# Dutch galleons and South Nias palaces

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In the southern part of the island of Nias, Indonesia, domestic architecture has assumed a complexity and scale totally unexpected in such a tiny, isolated part of the world. Given that Nias society is highly aristocratic, it is easy to understand that the houses of village rulers would be more impressive than the rest. Few would imagine, however, that a chief's house such as the one standing in Bawömataluo village would be twenty meters tall and rest upon more than one hundred pillars, each a meter thick, and that the entire edifice would be constructed of interlocking pieces of polished hardwoods (see Feldman 1979). One wonders how this architectural tradition evolved in a culture area of less than seven hundred square miles.

The true answer to this question will probably never be known. The absence of firm written and oral documentation precludes a definitive architectural history. The aim, therefore, of such an historical investigation is not to prove, but to probe, utilizing whatever relevant evidence is available, toward a plausible explanation. The conclusions of such an undertaking must be tentative but may establish a foundation for future research.

### Motivations for architectural change in the history of South Nias

The indigenous inhabitants of Nias island agree that the culture began in Central Nias in an area called Gomo (fig. 1). Since the names of the founding rulers of Gomo are known in both North and South Nias, it is probable that a stratified, aristocratic society had already formed in Central Nias before the cultures dispersed. Genealogies collected in South Nias are quite consistent, and it appears that the migration from Central Nias took place approximately nineteen or twenty generations ago. The longest probable span for a ruler's average tenure is approximately thirty-five to forty years. This would mean that South Nias was not settled prior to the late twelfth century. Since rulers held their position for life, and tended to live long, a short estimate of rule would be twenty years, implying settlement of the South by the sixteenth century. Therefore the southern region was probably settled by the present line of rulers some time between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. The absence of a modern archaeology of the island precludes dating by any other source at this time.

Although nothing survives of the architectural tradition of Gomo at the time of these migrations, it is possible to make some presumptions concerning its characteristics. Utilizing ethnographic analogy, our best guess as to the design of the ancient Central Nias chief's house is the plan that was in use when these houses were first documented. Although there have been changes throughout the centuries, in Central Nias there is a distinct type of house that shares certain features with both North and South Nias.

The Central Nias house is a rectangular structure composed, as are those in the other regions of the


Figure 1. Map of Nias Island showing cultural divisions and locations mentioned in the text. Drawing: Aileen M. Feldman.

A version of this paper was originally presented at the Douglas Fraser memorial symposium held at Columbia University on April 15, 1983. The field study and some of the research presented here were compiled while I was still a student of Dr. Fraser. The diffusionist methodology incorporated into this study was an important one in Douglas Fraser's life and probably what he will be best remembered for.

Figure 2. Chief's house from Central Nias. Photo: Greg Moore 1975.

island, of three vertical sections (fig. 2). The bottom section consists entirely of pillars. These are grouped into two types, the vertical *ehomo* and the oblique *driwa*, or *diwa*. *Driwa* usually meet at a point to form a V-shape or sometimes will cross to form an X. The X form is the style found in North Nias, while the V is found exclusively in the South. Thus certain elements of northern and southern designs are found in the central part of the island. *Driwa* frequently run across the house as well as in front and back. In Central and North Nias the first row of pillars in the front of the house is the *ehomo*; in the South the first row consists of *driwa*.

Above this section is the dwelling area, which is divided front and back into communal and private sections, respectively. The communal section contains most of the sculpture in the house as well as a special inner pillar called *lauwo ba gazi*, which has an animal head and a disc at its top. The facade of the center section consists of a single step projection corresponding to a seat that runs across the front of the house on the interior. Above this projection there is a trellis window, which is used when viewing the village square. On the exterior there are often carvings of composite monster heads at the edges and center. In addition there are often vertical supports running from the area just above the pillars to the base of the thatch (fig. 3).

The roof section consists of a high ridge pole and a graceful curving roof line. Characteristically, all well-made Nias houses have a flap in the roof to allow light and air to circulate. In Central Nias there would be one or two flaps in the front and back.

