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978-1-107-09478-9 - *After the Ancestors: An Anthropologist's Story*

Andrew Beatty

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AFTER THE ANCESTORS

Set on an isolated Indonesian island, this is the gripping true story of a fieldworker's experience of living in a tribal society during a period of crisis.

Featuring a cast of unforgettable characters, *After the Ancestors* follows a bitter feud between rivals as it escalates into murder, intrigue and revenge. A vivid account of life within a radically different world, it also portrays a unique culture undergoing the transition from tribalism to modernity. A century of alien rule has left the island, once famous for its warrior ethos, with a hybrid culture. As the possibilities for heroic action recede, men raised to be orators and overreachers rather than church elders and peasants find themselves occupying a stage too small for their personalities. 'Where can we turn', asks one tribesman, 'we who come after the ancestors?'

A revenge tragedy for modern times, *After the Ancestors* will be enjoyed by anthropologists and general readers alike.

ANDREW BEATTY teaches at Brunel University London.

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After the Ancestors

An Anthropologist's Story



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The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends.

Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*

So here we are, once again, lost in the backwater, once again stuck in some remote cranny. But then – what backwater and what a cranny!

Gogol, *Dead Souls*

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Preface

The passage from pagan to Christian, hill farmer to peasant, tribesman to citizen – the story of many tropical societies – has been exhaustively documented, but the people who make up that story have mostly been written out of it. This book, a narrative of interwoven lives, aims to capture the human dilemmas which attend the transformation of the tribal world under the pressure of colonization, modernization and conversion: a reorientation that comes *after the ancestors*.

The book is also about fieldwork. The sharing of life over a period of years with people of radically different temper, culture and circumstances is one of the great formative experiences – an intellectual and sentimental journey without obvious parallel and the source of anthropology's deepest insights. Whether the anthropologist's tale is worth the telling only the reader can judge, but to tell the bigger story without showing how those hard-won insights emerge – in what circumstances, among whom and for whom – is to lose half their meaning. A narrative approach has its own constraints, of course, but given the highly specific, personal and unrepeatable nature of fieldwork, the use of a narrator – a point of view and centre of consciousness – not only permits a gain in honesty and an entry for the reader; it opens up vistas closed to conventional academic presentation.

I came to this view many years after writing a different kind of book about the same village in Nias, an island on the westernmost fringe of

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Indonesia – next stop Africa. The focus in that early effort was ceremonial gift exchange: the calculus of giving and receiving, of just deserts, sin and damnation. A resonant theme, to be sure, but the analytical format of case histories and theoretical discussion had excluded the living drama, the characters, histories, emotions and most of what gave meaning to life in Nias. The ethos of rivalry and resentment – the agonistic world of overreachers – had eluded me. As I saw much later, what I had done was describe the *background* to this world, a background on which the figures flitted like puppets on a stage without light and shadow. It was this absent human dimension of motive, feeling and idiosyncrasy – the untold story – which haunted me, remaining locked away in diaries, tapes, memories and dreams. Yet, only after a later spell of fieldwork in Java, where I found a better method for integrating analysis and experience, could I see a way to telling it. Revisiting the story – seeing it take shape for the first time – was as intense as living it the first time around. I have always felt the characters (including those long dead) to be present and real, even as I grow older and they remain the same. Only now, as they commence their afterlife on the page, do they begin to release their grip.

So the tale is not quite old, if not quite new. It deals with the perennial questions of life and death, good and evil, freedom and fate, my brother's keeper. Niasan answers to such questions may surprise and even shock. But in getting to know the retired headhunters, magicians and priests, youths and girls, we can begin to connect with them, perhaps even glimpsing in them undeveloped aspects of ourselves.

In his wonderful memoir of political exile in southern Italy, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Carlo Levi – excusing his tardiness – writes of “the infinite, poetic contemporaneity of all time and every destiny”. *After the Ancestors* describes a particular moment in history – an emblematic moment, if not something for “all time”. But those small historical destinies speak to us too. And I hope readers will share Levi's conviction

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as they watch Susanna's youthful pranks, wince at the chief's grim humour and follow Ama Huku to the "rim of the grave".

