



THE GREAT CHIEF'S HOUSE AT BARUYULASARA PULAU TELLO, THE BATU ISLANDS, INDONESIA

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Fig. 1: The *omo sebua* in Baruyulasara, Pulau Tello, Batu Islands

Until the mid-1970s, the tiny Indonesian island of Tello, in the Batu Islands to the south of the island of Nias, could boast of one of the finest chief's houses in Indonesia (Fig. 1). It was in the village of Baruyulasara¹ situated on the northeast part of the island. The Batu Islands were settled chiefly by people from South Nias approximately two hundred and fifty years ago (Suzuki 1970, p. 62). They brought with them the customs, art and architecture of that area. In some respects, the culture of the Batu Islands has diverged from their South Nias sources, while in others they seem to preserve an archaic form of the culture. Evidence of this can be seen in their vocabulary and in their forms of art and architecture. At the time of my field work in South Nias in 1974, five chief's houses still existed, including this one in the

Batu Islands (Feldman 1977). Unfortunately, I was unable to get to the Batu Islands at the time, and the house had begun to collapse by 1975.² However I am most grateful to Marion Peltzer who permitted me to use the photographs her sister, Dorothy Peltzer, had taken of the house on 13 October 1965. These photos constitute the most complete record of the house available.³ At that time, many of the original images were still installed in the house.

Baruyulasara is one of the three main villages on the tiny island of Tello. The other two are Loboï, and Hili'amaodula.⁴ Baruyulasara consists of a single street with its entrance facing the beach and, as is typical of South Nias organization, houses face each other across the street with the chief's house at the end of the street



opposite the entrance. In front of the *omo sebua*⁵ was a small, walled-in stone plaza with two stone seats, presumably for the village chief and the head of the class of commoners (*si`ila*). This was the venue for village oratory (*gorahua newali*). Similar carved stone seats with armrests can also be found in the villages of Hilisimaetanö and Hilimondregeraya in South Nias.⁶

In the 20th century, this *omo sebua* was the oldest surviving wooden structure in all of Nias and the Batu Islands. In an anonymous article that describes the Batu Islands in 1850, the author mentions the large house at Baruyulasara and describes it in detail. Apart from the measurements of the house and the number of posts beneath it, which seem exaggerated, the description matches that of the present house (Anon 1853, pp. 92-93). If that *omo sebua* was not leveled in the disastrous earthquake and tsunami that hit the Batu Islands on 16 February 1861 (see Kielstra 1892, pp. 267-268), then it is likely that the *omo sebua* that survived until the mid-1970s is the same one that was described in the 1853 article. According to M. A. Bouman's informants the house was built by the *rajo* Siwa Badanö, but as there is unfortunately no genealogy recorded for this village, it is impossible to accurately estimate the age of the house (Suzuki et al. 1973, p. 602).

Peltzer estimated the house at Baruyulasara to be about 60 feet tall, 100 feet deep and about 35 feet wide (1966, p. 95). The supporting pillars were about three feet in diameter and were perfectly cylindrical (see Fig. 2). This house did not have – nor did it need – a stone platform in order to increase the apparent size of the building. Not only was the house very tall, but it was also wider than most other *omo sebua*. The only potentially larger recorded *omo sebua* is the one at Bawömataluo in South Nias (Fig. 3).⁷

The façade of the house showed some basic differences from the usual South Nias type. Generally, at the front of the house, there is a series of four levels to the floor (Fig. 4 gives the basic architectural vocabulary for South Nias houses). The top level, called *harefa*, was missing at Baruyulasara causing the lattice window (*bawaduhasa*) to be much larger than usual extending all the way up to the roof. The *salögötö* is raised by means of special props and the *ta'io danedane* (Fig. 5). From the interior, this gives the window area the appearance of floating above the lower stepped levels (Fig. 6). There is no trace of painting on the facade of the house (Fig. 7), and this is apparent even in the oldest photographs (e.g. Tillema 1922, Vol. 5, p. 403). However, the house may be so old that the paint had already vanished due to exposure to the elements by the time even those earli-



Fig. 2: Pillars under the chief's house, Baruyulasara village



Fig. 3: *Omo sebua* in Bawömataluo, South Nias. Photo: J. Feldman 1974

est photographs were taken. The *lasara* was very simplified, consisting of two diverging curves and a tongue shown in low relief along the lower jaw (Fig. 8). Both the large trellis window without a *harefa* and the style of the *lasara* are aspects of Central Nias architecture and not otherwise found in South Nias types (Figs. 9, 10, 11).