The villagers in the southern part of the island must have brought with them the traditions and arts of the central region. Often the older South Nias villages bear the names of the previous Gomo locations. Villages such as Lahusa and Orahili can be found in both areas. There is even a Gomo River in South Nias, named after its Central Nias counterpart. This type of house, therefore, is the best guess as to the architectural notions the settlers of South Nias would have brought with them. Sometime after the arrival in the South, villages were founded, and presumably constructed in a manner similar to those of the homeland in Central Nias.

Slavery was found in all regions of Nias, but it is clear from the historical record that it achieved extraordinary proportions in South Nias at an early period. In the early seventeenth century it is known that Aceh, under its leader, Iskandar Muda, led an attack on Nias in order to monopolize the slave trade (Lombard 1967: 94, 197). An even earlier report by the French admiral Beaulieu mentions an active trade with the port of Baros in Sumatra (1664–1666: II, 98). By 1822 the British

Figure 3. Facade of a Central Nias chief's house, located between Orahili village and the Eho and Susuwa rivers (Schröder 1917: fig. 127).

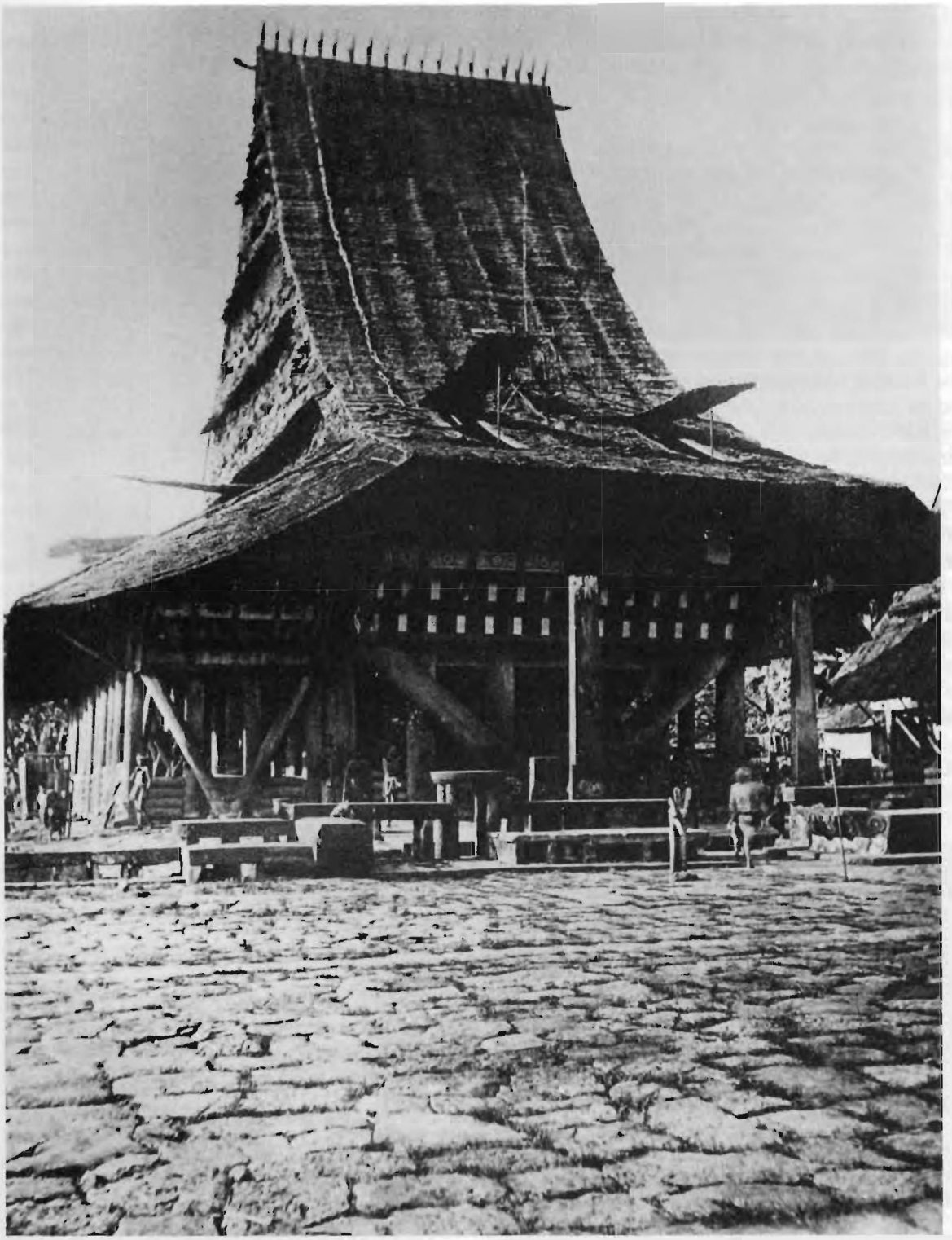

Figure 4. The *omo sebua* at Bawömataluo, South Nias (Schröder 1917: fig. 117).

reported that 1,500 slaves per year were being exported out of the port of Teluk Dalam, South Nias (Anon. 1822: 10). This trade resulted in the accumulation of enormous amounts of wealth in the hands of the rulers of the region.

