

THE TRANSITION PROCESS OF TRADITIONAL NIAS HOUSES

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March 28, 2008, was the third anniversary of the (second) major earthquake in Nias. Aid from different parts of the world poured in to the island to help rebuild houses and infrastructure destroyed by the quake. However, none of the efforts were dedicated to help restore northern Nias traditional houses - which take the oval form - or their southern counterparts - which take the square form - until the Asian Development Bank (ADB) came to extend their assistance to two traditional villages in South Nias district called Bawogosalu and Hilimondregeraya.

After seeing the results of the rehabilitation efforts in the villages, Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi (BRR) NAD-Nias - the central government agency set up to coordinate and implement reconstruction and rehabilitation of Aceh and Nias - has asked for more support to rehabilitate traditional southern Nias houses in nine villages including the famous Bawomataluo village. The challenge in completing the task is determining the definition of a traditional southern Nias house. Who should decide whether a house can be considered as a traditional house or not? Can traditional houses that have gone through a transition process as seen in many regions like Bali, Java, and Nias itself, still be considered as traditional houses?

There are not many people in Nias who knows where to show traditional northern Nias houses. At present, they can only be found in Tumori village. There are only a few that still remain and the number is decreasing. This shows that to many people living in the North Nias district, the definition of a traditional house that has been adopted for years is no longer relevant for different reasons such as high maintenance costs and little interests shown by young people. As one can observe, beside the very few traditional houses that still remain, there are many new houses built in an urban style everywhere by local and international aid agencies including BRR.

To understand the current concept of cus-

tom, we need to look at an incident that happened in Teluk Dalam, the capital of South Nias district, recently. A consultant from an aid agency involved in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of houses destroyed by the quake in a village was assaulted by the head of the village and his friends. They accused the consultant to have made mistakes that led to faulty construction. It turned out that the faulty construction was not his fault. A police report was later filed on the misdemeanor committed by the head of the village. During the police process, it was suggested that the problem be settled through the traditional custom. Everyone involved in the case agreed with the suggestion. An adat - translation to custom in English - judicial process took place in the village assembly hall. It resembled a regular court trial, and the defendant was represented by a senior villager. The process was led by village elders including the most prominent adat leader who proceeded with the charges. The head of the sub-district who attended the trial was asked to provide his views on the matter. The person who represented the victim was also given the chance to defend the case. The process was later closed by a villager who represented the head of the village.

To make sure that the process would not last too long - usually the process takes between three to seven days - it was suggested that the head of the village pay a fine of 30 grams of gold as ruled by the customary law. The suggestion was accepted and the whole process was finished within three hours. In addition to apology, the head of the village paid the fine that was later shared with the people involved in the case as the customary law rules it, including the officials from the village and sub-district administrations, as well as military and police officers. Everyone did not have to wear the traditional costumes during the process, but the procession was ended with a traditional meal. The dispute settlement was formally completed by a seal symbolized by blood from a pig that had been



Northern Nias traditional house



Northern Nias traditional house



Old world meets modernity



Rehabilitated traditional house with diagonal beam

slaughtered and whose meat was distributed to everyone attending the process. A formal report was made later and a copy of it was submitted to the police to notify them that the charges had been dropped.

From the above description, there are three aspects of adat that should be noted. First, people only adopt basic tenets of the adat law such as the non-negotiable fines. Second, for practical reasons, and because everyone has their own busy schedule, a customary judicial process that would take at least three days can be shortened, even to three hours. Third, the involvement of the head of the sub-district, sub-district military and police commanders, and others is no longer an issue and perfectly acceptable. Moreover, in this case, the victim did not object to sharing compensation due to him to help the poor in the village. In other words, the adat has been re-interpreted to accommodate current needs and trends. The same is true with all traditional houses. The only difference between one village and another is that it happens at a different scale of transition.

Adat is not something that is obsolete or retrospective. It can adapt to current and future issues. Adat is also open to new ideas. Everything is accepted as long as it is done by the people who practice the custom itself. This view is also adopted in the transition process that is happening to many traditional houses, and through this article, the writer tries to present things the way they are

through a simple review.

There are three aspects of traditional houses in its transition form. First, they stick to the basic principles such as the overall shape, the floor plan, and use of wood as the main material. Second, they allow the use of "modern" materials like galvanized sheet metal or aluminum sheets that have been molded to look like tiles and come in different colors instead of rumbia leaf roof. Third, changes have been made to the function and shape of long houses built on stilts because people want to use the space underneath for different purposes. In some cases these changes have led to the elimination of diagonal beams which are supposed to bear the lateral force of the earthquake.

The restoration efforts for traditional southern Nias houses involve several experts from the villages and nearby areas. The earthquake-proof feature becomes the main criteria and it is recommended that the whole design still resembles the original design and able to accommodate the need for space underneath the house.

About 700 of 2,000 houses being rehabilitated and reconstructed in Nias using ADB financial support are in traditional style. The owners of these houses have opted to adopt a fusion with a more modern look that leaves no extra space underneath. This newer style, however, has been adopted by many other traditional houses in the area before to suit the needs of the owners.



Rehabilitated traditional house without diagonal beam



Modified diagonal beam: another adoption of new ideas