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A Semiotic Analysis of Traditional Carvings in Traditional Houses of Orahili Sibohou Village, Gomo, South Nias

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to uncover the semiotic meanings of traditional carvings in Nias traditional houses *(Omo Hada)* in Orahili Sibohou Village, Gomo, and to compare the visual and social characteristics between noble houses *(Balugu/Si'ulu)* and commoner houses *(Banua Sato)*. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method with a semiotic approach. Primary data were gathered through direct observation of a ±500-year-old traditional house and in-depth interviews with the customary leader and heir of the Balugu house, Mr. Tandröziduhu Telaumbanua (A. Uco). The study is further supported by a literature review of "Bahasa dan Sastra Nias" (Zendratö, 2003), comparative statements from residents of Tumöri Village, and curatorial perspectives from the *Museum Pusaka Nias* tour guide, Filemon Soalisökhi Hulu. The results indicate that carvings on Balugu houses serve as representations of power, social status, and historical achievements through traditional feasts *(Owasa)*. Semiotically, the use of high-quality *Siholi* wood and exclusive motifs signifies a rigid class hierarchy. In contrast, commoner houses possess limited carvings due to financial constraints and customary regulations. Although motifs such as *Ni'olasara* can theoretically be placed in various types of houses, the practice in Orahili Sibohou demonstrates that the complexity of carvings remains the primary marker of social status. The study concludes that carvings and megalithic objects in Gomo are vital artifacts documenting the *Fondrako* (customary law system) and Nias cultural identity, which remains significant despite ongoing social shifts.

Keywords: Semiotics, Nias Carvings, Orahili Sibohou, Balugu House, Social Status.

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PENDAHULUAN

Nias Island, particularly the Gomo region in South Nias, is recognized as a center of megalithic civilization with an exceptionally rich heritage of material culture. One of the most prominent representations of Nias culture is its traditional architecture, known as *Omo Hada.* Philosophically, the form of the Omo Hada on Nias Island is a result of cultural adaptation inspired by the ancient ships that brought migrants to the island. The sturdy structure of these vessels, capable of navigating the vast oceans, was adopted into building designs to reflect resilience and preserve the historical memory of the ancestors' arrival on Nias soil.

Despite sharing a common ship-based philosophy, there are stark architectural contrasts across the island. In North Nias, traditional houses are oval-shaped. Semiotically, this circular form represents a crowd of people holding hands, symbolizing the spirit of mutual cooperation and community solidarity. Hierarchically, houses in the North are divided into "*Omo Hada Sisiwa Amo or Sisiwatete*" (tiered and larger) for the nobility, while commoners' houses appear simpler without specific naming conventions.

In contrast, in South Nias, including Orahili Sibohou Village, traditional houses are massive and grand rectangular structures. The social structure in the South is rigidly governed by Fondrako—a system of customary laws and sacred oaths consecrated through rituals by tribal elders. Any violation of

Fondrako is believed to bring supernatural disasters upon the transgressor. Based on this customary law, house typologies in South Nias are divided into three primary categories:

1. *Omo Nifolasara/Högö Lasara*: Exclusive houses for the nobility adorned with Lasara ornaments (a stylization of a dragon's head and the name of an ancient ship's prow). Access to these houses is located beneath the structure via a bottom staircase known as "*Sinörö arö"*.
2. *Omo Tuho*: Houses for commoners built without the Lasara ornament, yet still utilizing the under-house entrance (Sinörö arö).
3. *Omo Sala*: Houses for permanent settlers or migrants in the area. A striking difference is seen in the entrance, which is located on the side of the house *(Sinörö Ngai),* visually distinguishing the social caste and origin of the inhabitants from the indigenous population.

In Orahili Sibohou Village, there is a significant historical site: a Balugu traditional house estimated to be approximately 500 years old. This house serves as a cultural artifact symbolizing glory and strict adherence to the Fondrakö law. The wood carvings on the house act as a "visual text" communicating the owner's history of achievements through traditional feasts *(Owasa).*

The Balugu traditional house is characterized by high-quality timber such as Siholi and Manawa Danö. Although the literature by Rev. Dal Zendratö (2003) states that the Ni'olasara ornament can theoretically be placed on various types of houses, field evidence shows that strict Fondrako regulations and high production costs make these carvings a definitive marker of social class.

