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Gender roles and women's influence on traditional architecture and its development in Indonesia: a case study from Nias

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Abstract:

Nias is situated at the western brim of Indonesia, in the highest seismic risk zone in Indonesia where earthquakes occur regularly and frequently. This particular situation influenced the development of a unique earthquake-resistant architecture. Whereas the Niha (the people living in Nias) know about the advantages of the traditional houses, new houses are rarely built in this style. Furthermore old houses are adapted to fulfil the requirements of a modern lifestyle. The development towards modernity has been accelerated since the reconstruction period after a disastrous earthquake on Nias in March 2005. In the research project ASSIP (Architecture, Space and Society in Post disaster Built Environments in Indonesia), which started in 2011, an interdisciplinary group of researchers investigates the impact of this process on the traditional built environment.

Our focus in this paper is on gender roles and women's influence on the traditional architecture and its development. We have addressed the problem by investigating space and work from a gender-specific perspective. This has provided us with answers not only about women's involvement in construction and adaptation processes and in the design of the interior, but also about her position in the house and household which has led to broader and more complex questions about tradition and change in Nias society.

Whereas the change of building traditions is always the result of complex interactions of changing environmental, political, economic and social conditions, the role of women can be of crucial importance and should be taken in consideration for future planning or in the case of post- disaster management.



1. Introduction:

Indonesia is a country rich of cultural diversity which has led to the national phrase of “Unity in Diversity” - *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. On each of the approximately thousand islands that are permanently inhabited one can find diverse building traditions especially adapted to the local environmental and social conditions. Exceptional examples of outstanding traditional architecture have been developed on the remote island of Nias in the very west of the Indonesian archipelago. Especially the omnipresent danger of earthquakes influenced the design of the buildings. Traditional settlements still exist, but buildings and settlements have increasingly become modernised over the past decades. The developments towards modernity are increasingly changing buildings and settlements. This trend has been accelerated since the reconstruction works done after a disastrous earthquake in March 2005.

The impact of these reconstruction efforts on building traditions in interrelation with society have been studied in the interdisciplinary project ASSIP (Architecture, Space and Society in Post-Disaster Built Environments in Indonesia). Therein, teams of anthropologists and architects work closely together in order to investigate and analyse different factors that have influenced the transformation from traditional built environment to contemporary vernacular¹ architecture.

One aspect being researched are the gender roles and practices in relation to architecture and houses, with a focus on the region of South Nias. In order to offer an insight into the complexities of this topic, we will not only provide information on the architecture itself but also on the local society and culture.

¹— In the area of architectural theory, vernacular architecture has been defined as structures that have been erected by non-professional builders without the intervention of professional architects or planners.

2. History and traditions on Nias

Nias is situated at the western brim of Indonesia, 125 km off the west coast of Sumatra in the Indian Ocean, in the highest seismic risk zone in Indonesia where earthquakes occur regularly and frequently (Sieh, 2007). A population of approx. 757.000 (Census 2010) is living on this largest of a group of 131 islands covering an area of approx. 5.000 km². Most of the inhabitants are indigenous – the Ono Niha. The majority of other peoples is of Malay, Batak and Chinese descent. Administratively, the island of Nias has been integrated into the Province of North Sumatra and, since 2003, divided into four administrative regencies (Kabupaten). The South Nias Regency (Nias Selatan) includes the smaller Batu Island and is the largest administrative entity.

Despite its remoteness, seafarers and traders have visited the island for more than a thousand years and left their traces. The first written sources mentioning Nias are Arabic texts dating back to the 9th and 10th century (Modigliani 1890 and Schröder 1917). Today Nias is mainly known as an excellent surf spot and to the few travellers interested beyond that, for its fascinating culture, architecture and history. In ancient times, warfare between villages, family rivalry and social class tensions were common. Headhunting was frequently practised as the heads of the besieged enemies played a crucial role in a number of rituals that related to the erection of houses. Feasts of merit and ceremonies including the erection of megaliths in front of houses shaped people’s life on the small island. They were organised in order to increase a person’s social prestige and authority within the village. The megaliths indicated the status of the house owners within the hierarchical social structure which, in South Nias, consisted of the aristocratic class called *si’ulu*, free commoners and slaves. In the 19th century, slavery was officially abolished by the Dutch colonial rule, but the concept and practice of social stratification have survived. The ancestors are represented through the megaliths which, therefore, also function as objects of memory. Furthermore, a person’s rank was demonstrated by size of his house. Hence, the house of the village chief’s house usually was the largest building in the village and located at a strategic and prominent site, often in the centre of the settlement. An impressive central place surrounded by many megaliths signified the wealth of a village. In exchange for their rights and privileges, the nobles had to organise village life and work, such as the irrigation and cultivation of the fields, control external relations and distribute their wealth in feasts².

