

Prologue

The people of Nias in the west of Indonesia have no memory of how they came to populate their island, no legends of colonization, no distant homeland. Like Adam and Eve they were there at the beginning of things, alone in the world. They call themselves Ono Niha, Children of Men, and their island Tanö Niha, Land of Men.

What, then, was the origin of humans? There are fragments of a creation story. They tell of a nameless being adrift in the void, impelled by loneliness to bring forth from her body; of how she scraped the dirt from her skin, beat it into shape and breathed on it; and they tell of her botched first efforts and tears of rage. A glimpse of the cosmic artificer: rough beast, scratching and weeping in the sky-wilderness.

The first human, a round androgynous child, split in two at the source of a river. The twin halves rolled apart and grew into Man and Woman. When they met and mated, innocent of their origin, they begat the Nias race, the Niha. The myth (now forgotten) recalls Plato's fable of a round primeval being whom the gods divide in two. Perhaps the meaning is similar: "Each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the indenture of a man, and he is always looking for his other half." At the source of things is wholeness, a sacred but sterile completeness. Life requires division. We separate, find our doubles, reproduce; but a nostalgia for the whole remains.

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Later, better-remembered stories – the coded record of migrations or landfalls – tell of descent to earth from a heavenly village some thirty generations ago. Only one of the nine sons of Sirao could succeed his father as heavenly ruler: whoever could perch like a cock on the point of a spear. The youngest son succeeds and the others are lowered down at high spots around the island – each tipping the balance slightly “as though the land pivoted on scales”. The descent myth is a social blueprint. Each of the scattered ancestors – founders of clans – set about recreating the celestial village, on earth as it was in heaven.

Still other tales relate how this or that clan came to be where it is, but what they all agree upon is that the fount of life and culture was in the centre of the island. It was in the centre, at Gomo, that a sacred tree once grew. Hanging from its branches were the elements of Niha culture: gold, scales, rice, a touchstone, a notched stick for measuring pigs, the priest’s drum. Its fruit were the source of fertility in the domain. When a leaf dropped, somewhere on the island a human being died; when a branch fell to earth, plague followed. It was the Tree of Life.

In 1909, shortly after Dutch conquest was completed, a German Lutheran missionary, outraged by this superstition, took an axe to the tree and cut it down. To everyone’s surprise, perhaps even the missionary’s, nothing happened. No one died. The sun still hung in the sky. The spell of the ancestors was broken.

Or so, briefly, it seemed; for the missionary moved on and was forgotten. Few of the hill people, at least in Gomo, became Christians and things went on as before. But Niha were no longer masters of their island. The slave trade with Sumatra was closed down and the source of their wealth dried up. Under Dutch rule, raiding (“headhunting”) was forbidden, coins were introduced, Christianity promoted. Tribal warriors, men with outlandish titles – Terror of the Masses, Touchstone of God – assumed the lives of anonymous barefoot peasants. Even in the centre – of small interest to the colonial power – confidence drained away like the myriad hill streams.

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At around the same time, Gomo was visited by the Dutch administrator E.E. Schröder. He was touring the island to collect information on customary law, mythology and geography. He made an inventory of the stone-paved villages with their megaliths and peaked houses. (“Here are the pyramid builders in origin”, he wrote, with a gesture characteristic of the time.) He witnessed feasts, measured plazas, counted columns. His photographs of stone tables, slate thrones and chiefs standing on *naga*-headed pedestals are collected in a three-volume ethnography (each tome the size of a headstone) that memorializes Old Nias on the eve of its destruction.

They might have crossed paths – the missionary with his axe, the colonialist with his plate camera – though conquest and conversion moved to different rhythms. Gains in one field were not automatically secured in the other. Nonetheless, changes brought by foreign intervention did bring some mutual, if unexpected, benefits. In 1890 missionary Fehr had complained: “Unfortunately the people of Nias appear to have no motive for genuine God-fearing.” Within a quarter of a century his successors were witnessing a miracle. Ravaged by smallpox epidemics, faithless in their leaders, the people were turning to God. They had at last found a motive. And when a conversion movement known as the Great Repentance swept through central Nias in the 1920s, it met little resistance. Who could resist the Almighty?

The missionaries struggled to make sense of these events. In letters to parishioners back in Wuppertal, they spoke of a Pentecostal fire, a purifying flame. But what they had unlocked was a flood of tears. There was so much to confess – treachery, adultery, “cheating at the mouth of the rice-measure” and darker deeds newly revealed as sins. Prayer meetings turned hysterical. Penitents wept as they acted out forgotten crimes; their astonished victims came forward to embrace them. (“They couldn’t retaliate: your confession absolved you. You were happy in your tears.”) Like revivalists today, the converts spoke in tongues, a “new language” for the new religion. As fresh symptoms of

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piety took hold, the movement entered different phases. First came The Crying, then The Shaking and Shivering, then The Jumping. There was even a craze called The Laughing when whole congregations, unburdened of sin, would quake with laughter, bursting the walls of their makeshift churches. Carried from village to village by prophets, the techniques of salvation were theatrical and wordless – the “speaking in tongues” doubly so. And they were collective. People might speak of a bubbling up of the heart as if the Repentance came from within, but the moment of ecstasy – or horror – was always public. Sin might be singular, but revulsion was communal. In the caricature the foreigners held up, Niha recognized themselves. They had drunk and seen the spider.