While contemporary social views on nobility have begun to shift and are no longer the primary focus of daily life, the carvings on these ancient houses remain vital historical evidence. This study aims to deconstruct the semiotic meanings of each carving motif in Orahili Sibohou and analyze the differences in ornamental usage between noble and commoner houses. Through a comparative study approach, this research is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how visual symbols are used as tools for legitimizing social status within the Gomo-Nias community structure.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with semiotics as the primary analytical tool. The research is focused on deconstructing the sign systems and philosophical meanings of traditional carvings within noble-class traditional houses in Orahili Sibohou Village, Gomo, South Nias. This location was selected because it hosts the Balugu traditional house—an authentic structure estimated to be 500 years old—which serves as the primary object of study.

1. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through a triangulation process to ensure the validity of the findings:

- Field Observation and Documentation: In-depth direct observation and visual documentation were conducted exclusively on the noble traditional house (Balugu) in Orahili Sibohou Village, Gomo. The researcher documented the stylistic details and placement of ornaments (both interior and exterior) for semiotic analysis.
- Comparative Field Visit: A visit was conducted to the traditional houses in Tumöri Village, North Nias. The purpose of this visit was to observe regional architectural typologies, where it was discovered that the oval-shaped houses of that region do not possess the carving traditions found in the Gomo region.
- In-depth Interviews: Primary data were obtained from key informants:
  1) Mr. Tandröziduhu Telaumbanua (A. Uco): A traditional leader and the heir to the Balugu house in Orahili Sibohou, to explore the historical aspects and esoteric meanings of each carving.
  2) Filemon Soalisökhi Hulu: A senior tour guide at the *Museum Pusaka Nias*, who provided crucial information regarding the classification of traditional houses and the rules regarding entrance access that distinguish the inhabitants' castes.

3) Literature Study: Utilizing the book *"Bahasa dan Sastra Nias"* by Pdt. Dal Zendratö (2003) to validate theories concerning Fondrako customary law and the significance of iconic motifs such as Ni'olasara.

2. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using the Semiotic method, focusing on two levels of meaning:

- Denotative Analysis: Describing the physical form of the carvings and the craftsmanship techniques observed.
- Connotative Analysis: Interpreting the meanings behind the carving symbols as they relate to social values, power, and the belief systems of the Gomo community.

3. Social Comparative Approach

While the primary focus is on the analysis of meaning, this study utilizes comparative study as an analytical instrument to observe how semiotic meanings shift or are restricted by social status. Comparisons were made between the Balugu house (noble) and the Banua Sato (commoner) houses. This aims to identify the correlation between the presence of ornaments, economic capacity, and adherence to customary laws in the past.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Physical Characteristics and Semiotic Analysis: Carvings as a Manifestation of Power

Based on observations conducted on the ±500-year-old traditional house in Orahili Sibohou Village, it was found that carvings serve not merely as decorative elements, but as instruments of visual communication. Denotatively, these carvings appear in natural wood tones without artificial coloring; however, some sections are coated with a transparent varnish to preserve the wood's organic aesthetic. These carvings are executed on high-quality timber, such as *Siholi* (used for the structural framework) and *Manawa Danö* (used for the flooring). The selection of these specific woods is not purely functional; rather, it serves as a signifier of the house's durability and majesty.

The following motifs were identified:

a. Main Elements and the Sacred Structure of the Traditional House

1. *Behu* (Stone Monument)



Behu is a megalithic stone monument standing 1–2 meters tall, positioned at the center of the traditional house complex. Semantically, the term behu represents objects with vertical or elongated dimensions. Its usage ranges from functional contexts, such as *behu gai* (fishing rod), to sacred or structural objects like long wooden pillars and megalithic stone towers. In the Gomo traditional house, the behu serves as a sacred monument documenting the history of the house's ancestors *(zatua föna)*. The presence of this stone is mandatory as a form of customary legitimacy.