Due to the island’s isolated position, major interference by the colonial administration started only in the 19th century (Hummel, 2009). Nonetheless, traditional beliefs, rites, customs, values and laws, subsumed under the Malay term *adat*, have neither been completely abandoned nor undermined but still have a place in modern society and life. Today, *adat* comprises almost anything that is linked to the so-called traditional culture, which

²— See e.g. Marshall (1976); Scarduelli (1990); Viaro & Ziegler (1998) and Ziegler (1990).

has its origin in an undefined, preferably pre-colonial, past. It is considered still being strong in traditional villages of South Nias where its presence is manifested in the traditional-style houses (omo hada), ideally headed by the chief's house (omo sebua) as a highly visible marker. Among the intangible heritage, it is mainly songs and dances, often associated with warfare and headhunting, as well as the manhood ritual of stone jumping that have been preserved and are demonstrated to visitors who are willing to pay for the performances (Viaro, 2002).

3. Traditional Architecture of South Nias

Despite the relatively small size of the Island of Nias, the topography supported the development of three distinct architectural typologies.³ Whereas the oval houses of the North Nias style and the rectangular row houses in South Nias are easily to identify as an independent design, the style of the houses in the centre of the island can be identified as a mixture of both of these typologies. As Central Nias is seen as the “cradle of the island”, this area may be the place of origin of architectural styles that can still be found in the north and south. Although the traditional architecture of Nias has been the focus of numerous studies, many questions have remained open and unanswered until today.⁴

In the following chapters, we will present an overview of the relevant building characteristics that have been studied so far.

3.1

Traditional village structures in South Nias

In the south of Nias, the villages are traditionally located on hilltops which, in the past, allowed the inhabitants to overlook the area and defend the village against enemies. Most villages can be entered via a steep stone staircase which is flanked with figures and symbols that should protect the village and its inhabitants. Such statues are found on either end of the main road through the village and clearly define the beginning and the end of the core settlement. Along the road or path leading up to these stairs, old graves can often be found as indicators of a nearby village. In ancient times, when warfare and headhunting raids were endemic, an outer palisade of sharpened bamboo stakes and a deep ditch fortified the village. Beyond the territory of the village and its surrounding gardens, which were called banua (= village, land, world), the land was believed to be inhabited by evil spirits and humans.

3— Feldman (1977)

4— Gruber (2009); Gruber & Herbig (2009), Hämmerle & Lehner (2010); Viaro (2008) and Viaro & Ziegler (1998).



Image 1: The staircase to Hiliamaetaniha (Herbig, 2012)

When entering the village, we are struck by an exceptional view: the two rows of impressive houses densely built together. Along the linear space between the houses, we can easily recognise different zones of semi-private, semi-public and public spaces with separate and specific functions. Between the houses, there are roofed platforms which provide access to the neighbouring buildings. In front of the houses, the overhanging roof offers additional space to the residents where they gather, work or socialise while being protected from the rain. In front of this semi-private space, the drainage gutter marks the border to the so-called “wall of stones” (öli batu). This zone is reserved for the megaliths and indicates the rank of the house owners.



Image 2: Streetview of Hiliamaetaniha (Herbig, 2012)

Between the öli batu and the public walkway in the centre, a semi-public space belongs to the respective house and has to be maintained by the owner. It can be used for drying agricultural products or laundry. After the earthquake in 2005, which caused heavy damage to the houses, this space was used to erect temporary shelters. The only real public space is the narrow walkway in the centre of the open space. One can easily recognise the chief’s house, called omo sebua or big house, by its size as well as the large number of megaliths. Close to the omo sebua, a separate open structure, the balai desa is designated for village gatherings. This, of course, means that the lines of houses often do not run parallel to each other, but instead converge at the ends of the village while going further apart in the middle and thus forming a larger space in its centre around the gathering hall. There are also some villages that have a T-shaped or cross-shaped ground plan because a second “road” in the middle of the village runs perpendicular to the “main street”.