Wealth poured into a society in which displays of wealth and ostentation were very important. There was a strict two-tiered class system (slaves were not considered part of society) in Nias. One's rank within this system was determined by staging an expensive and dramatic series of feasts. Produced in connection with these feasts were vertical stone monuments, gold ornaments, or a house of a design and scale befitting the status attained by giving the banquet and distributing wealth.

As the feasting system operated, it created not only the need for memorials, but the necessity to elaborate upon the basic forms that the memorials had. In South Nias, for example, by giving a *fa'ulu* feast, one qualified for a vertical stone memorial (*batu wa'ulu*). Small *batu wa'ulu* were fairly common in South Nias, but if one gave an especially elaborate feast, a huge and ornate stone was designed and erected. The two tall stones in front of the *omo sebua* in Bawömataluo are a good example of this (fig. 4).

Architecture in South Nias formed the climax of the feasting system. If the village rulers could trade a large number of slaves for wealth, especially gold, which could be distributed in feasts, they would qualify for especially elaborate houses, and the highest prestige. The increase in wealth over a long period of time would result in the expectation that the South Nias chief's house should become more elaborate than the Central Nias prototype. Hence the motivation would be established for a new basic design for the *omo sebua* in the southern part of the island. The architects of these buildings would be searching for, or at least be open to, new ideas.

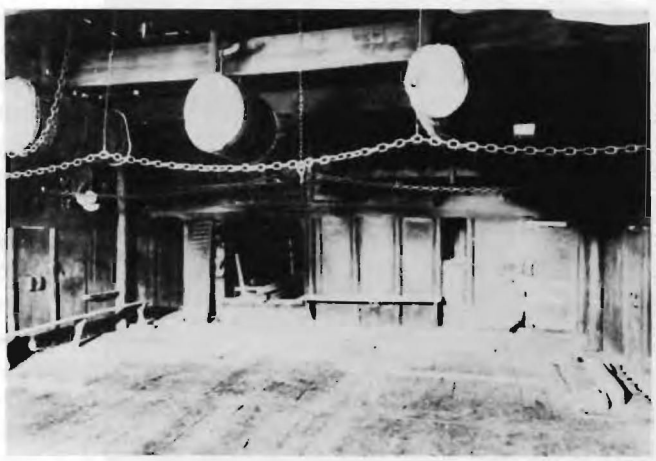

Figure 5. Interior of the *omo sebua* at Onohondro showing chains thought to have been captured from European ships. Photo: D. Pelzer 1965.

Figure 6. Warrior with his rifle, South Nias (Borgers 1936: 24).