Its specific meaning is determined by its placement: "the *behu famasindro banua*", located in the middle of the yard, acts as the primary monument validating the village's customary status by the Balugu. Meanwhile, "the *behu wolau owasa"*, situated beside the main monument, symbolizes that the homeowner has successfully held a grand traditional feast (Owasa). At the peak of the main monument, there is a carving of the *Gogowaya* (Hornbill) head, an endemic bird of Nias known for its long beak. Visually, this carving is a stylization of a hornbill looking toward the sky, which semiotically symbolizes power, authority, sovereignty, and the steadfastness of leadership within the cosmology of the Nias people.



This carving motif depicts a stylized figure of a deer, represented with its head perpetually tilted upward. The philosophy behind this motif is rooted in a local proverb shared by Mr. Tandröziduhu Telaumbanua (A. Uco): *"He wòi asai'ò, he narò danò, leifaigi tou lala nia isawò manò."* This describes the characteristic of a deer that continues to walk with its head held high without hesitation, even when at the edge of a cliff. The deer's behavior is adopted as a metaphor for humans with unwavering resolve. Semiotically, the deer's indifference to the obstacles beneath its feet is interpreted as a symbol of courage, resilience, and mental strength in facing life's challenges without fear.

This motif serves as a reminder of the importance of integrity and self-confidence for a leader or the owner of the traditional house.

3. *Meza Kara*



Meza Kara is a megalithic stone table that serves as a primary instrument for various customary ceremonies in the courtyard. Functionally, this flat stone monument is used as a ritual stage where women perform the *Tari Moyo* (Eagle Dance) during specific traditional processions. This dance functions as a symbolic marker affirming that the host of the Owasa occupies an elevated social status and commands respect, analogous to the eagle positioned at the apex. The placement of the Meza Kara in a public area (the yard) is not merely an aspect of spatial planning but a semiotic marker indicating vital ritual functions and social integration. The presence of this stone table reinforces that the traditional house is the center of community activity and a symbol of the dignity of a family capable of hosting large-scale ceremonies.

4. *Hasi*



Hasi is a stone sarcophagus reserved exclusively for deceased nobles. When struck, this stone coffin produces a resonant sound resembling that of a bell. The body of the noble was interred within the sarcophagus, while the head was deliberately separated and preserved inside the traditional house on a ceremonial plate to prevent it from being stolen. This practice was closely associated with past warfare traditions, in which the theft of a noble's head constituted a profound dishonor and symbolic defeat. Consequently, only the heads of Balugu—the highest-ranking nobles—were targeted, underscoring their exceptional social and political significance. Once only the skull remained, it was buried beside the Behu. This funerary tradition has persisted for centuries. Accordingly, the hasi is strategically positioned at the front of the Balugu house and is found exclusively in such dwellings, serving as an authentic marker of ownership, noble lineage, and the legitimization of Balugu status over the building.

b. The Exterior Walls as a Narrative of Protection

The exterior walls of the Balugu traditional house functions as a symbolic zone where cosmological principles and social order intersect. It articulates a gendered spatial division, with the right side associated with masculinity and the left with femininity, reflecting customary structures enacted in ritual contexts such as marriage and mortuary practices. Simultaneously, the façade serves as a space of reception that regulates social interaction with outsiders. Protective symbolic elements further mark the boundary between exterior and interior, asserting guardianship, authority, and the legitimacy of the household's status. Through these functions, the front façade operates as an exterior identity that communicates the social standing and cosmological orientation of the Balugu household to the wider community.

1. *Ni'olasara*



Ni'olasara is a carved wooden element projecting upward, terminating in the head of a giant serpent with an open mouth, prominent fangs, and additional ornamental details. In the Gomo region, it is more commonly referred to as *ewe*, while in Teluk Dalam it is known as *sikhòri*. In Gunungsitoli, it is called *ni'o bawa lasara*, as it depicts only the terminal portion of the serpent's head. The term lasara itself refers to an ancient vessel or ship. This element is prominently installed on the front of the house, facing the courtyard. Its placement signifies the grandeur and authority of the owner. Symbolically, it conveys notions of strength, vigilance against malevolent forces, and steadfastness in safeguarding the honor and dignity of the traditional house.