In contrast to this elaborate and well defined village structure in the south, the villages in North Nias consisted either of groups of 6 to

12 oval houses, oriented longitudinal-side towards the street, or of single cottages, also in oval shape, located far away from each other.

3.2

The traditional Nias house construction

Significantly the shape of the houses is dominated by its three-part structure. Like in many other Indonesian traditional building typologies, this format reflects the three-part cosmic order that has its origin in Indian influences from India. The connotation of the three basic cosmic spheres manifested in architecture can be found from prominent cult buildings like the Borobudur up to residential houses. Symbolic, functional and physical designs of the structures represent the underworld, earthly world and supernatural world. On top of the building, the roof area belongs to the gods and ancestors. It is a room without function reserved for the spiritual world. Whereas in South Nias, the roof construction looks like an elaborate lightwood support structure with numerous roof timbers based on the sidewalls, the buildings in the north are constructed with central posts. Traditionally, the roofs are covered with leafs from the sago palms. But due to the frequent and labour-intensive maintenance work and the rising prices for the raw material, corrugated iron roofs have become more and more common. Due to their intricate shape, which makes roof building with other materials a difficult task, most oval houses in North Nias are still covered with palm leafs. Notable are the large windows in the form of a flap positioned in the roof and provide the living area with light and ventilation. Furthermore the roof can also be used as an area for drying clothes which are laid out through these openings.



Image 3: Drying clothes on the roof in Hiliamaetaniha (Weichert, 2012)

The middle zone of the houses is the human living space and symbolises the earthly world. Everywhere in Nias, the construction of this part is relatively simple. Wooden panels within a skeleton construction form a stiffened box. Alongside the street, large louvered openings illuminate the interior. There, the walls are slanted and the windows offer a good view onto the activities in the street. In South Nias, the structural elements are also a part of the furnishing, like the plank underneath the opening, called lawa-lawaw, which is a popular place to sit and watch the village life. In combination with the large roof space, the interior is very light and airy and provides a perfect ambience which is well adjusted to the humid and hot equatorial climate.

Finally, the substructure symbolises the lower world associated with “animalistic desire”. Hence, this space was used as stable, storage area or to dispose waste (Hämmerle & Lehner 2010). In this zone, the construction of the buildings is most elaborately adapted to the frequent earthquakes in the region. Most notable in the substructure of the Nias houses is the use of diagonal struts and piles, which is unique for Indonesia. In North Nias, a sophisticated system of transverse and vertical pillars additionally supported by stones provides a stable but also flexible base for the house in the case of movement (Gruber 2009, 2010). In the south, struts forming a large “V”, in the front part of the substructure, are one of the hallmarks of the architecture. Like in the north, they stabilize the building in case of lateral movements. Whereas in North Nias, the diagonal struts just function as supporting elements, the V shaped part of the substructure in South Nias is also an important and integrative design element.



Image 4: Most famous building in Nias: the «Omo Sebua» of Bawömataluo (Herbig, 2012)

3.3 Recent developments

Although the traditional building typologies in Nias have many advantages, they have undergone changes and developments which started already in the times of the Dutch colonial rule. Due to a verdict considering the danger of fire because of the open fireplaces within the house, the kitchens had to be transferred to an extension. In South Nias, these new rooms have been erected behind the original building on the same level as the substructure. Most house owners used the new space also to integrate the sanitary facilities. Behind that, other functional places have been added, like the stables. With the declining availability of building materials and high building costs due to the feasts that had to be organised for the workers, family and community throughout the construction process, the erection of a traditional house has become too expensive for many people. Hence, a new architectural style was introduced. The former large dimension of the wooden parts were replaced by smaller elements. Concerning the substructure, the sophisticated pile system was either substituted by a simpler one with shorter struts or by a foundation on the ground. In some cases, the living area still contains certain traditional elements but with the entrance being shifted from the side to the front of the building, the opening alongside the wall had to be abandoned and common windows sometimes with shutters provide the lighting today. The form of the roof with the typical openings has still been kept in most buildings. With the introduction of cement as building material, the face of the building has been changed, while the interior parts have often maintained the traditional style in terms of space usage and furniture.