### The arrival of ornate Dutch ships

The earliest evidence we have of an intensified slave trade comes from the beginning of the seventeenth century, and it might therefore be reasonable to presume that the desire for and receptivity to new architectural ideas would have developed by 1700. This coincides with a period of time when journeys by ships of the Dutch East India Company between the Netherlands, South Africa, and Indonesia reached their historical peak (Hall 1964: 304–309). Written evidence of contact with Nias was presented by Schröder, but it cannot be proven whether other contacts had occurred (Schröder 1917: I, 309–313, II, pl. CXIII–CXVII). Informants on Nias claim

that there were many such early contacts with galleons, and they point out that in every South Nias chief's house there are sets of chains hanging from the rafters that were taken from these ships (fig. 5).

The fact that Dutch ships could be captured is also corroborated by evidence in Dutch accounts. In 1856 during a Dutch incursion into Lagundi Bay, a lieutenant Donleben and part of his crew were cut off from their ship by a well-organized action on the part of the Niassers. Under the direction of "radja Wadoea" (probably Siduhu, another name for Laowo, at that time the ruler of the powerful village of Orahili), the inhabitants formed two divisions. One was stationed on the beach, and the other opposite Donleben in the bush (Anon. 1860: 333). Donleben managed to get back to his ship, but the incident demonstrates that the claims made by the contemporary Niassers concerning their ability to capture ships may be true.

Even if no ship were ever captured, it is clear that Niassers would have been keen observers of any ships that would have anchored offshore. The galleons of the early eighteenth century were indeed impressive. Their sterns were elaborately carved and gilded, and often major European artists were commissioned to do the work. In Nias society gold is associated with feasting and royalty and is important enough for that color itself to attract attention.

### Cultural assimilation in South Nias

In order to understand how foreign elements such as the sterns of Dutch galleons could be utilized as artistic models in Nias, it would be best to examine the assimilation process in other instances that can easily be proven. The gun, for example, was first introduced into South Nias in the mid-nineteenth century. By the early 1880s guns were being manufactured in Bawömataluo

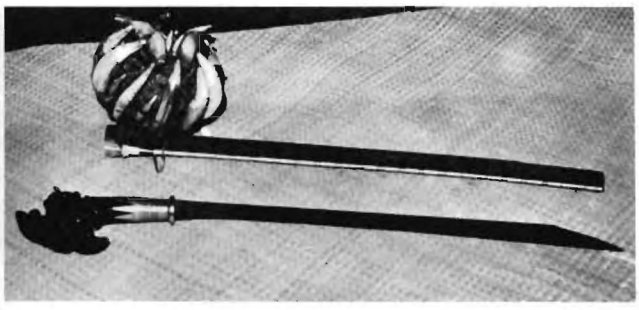

Figure 7. *Telögu*, royal sword, Bawömataluo. Photo: J. Feldman 1974.

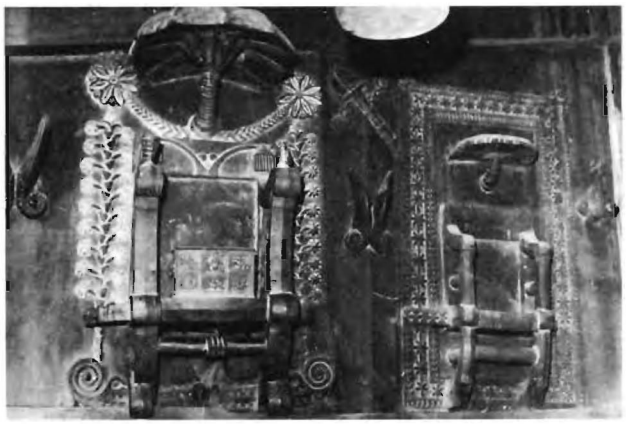

Figure 8. Ancestor seat, *darodaro ndra ama, omo sebua,* Bawömataluo. Photo: J. Feldman 1974.

and other villages (Thomas 1882: 95). These rifles were quite different from their European prototypes. The barrels were thickened and silver stripes were inlaid into the barrels. Rifle butts were carved with floral designs. In fact the European rifle was converted into a form that matched the Nias sword (figs. 6, 7). The stripes on the sword and rifle are a reference to the tiger, an animal that does not exist on the island of Nias, but which has been incorporated into the culture to metaphorically symbolize the qualities of a great ruler (Feldman 1983: 152–153).