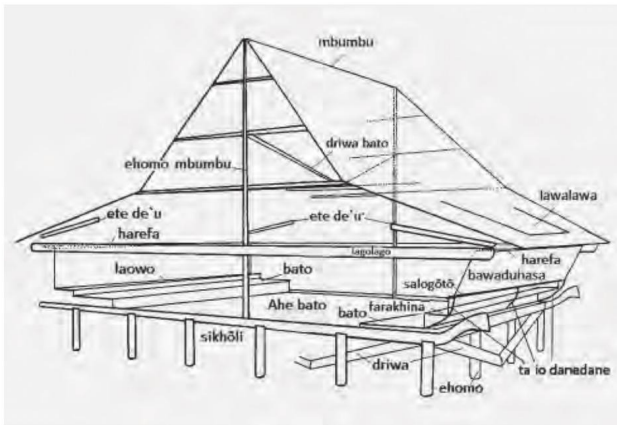


Fig. 4: Diagram of the major parts of a South Nias house. Drawing: J. Feldman

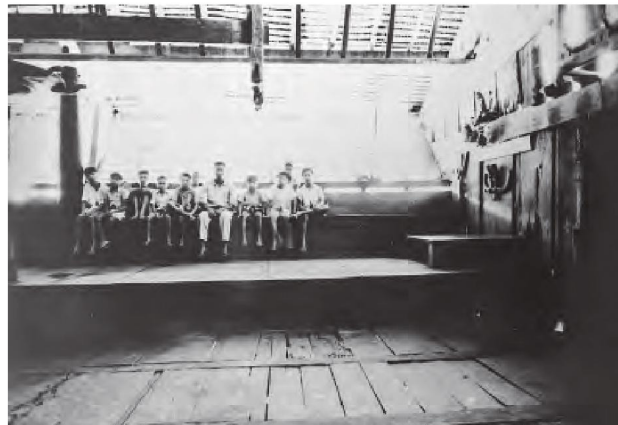


Fig. 6: Interior of chief's house facing the front trellis window



Fig. 5: Façade of the chief's house



Fig. 7: Façade showing unpainted parts



Fig. 8: Lasara on the Baruyulasara house

In other respects, the façade showed a clear relationship to other well-documented South Nias *omo sebua*. The *sikhöli* are unpainted but otherwise are identical to those found in South Nias. On the underside of the *farachina* there are eight relief carvings which depict female headdresses (Fig. 7). On all *omo sebua*, the *farachina*

is made out of a single piece of hardwood. The one on the house at Baruyulasara was especially large due to the extra width of the house. In front of the *farachina*, supports held up the *salögötö*. Normally the *salögötö* is a narrow strip that serves as an armrest, however, due to the gigantic scale of this house, it functioned as a large seat (Fig. 6).



Fig. 9: *Lasara* on the Baruyulasara house



Fig. 10: *Lasara* on a central Nias chief's house between Orahili Village on the Eho River and the Susuwa River (Schröder 1917: Plate LXVI, Figure 127)

A stone carved into four distinct steps leads to the *ete* (bridge) under the house (Fig. 12). At the centre of the house the steps lead to the left, and then to the left again, before one enters the *tawölö* or front room (Schröder 1926, p. 41).

The *tawölö* was especially grand. Not only was it large, but major sections of the walls and floor were made out of highly-polished *kafini* wood. This wood is found only in the Batu Islands, especially on Pini Island. It is a dense, hard, black wood that has great prestige value in Nias and is extremely durable. Its liberal use throughout this house may be one of the reasons that it lasted so long. The first central post in the front of the room was the *khölökhölö*. It was a thick pillar with very restrained decoration near the top, consisting of hooks (*saita*) and a small amount of engraved and high relief design (Fig. 13). Behind this was the second pillar with its



Fig. 11: *Lasara* from the chief's house in Bawömataluo Village. Photo: J. Feldman 1974



Fig. 12: Stone steps to the Baruyulasara house

extraordinary *ni'o telao gazi* (decorated capitol) (Fig. 14). Its decoration resembled the one at Onohondro village in South Nias, only here, it was more restrained and much more carefully executed. The post was especially thick and made out of the same piece of wood as the