Image 5: Substructure modified into a living room at Hiliamaetaniha (Herbig, 2012)

Another notable adaptation is the transformation of substructures into living rooms. For this purpose, columns are removed and in some cases even the floor has to be deepened to provide sufficient height. One reason for this modification is that the living condition in the upper floor has changed due to the new roof material. Underneath the corrugated iron, the former living space gets very hot during the day and also the noise during the rainy periods makes the stay in this area quite unpleasant. These developments did not cause major changes in the village structure within the designated boundaries of the core village, but at the entrances of the settlement the number of modern houses has increased significantly. Within the newer villages or the extensions of the old ones, the former use of space is changing and follows the need of modern traffic. As the overhanging parts of the roofs have become smaller, the space for transition is getting smaller too. Some people have even fenced in the area in front of their house which means a break with the tradition of space that allowed uninterrupted transition. The semi-public space is smaller in the new settlements than in the traditional villages and, instead, more space is given to the central street which the traffic of motorbikes or even cars.

Whereas these developments have been going on for years and traditional structures and concepts have been adapted and, step by step, led towards modernity, the reconstruction efforts after the disastrous earthquake in 2005 provoked additional acceleration of this process.

4. ————— Gendered Spaces and Labour

“In Nias philosophy, the house is defined as a human sanctuary (saʷatö Niha). It is said that up in the house on posts [...] man a safe haven or shelter. But the house (omo) has no meaning if there is no woman. Therefore the woman is called fu'omo, with fu or fo is the Niha word for root or support” (trans. U.H.)⁵.

In the following chapters, we will give an insight into the gendered organisation and division of space and labour, which are related to each other, in relation to houses, their building and maintenance and in the reproduction of households.

Although the styles of houses and their construction types are unique and, thus, differ from constructions anywhere else, the functions of the rooms and the definition of space show similarities to other areas in Indonesia and neighbouring countries. The focus of our paper is on gender roles and practices in relation to architecture and houses in South Nias. Space as well as work are organised according to various criteria and social categories. Gender is a prominent category within the domestic sphere.

4.1

Use of spaces

As described in detail in the previous chapter, a characteristic feature of traditional houses in South Nias is that the living and sleeping areas are erected on massive piles of ironwood. (manawa danö). The space underneath, between the piles, was used as living area for pigs until fairly recently. The staircase that leads up to the main room in the front part of the house, is positioned at the side and between neighbouring houses which can both be accessed by it. This front room is the place where the family gathers, especially during rainy weather and in the evenings, and guests are received. Slit windows that stretch over the whole upper part of the front walls provide ventilation and lighting and offer excellent views over the village from where those inside the house can observe life outside in the public and semi-public zones. While during daylight, the interior of the room is darker and therefore largely hidden from the gaze of outsiders, the situation is turned upside down in the evening and especially since the installation of electricity, which not only facilitates reading and working during the long evening hours, but gives the front room the quality of a showcase where life can be observed by people in other, neighbouring houses or in the street.

5— «Das Haus wird zur «Zufluchtstätte der Menschen» (saʷatö Niha). Oben im Pfostenhaus oder oben in Gomo finden die Menschen einen sicheren Hafen oder eine Bleibe. Ein Haus (omo) hat aber keine Bedeutung, wenn keine Frau darin ist. deshalb nennt man auf Nias die Frau des Hauses fo'omo. Sie ist gleichsam die Stütze oder der Wurzelstock (fu, fo) des Hauses.» Hämmerle&Lehner 2010:59

Image 6: The «lawa-lawa» is the most frequented place in the house, like in the «Omo Sebua» in Hiliamaetaniha (Herbig, 2012)



This quality of relatively easy access and visibility, in comparison to the house's back area, makes the front room the most public part of the house, and thus qualifies it to be used as a guest room (ruang tamu), but it also makes it the most vulnerable place. This is taken into consideration in the sleeping arrangements of the family and guests. Hence, men and young boys sleep in the front room where, in case of danger from outside, they should protect the women and older people living in the house. Between the front and the back room, we often find a small chamber built in-between in which the sexually-active married couple sleeps. Single women, young girls and children sleep in the back room.

