



Omo Sebua – An Endangered World Treasure



North Sumatera Heritage

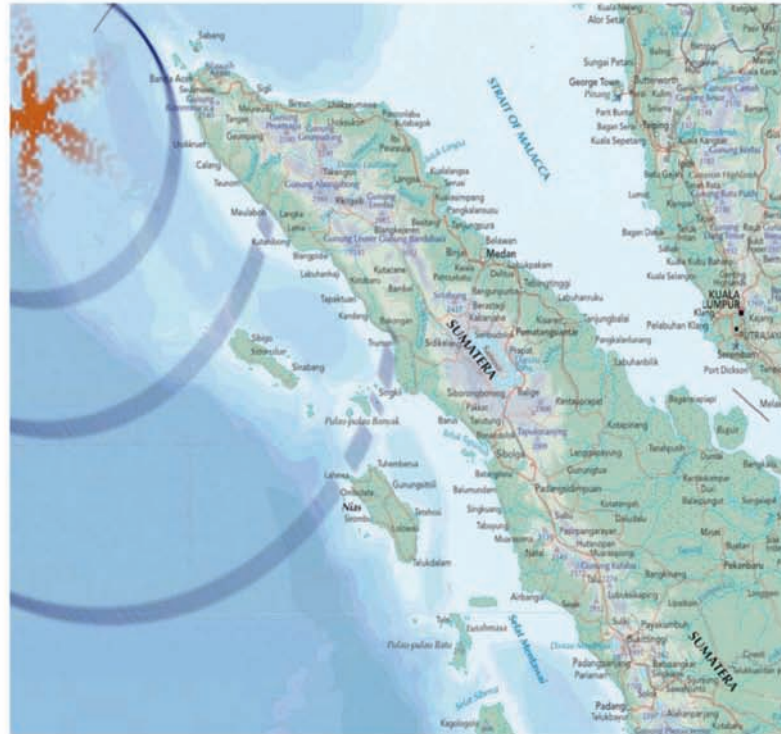
North Sumatera Heritage (NSH) was founded in November 1998 in Medan, North Sumatera, Indonesia. It is fully independent, non partisan and non profit making to develop cultural values and to save the natural and cultural heritage on a basic platform for the institutions that will implement any program activity. Its aim is to develop and strengthen the values, tradition and cultural symbols that still exist in the community; to advocate the subculture that is marginalized by modernization and social change; to revitalisation the tradition of community and local culture and to make an inventory of the intangible and tangible natural and cultural heritage in the community. NSH stands up for the rights of communities to preserve their culture and natural heritage.

WORLD MONUMENTS FUND

The World Monuments Fund (WMF) is the foremost private, non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of endangered architectural and cultural sites around the world. Since 1965, WMF has worked tirelessly to stem the loss of historic structures at more than 450 sites in over 80 countries. WMF's work spans a wide range of sites, including the vast temple complexes at Angkor, Cambodia; the historic centre of Mexico City; Nicholas Hawksmoor's London masterpiece, St. George's, Bloomsbury; and the extraordinary 18th-century Qianlong Garden complex in Beijing's Forbidden City. From its headquarters in New York City—and offices and affiliates in Paris, London, Madrid, and Lisbon—WMF works with local partners and communities to identify and save important heritage through innovative programs of project planning, fieldwork, advocacy, grant-making, education, and on-site training. Every two years, WMF issues its World Monuments Watch list of *100 Most Endangered Sites*, a global call to action on behalf of sites in need of immediate intervention. Omo Sebua in Indonesia was included on the World Monuments Watch list in 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006.

TURNSTONE **Communications**

The Turnstone Tsunami Fund was founded by Michael Buckley and Roger Miall in the UK with the aim of making a positive contribution to the rebuilding needed, following the great tsunami of 26th December 2004 in Northern Indonesia using local timber and supplies. This has been supported by many individuals and organisations, particularly Howarth Timber of Leeds, the Carpenters' Company in London, an ancient craft guild, and a concert by the London Symphony Chorus.



The island of Nias sits on the fault line where the Indian Ocean and South East Asia plates meet off the west coast of Sumatra. It measures 140 km long and 50 km wide with a population estimated to be around 640,000.

The 26th December 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake's epicentre was just to the north of the island, measuring 9.2 on the Richter Scale. The ensuing tsunamis killed 122 people on Nias and hundreds more were made homeless.