Fig. 13: Front pillar *khölokhölo* in the front room

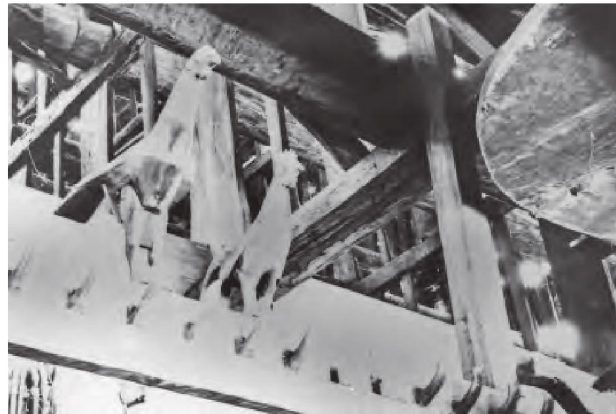


Fig. 16: *La'iya gana'a* figures on the bracket

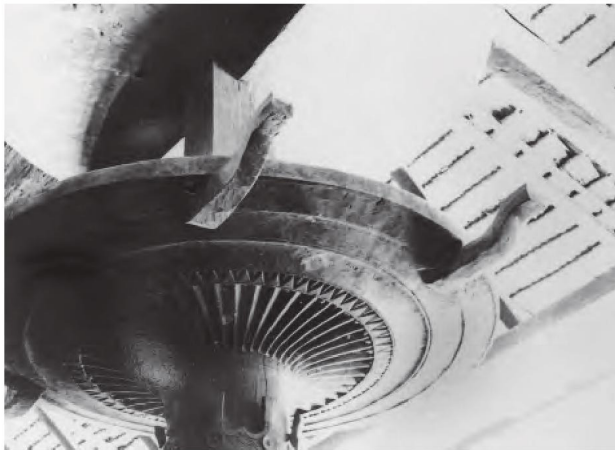


Fig. 14: Second pillar from the front with *ni'otelaugazi*

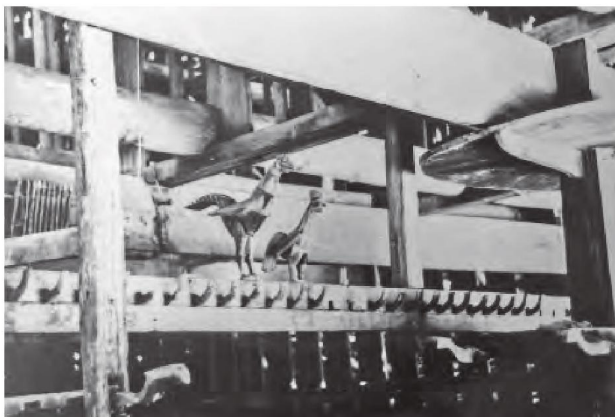


Fig. 15: Bracket across the front of the front room

disc. On the post there were *saita* and very intricate floral ornaments. In all South Nias *omo sebua*, the *ni'otelau gazi* is a showpiece intended to demonstrate the skill of the master carver (*tuka sonekhenekhe*) and to be the proud showpiece of the royal family (*si'ulu*).

An elaborate set of brackets was suspended behind the second *khölokhölo* (Fig. 15). Along the extensive wooden framework there were many *saita*, some stylized as *sichöli*. The *sichöli* design appeared on the edge of the *ni'o telo gazi* as well. The bracket system extended to the right and left of the midpoint of the room, but stopped several feet short of the side walls. Originally, Chinese plates (*figa zatua*) were suspended from the *saita* in wicker hangers (see Frickenschmidt 1919, pp. 58-60 and 1929, pp. 62-63). In Peltzer's photographs, two carvings of roosters can be seen above the bracket (Fig. 16). These *la'iya gana'a* were made whenever a nobleman commissioned the making of gold ornaments. The cock symbolizes the prowess of the ruler during the large feast that accompanies the commission (see Schröder 1926, p. 42; Steinhart 1937, p. 152). Behind the *la'iya* along the *silötö batö*, there were several *famaso* or *ache*, small, roughly-carved sticks of palm wood which represent newborn children (see Frickenschmidt 1924, p. 55). Possibly next to that was originally a dancing female figure or a male image brandishing weapons commemorating the dancing at a feast.