This division between front and the back areas of a house and its correlation with gender can be observed in many parts of Indonesia and elsewhere.⁶ It corresponds with a still widely dispersed view that the public sphere is male and the domestic sphere is female. Although this by now 'old-fashioned' categorisation has been rightfully contested by feminists since the 1980s, it holds some validity, especially in rural areas and when maintaining the traditional association of 'public' with 'political'.⁷ In the villages, we still find almost exclusively men who hold public positions and determine local politics. In the past, it was the men who were involved in warfare and headhunting which led to public recognition, prestige and high status.

The use of space is linked to social and work activities. The kitchen is the most domestic part of the house, the core part of the house which represents the founding of a household. Kitchen work, like cooking and washing the dishes, is generally considered women's task. While in the past, it might have been the case that the hearth was located in the back room in the wall to the front room, as it is still the case in the chiefs' houses, these

6— See e.g. Carsten & Hugh-Jones (1995); Izikowitz & Sørensen (1982); Sparkes & Howell (2003) and Weichart (2007b) for a comparison in research on gender and domestic space in Southeast Asian societies.

7— See e.g. Rosaldo & Lamphere (1974); Elshtain (1981); Weintraub & Kumar (1997) and Yanagisako & Collier (1987).

days the kitchen is located in the back of the house, usually in a separate structure added to the main building at the ground floor. This development came along with the Dutch colonial government's regulation to remove the kitchen from the interior of the house, because of fire hazard and health reasons (smoke). The removal of the female work area from the living area to its rear part indicates a change in activity and perhaps in status too. It means that women and their work are removed from the public gaze and from other activities in the house. It could also lead to a devaluation of this work which now takes place in an area close to the sanitary facilities and the pigs' sty.⁸ Thus, what once was the centre of the house, where people gathered and what constituted family life, the fireplace, has become associated with a place of dirt which is normally kept away from the eyes of strangers. This, of course, could have had an effect on the status of the domestic work, especially cooking, generally and consequently, on the status of women.



Images 7: Left: Substructure modified into a living room at Hiliamaetaniha (Lestari, 2012) Right: A shop in the substructure at Hiliawalö Fau (Herbig, 2011)



8— See e.g. Carsten (1995, 1997); Janowski (1995); Janowski & Kerlogue (2007) and Weichart (2007a) on the importance of cooking and food in constituting households in Southeast Asian societies.

Another major recent change in traditional architecture has been the modification of the substructure. By erecting walls around it, the size of the living space is doubled and allows more people to live fairly comfortably in the house. It often is occupied by an extended family (e.g. the parents with one or more of their sons and their respective families) and each nuclear family can claim their own space this way. However, it not only means an objective extension of space but the new substructure also influences the use of the remaining space in the house. Most notable is that the main living and guest room shifts from the upper to the ground floor. That means what once was the realm of the pigs and associated with dirt and the 'underworld' has become a desirable living area respectable

enough to receive guests. It has also become a sign of wealth and modernity because not everybody can afford to pay for such a construction in his old house and we have even seen a new house that has been built with a modified substructure from the beginning. As women tend to spend more time in and around the house than men do, they seem to benefit more from such modifications. Some of them have installed small shops and other kinds of businesses at the ground level. Hence, the changes in architecture have offered them new opportunities for work and additional income. Women are largely responsible for the management of the house and household. One such example is the family where we spent quite a lot of time during our research in Hiliamaetaniha. There, it was the wife who was considered responsible for renting to our research team the two rooms in the nowadays less used upper floor. She not only had to cook for us, provide us with large quantities of soft drinks and generally look after her 'guests', but it was basically seen as her business to put us up and, this way, make some extra money. Although this house was somewhat exceptional because due to its high standard in furnishing and the owners' status in the village it was considered especially appropriate for hosting strangers, other houses too had little shops or workshops installed in the area of the modified substructure where the women had their own businesses.



Image 8: A kitchen in the annex building (Aahs, 2012)

4.2 Women's work

Most domestic work is done by women. This includes cooking, cleaning, washing dishes and clothes, fetching water from the well, and taking care of small children. Although men generally spend more time outside the house and the village than women do, some of their work is also done in and around the house.

