NIAS - A DOT ON THE EQUATOR

Bal Saini
Emeritus Professor of Architecture
University of Queensland

The Land of the Wood-Carving Warriors

In 1979 I joined a group of educationists who were sent to Indonesia by UNESCO to improve facilities of the University of North Sumatra. Soon after our arrival in Medan, we piled into a minibus and drove to the campus on the outskirts of the town. After greeting us at the gate, the rector led us to his upstairs office, past crates of books and laboratory equipment that cluttered the corridors of the modest two-storeyed administration building. Then followed a tour of the cam-

pus. A motley collection of buildings was scattered here and there amidst swamps, rice fields, and peasant huts. Students skirted past little children, cows, goats and stray dogs, as they hurried from one class to another.

Originally a low flood-prone rice field, the Government acquired the 137-hectare site for a university when nothing else was available. No one compensated the farmers, so they stayed. Poorly constructed, buildings, even new ones, looked sad.

Left: Our guide gave clear instructions to Sumet, Elizabeth and Peter to avoid stepping on cultural sensitivities.

I wasn't surprised. Widespread graft and irresponsibility was (and still is) accepted normal practice in Indonesia. Local building contractors told me that no more than 50 percent of the money actually found its way to pay for the construction. "It's going to be quite a challenge sorting this mess out," I said to Luke, our team leader.

Traditional Houses in Gunnungstoli

For the next few weeks, there was little time to spare, even on Fridays when the locals went off to their prayers at the mosque. I was lucky I knew Abduh Pane, an old graduate student of mine at the University of Melbourne who had returned to his home province to take up his position as Sumatra's Chief Town Planner. Pane smoothed the way for me through the maze of Indonesian bureaucracy and I was able to finish my work a little earlier than planned. I even managed to snatch a couple of short weekend trips to see Batak houses and orangutans in the adjoining forests south of the city.

Pane's wife Margaret was an Australian, a Melbourne girl who, after her marriage, became a Muslim and settled easily into the local Sumatran society. One evening after dinner at their house, he showed me some colour slides of Sumatra villages. The richness and variety of Batak houses fascinated me. 'But
you must visit Nias...it's quite
unique,' said Pane.

Nias – A Dot on the Equator

Nias is a tiny island off the west coast of Sumatra, a mere dot almost on the equator. It is well known to anthropologists for its megalithic culture. Until relatively recently, head hunting and human sacrifice played a part of life here, as it did in Batak culture on the main island of Sumatra.

'You'll need at least a week to ten days to see it properly.'

'I don't think I can make it - not this time anyway. Perhaps I should

return as a tourist.' We went on to discuss the logistics of a future trip to Nias that, even in 1980, was still well off the beaten track and involved quite an effort to get to.

'We'll have to charter a small aircraft, an eight-seater that would fly us to the Island's one and only airport north east of Nias,' said Pane.

'I'm sure Elizabeth would love to come. Will you and Margaret join us?'

'Sure!'

'I'll see if I can interest another four people...will get back to you after I've done my homework in Brisbane.'

The trip to Nias eventuated a few months later. Pane and his wife Margaret, and Elizabeth and I had an early breakfast at the Polonia Hotel near Medan airport. Architect Peter Keys and his wife Margery, who had flown in from Singapore the night before, soon joined us. Sumet Jumsai and another architect from Bangkok arrived just before we all headed for Medan airport.

The small aircraft landed at an airstrip among coconut plantations and rice fields just north of a seedy little tropical town of Gunung Sitoli. Pane had hired a small rickety boat to take us to the south of the island.

Unfortunately, the tide was out and the boat got stuck on a sandy bank and refused to budge. After a lot of huffing and puffing on our

part, we managed to free the boat while the tropical sun beat down over our heads - it was already midday. There were some anxious moments as, buffeted by strong waves, the small boat tossed and turned in the open sea while the two boatmen vigorously emptied the water that kept filling its bottom. It seemed we were in for a long haul.

Half way through the journey we found ourselves parallel to a secluded white, sandy beach on a small atoll. “How about a break?” suggested Peter.

It was such a relief to hop off the boat, even if it meant walking barefoot on hot sand. As we sat watching the sea Sumet suddenly produced a bottle of the finest Spanish sherry he had the good sense to buy from the Duty-free shop at Bangkok airport. He passed it around like a hooka in a Turkish coffee house. It was empty in no time. Now that we were much happier, the boat seemed to be steadier during the rest of the trip to Teluk Dalam where we were all piled unceremoniously into the back of a truck that waited to take us uphill to our destination, the village of Bawomataluo. (Nias people believe that a village is a reflection of the cosmos; that is why the word for village is banua, meaning the ‘world’, as well as ‘sky’ or ‘heavens’.)