Wooden images were an integral element of Nias architecture. Those in the Batu Islands follow the same patterns as in South Nias, with regional variations in terminology and form. Ancestor figures are called *hazi nuwu* or *ndrogondrogo*⁸. These are standing figures that only have stumps for arms and have heart-shaped faces that are formed by having the line of the nose extend around the eyebrows, over the cheeks and meet at the chin (Fig. 17). Many such figures can also be found in the *omo sebua* in Hilinawalö Mazingö in Southeastern Nias (Schröder 1917, Plate LXXXI, fig. 151). The figures are generally cruder than their South Nias counterparts and sometimes exhibit restrained painting that is a bit more extensive than South Nias counterparts. The ancestral

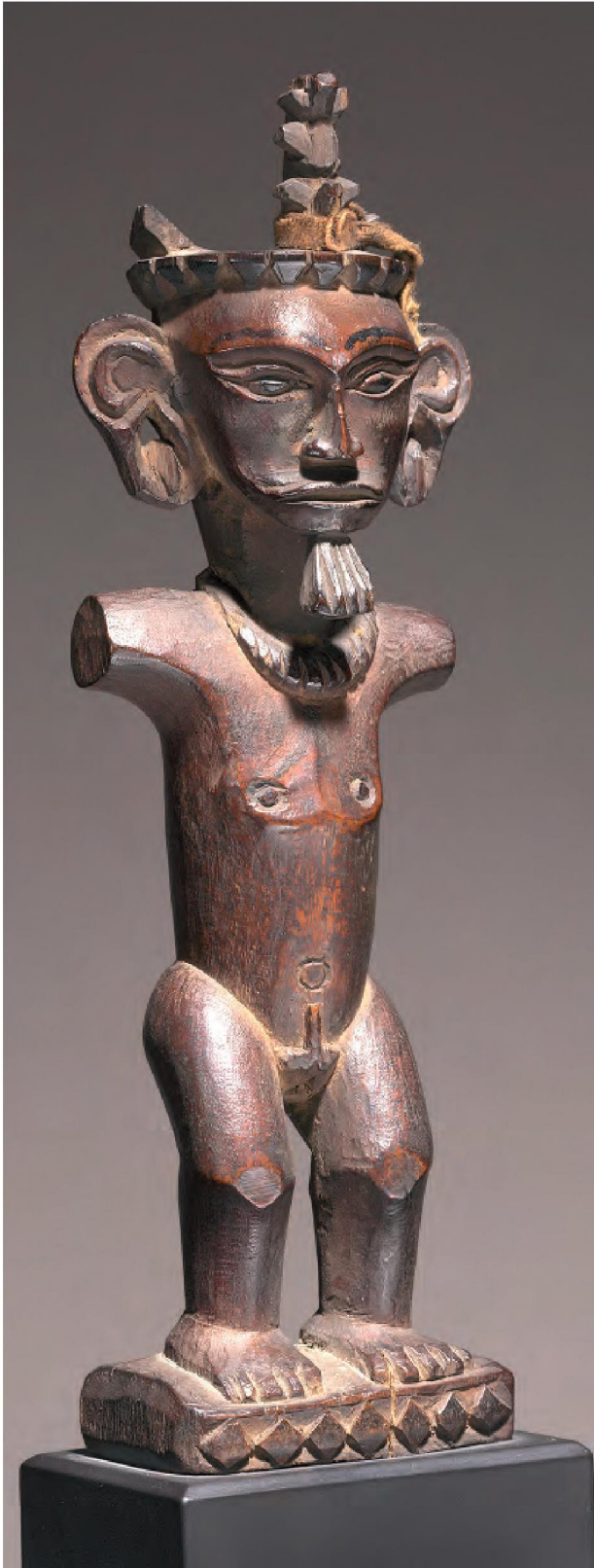


Fig. 17: *Hazi nuwu* or *ndrogondrogo* figure. Collection of Alan Varela: photo courtesy of Thomas Murray