Having dispensed with the scholarly apparatus of footnotes, references and explanations, I should indicate how far I have departed from the facts – much less, I think, than in a formal ethnography where selection and abstraction are the rule. To protect individuals, I have disguised a few particulars, reassigning names and omitting certain details. Dialogue – though edited – was noted down as soon as possible after occurring. Where I could recall the sense but not the exact words, I have drawn on tape recordings – some 150 hours' worth – to get as near as possible to the idiolect of particular characters. (I would leave the machine running unnoticed, often forgetting about it, as people came and went; aside from a household survey, I rarely committed an interview.) Fundamentally, nothing is made up, not even the chess game – a dramatic cliché a realist author would scorn. To my adversary, it was not a cliché, and what sport he made of me! The result might be described as narrative ethnography (but that would be too impersonal), memoir (too subjective), perhaps even a non-fiction novel. If that term recognizes the freedom to draw on the resources of fiction – plot, character, dialogue, imaginative engagement – while respecting the actuality, I accept it.

Like any Niasan I have debts both spiritual and material. Research was conducted in Nias from 1986 to 1988 and again briefly in 2011, with grants from the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Academy. My lasting debt is to the villagers of Orahua (a pseudonym), alive and dead. My wife, Mercedes, shared the entire experience: it was as formative for her as for me. She has been my best reader and critic, as well as everything else imaginable to me. For editorial suggestions I am grateful to Harry Miskin, Caroline Davidson and Neil Belton. My daughter, Sofia, read the manuscript with fresh eyes and made valuable suggestions.

The person who first encouraged me to write this book is my late, deeply lamented brother-in-law, Juan García de Oteyza: friend and

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inspiration, editor, publisher, man of many parts. This book is dedicated to his memory and to Mercedes: brother and sister.

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DEAD SOULS translated by English (1998) 25w from p.258. By permission of Oxford University Press.

People

Grouped by household, showing clan and approximate age. Principal characters in bold.

The Chief (Bu'ulölö clan), fifty-nine; headman of Orahua for thirty-three years; **Ina Sökhi**, forty-four, chief's second wife; Sökhi, oldest son, twenty-one, mostly away at university in mainland Sumatra; two small sons (three daughters married out of the village). The family resides alternately in the great house overlooking the village square and in a small store beside the marketplace.

Ama Darius (Bu'ulölö), forty-eight, deputy headman of Orahua, first cousin of chief, orator; Ina Darius, his wife; **Yulia**, his daughter, nineteen; three small daughters; a son of fifteen and two infant sons. They live in a two-storey wooden house opposite the chief and run a weekly market stall.

Ama Jonah (Bu'ulölö), forty-four, brother's son of Ama Darius; malcontent and critic; lives in a house near the path between the upper and lower settlements with his wife and his younger children; estranged from oldest son, Ama Helu, who lives in a field hut.

Ama Ruyu (Bu'ulölö), thirty-three, younger brother of Ama Jonah; building a house near the marketplace.

Ina Edi (Laia), forty-three, widow of the chief's younger brother; her husband was an evangelist. Son **Edi** (twenty), daughter **Susanna** (seventeen) and two small boys. They occupy the older half of the great house. Our immediate next-door neighbours.

Ina Mulisa (Giawa), sixty, widow, mother of Ama Festi and Ina Onekhe; occupies a room in Ina Edi's house.

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Ama Festi (Bu'ulölö), twenty-nine, son of Ina Mulisa, cousin of chief; hunter, exponent of martial arts; lives with wife and young children in a field hut.

Ama Zinga (Bu'ulölö), thirty-three, our nearest neighbour, to the west of the square; wife, Ina Zinga (Giawa), twenty-nine; daughter, Elina (ten); son, Zinga (thirteen); two infants.

Ama No'eli (Bu'ulölö), thirty-three, tailor, cousin of chief, church elder, owner of a brick house on lower plain. Ina No'eli, thirty, his wife, mother of five.

Ama Rosa (Bu'ulölö), thirty, brother of tailor; lives with wife, Ina Rosa, and children next to Ama Zinga in the square.

Ama Budi (Bu'ulölö), thirty-seven, neighbour of Ama Rosa; related to Ama Zinga; wife and two teenage daughters.

Ama Onekhe (Halawa) ("the fighter"), forty-nine, martial arts teacher, titled elder; one son, Gohi (nineteen), daughters Susi (twenty-one) and Selina (eighteen) and seven other daughters; in-law to the chief's lineage. His wife, Ina Onekhe (Bu'ulölö), forty, is sister of Ama Festi. They live in a modern wooden house on the lower plain.

Heronimus Daely, thirty-one, lodger and pupil of Ama Onekhe, a drifter from outside the district; makes a living repairing radios and lamps, and from petty trade.

Ina Peha (Bu'ulölö), thirty, sister of tailor, keeper of small store near Ama Onekhe; Ama Peha (Giawa), her incomer husband.

