



Ephemeral Isle

TRADITION AND TOURISM VIE FOR THE FUTURE OF NIAS

Cool air blasts across my face as I gaze out a broken window on our twin-engine airplane, bound for Gunungsitoli on the island of Nias, 125 kilometers off the west coast of Sumatra. Below, whitecaps frolic atop the deep azure waters of Mentawai Strait. Today, these very waves, spawned by strong currents in the Indian Ocean, are shaping the island's future. Once known for its exquisite wooden architecture and fierce tribal ways, Nias has become a mecca for surfers, whose only connection to the past is through reenacted war dances and the buying of native trinkets.

At 130 kilometers long and 45 kilometers wide, Nias is just slightly smaller than better-known Bali. Until the Dutch colonized the island in 1825, its rugged terrain, malarial climate, and warlike population had isolated the peoples of Nias from mainstream Sumatran culture. As a result, islanders were spared most of the dramatic influx of Indian, Islamic, and European cultural influences that swept through the rest of Indonesia. In relative solitude, they developed a feudal society, built on a reverence for ancestors and those who could mediate between this world and the next. Over the past century, however, Christianity has taken hold on the island, replacing traditional beliefs, with old ways gently yielding to the lure of a modern world.

I have come to Nias on behalf of the National Museum of Denmark to retrace the steps of Agner Møller, a Danish doctor who carried out extensive ethnographic work on the island in the 1920s, and to document what is left of the island's traditional villages and their wooden architecture. Møller, a somewhat controversial figure, procured an extraordinary collection of artifacts from the island on behalf of the National Museum, including significant portions of an *omo sebua*, or chief's house, purchased from its owners in the village of Hillimondregeraja.

Much has changed since my first visit in 1988. At that time, the island was just beginning to emerge as a favored destination for backpackers and surfers, who sought its rustic hospitality, lively nightlife, and towering "righthanders," considered

text and photographs by
JESPER KURT-NIELSEN

A TOURIST BUNGALOW AT SORAKE BEACH IS ONE OF MANY THAT HAS SPRUNG UP IN RECENT YEARS TO CATER TO AN EVER-GROWING SURFING POPULATION. ONCE ISOLATED FROM MAINSTREAM SUMATRAN CULTURE, NIAS IS NOW HOME TO THE INDONESIAN SURFING OPEN, HELD EVERY SUMMER.





THE SECLUDED HILLTOP VILLAGE OF ORAHILLY, TOP, IS EMBRACED BY TROPICAL JUNGLE. A SURFER ENJOYS ONE OF NIAS' FAMOUS "RIGHTHANDERS."

among the best waves in the world. Although many of the island's traditional buildings were in desperate need of care and attention, they were, nevertheless, still standing. Today, however, concrete buildings with roofs of corrugated metal outnumber those constructed of wood; in many villages, satellite dishes have displaced stone megaliths dedicated to revered ancestors as village focal points.

The recent political crisis in Indonesia, and the hardship it has created, have made it more difficult to travel on the island than in the past. The only improvement I have noticed since my last visit is the condition of the coastal road from Gunungsitoli to the south end of the island, the by-product of a failed attempt to

enhance the island's allure as a "high-end" tourist destination a few years back.

Upon my arrival in Sorake Beach, which I planned to use as a base of operations, I was surprised to find not the idyllic cluster of rustic palm huts lining the beach where I had stayed on my previous visit, but numerous concrete buildings, mostly guesthouses, abandoned midway through construction and left to rot in the tropical sun. The most opulent of these was the Sorake Beach Resort, a multimillion-dollar establishment built to cater to rich and discerning travelers, primarily those from Japan. Political unrest in Indonesia and a fiscal crisis in Japan, however, put a halt to the project. Nevertheless, the hotel is tended by a staff of nine that spends most of its time cultivating vegetables

on once-manicured lawns. As I walked through the reception area, the only sound I heard, apart from my own footsteps, was that of geckos. Clearly, good intentions had gone astray.