This includes repairs at the building, certain crafts like the production of tools etc. and the slaughtering of larger animals, especially pigs. An explanation given for the gender-specific division of tasks is that men are stronger and therefore can carry out physically more demanding labour. Such examples are the building industry, coconut harvest and butchering. However, women's work is not necessarily easier. Especially those in poorer families experience this. They often not only lack a well of their own but also a motorbike and women in these families have to carry heavy loads. In Hiliamaetaniha, where not every house is equipped with a water tank, women have to fetch the daily water supplies from a public well downhill at the lower end of the village and carry it up the steep staircase.



Image 9: Woman carrying the water supplies at Hiliamaetaniha (Herbig 2012)

Individual transport and mobility have dramatically increased over the past ten years all over Indonesia and have strongly influenced people's everyday lives. In Nias, they also have had an impact on the organisation of work between men and women. An example is the shopping for groceries at the local market which, traditionally, was rather women's task. It still is the case among those families that lack their own transport and are dependent on public transport, while the convenience of motorbikes has encouraged men to take their wives to the market or even do the shopping themselves. Another work in which both gender engage is the harvest of rubber which is one of the main cash crops in the region. The examples stipulated above indicate that neither the division of space nor that of labour by gender is a hard and fast one because there are many instances when the different spheres overlap. There are no spaces inside the house and the village that are completely restricted to men or women. The only exceptions are public bathing places, which sometimes have separate locations for men and women. There are a number

of tasks considered socially appropriate for both gender and even those “typically male” or “female” jobs are not uncontested. Men may also cook and do other types of housework, especially when their wives are ill or absent, and women help with house building, like mixing cement, when needed. In the following chapter we will investigate this aspect in more detail.

4.3

House building and maintenance

During our research in South Nias, we talked to many men, women and couples about the construction, maintenance and usage of their houses. While it was mainly the men who volunteered and were able to provide us with valuable information about technical features, construction details, work process and materials used in the building, women were happy to show us around and inform us about the functions of the different rooms and the social aspects related to the household. We repeatedly were told that house building was man’s work and that women had neither knowledge nor skills to compete with the men in this domain.

It is true that today many younger and middle-aged men have the necessary skills to build a modern concrete house, skills they acquired when working on other construction sites, either on Nias or on the main island of Sumatra. The buildings seem to satisfy people’s immediate needs although the technical standard, which again influences the level of security in case of an earthquake, may often be rather low. Hence, depending on such individual experiences as well as on the financial capacities, local men either build their new houses themselves, with the help of neighbours, kin and friends, and perhaps their wives, or they hire workers to carry out this task. However, it would be wrong to assume that construction has always been a traditional work of all men in a village. As we have described in detail in the first chapter, the traditional-style houses are complicated constructions which require expert knowledge. Even in pre-colonial times, only a fairly small number of specialists had such detailed knowledge. House building was done by working teams supervised and guided by the master builder (*tukang*). The number of such experts has been steadily decreasing, a fact that adds to the obstacles, and costs, of building a traditional-style house today. As a result, the new houses built today are mostly modern types. Most traditional houses that can still be found in the villages were built one to two generations ago.

It is difficult to say how much and in which way those mothers, grandmothers or grand-grandmothers of today’s house owners



Image 10: Men working in the new «Omo Sebua» in Hiliamaetaniha (Zamoloyi, 2011)

helped in the building of the house and how much they were involved in decisions regarding its construction and finishing. Lacking this kind of information, however, does not seem to really matter here since the building tradition in South Nias followed one main pattern, which allowed only little variation and individual creativity among the different buildings. Today, even such traditional houses have become less standardised but reflect their owners’ or residents’ creativity and taste. Markers of distinction that can immediately be observed by any onlooker are for instance the building of the substructure and coloured painting of the outside walls. Inside the house, furniture and decoration, and more than anything else tiled floors, represent people’s economic status and, consequently, their social status, irrespective of genealogy and lineage. Modern trade and global economy allow inhabitants of even small and remote islands like Nias to choose their consumer goods, including furniture, kitchen ware, and other household goods, from a wide range of options. However, even many modern houses are only sparsely furnished and a high level of conformity among them is noticeable. The most common forms of an “individual touch” that can be detected are the family photos that on the walls. Putting up these photos, paintings or colourful calendars, covering the tables with tablecloth and adding other little objects of decoration like plastic flowers, is mostly done by women. Thus, while men are responsible for the major works of building the house, and thus creating its framework, it is women’s task to create a comfortable and cozy living space.

