

Wolfgang Marschall

The Nias si'ulu and the sources of their wealth

1. The layers of Nias society

Until recent years Nias society was built of three social layers and a special group. The vast majority in almost every village were the *sato*, the commoners. The word is contracted from *si ato* 'those who are many'. They were mainly swidden farmers, who worked their *novi* in a slash-and-burn technique before sowing and planting rice, taro, sweet potatoes, manioc, sugar cane, maize, bananas and other cultigens.

Above the *sato* were the *si'ulu*, the formal elite layer of Nias society. *Ulu* means upstream, upper course of a river, and – more generally – above, from above. Thus the *si'ulu* were 'those from above', which by itself means upper class people in the consideration of all *ono Niha*, all Niassans. In Central and Northern Nias the word *salawa* (from *si alawa*) 'the high ones' is more common than *si'ulu*. Both words, *si'ulu* and *salawa* comprise the same notion of the elite.

Below *si'ulu* and below *sato* were *savuyu*, the slaves. The word is contracted from *si avuyu* 'those who are young'. This is a euphemism, since its connotation in Nias is that as young people they are incomplete and do not have the rights adult people will have, and also, that as unmarried men they are not full members of society.

In Nias society you are born into the *si'ulu* layer or into the *sato* layer or the *savuyu* layer. You cannot become a *si'ulu* by being extraordinarily strong or clever or rich. Mixed marriages between *si'ulu* women and *sato* men produce *sato* children. Mixed marriages between *si'ulu* men and *sato* women might be tolerated, if it is a second or third wife of the *sato* men. Offspring with them are called *ono ba zato* 'a child of the many' and might fall back to *sato* status.

If you were not born into a *savuyu* slave family, then there were two major ways to become a slave. You had either debts or you were taken as slave in one of the many inter-village raids. As a debt slave you either had not paid your debts (mainly to a *si'ulu*) or you behaved in such a way that a village council condemned you to death or slavery. *Si'ulu* could not become slaves.

In addition to these three layers there is a group of people selected and formally elected by the *si'ulu* to help them in the village council. They are the *si'ila* 'those who know, those who see'. They were middle men in the true sense of the word, in that they lived as *sato* and helped the *si'ulu*. They were usually knowledgeable people, or specialists like healers, or very good speakers. They were assigned as *si'ila* so that their children were normal *sato* again.

2. Stories from the si'ulu

From the years 1973 and 1974 stem the following information and events (turned into information by my telling them):

a. The blacksmith

A few days after I had arrived in the South of Nias I went to the village of Hilisimaetanö. I started talking to a blacksmith, whose work I knew best since I had written my Ph.D. thesis on metallurgy in Indonesia. We were talking about iron ore and the type of bellows he used and the material that produced the highest temperatures and the artefacts he produced. After a while he told me that his father had been a blacksmith, too, and that their family belonged to the *sato*. And I asked him about his father and his ancestors. He told me that he remembered nine generations and gave me the names of his forefathers. I knew about the importance of genealogies in Nias and was glad that I found it confirmed by what the blacksmith had told me.

Later when I had settled in Bavögosali (Hilizolagötanö 'mountain of the lord of the earth') and talked about genealogies with *si'ulu* men, they told me that *sato* would not remember more than four generations, just by being *sato* it would be beyond their capacities, and that it was only the *si'ulu* who could remember the names of more than 20 forefathers.

Several weeks later while passing the village of Hilisimaetanö again, I visited the blacksmith again. Of course we came to talk about genealogies, and I told him what I had heard about *sato* who were not capable of remembering more than four forefathers. But his version of the story was different: He said that the *sato* were not allowed by the *si'ulu* to name more than four ancestors in a row. But having seen my interest in genealogies, he had added the names of four brothers of his grandgrandfather, and that by adding himself as one generation he had arrived at nine ancestors. Thus, he said, he had not violated the rule given by the *si'ulu*, nor had he been ashamed by not coming up with my obvious interest in genealogies.

As a preliminary consequence we can state that genealogies play an important role in Nias culture, and that they are of existential importance for the *si'ulu*, since there is no other reason for them to reserve for themselves the right to know much longer genealogies.¹

b. The si'ulu by genealogy

During the 1970ies it happened that in several villages *sato* men tried to become village headmen. Different from the government-appointed *kepala kampung* 'mayor', the village headman was responsible for solving the major part of internal village problems. It was considered natural that this position was taken by a *si'ulu*. Now when *sato* claimed the right to be elected headman, the *si'ulu* were shocked by the threat that a *sato* could decide what a *si'ulu* had to do. The *si'ulu* organised meetings where they discussed what made them superior to the *sato*, and thus better prepared to run village life. Three criteria came up during these discussions. The first was: wealth. One of the participants said that *si'ulu* are richer than *sato*. This was immediately denied, and some *si'ulu* said that they would even possess the slightest amount of *hamó* 'gold dust', let alone nuggets or even bigger amounts of gold. The idea of wealth being a criterion of the *si'ulu* was

dismissed rapidly, since several sato were richer than some si'ulu were. Nevertheless the discussion showed that wealth in the form of gold had been a specific criterion for being a si'ulu, which, however, did not work anymore (The island of Nias, by the way, does not show any gold veins or river gold. All the gold that is on Nias is imported gold).

The second criterion was: gift of speech and rhetoric. Whoever assisted to a (South) Nias legal procedure will remember the enormous eloquence of Nias men and especially – by training – Nias si'ulu. Their intellectual capacities – as compared with those of the sato – are expressed by a proverb:

A silent si'ulu has more to say than a sato with 1000 words.