Over the course of a month, I took several thousand images of more than a dozen traditional villages, all of which had been documented and photographed by Møller nearly a century ago. Despite enhancement of the coastal road, several of the villages remain accessible only by narrow paths that wind through dense tropical jungle and rugged terrain. I knew from my last visit that much had changed since the doctor conducted his research. I was disheartened, however, to find that in 15 years, many of the island's traditional buildings had fallen victim to merciless sun, tropical rains, insect infestation, and neglect. Others had been completely stripped of their magnificent woodcarvings. Overharvesting of timber has made it impossible to rebuild or restore the chief's houses and in several villages, there is nothing but an empty spot where in earlier times, a magnificent building rose above the forest canopy.

The economic situation has given rise to a rampant trade in old objects. In one village, I spoke with the headman/chief, and he was willing—almost insisting—to cut out carvings from the wall panels in his house, without any regard to their age or importance. In another, the headman said to me in a melancholy, remorseful tone: "Everything is gone, nothing is left, and everything has been sold," his words echoing in a stately, but empty, audience hall, robbed of all its former glory.

Despite the seemingly desperate state of affairs, a few splendid *omo sebua* remain, in the villages

OVER THE PAST CENTURY, CHRISTIANITY HAS TAKEN HOLD ON THE ISLAND, EVIDENCED BY A CROSS MARKING A GRAVE IN THE VILLAGE OF HILLISIMARTANÖ, BELOW LEFT. SATELLITE DISHES HAVE COME TO DOMINATE MANY A TRADITIONAL VILLAGE, LOWER LEFT. PLASTIC WATER BOTTLES, A CHURCH, AND ELECTRICAL LINES HERALD THE ARRIVAL OF THE MODERN WORLD IN HILIAMAE TO, BELOW.



VANISHING VERNACULAR

Traditional Houses of Nias

text and photos by ALAIN VIERO

When I began traveling to Nias in the 1970s, I was struck by the imposing and ornate chief's houses that dominated most of the local villages, particularly on the south end of the island. Erected on stilts, the chief's houses—known as *omo sebua* (big house) or *omo lasara* (house with *lasara* or dragons' heads)—towered more than 20 meters above the ground, had steeped pitched roofs and skylights, and were adorned with some of the finest wood carvings known in Indonesia.

At that time, most of the chief's dwellings, which served as royal residences and community meeting houses, were in relatively good condition. The older ones, particularly those built in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were in need of some repair but not much beyond routine maintenance. Perhaps more important, village houses—for royal and commoner alike—were still being built using traditional methods and materials.

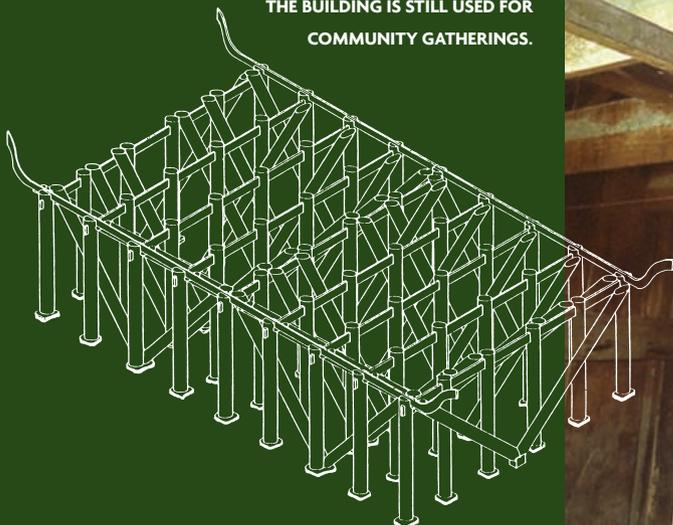
In the 1980s, I was invited back to the island to design a small, local museum for a friend, Pastor Johannes Hämmerle of the Catholic Mission of Nias. While I was there I was asked if I could assist in the restoration of several *omo sebua*. I was surprised to find that in just over a decade, many of the chief's houses had fallen into ruin. One, in the village Ondhondrö, had collapsed, having been abandoned by the family who lived there; they were too poor to maintain it. Another in Bawömataluö—the only village that has managed to capitalize on the few visitors to the island—was being completely rebuilt as a tourist attraction with government funds. New panels and sculptures had to be carved to decorate the building; its originals had been sold off to tourists or art dealers.