The chair is another element that was put to use in a peculiarly Nias way. In the traditional context, horizontal stones in the village square, called *darodaro*, are used as seats for ancestors and living dignitaries during formal oratory (*orahu*). The term *darodaro* is also used to describe the seat for an ancestor image inside a house. In certain villages, notably Bawömataluo and Hilizihönö, a chair (*darodaro*) is carved on the wall; the ancestor figure does not sit on the chair, however, but upon a stool on top of the chair (figs. 8, 9). The chair then is used as the Niasser would use a horizontal stone, which also bears the name *darodaro*. In fact a person of high rank, such as a priestess, would often sit upon a stool atop a stone *darodaro*. A stone version of the *darodaro*-stool combination can be seen in figure 10.[1]

1. Heine-Geldern was also intrigued by similarities he observed linking aspects of Nias culture to other parts of the world. He related the chair as a cultural notion to reliefs at Amaravati in southern India (1961: 300). He also felt that the *lasara* monster originated at Buddhist monuments such as the *stupa* of Sanchi in India. The relationships he observed, however, do not coincide in time, location, or visual context to the situation in Nias.

In Bawömataluo there is also an example of a Dutch ship that was used in a distinctly Nias way. On the wall of the chief's house is a carving, which Schröder dubbed the "Dutch Cruiser" (fig. 11). The ship is modeled after a combination steam and sail vessel similar to those which appeared in the mid-nineteenth century (fig. 12). The two large cannons indicate that it is a warship; the uniformed Dutchmen on the deck identify it as Dutch. A vessel closely matching this description — the *Reiner Claussen* — was used by the Dutch in 1863 to attack the South Nias village of Orahili (Anon. 1863: 8). During the attack the Dutch burned Orahili, and the inhabitants were denied a permanent village until 1878 when they founded Bawömataluo (Schröder 1917: 731). It is very likely that it is the *Reiner Claussen* that is depicted in this carving.

The Niassers totally transformed this ship to fit their needs. They made it into a carving on a wall opposite the ancestral altar. In this position it becomes a symbol of the living Nias society, as opposed to the dead ancestors. The figures aboard the ship are depicted capturing two large fish, while below a crocodile catches a small fish. An analogy is intended between the crocodile and nature, and the ship and society. Society is highly productive, whereas the yields of nature, or nonsociety, are meager.

Figure 10. Stone seat, *darodaro salawa ahe,* Bawömataluo. Photo: J. Feldman 1974.

Figure 9. South Nias *adu zatua,* ancestor figure seated upon a stool. Photo: M. Gittinger.

It is clear that within the indigenous tradition, foreign elements must be transformed into usable Nias cultural items. Despite these transformations, influences are clearly recognizable. If Dutch galleons were a source for the South Nias architectural tradition, one should not expect an exact copy of the galleons, but rather that the structural ideas and decorative forms would be put to a distinctly Nias pattern and mode of use.

### Design elements found on Dutch galleons of the early eighteenth century and South Nias palaces

Schröder was the first to publish the observation that the facades of South Nias houses resemble the designs of old European ships' sterns (1917: 118).[2] A

2. Schröder did not elaborate further upon this idea. Subsequent authors also have not been more specific.

Figure 11. Carving of the "Dutch Cruiser," left wall of the chief's house, Bawömataluo. Photo: J. Feldman 1974.

