes from 'pneuma', which means spirit, the most vital breath of life in humans. This part is the part that rejoices overflowing in Mary because of God the Saviour, the Deliverer. The words 'God my Savior' prove that Mary herself needs a Saviour and forgiveness of sins (Guzik 2017). Mary is aware of her helplessness as a human being, but she always remembers the source of her salvation. Her joy does not depend on worldly things but only on God. Therefore, she whom God made as the way for the incarnation of Jesus was responded to with joy, not burden. Mary fully accepted what God did for her, namely being chosen as the mother of the Lord. Even though Mary was still a virgin and unmarried,

she truly believed that she would not be humiliated but rather glorified by God.

Verse 48: 'For He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant'. The lowliness in Greek is 'ταπεινῶσις', which means humiliation, be made low, low estate, vile (Strong 1997). The word 'His servant' in this verse in Greek 'δούλη' further explains the meaning of the lowliness, namely a female slave (Strong 1997). This section is the only one that directly describes Mary's low social status, which means she has no significant influence in society (France 2013). If Mary had previously felt low and even humiliated by the social structure that tended to be oppressive (Webb 2018), now she is exalted by God as the subject of His great work.

Section two, verse 49–50

Verse 49: 'For the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is His name'. This section explains that Mary glorifies God because of His power and holiness. Mary's election is a great act of God, and its impact is far into the future. The next generation will call her blessed. God's deeds are done holily, as His name and person are holy. God is sacred and different from humans because He is superior, especially in His moral and ethical perfection (Constable 2015). Although not the same as God, Mary is a woman who commits to living holy and with high integrity.

Verse 50: 'His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation'. The word 'mercy' comes from the Greek word 'eleos', meaning faithful love and lovingkindness, and is shown to those who fear God (Constable 2015). Mary herself fears God so that God's goodness is pleasing to her. Even though she is lowly and not considered according to worldly standards, when someone honours God, he will receive great grace like Mary. Once again, Mary's spiritual aspect is emphasised here as the basis for God's approval.

Section three, verse 51–53

Verses 51–53: 'He has scattered those who are proud... brought down rulers... lifted the humble'. These three verses in Mary's Magnificat are called reversals, and they state that God has the power to make radical changes in the socio-political context by providing justice to the poor and opposing oppressive rulers and rich people who act arrogantly. This part of the Magnificat states about God's three revolutions, namely: (1) Scattering the pride in their hearts, which is called the moral revolution; (2) Bringing down the rulers and exalting the lowly people, which is called the social revolution; and (3) Bestowing everything pleasing to the hungry, and sending the rich away empty-handed is called the economic revolution (Constable 2015). In essence, God can reverse the situation of poor, marginalised and underdeveloped people from various dimensions to receive God's mercy. Mary was someone whose social status was low, inadequate and even despicable, but her life depended on God, and she was ultimately elevated to become the mother of God.

Section four, verse 54–55

Verses 54–55: 'He has helped His servant Israel'. This last stanza reminds us of God's mercy to Israel and Mary (see Is 41:8–9; 42:1; 44:21). God's goodness will not change for Israel because He has been consistent in His covenant from time immemorial. Likewise, God has treated Mary as He does His people (Ps 118:14–16).

Eventually, based on this exegesis, there are some key findings that could be derived. In Luke 1:48, Mary's humility caused God to choose her to be the mother of Jesus, the son of God. God gave her this gift because of her humility. God exalted Mary even though she came from a low social status. This reflects the Christian view that emphasises that humility will receive God's grace and not one's status according to the world. Luke 51–53 also describes a moral, social and economic reversal in which the proud will be humbled. God will frustrate the proud and exalt the lowly (Schubert 2019).

Virginity is often associated with spirituality (K.E. Southwood 2017). According to Speelman (2016), virginity is a unique, but not exclusive, form of spirituality. Virginity is often associated with purity in Greco-Roman texts (Croy & Connor 2012). Luke 1:46–47 highlights Mary's deep spirituality towards God. Luke reflects the theological view that virginity is related to purity. Also, Mary's role as the mother of Jesus is presented as one of honour. Her virginity and moral integrity make her worthy of being elevated to this exalted role, which corresponds to her being glorified by future generations, as stated in Luke 1:48.