Fig. 18: Ancestral altar

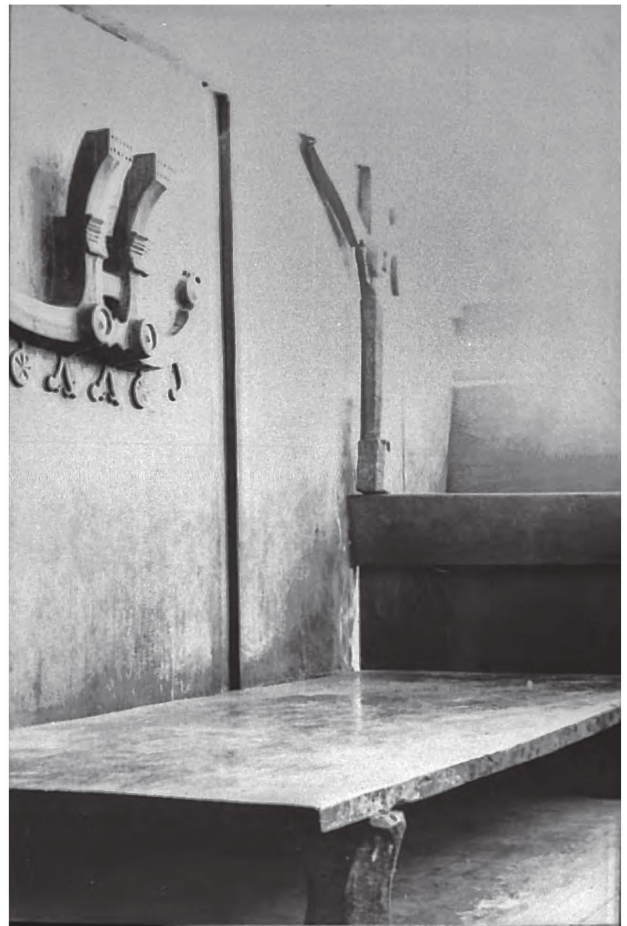


Fig. 19: *Siraha* figure and *laso sohagu* panel left wall (facing forward in the front room)

altar (*öri hazi nuwu*) consists of a plank with a curved miniature *sikhöli* at the front (Fig. 18) (Steinhart 1937, p. 109, fig. 30).

Forked images are also found in the Batu Islands. These *siraha* are described in the earliest literature of the Dutch period (Horner 1840, p. 342). In another description, the very large image that signifies head-



Fig. 20: Right wall, ancestral altar and *laso sohagu*

hunting (*adu so bawa zihönö* or *adu hörö*) is mentioned (Schröder 1926, p. 42).

Another image found in the Batu Islands is the *lawölö*. It stands about a metre high and brandishes a sword and shield – made of wood (Horner 1840, p. 352). This could be found in the village square as a protector and can also be found in the chief's house. It typically brandishes an enormous phallus (Steinhart 1937, p. 126)

In Peltzer's photographs, several images can still be seen along the left and right walls of the *tawölö*. On the left side, there is a *siraha* between the *farachina* and *lagolago*. This image has *daha* (forks), no arms or legs, and the heart-shaped face typical of images from the Batu Islands. To the left (Fig. 19), is the *laso sohagu*, complete with female ornaments. The meaning of the *laso sohagu* in the Batu Islands is the same as in Nias: i.e., it indicates that the golden ornaments shown are in fact owned by the royal residents of the house (see Schröder 1933, pp. 87-88). Along the right wall are three *siraha*, an ancestral altar, and another *laso sohagu* (Fig.



Fig. 21: Early photo of the same altar by Viruly (1923)

20). The ancestral altar (*öri hazi nuwu*) consists of an extended plank on top of the *lagolago*. Armless, standing *ndrogondrogo* or *hazi nuwu* were once lined up here along with pigs' skulls as offerings. One old photograph shows six images on this altar and at least three on subsidiary altars to the left of the remaining *öri* (Viruley 1923, p. 89). Only three ancestor figures remain in the photograph along with three pigs' skulls as offerings. The same skulls appear in the old photograph (Fig. 21). The *sichöli* in front of the altar is far too short for the plank which holds the *hazi nuwu*. A close examination of the photograph reveals a shorter plank underneath, which actually supports the *sichöli*. This suggests that the altar was originally designed to only hold a few images and was expanded later.

The *laso sohagu* on the right side is roughly carved (Fig. 22). There is no obvious indication as to whether it represents male or female ornaments; however, since the one on the left wall is distinctly female, this one ought to be male. It has *saita*, *ni'o woliwoli* (fern motifs) and other ornaments being unidentifiable.



Fig. 22: *Laso sohagu* right wall

Along the same wall (see Fig. 23), there are two forked images which are called *siraha sabila*. According to Peltzer's informants, these are used to correct a problem when there is a question involving the law or when something has gone wrong, such as a transgression of some sort. Functionally they are related to the Nias *adu hörö* and *sabila* may be the term for *adu hörö* in the Batu Islands. The figure on the left has two hooks carved about the centre of the torso, and both figures are somewhat unusual in that they are painted with linear designs. These lines are more apparent on the figure on the left which has stripes on the *daha* (forks at the top) and what appears to be a necklace and stylized breasts. Below the hooks is a pattern which resembles a face with two dots for eyes, a triangular nose and a mustachio. This style of painting is related to Mentawai Islands to the south of the Batu group, where the bodies of figures are commonly painted to show tattoos (see Palm 1963, p. 218 and 1929-30, p. 340; Schefold 1979/80, p. 175, fig. 190).