Three months later on 28th March 2005, having celebrated Easter Sunday, this largely Christian island was hit by the Sumatran Earthquake, measuring 8.7. It was initially thought to be an aftershock of the 2004 quake, but is now regarded as the second most powerful earthquake in the world since 1965, and twelfth most powerful ever recorded. At least 800 were killed, many more injured, and many buildings collapsed leaving thousands homeless on Nias.



Nias has a unique culture, which is far different from other areas of North Sumatera. This is because of its remote location 125 km off the west coast of Sumatera. The people are of Malay, Batak and Chinese origin.



One activity is stone jumping, where young men leap over a stone wall two meters high – a dangerous and thrilling sport. To jump is a test of manhood.

There has been an ongoing programme to nurture the cultural heritage of this community, led by North Sumatera Heritage which included the survey mapping of the village and environs, the condition mapping and analysis of the Omo Sebua - the Great House belonging to the village chief - funded by the World Monuments Fund; with subsequent contributions by WMF to the restoration work on Omo Sebua.

Nias traditional war dances are exciting and until the mid nineteenth century battles between the clans were quite common. The performers wear traditional costumes; warrior jackets made from black palm fibre called ijuk, and bark-cloth fibre. Their heads are garnished with bird feathers, and they carry spears and shields.



The traditional wooden houses of Nias, shown below, are very attractive. The village of Bawomatoluo, meaning sun hill, has the oldest and largest Omo Hada (or big house) on Nias, occupied by this indigenous, warlike tribe. Its height is up to 30 meters and some of its hardwood pillars are more than a meter thick. In addition to its magnificent architecture, it has interesting wall carvings that honour a great feast. Just a very few such structures still exist, including Omo Sebua in the southern upland village of Hilinawalo Mazingo.



The recent earthquakes affected Omo Sebua in Hilinawalo Mazingo causing great hardship to the community and threatened to destroy their cultural heritage.



Hilinawalo Mazingo is in the southern uplands and was therefore spared the effects of the tsunami and flooding that so damaged Aceh on the mainland. However both earthquakes and their after-shocks severely damaged the hardwood beams and timbers of their traditional houses. None collapsed but most were left unsafe, so the villagers built temporary shelters on the street outside their homes to sleep in, and they continued to use their homes during the daytime. Later international aid agencies gave out some tents.



Although the chief's house, Omo Nifolasara has survived nearly three centuries, it was already in desperate need of restoration and conservation, having fallen victim to intense sun, tropical rains, insect infestation, and neglect. Carvings and gongs, that once graced its interior, have been sold off. Recent events attest, however, that the traditional timber building methods of Nias are particularly resistant to the earthquakes to which the island is prone – as shown on the opposite page. This Omo Nifolasara is the oldest Omo Hada in Southern Nias.





The elderly village carpenter in Hilinawalo Mazingo, Ama Liana, was keen to pass on his skills to younger generations and he volunteered to run the courses. Two courses, each lasting four weeks, were held. The trainees ranged from 23 to 50 years old. Some were active carpenters and others were learning from scratch. They built a miniature replica of Omo Sebua in the traditional way with wooden pegs, and stones under the meranti pillars.



The Turnstone Tsunami Fund Carpentry Project in 2005/06 was aimed at training men from a number of villages to become skilled carpenters in building traditional Nias houses, and to repair the traditional Great Houses, such as Omo Sebua. Such capacity building is a vital first step in a campaign to restore the architecture of the island, and to assist in maintaining appropriate buildings as protection against future earthquakes and tremors.



North Sumatera Heritage worked on the budget for this restoration project and later provided overall supervision, and requested Turnstone to seek funding. The Carpenters' Company of the City of London and other donors were most generous. As a Livery Company incorporated by Royal Charter in 1477, the Carpenters' Company was originally a medieval trade guild formed to safeguard the welfare and interests of carpenters. It still maintains close links with the craft of carpentry and other building trades. Following the two carpentry courses, all the houses in Hilinawalo Mazingo and the surrounding four villages had been fully repaired by mid 2006.



The Restoration of Omo Sebua, or the Great House, has just been completed with support from the Carpenters Company and the World Monuments Fund. However the work was not without incident. An earthquake, measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale, hit southern Sumatra on 17th September 2007 whilst seven carpenters were replacing roof timbers. They felt the strong vibrations, but no one was hurt and the flexibility of the building withstood the quake. They have now replaced 250 roof timbers - a section at a time - during the monsoon. Meanwhile the villagers, having collected over 5,000 local rumbia palm leaves and nipa vines, thatched the steep roof of this nearly 300 year-old building. There is a tradition of community service in South East Asia where everyone helps in the restoration of such damaged buildings.