Moreover, based on the cultural analysis of the Nias bridal tradition, it reveals strong parallels with the theological values expressed in Luke. In the Nias wedding tradition, the bride allowed to participate in the 'Mamahea Ni'Owalu' traditional ceremony must be a virgin. Virginity is a requirement to be able to perform this ceremony. As explained (Zaluchu 2020) in theological perspective, virginity symbolises honour. This means that the family carrying out the marriage with this ceremony is honourable.

Similar to Mary's glorification in the Magnificat, the Nias bride's virginity is glorified through public ceremonies. The act of carrying the bride highlights her purity and publicly acknowledges her adherence to cultural norms of moral conduct. Just as Mary was elevated in status because of her purity, purity brings goodness. Failure to maintain virginity in Nias customs results in shame. Marriages that occur because the bride is already pregnant will be a shame for the family because they are not allowed to carry out the 'Mamahea Ni'Owalu' ceremony. On the other hand, families who are allowed to carry out this ceremony will rejoice and be seen by the community as honourable families because they could uphold virginity. From a theological perspective, Mary in Luke 1:46–47 twice mentions rejoicing because God gave her a gift, namely being chosen to be the mother of Jesus the Saviour.

Virginity, purity and honour in Nias bridal culture

Marriage in the Nias tribe follows three stages: finding a bride [*famaigi ono alawe*], engagement [*fanunu manu*] and the wedding celebration [*falöwa*], which is the culminating public event involving both families and the village community (Zaluchu 2020). The final stage, *falöwa*, includes the unique tradition of carrying the bride in a ceremonial chair when the groom's family returns to their village (Duha, Ndruru & Laia 2022). The bride is seated on a stretcher – a chair tied to bamboo poles – and lifted by the groom's relatives as a symbolic gesture of honour. The key to this tradition is that only virgin brides are allowed to be lifted onto the chair using a stretcher. This ritual emphasises the value of virginity about the honour of the bride, her family and her community. On the other hand, a girl who is not carried because she is pregnant outside means embarrassing herself, her parents and close family. Being pregnant without a marriage is an immoral act that is so shameful because it causes adverse reactions from society (Halawa 2019).

Indeed, virginity, purity and honour play significant roles in shaping societal expectations and marital customs. These values are deeply rooted in the patriarchal structure of the Nias society, where a woman's chastity before marriage is closely tied to family honour and social status. Virginity in Nias culture is considered a marker of a woman's moral integrity and familial respectability. A bride who is perceived as 'pure' is highly valued, as her virginity symbolises not only personal virtue but also the honour of her lineage. The expectation of premarital chastity is reinforced through cultural narratives and customary practices, which emphasise a woman's responsibility to uphold the dignity of her family. The loss of virginity before marriage, whether consensual or not, can lead to severe social repercussions, including the potential rejection of a bride by her prospective husband's family or a diminished dowry price. Further, purity in Nias bridal culture extends beyond physical chastity; it also encompasses obedience, modesty and adherence to traditional norms. A bride is expected to demonstrate not only sexual purity but also moral and behavioural propriety. This ideal reflects broader gender expectations, where women are required to embody virtues such as patience, loyalty and submission, ensuring their suitability as wives and mothers. Also, honour is a collective value in Nias society, influencing familial and communal relationships. Marriage is not merely a personal union but a transaction that reinforces alliances and social stability. The bride's perceived purity directly impacts the honour of her family, reinforcing patriarchal control over women's bodies and choices. However, modern influences, including education and globalisation, have begun to challenge these rigid expectations, gradually shifting perspectives towards gender equality and individual autonomy in Nias bridal customs.

In the past, Nias women were secluded before marriage to protect their purity, and interaction with men was strictly controlled to prevent moral transgressions, such as adultery, which is considered a grave sin [*horö*] that damages both

individual and communal honour (Telaumbanua 2015). Constructive local cultural wisdom must be lived to ward off destructive foreign cultures. From a cultural and theological perspective, the urgency of searching for the meaning of the tradition of carrying Nias women lies here.

Comparative analysis of virginity in the Magnificat and Nias bridal culture

The comparative analysis highlights several insights that link theological and cultural perspectives on virginity, as can be seen in Table 1.