Figure 12. An early steamer headed for Indonesian waters in the Suez Canal. Photo taken November 17, 1869 (Nieuwenhuys 1961: 11).

comparison of a number of different ship sterns reveals that Dutch ships at the beginning of the eighteenth century show the closest relationship. Ship builders' models and artistic engravings give a detailed picture of the appearance of these ships.

A model in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston of the East Indiaman *Valkenisse* is an excellent example of the type of ship that resembles the South Nias chief's house facade.[3] The actual ship was launched in 1716 in Zeeland, the Netherlands. The 1,150-ton vessel was equipped at Zeeland and made its first voyage for Batavia from the port of Rammekens on July 11, 1717 (Bruijn, Gaastra, and Schöffer 1979: II, 338). It is estimated that the ship was 161 feet long and had a beam of approximately 42.5 feet (Anderson 1932: 163).[4]

3. For other examples of vessels of this type and period see Anderson (1932).

4. These are roughly the dimensions of the largest South Nias *omo sebua*. Three of this scale were extant in the nineteenth century. One in Orahili village and another in Bötöhösi were burned by the Dutch in the 1863 invasion (van Rees 1866: 71, 76). The third is at Bawömataluo.

Figure 13. Stern of a ship model of the *Valkenisse*. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 14. Lion from the stern of the *Valkenisse*. Detail of figure 13.

The vessel made seven voyages to Indonesia over a period of twenty-three years. The last official voyage was in 1733 under captain Elias Moenix arriving in Batavia on January 21, 1734. There are no accounts of the *Valkenisse* for the next six years, but it is reported to have been wrecked at Bantam in 1740 (Bruijn, Gaastra, and Schöfer 1979: II, 430–431). It would be tempting to assume that during its six years in Indonesian waters, the ship stopped at Nias, but there is no direct evidence.

The stern of this ship has many elements in common with the facade of the South Nias *omo sebua*. Both have step-like projections that result in a cantilever consisting of two steps and a trellis window that runs across the facade (figs. 4, 13, 18). Evidently the Rococo curving lines of the Dutch ship did not appeal to the Nias architects, but many of the other elements may have. Below the trellis window in both cases are curved pieces of wood that stretch in front of the facade projections. In the center of the *Valkenisse*, just below the trellis window, is a carved lion (fig. 14). In the same position on the *omo sebua* is the *lasara monster*. Two more monsters adorn the sides (fig. 4). In the old *omo sebua* from Hilimondregeraya, now in the Copenhagen National Museum, the *lasara* also have four legs and a curving tail similar to the *Valkenisse* (fig. 15). Below the trellis window on the ship is a band of carved curvilinear ornament. On the chief's house this area is reserved for designs that are painted over shallow relief carving. At the village of Hilinawalö Mazingö there is a design in this area that resembles the style of carving on the ship (fig. 16). Between the curving vertical wooden pieces of the ship and below the carved panels just described, there are coiled foliage designs with vertical plants arising from the center (fig. 17). These are repeated in each of the eight bays. A very similar design consisting of coiled ferns with vertical plant elements appears in the same position in each of the eight bays on the *omo sebua* (fig. 18) (see footnote 3).

Although there are variations in the facades of *omo sebua* and in the sterns of East Indiamen, the type of elements, their position, and their design are very consistent. These designs are complex and arbitrary, which, as Douglas Fraser pointed out, diminishes the chance of accidental similarity (1966: 36).

Many of these elements also appear on Central Nias *omo sebua*, but in a very different form. The curved wooden strips start lower on the facade and proceed in front and over the trellis window. The stepped facade

Figure 15. *Lasara* monster from the chief's house at Hilimondregeraya village (detail). Danish National Museum. Courtesy of Dr. Agner Møller.

Figure 16. Detail of the facade of the *omo sebua* at Hilinawalö Mazingö. Photo: J. Feldman 1974.

Figure 17. Foliage designs on the stern on the *Valkenisse* model. Detail of figure 13.

