

Djalan Sultan Hasanuddin 29
Medan, North Sumatra
Indonesia
June 24, 1953

Mr. W. S. Rogers
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522 Fifth Avenue
New York, 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

If the morning is bright and clear, you can lie on the beach near Sibolga, North Sumatra, and see the low profile of Nias Island out beyond the rolling combers in the Indian Ocean. Nias is an island of low mountains and coral beaches, about sixty miles long and half as wide. During the last several hundred years, its late stone age culture has been subjected to a series of shocks: Atjehnese slave raids, the Dutch conquest, the conversion of most the island's inhabitants by German missionaries, and the Japanese occupation. Now, Indonesian independence has brought a flood of ideas—and officials—from the mainland which will almost certainly obliterate that culture in time.

But in April, 1953, reminders of the glory and brutality of past ages can still be seen in the hilltop fortress-villages near Teluk Dalam in the southern part of the island.

We had ridden the launch in from our KPM ship at eight in the morning, stepped out on the dock where a score of coolies were stacking sacks of copra, and headed down the single sleepy street of Teluk Dalam to the headquarters of the sub-district official (tjamat). Mr. Telaumbanua was already at work, a slim Niasian aristocrat with a very quiet smile. In several minutes, he had borrowed two police bicycles for us and rounded up a three man guide team for our trip to the village of Bawamataluo: his assistant officer, a young police official, and an extraordinary young policeman from the mainland, with an Italian face, a disrespectful attitude, and a black-barreled burp gun.

We pedaled out of town on the coral-sand road and headed for the hills. A half hour later, we had left the lowland coconut groves, and the road began to ascend. We were already twenty kilometers from Teluk Dalam when we left our bicycles at a stone cutter's shack by the side of the road. A narrow pathway of carefully fitted stones disappeared up the forested slope to our right.

We headed up in single file, scrambling and slipping on the slick, worn rocks. A formidable hunter passed us, wearing a loin cloth and armed with sword and long spear. He stood aside and gave a stiff hand salute for the official, the foreigners, and the burp gun. We continued up the stone pathway, which soon broadened into a finely constructed stone stairway, the work of highly skilled craftsmen. Several hundred meters above we could see the sky and the silhouettes

of a reception committee of curious children.



On the top step, we passed between two small, carved stone monuments and entered the village-fortress of Bawamataluo, laid out symmetrically on the flattened hilltop.

The sight was incredible. Before us stretched a long avenue, fully forty yards wide and made entirely of huge fitted granite slabs. On either side we could see rows of substantial wooden houses, set ten feet up on huge pilings. In front of each house, two carved timbers jutted out so that the row looked like a formation of unique elevated barges. In front of the houses were immense carved granite stones of various shapes, some of them serving simply as benches and tables, others ornately carved with monkeys, salamanders, and floral designs.

The biggest blocks must have weighed many tons.

We marched down the center of the street as the men and boys crowded close. The little girls went on with their work of pounding rice and carrying water, and the younger women covered themselves and scurried indoors. Through the wooden bars in front of every house, many eyes watched our party from the dark behind. The people of Nias were as curious as we. We arrived at the center of town and waited for the chief by the high jumping pillar.

The people of Nias are famous high jumpers, perhaps Indonesia's secret hope for future Olympic Games. Young boys practice jumping over ropes until they are skilful enough to try the stone piling in the village square, which is six feet four inches high and two feet square on top. Most jumpers use a stone take-off block about eight inches high. A competent jumper approaches from the front, gives a terrific leap, reverses direction midway over the obstacle, and lands facing the stone barrier. If he is a master, he will draw his sword at the height of his leap, and one fantastic story tells of a young athlete who was able to clear the stone piling with ease, draw his sword with a shout at the top, and land gracefully on the other side without disturbing the young child strapped to his back.

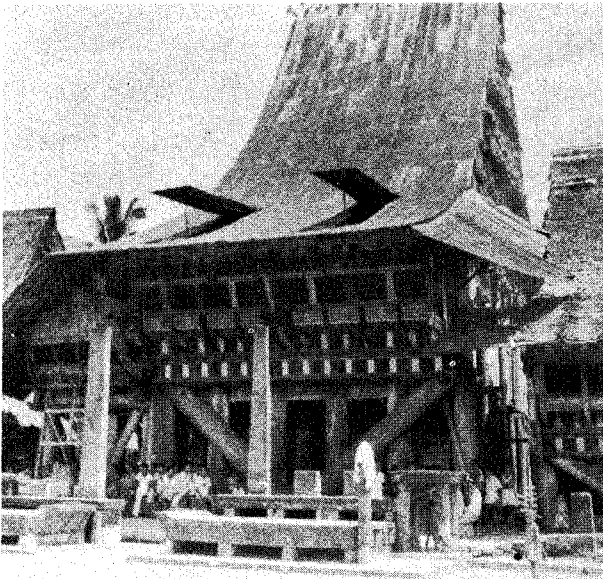
No one knows quite how high Nias jumpers will leap in competition, but if we are to believe the tale, their original incentive for jumping has passed with the stone age. It seems that ancient Nias kings were buried with a retinue of servants for the next world. Villagers were for some reason averse to following their own monarch to the grave, so the situation quite plainly demanded that prisoners be taken from a neighboring village for the sacrifice. To kidnap someone from an

elevated house demands no little skill in high jumping. Thus high jumping practice became a necessary part of Niasian everyday life.

The village chief came over to us in rotund dignity, a fat necked man with sun glasses, white shirt, and immense grey pants. After an exchange of courtesies, we asked to see the famous palace of the former radjas. He led us into the building behind us, where the rulers of Bawamataluo had lived before Dutch troops had broken their power. The palace is a mamouth duplicate of the smaller village houses, built over a hundred years ago when Nias was still a collection of village kingdoms emerging from the stone age.