The findings of the theological and cultural analysis of Nias show that there is a strong relationship between virginity and purity. Virginity is a symbol of the honour of society and the goodness of God. The view of society about the bride who is allowed to participate in the '*Mamahe Ni'Owalu*' ceremony because of her virginity is in line with God's view of Mary, who was chosen to be the mother of Jesus because of her purity.

There are similarities and differences between virginity in Luke 1:46–55 and the Nias traditional ceremony '*Mamahe Ni'Owalu*'. The theological and cultural contexts both emphasise the importance of virginity as a sign of honour and purity. The following text presents the theological and cultural implications contained in virginity and its relevance to the current discourse that promotes cultural preservation and joint protection of women's purity in the form of preventing sexual harassment behaviour.

Theological and cultural implications for contemporary Nias society

Viewed from the theological perspective of Luke 1:46–55, the glorification of Mary, the mother of Jesus, based on spiritual values and the holiness of her life, has similarities with the glorification of a Nias bride based on her holiness, especially the value of virginity. This is part of the implication of Mary's life, which much earlier showed the holiness of her life before and after giving birth to Jesus (Frizzell 1999; Neumann 1982; Word on Fire n.d.). This narrative reinforces the Christian understanding that divine favour is not based

TABLE 1: Comparative analysis of virginity.

Number	Aspects	Theological Perspective of Luke 1:46–55	Cultural Perspective (Nias Tradition)
1	Shared values of honour and purity	'Mary's purity is glorified by God and serves as the basis for her role as the mother of Jesus. Her humility and virginity are key to her divine honour'.	'A bride's virginity is a prerequisite for honour in Nias society. Virgin brides are publicly honoured and respected through the ritual of lifting during the ' <i>Mamahe Ni'Owalu</i> ' ceremony'.
2	Public display of purity	'Mary's purity is declared in the Magnificat, where her blessedness is publicly acknowledged by future generations'.	'The Nias bride's virginity is publicly acknowledged during the lifting ritual, which serves as a community display of her purity and moral worth'.
3	Cultural preservation of purity values	'Theological teachings on Mary's virginity preserve values of purity and holiness, reinforcing moral integrity in Christian tradition'.	'The Nias tradition of lifting the bride serves to preserve cultural norms related to purity, reinforcing community expectations of moral behaviour'.

on social status but on one's moral and spiritual purity (Croy & Connor 2012; Rule 2008). If Mary was honoured by being pregnant by the Holy Spirit and becoming the mother of God, then the Nias bride was honoured by being lifted, carried and exalted at her wedding. Theologically, the meeting point of the glorification of Mary and the Nias woman lies in the holiness or sanctity of life. This means that the Nias culture in carrying the bride contains theological values because there is an act of glorification and appreciation based on exemplary faith, morality and noble values that lead to the holiness of life.

On the other hand, glory and appreciation can also be obtained through achievements, rank, position, personality and so on. However, the glory displayed by the local culture of carrying the bride of the Nias tribe is obtained through character and integrity that is worthy of praise, not because of any prestige. Even though the child of nobility is rich and highly educated, if she is unable to maintain her purity or even gets pregnant out of wedlock, then the woman will not be carried in a litter when married as a symbol of glory. Suppose the local wisdom of the Nias tribe is viewed from a feminist theological perspective. In that case, it is not what position, role, contribution, performance or prestige that is considered but rather an example of a holy life and good morals. For example, the figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, was chosen because of her humility and simplicity. In many cultures, retaining one's virginity was rewarded while losing it resulted in punishment (Ademiluka 2023). This research also encourages that the award (reward) given to someone is not limited to achieving capacity but also pays attention to the aspects of integrity, character and high spirituality.

The public recognition of virginity in the Nias tradition underscores the cultural importance placed on purity. As noted by Zaluchu (2020) and Duha et al. (2022), a bride's virginity is seen as a reflection of her family's honour, and failing to uphold this expectation may result in social shame and exclusion from the ritual. This finding resonates with the theological concept that purity brings not only divine favour but also communal honour and respect.

The findings of this study are particularly relevant in light of evolving sexual norms and the challenges of preserving cultural traditions in a globalised world. In both theological and cultural contexts, virginity is treated as an essential aspect of moral and social identity. However, the increasing acceptance of sexual freedom and premarital relationships in contemporary society raises questions about the relevance of these values today.