Ama Huku (Bu'ulölö), eighty-five; lives in an apartment of the Bu'ulölö clan house in the square with his second wife, **Ina Huku** (thirty-four), two daughters (fifteen and ten) and son (three); a titled elder, veteran of feasts of merit, wars, headhunting; belongs to a lineage which branched off from chief's line six generations back. His surviving children by first wife are now middle-aged, all living in remote field huts.

Ama Genoni (Bu'ulölö), seventy-five, titled elder; lives in the Bu'ulölö clan house with his wife, **Ina Genoni** (the midwife, seventy) and sons, **Ama Firman**, thirty-five (plus wife and five children), and **Fanolo**, twenty-five. Daughters have married out. Boon companion of Ama Huku, his lineage mate.

Ama Maera (Bu'ulölö), forty-one; lives adjacent to Bu'ulölö clan house; same lineage as Ama Huku and Ama Genoni. Wife and five children.

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Ama Yosefo (Laia), thirty-seven; village secretary; informal leader of a Laia lineage in Balöhili hamlet; brought up by the chief; has numerous children.

Ama Gamböta (Bu'ulölö), seventy-five; bard, elder, formerly pagan priest; lives in Hilidanaya'ö hamlet.

Ama Bute (Bu'ulölö), twenty-nine, from England; **Ina Bute** (Laia), twenty-six, from Mexico; live in the great house next door to Ina Edi.

Religious teacher (Ndruru), forty-eight; lives in a wooden house next to the priest, below the village square, with family.

Schoolmaster/headmaster (Ndruru), fifty-two, head of Orahua's primary school; incomer from a western district; church elder.

Harefa (known only by clan name), fifty-four; headmaster of school in a neighbouring village; an incomer; crony of chief.

carpenter (Giawa), fifty-nine; son of a fugitive settler; a pioneer of the Repentance movement and veteran church elder; part-time diviner; a widower.

first priest, from North Nias.

second priest (Laia), twenty-eight, from a western district.

Robert the preacher, thirty, a Chinese from Madura near Java.

Persons living outside Orahua

Ama Ezra (Bu'ulölö), chief's elder brother, sixty-five; retired district officer of Lahusa; now living in Lahusa, twelve miles from Orahua; possessor of great titles; many grown-up children.

Ama Leo (Bu'ulölö), forty-five, son of Ama Ezra; studied law in Jakarta; lives in Lahusa with wife and children.

Ina Ria (Bu'ulölö), fifty-seven, younger sister of chief, widow of a great chief, herself a titled elder; lives in Tetegewo, eight miles from Orahua.

Ama Bulu'ati (Bu'ulölö), forty-four, elder brother of Ama No'eli the tailor, head of polyclinic in Gomo.

Place names

Orahua: the village.

Balöhili, Hilidanaya'ö, Lölömoyo: hamlets belonging to Orahua.

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Bohö, Siraha, Hiliána'a, Hiliarahua, Hoya, Tetegewo: villages in the Susua valley.

Gomo: district in south-central Nias from which all Niha are held to derive; also name of the village where the district officer's headquarters and local government offices are located. Orahua is one of the thirty-three villages in Gomo.

Gunung Sitoli: port and capital of the island located on the northeast coast.

Teluk Dalam: a small port in the south.

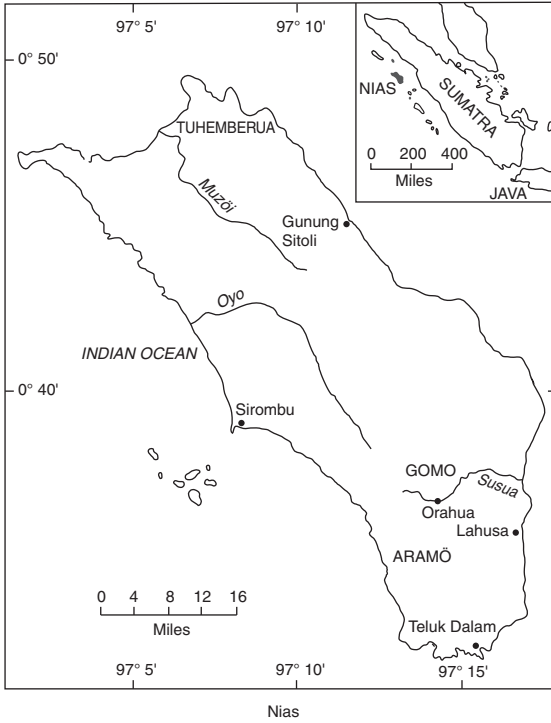
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Map of Nias