At the top of the steep stairs, we entered the gloom of a long royal reception room and sat on the carved dais while our hosts' explained the wonders of the palace and Nias. Our machine gunner did a sort of tap dance with his hob-nailed boots to test the hardness of the ironwood floors. Hanging from the rafters above us were the jaws and tusks of hundreds of pigs that had been butchered for the memorable feast which commemorated the completion of the palace.

Symbols were everywhere. On the walls were weird gold-painted wooden carvings of ear rings, neck pendants, and other valuables which were supposed to represent the radja's treasure. In this way, he would show off his wealth and at the same time keep it safely buried outside. A wooden room jutted out into the end of the hall, some five feet above the floor; this had been the radja's bedroom and symbolized the fact that the radja reigned over the nobles in the hall below in the same way that he reigned over the kingdom from his palace.



Almost incidentally, our host reminded us that this huge structure of elevated planks and three foot timbers was built without a nail or peg. The many tons of wood were merely carved to fit.

While we ate our noon meal of chicken and rice next door, the chief explained that he was a descendant of the radja, but that royalty was a thing of the past. Stone carving is already a lost art, and much of the ancient adat (customary law) has vanished. Three hundred children from Bawamataluo and a neighboring village go to a national school on the slope below the village, and contact with the larger towns of Nias has brought in much of the paraphernalia of modern times.

The most telling blow to the old culture was delivered by Lutheran missionaries who entered the island in the early



years of the Dutch reign. Neat little churches are seen in nearly every village, and the centralized church organization is second only to the government in power on the island. The Church has been forced to compromise with some of the ancient animistic beliefs, and the old Gods are still carved in dark iron wood in inland villages. However, when we were shown the beautifully carved statues of the fierce dieties, we noticed that they were draped modestly with red loin clothes. The Christianity of Nias, however, is not just old wine in new bottles. Missionary schools were set up in remote villages before the war, clinics established, the language of Nias was given a Latin alphabet and written for the first time. In the island capital, we saw the latest shipment of bibles and hymnals from Germany, neatly printed in the myriad f's, l's, and w's of Niasian. While the Dutch government stood off and ruled from the relative distance of the resident's office, the missionaries entered Niasian society and began to transform it in a basic way.

Aside from the stone work and high jumping, the characteristic sight in Nias is pigs. Perhaps the number of pigs seemed all the greater to us after months of travel on the Moslem mainland, but they are seen everywhere. Their importance is partly ceremonial. Every marriage or death is celebrated with a feast, and the number of pigs slaughtered reflects the social standing of the family involved. Naturally, a lively competition develops, and the custom has become as socially destructive as the caribou feasts of the Toradja country of Sulawesi. In a small village like Bawamataluo, the young man must provide at least three pigs and a certain amount of gold as a marriage price. The pigs are all eaten, but the gold is buried again until another marriage is to be arranged. In the larger towns, the price may run as high as fifty pigs.

The marriage price burden is not borne without complaint by the young men of Nias. Our young friend from the police office complained that his beautiful wife was hardly worth the price: "As soon as you're married, you're poor." So in Nias, there are many bachelors and attractive old maids of thirty.

The old marriage customs are handled with restraint by the church. According to the chairman of the Nias Protestant Association,

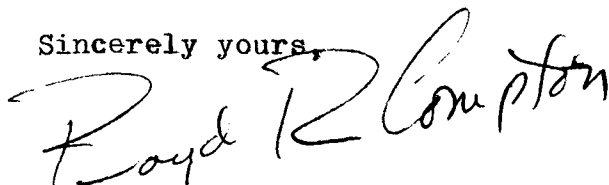
the church opposes the traditionally high marriage price as wasteful and senseless, but hesitates to do more than offer quiet advice on the subject. The chairman himself is setting an example by giving his daughters in marriage without demanding pigs or gold, while the church youth group—seeing alternatives of loneliness or poverty—is taking a strong stand against the custom in general.

Law enforcement in Bawamataluo is a monopoly of the village chief. He settles small cases himself and claims that there are no major cases. Land in the village area is theoretically held in communal possession, but it is occupied in permanent hereditary proprietorship. When a family head dies, his land is divided among male heirs. If there is not enough land for a young man when he marries, the village chief can allot him communal land which he will occupy as long as he cultivates it. Communal land is plentiful, and the chief claims that disputes are rare.

The hospitable chief ended his discourse on adat, pigs, and land by saying that transmigrants from overcrowded parts of Indonesia would be welcome in Nias. Perhaps his statement is indicative of the great changes that recent years have brought to Nias; not so very long ago, large numbers of mainlanders came to Nias on a different mission—looking for slaves in this island of amiable, attractive people.

We were surveyed once more by hundreds of pairs of eyes as we returned to the remarkable stone stairway at the end of the broad avenue. Before descending, we looked down the steep slope below. Less than a hundred years ago, the slopes were stripped of trees, and the warriors of Bawamataluo waited silently above for their enemies from neighboring village kingdoms. Below we saw the national school, the new foundations for the Lutheran church, and a group of men carrying a grunting pig back from market. The hunter we had seen earlier was coming back with no game, but a heavy load of firewood. We passed a group children playing the island equivalent of baseball in front of the school, yelling at each other in good Indonesian, and made our way down the stairway, out of the receding stone age into the lowland world of native copra, Chinese shops, and Dutch ships.

Sincerely yours,



Boyd R. Compton

Received New York 7/8/53.