Instead of leading men towards the new god, the path of salvation lay through destruction. Megaliths were toppled, sculptures smashed, village squares wasted. Penitents burned the ancestor figures and priapic idols that crowded their houses. Bonfires lit up the hills. Then the storm blew over; peace returned. World War II saw off the missionaries; native priests, poorly educated and mired in political intrigue, took over. The high tide of Protestant evangelism had passed. What followed is aptly characterized by Max Weber’s famous phrase, the “routinization of charisma”: a proliferation of sects and schisms, each with its clutch of officers, committees and doctrines, answering to everyday needs rather than eternal questions, and as often as not bogged down in local rivalries. And so the vacuum left by the old ways was never really filled; a nostalgia for the whole remained unsatisfied.

ONE



The statue

The statue – large, broad and solid, a thick pedestal with three dragon heads – was cut from grey stone and rang with a dull soft note like a muted bell. It was a week before I knew I had been sleeping in its shadow. The day had begun with the family singing in the room below – a Lutheran hymn, sung at the dragging pace of a dead march. Lying in the attic, prevented from sleep, I followed its halting progress, disturbed by the defeated tone and odd emphases. In the intervals between lines, I could hear the rumble of Ama Darius's voice. What did he mean by such a performance? In a village of staunch churchgoers, his family spent Sundays at home. Yet in our conversations he had been at pains to impress me with his piety and with the great struggle it had cost him, as if the whole burden of Nias, its poverty, its violent tribal past and its uncertain salvation fell upon his shoulders.

Dawn smells of woodsmoke and pig dung drifted in. Above the dirge, the sounds of morning: the scraping of a twig broom, the clunk and splash of a streaming well and women's voices, busy before the heat built up. In the gabled attic the air was cool, dank with mould. The shapes of night grew distinct: heaped sacks, wicker fish traps, lanterns, rolled matting. And above the lumber, quite suddenly there it was, pale in the vestry-like gloom: a three-headed pedestal, mount of a chieftain. Out of the shadows it loomed, a stone Cerberus.

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But what was it? In the half-light the faces had an air of newness, as if the statue had sprung ageless and unblemished from the past. The jutting heads were unfinished, the jaws mute. In villages upstream I had seen similar monuments, scuffed and rain-worn. Here was their prototype.

I would have liked to ask my host about the statue but was uncertain of how to approach him. Was it a casualty of the Great Repentance – a relic of conversion – or a piece of cultural salvage? Could you repent of repentance? Such things could not be asked, least of all to a man like Ama Darius. As I would learn, the statue belonged to an unfinished history, muted but persisting, and it posed a blunt challenge: what to do with a devalued past. This was no abstract question. The past could be denied, but the people who embodied it went on; and what they made of the present would depend on how they came to terms with that past. When I next heard Ama Darius embark on one of his pious discourses, I thought of the statue in the attic, half-forgotten but still potent, like a bad conscience.

It was my second visit to Orahua. A month earlier, I had toured the hills looking for a field location, somewhere to begin research. I intended to stay in Nias for two years – long enough to gather material, learn the language and – something all anthropologists crave – enter a different world, another life. With a guide I had visited most of the villages in Gomo, in the rugged centre of the island, and Orahua had what I was seeking. Here the pattern of ceremonial feasting which gave Nias a certain specialists' fame had endured, or at least was interestingly compromised. It wasn't too isolated – this was no quest for the primitive – nor was it too close to town. The weekly influx of goods – tobacco, hardware, patent medicines – and the export of coffee and patchouli oil to world markets still permitted a distinct prestige economy to flourish. Against the market mentality, with its motives of profit and calculation, true valuables – people, gold and pigs – circulated according to quite different principles. To all appearances, Orahua was still its own place, however much

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outsiders might see it as marginal to somewhere else. And proof of this was that it had a proper chief, not just a government-appointed head – a man who had ruled for thirty years and who descended from a line of chiefs.

These were reasons to stay, but other things weighed too. Unlike some of the straggly hilltop hamlets further north – mud-moated in the wet season, parched in the dry – Orahua had abundant fresh water, the Susua, which swept in a glassy tide past the lower settlement. It had a long clan history written into its wood and stone. And it was beautiful. Here was a big compact village that had stood for ten generations – half the age of humanity by local reckoning – in the midst of Gomo's thickly wooded hills.