As Novrizaldi (2021) points out, rising rates of premarital sexual activity and unintended pregnancies among young people in Indonesia reflect a growing disconnect between traditional values and modern behaviour. In this context, the preservation of cultural traditions like '*Mamahea Ni'Owalu*' faces significant challenges, particularly as younger generations may view these practices as outdated or

restrictive. From a theological perspective, the emphasis on purity and virginity continues to hold moral significance, especially within conservative Christian communities. However, feminist theologians like Kateusz (2019) argue that such teachings must be reinterpreted in a way that empowers women rather than restricts them to patriarchal norms of purity and modesty. This suggests that while the theological value of purity remains relevant, it may need to be understood in a more nuanced and empowering context.

In the Nias culture, women hold a position of great respect, a reverence so profound that they are shielded from direct contact with men before marriage. This tradition not only protects women but also preserves their dignity, emphasising the community's commitment to honour and safeguard their purity. The act of carrying a virgin bride on a stretcher is the ultimate symbol of this cultural respect, a public affirmation of her honour and virtue.

Men in Nias society honour women by upholding their purity, reflecting a shared responsibility to protect and value women's dignity. This article contributes to the urgent call for preventing sexual harassment and violence, stressing that this responsibility is universal. A woman who remains untouched by violence or harassment embodies the ideals of respect and integrity, core values in Nias families, where virginity is a source of immense pride.

The parallel between the cultural practice of honouring virgin brides in Nias and the theological significance of Mary, chosen as the mother of Jesus for her purity and humility, cannot be overlooked. Just as Mary was revered for her holiness, Nias women who maintain their purity are celebrated in their community. This enduring tradition serves as a cultural reminder of the importance of protecting and uplifting women while also offering a lens through which modern society can reflect on its own values regarding women's dignity and honour.

Conclusion

The concept of virginity in Luke 1:46–55, also known as the Magnificat, reflects theological ideals of holiness and purity. In Christian theology, Mary's virginity is viewed not only as a physical condition but also as a symbol of spiritual purity. Mary's virginity is considered a sign of her humility and commitment to a life of holiness, making her worthy to bear Jesus, the Saviour. God's choice of Mary was not based on her social status, but on her moral and spiritual qualities. In Christian theology, purity symbolises a close relationship with God and obedience to His divine will. The Magnificat highlights that Mary's purity and humility were the reasons God elevated her to the honoured position of being the mother of the Messiah. Thus, her virginity is seen as an expression of holiness, a necessary condition for the divine purpose she was chosen to fulfil. This theological view positions virginity as not only a personal virtue but also a requirement for divine favour.

In the Nias culture of Indonesia, virginity also carries significant cultural implications, particularly concerning honour and dignity. In the traditional Nias wedding ceremony called *Mamahea Ni'Owalu*, a virgin bride is carried on a ceremonial stretcher as a symbol of respect and honour. This tradition emphasises the importance of virginity as a marker of moral integrity in Nias society. Virginity is not only considered a personal attribute but also a representation of the family's and community's honour. Public recognition of a bride's virginity in this ritual demonstrates how virginity is regarded as a high moral value, one that elevates the social standing of both the bride and her family. Conversely, a bride who is not a virgin does not receive the same honour, reflecting the public and communal significance attached to purity.

These theological and cultural values provide important insights for contemporary discussions on morality, gender roles and cultural preservation in the face of modern global challenges. The values of purity and honour found in both Christian theology and Nias culture emphasise the importance of respecting women and maintaining moral integrity in society. However, with the rise of global norms around sexual freedom, such as increasing premarital sexual activity and unintended pregnancies, these traditional values face significant challenges. For instance, in Indonesia, the growing number of unintended pregnancies reflects a shift away from traditional values. Therefore, it is crucial for modern society to reinterpret these values in ways that empower women rather than reinforcing restrictive or patriarchal norms. This reinterpretation could involve promoting respect for women's bodies and dignity while recognising individual freedom. Additionally, preserving cultural traditions like *Mamahea Ni'Owalu* remains vital for maintaining cultural identity in a globalised world though these practices must adapt to more inclusive and progressive modern values.

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I.G. is the sole author of this research article.

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