Figure 18. Facade of the *omo sebua* at Bawömataluo showing coiled fern designs. Photo: J. Feldman 1974.

usually consists of only one step. The *lasara* monster is very plain and geometric as opposed to the more ornate *lasara* of South Nias and the Dutch lion. There are no coiled ferns in similar positions on the Central Nias house (figs. 2, 3). The style of the Central Nias *omo sebua* does not have the refinement found in the South and on the galleons. It appears that the facades of South Nias *omo sebua* more closely resemble the Dutch galleons than they do their Central Nias counterparts.

On the interior of a South Nias chief's house there are some elements that may have a distant connection to the structure of Dutch galleons. The floor of the house has several levels: high in the front, it reaches its lowest point in the center and rises to the highest level in the back (fig. 19). In Dutch galleons the deck levels are not identical to those of South Nias, but they do follow the same pattern (fig. 20). In Central Nias the floor is level with seats at the front and back. There are four decorative posts on the interior of the South Nias *omo sebua* that serve not as structural supports but as display pieces for great sculptures (fig. 19). The form of these posts derives from stone monuments in Central Nias, but their proliferation in the house may have been inspired by masts. At the rear of the house in Bawömataluo, at the center of the highest level, there is a carved loop that has no explanation in Nias culture, but which resembles a cleat, or a place for tying rigging (fig. 21). The comparisons on the interior of the house are much less apparent than those on the facade, but again these details do not appear in Central Nias houses.

The cultural meanings of the *omo sebua* have nothing to do with its resemblance to ships. According to informants, ship symbolism and metaphors are limited to coffins, horizontal stones, pallets, and direct depictions of ships. The house is a metaphor of the cosmos and may also represent an ancestor (Feldman 1979). The resemblance between the *omo sebua* and ships (which some Niassers recognize) is purely formal and derives from artistic sources.

### The spread of "galleon style" facades into commoners' houses in the twentieth century

In the oldest photographs taken in South Nias the commoner's house (*omo hada*) is quite different from the way it appears today. In figure 22, the facade of the left *omo hada* is almost identical to the style used in Central Nias (figs. 2, 3), while the newer house on the right has extra steps in the facade and the vertical curved elements are done as they are on the *omo sebua* and galleon. The house type at the left is no longer seen in South Nias, and its old age at the time of the photograph (c. 1900) can be detected by the existence of temporary props of the kind used to salvage houses that are about to collapse. The house on the right is typical of modern *omo hada*. *Omo hada* are not permitted to have *lasara*.