Today, sadly, only five buildings predating the mid-nineteenth century still stand—in the villages of Bawömataluö, Sifalagö Suzuwa, Hilinawalö Gomo, Ondhondrö, and Hilinawalö Mazino. The *omo sebua* in Hilinawalö Mazino is by far the most beautiful. Built six generations ago by Sihola Bulölö, whose descendants still occupied the dwelling until 1979, the house stands on a terrace facing the village's street. It is the first house in the village to receive the morning sun. Consequently, it is also the first house the commoners see when they wake up. Its location is a reflection of the revered status of the chief, whose title, *si'ulu*, means "the one who is upstream."

The house has a superb, east-facing facade. Beneath the window, there are three levels of painted panels. The upper level is covered with a frieze of diamonds and leaves, the



ONE OF ONLY A FEW SURVIVING CHIEF'S HOUSES ERECTED ON STILTS, THE OMO SEBUA IN HILINAWALÖ MAZINO, FACING PAGE, WAS BUILT IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. THE BUILDING IS STILL USED FOR COMMUNITY GATHERINGS.





two lower ones with a frieze of rosettes, with the whole decor being black, white, and red. A footbridge leads to a flight of stairs beneath the house. One enters the building through a door in the floor on the main audience hall. Interior spaces are adorned with numerous carved, painted panels—some of which are remnants of earlier dwellings. On the left side of the building, another flight of stairs lead to a verandah.

The public area within the house measures 103 square meters. On the right wall is an altar for the ancestor figures, adorned with *lasara* head carvings on each end. The *lasara* is the symbol of the *si'ulu*, the chief. On display are numerous symbols and foreign objects acquired by the chief, including a collection of gongs, drums, and steel chains from Dutch ships.

Although the chief's house in Hilinawalō Mazino has survived for nearly two centuries, it is in desperate need of conservation, suffering from age and insect infestation. Moreover, the traditional methods of construction have been for the most part forgotten, concrete having displaced wood as the island's preferred building material. Economic hardship in the region compounded by a shortage of timber on the island has thwarted restoration efforts. Given the perilous state of the building, it was included on WMF's 2000 and 2002 lists of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. Without funds and technical assistance, as well as an advocacy campaign to increase awareness of the elegant wooden buildings, we are certain to lose an exquisite, yet vanishing, vernacular form.



YOUNG CHILDREN PEER OUT FROM A TRADITIONAL HOUSE IN HILLIMONDREGERAJA.

of Ondhondrō, Hilinawalō Mazino, and Bawōmataluō, the latter significantly rebuilt by the Sumatran government as a tourist attraction. At present, Nias does not have the infrastructure or even the service level to attract, much less support, the high-end tourism necessary to generate the revenue needed to preserve or maintain what remains of their vanishing vernacular architecture. Nor has there been any economic incentive to do so. Surfboard rentals and the sale of antiquities stripped from the houses account for nearly all of the island's economy.

In addition to the destruction of traditional houses, the economic crisis has fostered a rise in crime, an issue that was never thought of ten years ago. During my stay, perhaps 20 tourists arrived in the area. Most, however, left almost immediately, driven off by aggressive beach vendors and innkeepers whose idea of cornering the market was to prevent guests from dining anywhere outside their hotels.

Moreover, traditional cultural values continue to erode at an accelerated pace. For all their isolation, villagers now experience the never-ending joy of karate movies, soap operas, and music videos on flickering television screens that never seem to be switched off. What has not been influenced by television, has clearly been affected by the surfing culture, with its cool, carefree lifestyle and impact on the economy. Nearly all of the island's tourism revenues are generated during the brief few weeks each year when Nias hosts the Indonesian Surfing Open.

For the adventure traveler who delights in the splendors of Angkor or of the regal city of Luang Prabang, a trip to Nias is more than worth the effort. And, if the political situation in the region ever stabilizes, and if the Indonesian government is able to resist falling into the hands of fundamentalists, it is possible that a wider audience might be able to appreciate the cultural treasures Nias has to offer. Time, however, is clearly running out. ■