No descriptions or photographs showing the centre of the house survive. However, the entrance must be



Fig. 23: *Siraha* figures on the right wall

towards the left as one stands in the *tawölö* facing the back of the house (see Schröder 1926, p. 41). There was a special miniature room called a *bari*, where the wives of the aristocrats could watch the oratory that took place in the *tawölö*. There were also probably communal hearths on both the public side of the house and in the private quarters. A long, dark passage leads to the *foroma* (back room) which is also set off by a high threshold (Viruley 1923, p. 89).

The interior roof structure was particularly impressive, due primarily to the enormous proportions of the building (Fig. 24). The photograph clearly shows the typical South Nias structure that consists of three interior and two exterior walls of supports that run from the front to the back of the building. These arise from the first horizontal beam above the open dwelling space. This beam is called the *füso bato* (navel beam) and is the source of the roof structure. The *driwa bato* (diagonal truss supports) are unusually thin for such a large building.

That such a huge building existed in the remote and tiny island of Tello is cause for wonder. Undoubtedly, at



Fig. 24: Roof structure

one time there were other *omo sebua* in the Batu Islands. Bouman lists five (Suzuki et al. 1973, p. 602), but there were probably even more. Reiche, for example, describes a colossal house on Tana Masa Island but there are no details as it had fallen down about 1910 and a new one was not finished (1901, p. 123). Were these built as expressions of the imperial ambitions of powerful South Nias chiefs or as a matter of aristocratic tradition and continuity from the larger island to the north? Aside from the precious resource of great forests of the highly-valued *kafini* wood from Pulau Pini that was used to impress visitors to South Nias *omo sebua*, there is no environmental causality for these outsized palaces in the minimal environment of the Batu Islands.

The architectural tradition that made its way to the Batu islands represents a pinnacle of domestic tribal architecture. It was rooted in economic developments in South Nias that led to the need for extreme forms of ostentation and was likely fueled by the slave trade with Sumatra and Java. The design details of these houses show influences of Dutch ships that plied these waters in around 1700 (see Feldman 1984). While the building

at Baruyulasara is clearly strongly rooted in the architectural tradition of South Nias, details such as the width of the building and the trellis window design are closer to Central Nias models, and the ancestor figures and their altar are similar to examples from Southeastern Nias. This evidence suggests that the Batu islands were settled by Southeast Nias aristocrats shortly after the development of the great *omo sebua* of South Nias, when some remnants of Central Nias architectural designs may have lingered.

The authentic *omo sebua* of South Nias are all endangered structures due to a combination of old age, terrible earthquakes, tsunamis and the neglect of a culture that is too often losing touch with its roots. As for the Batu Islands, Peter Suzuki long ago called for urgent study of this precious culture, yet little has transpired since the days when the missionary W. L. Steinhart compiled an amazing collection of oral literature from the Batu Islands. There is a need for greater outside support and recognition of the importance of these supreme examples of domestic architecture on Nias and the culture of the tiny islands to the south. Aside from a small circle of dedicated Nias citizens, a few scholars and Pastor Johannes Hämmerle of Gunung Sitoli village, this tradition is only vaguely known to the outside world. And yet, there is nothing in the rest of Southeast Asia that compares to the magnificent *omo sebua* of Nias.

References

- 1 Nias villages may change their name over time as certain levels of feasting are reached. Perhaps this is why the same house is recorded by Reuser as "Hiliamadoela" (Mittersakschmöller 2009, p. 120).
- 2 This paper expands upon a chapter for my thesis (1977) that was excluded when my advisor required that the thesis be shortened.
- 3 Another earlier collection of photographs of the same house taken by Ernst Ludwig Reuser in 1922 is recorded by Mittersakschmöller (2009, pp. 120-123).
- 4 Thanks to Ina Noniawati Telaumbanua for this information.
- 5 The term literally means 'big house'. Another name for a chief's house is *lasara* – a reference to the three composite monsters that adorn the façade of the house. This is also embedded into the name of the village, Baruyulasara.
- 6 For a good description of this plaza, see Schröder (1933).
- 7 Nias informants say the *omo sebua* at Orahili village in South Nias was built on a similar gigantic scale. The one at the village of Bötohösi was reputed to be the largest of all. These houses were destroyed during the Dutch invasions of 1863. Mittersakschmöller records that the Batu Islands house was "regarded as the largest in [the] entire Nias archipelago." (2009, p. 120).
- 8 Both terms are unique to the Batu Islands.



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All photographs are from the Dorothy Peltzer collection unless otherwise noted.