2. Nadu Same'e Afo



This three-dimensional motif depicts a female figure presenting betel leaves. It is positioned at the front of the house and is symbolically associated with the tradition of welcoming guests, representing respect, hospitality, and the codes of etiquette within Nias society.

3. Nadu *Sohuhugò*



This carving symbolizes the role of men in social and customary life, particularly their responsibilities, strength, and obligations in maintaining social harmony. *Huhugò* refers to a form of oral literature consisting of metaphors, proverbs, and customary expressions rich in meaning. In ceremonial contexts, especially during the arrival of guests, huhug*ò* is delivered as a symbolic verbal exchange that conveys specific customary intentions, such as conflict resolution (*fondrako*), marriage negotiations (*bòwò*), and communication among customary leaders. Through this

practice, the carving reinforces the male role as a mediator, spokesperson, and guardian of social order within Nias society.

4. *Ni'o Ba'e*



This three-dimensional carving in the form of a monkey serves as a symbol of power and social status and is found exclusively in Balugu houses. Its presence signifies the owner's position as a holder of customary authority. Symbolically, the motif represents courage, alertness, and readiness in facing life's challenges, particularly those related to customary and social responsibilities. These meanings emphasize the role of the house owner as a resilient, vigilant, and decisive figure in maintaining social harmony.

5. Symbol of *Ya'ahowu*



This carving reflects the Nias customary practice of greeting one another with the expression "Ya'ahowu," often accompanied by a handshake or a respectful nod. Symbolically, it embodies the values of kinship, openness, and mutual respect, serving as a visual affirmation of social harmony and courteous interaction within Nias society.

6. *Lahuru Mao*

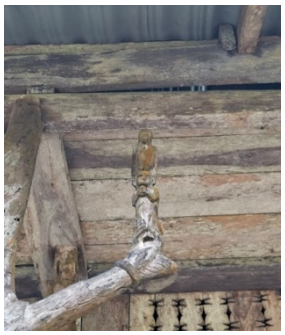
The owl-shaped carving symbolizes the spirit of togetherness, unity, and collective strength in the life of the customary community. The owl is chosen as a symbolic figure because of its alert nature and its tendency to vocalize when sensing the presence of people, animals, or any form of disturbance. This characteristic is interpreted as a metaphor for collective awareness and mutual vigilance, where members of the community remain attentive to one another and respond together to emerging situations. Consequently, the carving conveys the importance of solidarity, shared responsibility, and communal cohesion in maintaining social harmony within traditional society.



7. *Fofo yawa Ba'e*



The carving depicting a bird positioned above the head of a monkey is located on the front wall pillar of the Balugu traditional house. Its placement corresponds to the meaning of the Nias proverb "so fofo yawa ba'e," which conveys the idea that above the sky, there is still another sky. This proverb expresses an awareness of the limits of human power and



acknowledges the existence of a higher order beyond worldly authority.

The presence of this carving on the front of the Balugu house functions as a public symbolic statement, indicating that although the house owner holds a high customary status and authority, such power remains bounded by moral, customary, and cosmological principles. The bird positioned above the monkey symbolizes control, supervision, and balance over strength, making the carving an emblem of humility, wisdom, and self-restraint expected of a Balugu leader. Thus, the carving not only represents a symbolic hierarchy but also serves as an ethical reminder in the exercise of customary leadership.

8. *Sifabaluse*



This carving depicts a male figure performing the Baluse dance. On the side of his face, a ni'omeme (female breast) motif is carved, signifying that his strength and authority are derived from a maternal source. It symbolizes glory derived from strong and authoritative leadership. The motif is generally found only in noble houses and serves as a symbol of power and protection.

9. *Sanari*



This carving depicts a female figure dancing, accompanied by a carved representation of the faritia musical instrument positioned beside her. It symbolizes glory and steadfast leadership and is closely associated with traditional dance practices performed in various ceremonial contexts. The carving is placed proportionally in relation to the Sifabaluse carving, reflecting a balanced symbolic composition.