Contrary to South Nias, where few traditional houses are built today and where many of those remaining are equipped with metal roofs, the construction of traditional houses in North Nias has undergone a kind of “revival” which includes the usage



Image 11: A traditional house, North-Nias type. The roof is made of the leaves from the sago-palmtree. New roof tiles in front of the house are ready to be processed. (Lestari 2012)



Image 12: A woman from Nias producing roof-tiles from the leaves of the sago palmtree (Breuling 2012)



Image 13: A large and a small knife are the only tools employed to produce a sago palm tile (Breuling 2012)

of traditional materials, as for instance the leaves of the sago palm covering the roof. Due to the oval shape of the houses, sago leaf roofs are easier to be constructed than roofs made from corrugated iron, which is one of the main reasons why this traditional roof type still remains. In the following paragraphs we will describe the process of sago tile production carried out by women in North Nias and recorded in the village of Tumöri which is located only a few kilometers from the capital city of Gunung Sitoli. Image eleven shows a traditional house of the North Nias type during the renovation process in which the roof has been renewed.

With the conservation of this specific roof, another tradition has been kept alive: the art of producing sago palm tiles which has been practised by women. The knowledge and technique how to stitch the sago leaves together to produce a tile has been traded amongst women for at least three generations and thus can be claimed to be a traditional technique. However, it is not restricted to the island of Nias but also in other parts of Indonesia, such as the Mentawai Archipelago, women have produced the same type of sago palm tiles over thousands of years. According to the anthropologist Reimar Schefold (1988), this neolithic technique evolved around 3000 B.C. due to the necessity of gender cooperation during the process of house construction, in which women carried out the physically less strenuous tasks. In Nias, too, we can observe a similar correspondence between the gender-specific division of labour and physical strength.

Image twelve shows a woman from Nias Island producing sago palm tiles. With a large knife, a bamboo stick is cut into a straight shape. Afterwards, with the same knife, a thin slice of the bamboo stick is cut off, which is used as a string to stitch the palm leaves together. A small knife is used to cut the string into a smooth shape. Around 30 fresh sago palm leaves, overlapping each other to 50 %, are folded over the bamboo stick. Then the leaves are stitched together, by using the bamboo string and without a needle. The material is prepared by the woman's husband, ready to be processed. Her daughters are assisting her. Under these conditions, she can produce one tile within less than ten minutes. In one day, she can produce a maximum of 50 tiles. After one week, the fresh, green palm tile has dried and turns into a brown color. The price for one sago palm tile amounts to 2000 IDR. The tiles are produced on stock. Usually they are bought by the inhabitants from the village of Tumöri, but also by customers from other villages. The tiles are an essential part to build the oval-shaped traditional houses in North Nias. Also

some of the modern houses have roofs covered with palm tiles.

Besides such labour-intensive works as described above, women perform other relevant jobs that are related to the house: one of these is the management of the household finances. Although men more often than women work outside the house and garden in salaried jobs, and thus contribute to a larger extent to the regular monetary income of the family, it is considered women's task to take care of the money. How individual women deal with this responsibility and which consequences this has on the gender relations within the family, varies from case to case. One such variable is the economic situation of the household. In low-income households with very little cash at their disposal, such a task is more likely to be of minor importance.

However, this does not automatically imply that these women have an inferior position within the family. By working in the gardens and fields and selling their produce, the women's contribution to the family economy is often quite substantial. As we know from other examples, such active economic involvement and relative independence offers certain individual freedom and strengthens people's positions in the negotiation of their status within their social environment. On the other hand, it cannot be taken for granted that with the task of finance administration, the women are also granted rights over financial decisions. While the majority of our interview partners insisted on presenting their case as a gender balanced situation in which men and women mutually and consensually decide upon important issues in house building and purchasing, we also heard other voices. According to these latter, the women look after the money but the men decide how to spend it.

4.4

House ownership

In the above descriptions we have intended to present a balanced picture of South Nias society in which men and women collaborate, without major divisions or inequalities, in the building and maintenance of houses and households. In the remaining section of this chapter we would like to challenge this view and open the discussion for a broader perspective. As we have mentioned, women usually spend more time and carry out more work inside the house than men do. They therefore are more affected by major changes in the architecture of the building. They also manage most household affairs and administer its finances. Hence, women are present, visible and knowledgeable as well as authoritative in many decisions regarding their houses and households.