Bawomataluo, Hill of the Sun

Bawomataluo - meaning ‘hill of the sun’ in the Nias language - was perched on high ground about 400m above sea level. We had to climb 88 steep stone steps to get there. As we arrived at the top we were mesmerised by the elevated houses with beautifully carved sinuous brackets and finials. Their exotic roof shapes swooped skywards like

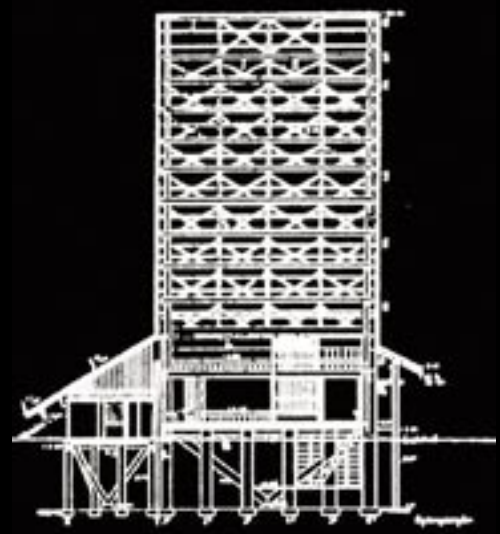
Viking ships riding the waves. They were built shoulder to shoulder and were quite different from the freestanding oblong structures on stilts we saw in northern Nias.

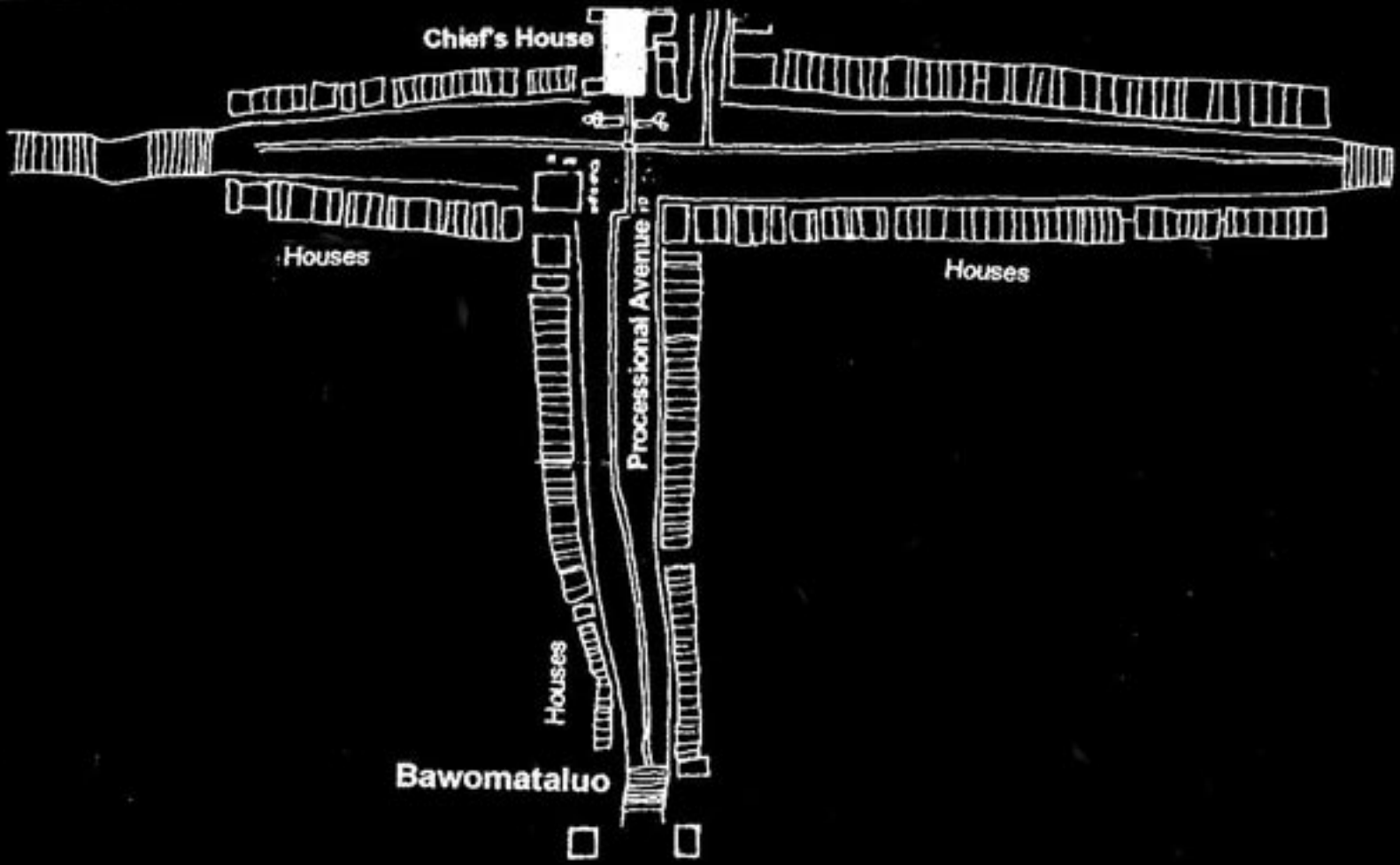
They were linked together by party walls and by a central corridor considered a handy device to get away if the village was under attack. Houses were arranged along the two main stone-paved avenues that met opposite the impressive Chief's House, which was to be our 'hotel' for the next few days.