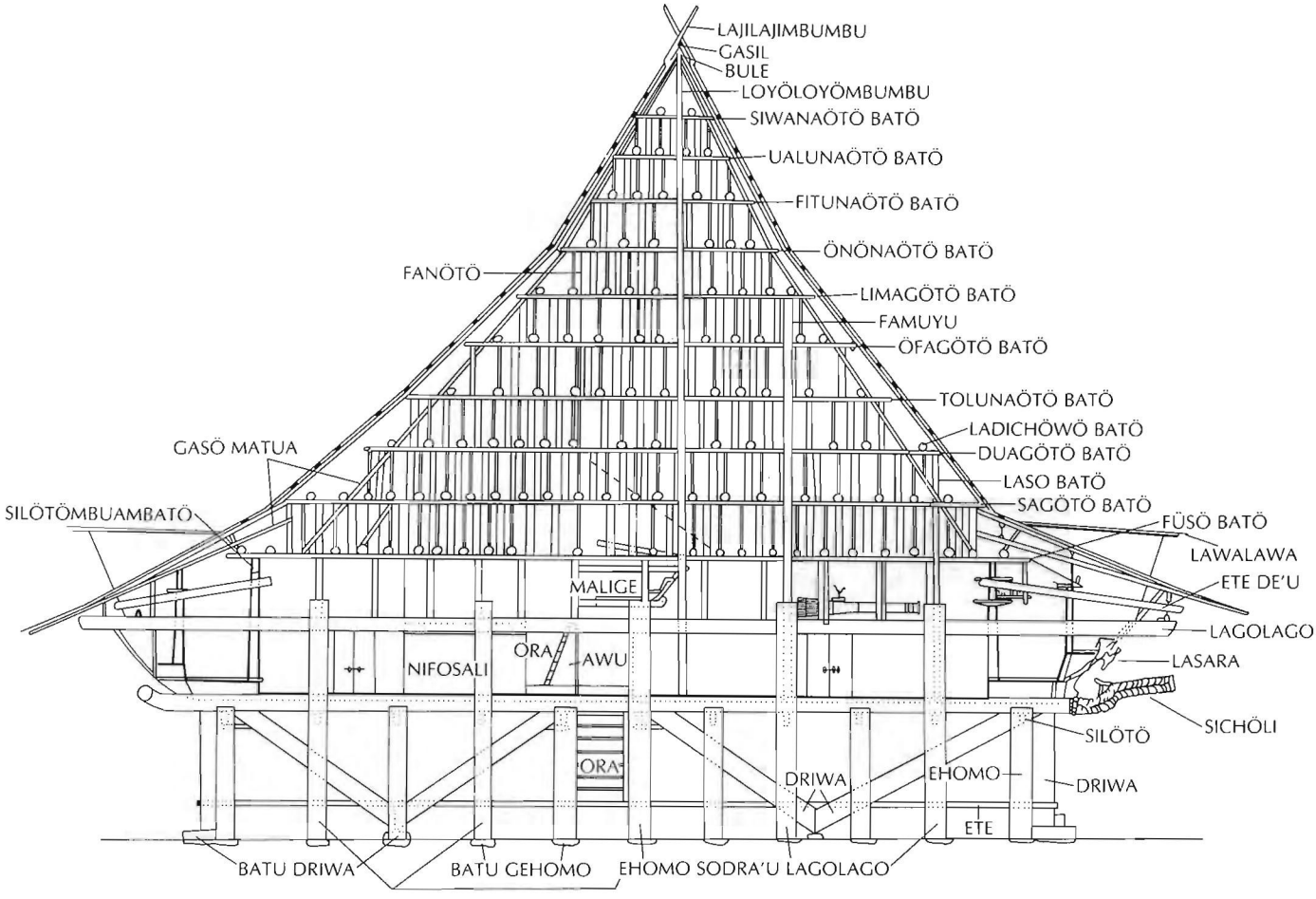


Figure 19. Longitudinal section through the *omo sebua* at Bawömataluo. Drawing: J. Feldman, modified after DeBoer 1920: no. 4.

Figure 20. The deck levels and mast arrangements of an eighteenth-century ship. "The Ship is Careened," no. 8 from the series of etchings under the title *Navigiorum Aedificatio*, by Sieuwert van der Meulen (eighteenth century) (DeGroot 1980: fig. 145).

It is apparent that the changes that were made to the *omo sebua* are filtering down to the commoner's house. The *omo hada* shows clearly the genesis of the modern house from its Central Nias prototype. The direction of this change is toward the designs found on early-seventeenth-century Dutch galleons.

Figure 21. Carving at the rear of the *omo sebua* at Bawömataluo. Photo: J. Feldman 1974.

Figure 22. Detail of a photo showing old and new types of *omo hada*. Photo: W. L. Abbott, c. 1900. Smithsonian Institution glass neg. no. 52.3.

The evidence shows that economic pressure from increased wealth, combined with a cultural need for ostentation, could have resulted in new house forms for the chiefs of South Nias. The timing of the increase in wealth and the arrival of ornate Dutch galleons, as well as the establishment of a process for assimilating foreign motifs, made it possible for the architects to make innovations. The complex clustering of similar motifs in similar positions argues strongly in favor of the hypothesis that the sterns of Dutch galleons were formal models for the facades of South Nias *omo sebua*. The process of change from Central Nias prototypes is illustrated in the commoners' houses in the early twentieth century.

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