Other carpenters used local meranti timber to restore the interior beams, flooring, and some of the eight meter pillars on which the building rests. These pillars in turn stand on large stones, a few of which had shifted in earlier earthquakes. The carpenters also reproduced the traditional carving on the front of the building.

This chief's house, originally built in 1715, stands four meters off the ground and has a retractable stairway in the midst of the pillars so that it could be defended against attacks from other villages. The village of Hilinawalo Mazingo is built on a hill and, half way round a "U" of traditional wooden houses, Omo Sebua is situated looking down a cobbled street towards a river.

The Great House stands out from the others due to its large size and roof soaring 22 meters into the sky. It was built for the chief of the Bu'ulolo clan and his hereditary heir, Sozalawa Bu'ulolo, and his family have moved back into the house now that it

has been restored. The house has a large audience chamber, with a highly polished wooden floor, where meetings of village elders and weddings are held. There are two jails for offenders, and living quarters at the back for the Bu'ulolo family. Four other nearby villages recognise the Bu'ulolo chief.

A ceremony for the completion of the restoration was held there on Saturday, 17th November 2007. Roger Miall, representing the Turnstone Tsunami Fund, joined the carpenters and villagers who worked on the two years project, local dignitaries and the staff of North Sumatera Heritage, who had supervised the restoration, at the completion ceremony feast. The island is predominately Christian, although there are many Muslims and a few animists as well; so it was a multi faith gathering of thanksgiving. The youths of the village took part in the traditional jumping over a two meters high stone wall, as a demonstration of their manliness.

The carpenters were trained thanks to funds from the Carpenters' Company, thus empowering the people on the spot to first repair their traditional wooden houses and then to join in this community project.

To date all donations received by the Turnstone Tsunami Fund for the above projects have been spent in Sumatera, mostly in the village of Hilinawalo Mazingo.



Further details and photographs are available at www.turnstonesingapore.com

A Re-Forestry Education Project was another initiative, which held particular interest for those who had donated – especially Turnstone and The Carpenters’ Company, which are active in the wood sector. Nias has largely been stripped of its forests over the past 150 years since head hunting ceased and the population grew substantially.

A Nias schoolteacher, Yamin, funded by Turnstone, undertook to run a programme to educate local teenagers about sustainable forestry. The support and consent of village elders, landowners and the local school were obtained. Soon the younger generation were collecting the seeds of the native hardwood tree, afoa, and 1200 seedlings were planted in poly bags of earth in a small nursery. Once they reached 50 cm they were planted on seven selected growing sites just before the annual rainy season.

Today’s teenagers can now tend their trees and watch them grow. When they are in their sixties, the trees will reach maturity - a resource for the future.





Turnstone has facilitated seedling production and advises on maintenance.





In the future Hilinawalo Mazingo, like so many villages on Nias, needs running water with a purity to reduce illness. The women and children of Hilinawalo Mazingo currently carry water half a kilometre up a very steep hill to the village from the nearest source of water. So, one last project is planned under this programme. If funds and expertise can be found, it is hoped to introduce running water to the forty houses using a gravity fed system from a fresh water spring 2 km up in the hills.

Longer term, if the island is to withstand future severe earthquakes, it needs to redevelop its capacity to build these unique traditional timber houses. Essential for this is the reforestation of spare land with native afoa/meranti trees, which take 60 – 100 years to reach maturity. The teaching of local carpentry skills takes time and funding.



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“Traditional houses are built in accordance with the traditional structure of society, almost like a micro cosmos of the world in its ideal form. The size and shape is determined by the social status of the owners and the floors are built on varying elevations, in accordance with the class division within the nobility, the bourgeois and ordinary citizens.

Moreover, the traditional houses of Nias are an admirable sample of the long experience and knowledge of Nias people of working with stone and especially with wood that come from the stone-age culture. The sophisticated and complicated design of these houses has been acknowledged by architects from around the world. They are constructed from various types of heavy tropical woods, and without the use of any nails. They are built on poles and have a characteristically tall roof.

It is important then, to maintain these traditional houses as a reflection of Nias identity, but specially carpentry techniques that are in risk of getting lost, because of the death of carpenters during tsunamis and of the lack of timber supply due to large scale deforestation. It is therefore necessary to rebuild, or strengthen the capacity of the local people to safeguard the long-inherited traditional cultural know-how of rebuilding traditional homes, in order to transmit such skills to future generations and to protect their unique social cultural identity and livelihood.” - UNESCO

This brochure was designed, written and produced by Michael Buckley, with printing funded by Turnstone Communications Singapore Pte Ltd