The “great house”, Orahua

Orahua also gave the impression of being a world unto itself, a dubious quality sure to appeal to a novice anthropologist but one which reflects a common regional pattern, for settlements all over

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Southeast Asia, from bamboo hamlets in Borneo all the way up to Angkor Wat, have cosmic pretensions. Standing in its grim square, shadowed by standing stones and beetling roofs, you could think you were in the centre of the world. So it must have felt to the people who built it. Yet only a short walk away, the high roofs dwindled to nothing: a reversal of scale that tells much. From the top of the nearest peak the village disappears in dense greenery, only a thread of smoke indicating human presence. Like the cosmic village, this too is a readymade image; yet to confirm its truth I have only to glance at the panorama that hangs on my wall. An inch from the left border a grey wisp hovers eternally over a green forest, as if Orahua itself, like the remembered village, were forever present, forever absent.



Susua valley and the remembered village, two roof peaks visible left of centre

On that first reconnaissance we asked to be put up by Ama Darius, a distant uncle of my guide who took in visiting officials and itinerant

The statue

peddlers.¹ His was a modern, two-storey wooden house with a zinc roof down by the marketplace. It doubled as a store selling basic provisions: soap, lamp glasses, betel-chewing ingredients and clove cigarettes, sold singly as a luxury item. On market days he opened a canopied booth at the side where his daughter, Yulia, served boiled pork and rice to dealers. A few yards away, in a small concrete house across a stony path, lived his cousin. I had met this man, the village chief, earlier in the day in the “great house”, the ancestral home he had vacated to be near the market. According to my guide, he was a prickly, forbidding person, not someone to approach as a stranger. “Stick to my uncle”, Halawa had said. There were other reasons to follow this advice. Urbane and intelligent, Ama Darius was one of the few people I could talk to, as he spoke the national language, Indonesian, which I had picked up on earlier travels. In a rural society where the Bible is the only book, he was unusual in possessing a large dictionary.

These cousins, whose company I shared on and off for two years, dwell in the memory, as “big men” in Nias should: the chief, pale and stiff-necked, lank hair flopping over his high forehead; his deputy, a man of many faces, accusing, complaisant and cynical by turns. I can picture him now as I first caught sight of him on that day, striding out of his house to break a stick over a dog that was nosing in his yard.

“Whose dog?” asked Halawa, laughing, as it ran yelping away.

Ama Darius looked at him askance. “Mine.”

We introduced ourselves and went inside, glad to get out of the heat. The interior was modest but decent, carefully presented – nothing like the rough huts encountered along the way or the tribal houses of the upper village. A round table with a clean cloth and ashtray, a glass-fronted cupboard, a shelf piled with notebooks, even Ama Darius’s appearance, all suggested respectability. He wore grey trousers and a

¹ Adults are named after their first child. Ama Darius means Father of Darius; Ina Darius means Mother of Darius. These teknonyms are equivalent to Mr or Mrs, but less impersonal.

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plain short-sleeved shirt with a fountain pen in the pocket, a wristwatch loose on his wrist. Not a peasant. He was tallish with a sallow, lined face and receding hair – about forty-five. But there was something youthful in his frame; his movements were quick and forceful.

We sat at the table and his wife, dark and self-effacing, served us tea – two steaming glasses with a finger of sugar at the bottom. Ama Darius stood leaning against the window sill and watched composedly, ignoring the dog that had slunk in and curled up under the table. As at every other stop, Halawa, a trainee teacher, gave a little cough and launched into a high-sounding speech explaining my purpose, or at least his idea of it: that I had come from *Inggris* as a guest of the Indonesian government to learn about the history and customs of Nias, to write about the people and make them famous.

“Well, my ‘elder brother’ the chief knows everything there is to know about custom. None more than he,” said Ama Darius. He eyed me coldly and then added: “I doubt he’d be willing to tell you, though; he’s a busy man. His daughter’s getting married tomorrow. Perhaps you’ve heard? Besides, he’s already famous – famous in Nias.”

“No. What Mister André wants is to live here – or in some other village – for a long time, even a year. He wants to learn the language and get to know people.”

Ama Darius opened his mouth and emitted a short laugh. He went over to a cupboard and took out a cigarette, lit it with a lighter that hung from a string and stood gazing out of the window. After some moments, his back still turned to us, he said: “What, may I ask, is in it for us?”

I couldn’t understand Halawa’s reply, spoken confidently in Niasan, but our host nodded slowly as he exhaled clove-scented smoke. Then he turned to me with a formal smile. “Well then. That’s settled.”

And before I could ask what he meant he had disappeared, calling something to his wife on the way out.

My first encounter with the chief that day had been less promising. He had gone up to the great house in the upper part of the village to