

Nias is the largest among the islands in the west side of Sumatera, Indonesia. It is an isolated island and has a unique and attractive culture, which has survived millions of years.

The culture of Nias is very distinguished in terms of its megalithic tradition. Local people still build and use megalithic structures in their present ceremonies. In fact, this ethnoarchaeological data can be utilized as a comparative reference in the reconstruction of the social, economic and religious backgrounds of the Nias people.

Several scholars have previously studied the culture of Nias. For example, in his book entitled "Das Kopfschnellen auf Nias", A. Fehr described the head hunting ceremony of Nias for the death of a chieftain, during the feast of merit and the establishment of an assembly house. R. Horsky, in "Religiose Holzplastik auf Nias", described in detail the wooden statues of Nias and their religious meaning, especially the specimens collected in the "Museum fur Volkerkunde" in Vienna.

But in 1981 a systematic study was carried out by a team, led by the author, from the National Research Centre of Archaeology (NRCA). The study focussed on a number of megalithic sites, both in Central and South Nias.

Megalithic objects in Nias are regarded as important mediums for ancestral worship. The megalithic societies of Nias generally established and erected megaliths on high hills or terrains.

In the article "The Arts of Nias" von Heine Geldren explained and discussed the arts of Nias and presented a series of very fine pictures. Here he concluded that the megalithic culture of Nias is a mixture of elements belonging to the older

The Megaliths of Nias Island

by Haris Sukendar



A menhir statue from Onowembo Telemaera.

MAP OF NIAS ISLAND



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and the younger megalithic traditions (Heine Geldren and Loeb, 1935).

The younger megalithic tradition is revealed in megalithic statues and menhir statues representing human beings or the king of faunal beings, locally known as *sitilubagi* and *neobehe*. Menhirs, in this tradition, have different decorative patterns. *Neoadulomano* and *neogadi*, two kinds of stone tables, are each supposed to represent a female lying on the ground beside the standing menhirs.

The older megalithic tradition, on the contrary, show huge and simple menhirs. Here stone terraces are used as graves or places for offerings.

Anyhow, the purpose of megalithic statues representing the human figure is very significant in Onowembo Telemaera, Ononamolo and Onositoli.

THE MEGALITHS OF CENTRAL AND SOUTH NIAS

Onowembo Telemaera

The menhir statue found in Onowembo Telemaera is made of greyish limestone. It is 155 cm. high and 40 cm wide, with elaborate eyes. The nose and mouth are simply outlined but the lips are large and curling. It has a broad and protruding tongue as well as a male genital. The statue carries a creese (dagger).

According to the local people, the menhir statue represents the chieftain. This very important information, by the way, contributes to data found on the functions of menhir statues. The statue is still worshipped by the local people, especially in curing illness.

The menhir statue of Onowembo Telemaera still stands *in situ*, near the house of the chieftain. It is in association with other stone structures,



Human head statues from Onozitoli.

menhirs and altars, locally known as *dane-dane*. All of these megalithic objects, arranged in a courtyard, are usually located in the centre of the village. The courtyard is used for setting offerings.

The courtyard at Onowembo Telemaera is rectangular with two parallel lines of menhirs and altars. This arrangement is still intact, particularly the menhir statue standing on the southern part of the courtyard.

A stone structure, on an oblong ground plan (length: 255 cm., width: 85 cm.), is found about a hundred metres to the southeast of the menhir statue. It is built from unprocessed stones. According to the local people, it is the tombstone of the first chieftain who settled in this village, hundreds of years ago. This tombstone is not worshipped any longer. Hence, it is now covered by dense shrubs and vines.

At the west end of the courtyard is a terraced stone grave. It is 3.5 metres long, 15 metres wide and 60 centimetres high. It is believed to be

the burial site of a former chieftain.

Onozitoli

The megalithic site of Onozitoli is located on a hill. To reach the site, one has to walk along stepped slopes, cross five rivers and pass through deep gorges. The site lies on a stepped plateau. At present, about 30 families live in round piled houses.

In the site, megalithic statues, including two human head statues, still stand in front of the house of the chieftain. According to the villagers, these megalithic statues represent previous chieftains. They are regarded as ancestral statues and are still worshipped today. The height of the statues vary from 75 to 85 centimetres.

The courtyard, where the megalithic elements stand, is used for carrying out ceremonies and festivals, including the slaughtering of pigs.

During any house construction or funeral gathering, villagers usually dance together in this courtyard. They bury their dead near the village and then cover it with a square stone structure.

The human head statues located in front of the chieftain's house represent sacrificed victims, before the erection of a huge menhir. Heads of human foes are regarded to have magical powers. Prehistoric people believed that parts of the human head such as the hair, head, and nails had magical power. The human genital organs were also believed to have this power. Nowadays, however, villagers use statues of buffalo heads instead of human heads in ceremonies, particularly in the construction of huge monuments.