But during the meeting of the si'ulu several participants said that good rhetoric is no longer a specific capacity of the si'ulu and cannot be used to differentiate between si'ulu and sato.

The third criterion debated was: genealogies. All si'ulu agreed that it was only them who had these long genealogies leading back to the first four brothers sent down on earth to settle the island of Nias, or leading back to any other deified ancestor. It was not argued where the sato stem from. But it was clear that the sato did not belong into the course of the creation or origin stories. Thus they were not entitled to recite their genealogies as far back as the si'ulu. During feasts, when genealogies were recited or sung by si'ulu, this was done often at high speed, which made the recital more impressive but also with the intention to not allow the sato remember the correct sequence of names (Given the extraordinary memory of most people in non-literate societies this was a senseless argument. Nevertheless it was used). Genealogies then – in the 1970ies – made the si'ulu different from the sato. The savuyu were not discussed at all, since they were not complete humans and thus irrelevant to this debate.

Today, while still playing a role in the prestige and reputation of a si'ulu and still used in networking and in getting access to power and wealth, genealogies are not considered anymore as the exclusive characteristic and feature of the si'ulu in the sense of setting them apart and high up over the sato.

The rigid differentiation of Nias (and especially South Nias) society and its pervading importance and its strict obedience (unless a si'ulu headman behaved against si'ulu norms of behaviour), they all have collapsed or are becoming unimportant. But when this social and cultural system can collapse within a very short time, then the basis of the system must have broken down or just disappeared. And what was the basis?

3. Wealth and power of the si'ulu

Elsewhere I have argued that Nias society was a fitting example for Robert Carneiro's theory of the origin of the state, according to which states come into existence when in a circumscribed area the population grows and resources are not available anymore for everybody. Then –says Carneiro – an élite by using force, deprives a given part of the society of access to some of the resources.² Nias is a circumscribed area. Apart from the Batu islands to

09.07.2007

the South of Nias there were almost no areas where to emigrate. When the population grew, some people must have taken the chance to transform the social system by creating slaves, either by catching them during raids or by setting up rules the violation of which would make you a debt slave. A small part of a village population could make any sato a slave if he did not pay back more than he received or violated rules the si'ulu had set up. The worst of all crimes, which a sato could commit, was to watch si'ulu women bathing naked at the hele, the bathing place. Such a person was sentenced to death, from which he could escape only by becoming a house slave for a si'ulu woman. This meant having means of production in the form of human beings. They could help you in the household, cutting wood or stone, winnowing rice or drying rice on the village court, plaiting baskets from bamboo. Such a system would never have gone as far as it went, if there had not been other, material backgrounds to put on stage the outstanding role of the si'ulu. This other background was weapons and gold. Si'ulu started selling their own people or people from neighbouring villages and areas to foreigners who were extremely interested in slaves from Nias after it became known that Nias men were stronger than other men from Sumatra. Nias si'ulu "solved" the demographic problem of a growing number of people vs. stable or diminishing resources mainly by selling Nias people to foreigners. With the weapons they got it became easier to force people into slavery, and with the gold they received, the si'ulu built a complex system of feasts which had to be given by every male si'ulu, at the occasion of which gold ornaments were made by the goldsmiths and given by the si'ulu husband to his wife. Sato never could collect the amount of gold needed to make a golden collier as prescribed by si'ulu rules. Sato could never give the amount of gold that had to make up a major part of the bride wealth as prescribed for si'ulu men marrying a si'ulu woman. Thus by selling people as slaves to the Sumatran mainland si'ulu became si'ulu und continued as such. Nias si'ulu became rich and able to set themselves off the average sato by providing human means of production in an established slave trade. They did not make use of them in own plantations but "just" sold them. They sold them, in a pre-colonial trade to Aceh owners of pepper-plantations, later to Dutch VOC traders who had it in their treaty, that

"...since the island's trade comprises mainly slaves and food, the honourable Company shall be, with the exclusion of all others, the only beneficiary (of this trade)

and this without being obliged to pay any taxes or legal expenses, let alone charges for ships riding at anchor."³

The sources of wealth for the Nias si'ulu were the weapons and the gold received from Aceh and later on from European slave-traders. A former common body of myths was transformed into si'ulu property as were the genealogies, which the sato were not allowed to make up for more than four generations. The ideology built up around the si'ulu was enforced by the Dutch colonial government which allowed only the upper layer of society, which is the si'ulu, to

enjoy higher education. Only si'ulu were thought to be able to enter the middle range colonial administration.

But with independence in 1945 and finally in 1949 and the formal collapse of slave trade much earlier, although people were sent abroad as bonded labourers well into the 20th century, the sources of si'ulu wealth shrank and finally fell dry. The social system of Nias has changed dramatically during the last decades. No slaves are sent abroad any more, but also no mythical songs are sung anymore, no gold ornaments made anymore. And the tourists who came did not bring enough capital and often not directly to the si'ulu, that they, the si'ulu could continue to live their former si'ulu way.

If the si'ulu do not succeed in forming an upper layer by continued excellence in formal training, the si'ulu

will disappear as a social layer with the wealth they lost which they got from inhuman trade using their own countrymen.

¹ Marschall, W. 1976 *Der Berg des Herrn der Erde*. München:dtv

² Carneiro, R.: *A theory of the origin of the state*. *Science*, 169:733-738, 1970

³ Modigliani, E.: *Un viaggio a Nias*. Milano:Treves 1890, p.28 and

Marschall, W.: *Social stratification and slavery on Nias and its reflection in oral history*. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 30, 2002, No. 88:309-318, p.310