The main feature of a typical house was its roof. Its construction used pylons made of whole tree trunks and crossbeams slotted together without the use of nails. Inside the house, we sat on a bench that was built all around the edge of the wall, and from where we could look out through the openings. There were more flap-like openings in the roof which could be propped up from inside to get more light and air.

Sumet, Peter and I were goggle-eyed when we first saw these Bawomataluo houses. We had always believed that house forms were solely derived from effect of local climate and available materials. 'Form follows function' was the accepted slogan. Yet features of these houses had no function. They were redundant but symbolically essential as they revealed a Anthropomorphic meaning - ridge beams were 'crania', rafters were 'bones', and superfluous twine bindings atjunctions were 'sinews'. Specialists in exorcism performed building ceremonies to appease felled trees and other materials used in their construction.

Above: The Chief's house is a more elaborate version of a typical rectangular two-storeyed house where the upper floor serves as living quarters for the family while the lower floor is reserved as sitting room and for guests.
Below: This megalithic rectangular stone slab is used by chiefs on significant occassions such as prestigious feasts at which many pigs are slaughtered; for formal announcements; and viewing dances. The figure chained in iron is much later version as iron was not known during megalithic period. This was probably made for village chief during first contact with foreign ships which carried iron chains.





Plan of Bawomataluo village Nias

Left: Elizabeth tape recorded Foalo war dance music at a ceremony to welcome us.

Above: The dancers wore bright red, yellow and black costumes with shields, swords and black hats.

The evening was already upon us. We were exhausted. It had been quite a day. The Chief's House, our 'hotel', was essentially a large hall with a gallery on three sides. "Let's sit down and have a rest...dinner will be served soon,"said Pane, pointing towards a large wooden platform that straddled right across the front part of the hall.

The platform was also to be our communal bed on which we rolled out our thin matresses and slept parallel in a single row. It was the first time each of us shared a bed with seven other people, some snoring their head off while others lying semi-awake in case they accidentally cuddled someone else's partner.

As I got up I found our two Thai Buddhist colleagues sitting cross-legged in their pyjamas, meditating. Soon the Panes woke up and after ablutions, proceeded to perform their Muslim ritual prayers. We,

remaining four ‘heathens’, decided to go out clicking our cameras as we walked around the village. We had discovered that early mornings, when the light is soft and mellow, were the best for capturing details of buildings.

The meal arrived - sago rice and fish (little fish floating in warm brown salted water). It was to be our staple diet for the rest of our stay. And, we had an audience. A group of villagers lined up opposite us along the edge of the platform that had now turned into a stage. They were curious. After all we were probably the main topic of gossip in the village.

Our faithful audience of children followed us everywhere, even to the Chief’s latrine reserved exclusively for guests, at the rear of the house. Word spread as soon as any of us was seen heading towards what we had by now christened ‘The Throne Room’. Dozens of children would suddenly appear as if from nowhere.

One afternoon, Elizabeth went to the ‘Throne Room’ and closed the door thinking, Peace at last, I’ve a place of my own.

‘I could hear whispers and giggling from outside,’ she told us later… ‘I couldn’t understand where the sounds were coming from until I saw a row of brown eyes all along the chink under the door.’