The existence of megalithic statues, representing the human figure, and human head statues prove that the megaliths from Onozitoli belong to the younger megalithic tradition. They may have developed after the megalithic tradition of Gomo, indicated by the huge and crude menhirs. The legend of Onozitoli mentions that the earliest settlement of Nias is Gomo, which is now a district situated in the hilly area of South Nias.

Also found in Onozitoli are the altars, known as *dane-dane*. A *dane-dane* is a female symbol said to be used as the stone seat of the deceased. Intended as a memorial for the dead, it is also regarded as the resting place for the deceased's soul.

A *dane-dane* is usually found on the ground. On its side is usually a menhir. In Nias, a menhir is considered as a male symbol and as a phallic representation.

Tundrumbaho

Tundrumbaho is located on a hilly and cloudy plateau, about 520 meters above sea level. The site is 120 meters long and 50 metres wide.

In front of the site is a stone terrace known as *areosali*. It is used as a sitting place during council

meetings or any festival. Standing beside the terrace is a large *neogadi*. The chieftain usually sits on the *neogadi* when he decides on a penalty.

Megalithic remains are arranged in a row on the right side of the site. On the left side, is a long terrace where traditional houses were once located. A number of menhirs stand in the centre of the courtyard. They consist of sword shaped menhirs,



menhirs with human face decorations, menhirs with geometric decorations, simple menhirs, etc. This group of menhirs are usually called *saitagiri*.

Menhirs called *saitagiri* are used to mark places for weapons belonging to the chieftain in any ceremony or council meeting. *Neogadi* and *neoadulomano* belonging to the chieftain's wife are arranged in a row and are used to mark places for dancers during ceremonies.

Two types of *neoadulomano* are found in Tundrumbaho: the undecorated and the decorated. Decorations of *neoadulomano* are usually *tumpal* or triangles, double spirals, "S" shapes, *vahasaradede* or circles, etc. A *tumpal* decoration is also known as *neofulayo*, meaning power. *Vahasaradede*, on the other hand, are circles representing unity.

Left: A menhir, or an upright stone, from Tundrumbaho.

Below: Harvena, or stone tables with the geometrical design, also from Tundrumbaho.



On the wall of the areosali are carved decorations in bas relief representing a human dancer and a crocodile. In prehistoric mythology a crocodile symbolizes the audacity of the chieftain.

A similar design is also found on a *penji*, a kind of menhir from Sumba island. On the lid of a large *sitilubagi* is a decoration depicting mother's breasts. This decoration is also found at the entrance of the traditional house of the chieftain of Kewar, West Timor. A megalithic statue with large mother's breasts was found by Hasan Muarif Ambany in the Regency of Sukabumi. This design is supposed to symbolize fertility.

A very interesting find at Tundrumbaho is the square hole carved on top of a large menhir. This square hole was used to preserve the corpse of the former chieftain. This data about the function of menhirs has never been found in other sites in Indonesia. But other menhirs were used in skeleton preservation.

Sifarauasi, Gomo

Sifarauasi is located on a high hill, about 320 metres above sea level. The megalithic site of Sifarauasi can only be reached by climbing slippery tracks and crossing shrubs. Artefacts are concentrated in a very limited area of 50 metres long and 10 metres wide.

In this site the presence of *neobehe* is very dominant. Contrary to the *neobehe*'s general height of about 65-100 centimetres, the *neobehe* from this site are very small. They vary from 20 to 50 centimetres high. It is very difficult to explain this size discrepancy.

The largest *sitilubagi* stands on the west end of the yard, in association with other megalithic elements.

About 20 *neogadi* and *neoadulomano* are in this place. There are also one decorated and three undecorated *sitilubagi*, all of them oriented to the east. The largest *sitilubagi* is slightly shaped but is very richly decorated.

Some *sitilubagi* and *neobehe* are broken and have gone into ruins. On the northern side of the yard are *sitilubagi*, *neobehe*, *neoadulomano* and *neogadi*, collected under the thatch grass and shrubs. On the lid of a *sitilubagi* is a fine lizard decoration. It is carved in parallel lines in association with geometrical decorations, such as S-shape, triangles (*tumpals*), doubled spirals and circles (*vahasaradede*).

Six metres outside the west end of the yard are two menhir lying on the ground. This place could be the entrance to the yard. *Sifarau* means "can see", while *as* means "the sea". *Sifarauasi* therefore means "can see the sea". From *Sifarauasi* one sees a magnificent view of the countryside, particularly when the sky is clear.

CONCLUSION

The megalithic objects from Nias are specifically designed, not found outside of Nias. They are exceptional and significant. The people of Nias are many isolated ethnic groups, still practising megalithic worship.

The megalithic culture or tradition of Nias Island survives until the present. It is a living megalithic tradition. ■

Glossary

Neoadulomano

A kind of stone table used for ceremonial purposes.

Neobehe

An animal statue used for ceremonies.

Sitilubagi

Another animal statue used for ceremonies.

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