But – women usually do not own these houses, not even half or a smaller part of them. In South Nias patrilineal society, the eldest son in a family inherits his father's house and, ideally, remains living there together with his wife and children. The wife therefore has to move into her husband's house which at the time often still belongs to his father. The young couple forms a household of its own but has to share the house, and especially the communal spaces, kitchen, bathroom and living room, with the husband's parents. The young wife is a stranger in the new family, house, and often in the village too. The rituals of integration prove that this is a concern taken seriously also by the husband and his family. These rituals are to be performed at the wedding, when the wife moves into the husband's house and/or village, and when a new house is being built. In all instances, the husband's family, who are the hosts, invite the wife's family and offer them the best and most prestigious foods available, which are the heads of the pigs slaughtered for the occasion.

By exercising such rituals and by the everyday practice of living and working in the husband's house and in their mutual household, women have probably enjoyed considerable freedom and rights in movement and important decisions regarding these houses. Until today, however, the custom of patrilineal and therefore male ownership has not been touched. While this might not lead to any major consequences as long as the marriage works well and the husband does not exercise his rights as owner but appreciates his wife's contribution, it shows its effects when things go wrong. In the rare situation of separation or divorce, it is beyond doubt that the man continues living in the house which remains in his possession. The wife then has to move out, no matter if she herself or the husband has initiated the separation or is claimed guilty in its process. The children are either divided between both parents or remain with their father. A woman can inherit and own a house only when there are no brothers or nephews who would be eligible for inheritance.

In the past, houses were objects of durability that were owned and used by various people and handed down over several generations within a family. This pattern can still be observed, especially in villages with traditional-style houses. However, modern-style houses grow in numbers, and with them it is expected that attitudes towards ownership become 'modernised' too. This assumption is based on various grounds. The first is that most new houses today are built in modern style, of cement and bricks, and often by unskilled craftsmen. Their low quality of building suggests that many of them will not survive more than one generation. This means that the future

sons will probably either have to build their own new houses or make substantial repairs at their fathers' houses. In both ways, their wives will most likely be involved in those procedures and make substantial contributions. This leads us to our last point of argumentation, which refers to wider changes in Nias society linked to education and income opportunities. Like everywhere in Indonesia, school education on Nias is compulsory and equal for boys and girls. Although parents still invest more money and energy in their sons' education, the daughters no longer wait in the second row, and the numbers of girls with higher education are rising. Better qualification generally leads to better income opportunities which women, especially in urban areas, have already benefitted from. Women's increasing financial independence will probably lead to more gender equality in general terms (cf Salkeld 2008). With respect to the housing situation, we may assume that women will eventually contribute not only with advice and labour, but also with their financial resources. A direct investment into the construction and/or rehabilitation of houses could then lead to women's claims to ownership. Such a development could result not only in cases that women own houses, either themselves alone or together with their husbands, but also in other fundamental social changes, like post-nuptial residence from patrilocality to neolocality (as it already happens quite often) or uxorilocality, and patterns of inheritance which might include women as givers and takers of houses.

5. Conclusion

The traditional architecture of South Nias is a striking testimonial for a unique culture. For the people of Nias as well as for foreigners it is an integral part of the island's cultural landscape. Even for those who do not own a traditional house they are markers of origin, representing the belonging of the people of Nias, their cultural and social identity and their heritage. Even though women in Nias have not been involved in the construction of the traditional houses they have played a significant role the continuity of these buildings. With rapid and major changes in society and the increasing participation of women in the local and household economy, their influence is expected to rise in the architecture as well.

A big advantage of the traditional architecture of South Nias is the possibility to adapt the houses to modern needs. Starting with the building of extensions for the kitchens during the colonial times, up to the modification of the substructures in recent years, the traditional architecture of South Nias has been developed to satisfy actual social and economic needs. Nias women have made their contributions in decisions about adaptations of new buildings, they have installed the kitchens, they are the main users of the substructures either as a living space or as a place for work, and they still work in the maintenance of the older parts of the house. Through their active and competent engagement, women have played an important role in the preservation and adaptation of traditional architecture and by continuing this task, they will keep this cultural heritage alive – for themselves, other Indonesians and the rest of the world.

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