10. *Ni'obuaya*



The crocodile-shaped carving is found exclusively in Balugu houses and symbolizes power and justice. According to local belief, the crocodile—an animal that inhabits water—does not actively hunt for food but waits to be fed or is brought offerings by the people, as it has been deified. For this reason, it is referred to as *"Aweda."* This belief underscores the crocodile's symbolic association with authority, reverence, and the enforcement of moral order within the customary system. The placement of this carving is carefully arranged in proportional balance with other carvings, reinforcing the harmony of symbolic meanings expressed on the house façade.

11. *Ni'oasu*



This dog motif symbolizes loyalty, courage, and the ability to guard and protect the inhabitants of the house.

12. *Bulu Ana'a /Kabo ana'a* (Gold Scale)



This carving depicts a gold scale that was traditionally used to weigh gold or other precious metals, symbolizing wealth and prosperity. The accompanying large earring motif represents the ornament being weighed, reinforcing the association with material value, economic status, and affluence.

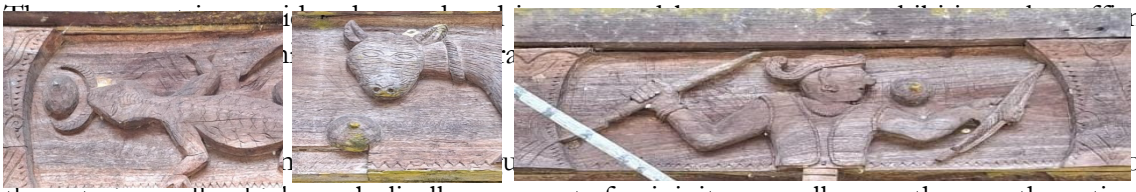
13. *Ni'obaluse*



This shield-shaped motif, featuring a central circle and four petal-like forms, symbolizes protection, strength, and the social status of the house owner.

14. *Ni'omeme*

Ni'omeme is a symbolic ornament representing fertility, the source of life, and the origin of legitimate power, rooted in the role of women—particularly mothers—within Nias culture.



the exterior wall, which symbolically represents femininity, as well as on the mouth sections of several carved figures, including male figures, dogs, and crocodiles. Its placement at the mouth signifies that the strength, authority, and customary power embodied by these figures derive from women as the source of life and moral legitimacy. Thus, ni'omeme functions as a visual statement of gender balance, honor, and controlled customary authority within the Nias cultural system.

c. The Interior Walls

The placement of carvings within the Balugu house follows a structured visual communication scheme. This study categorizes these zones into three strategic areas based on their symbolic function:

- Right Side (Owasa Narrative)

  This area documents the sequence of traditional feasts (Owasa). Semiotically, the right side serves as a space to celebrate the economic success and social standing of the homeowner. The carvings in this zone validate the nobility title attained through the capacity to host grand communal feasts.

1. *Kawali*

   The cauldron motif symbolizes prosperity and food security. As a functional artifact of daily life, the cauldron carved onto the house walls serves as a symbol that the homeowner possesses an abundance of resources to sustain both their family and the community.



2. *Samagòlò Bawi*



This carving visualizes a human figure slaughtering a pig. In Nias cosmology, the pig is the primary sacrificial animal in customary rites. Semiotically, the number of pigs sacrificed is directly proportional to the prestige and validation of the homeowner's wealth in the eyes of the public.

3. *Kela-Kela Mbawi / Urakha*

   This motif represents the scales or the process of equitable pork distribution. The carving reflects the values of justice, equity, and the integrity of a leader in distributing the blessings of a feast to all villagers without discrimination.



4. *Sohuhugò*

   Within the structure of the Owasa, Sohuhugò is a crucial stage where the objectives and reasons for holding the feast are formally announced to the customary community. The placement of this motif in the house's interior reaffirms masculine responsibility in maintaining political communication and the stability of the customary structure. "In the Gomo tradition, Sohuhugò is far more than a mere announcement; it functions as a mechanism of transparency from a leader to the community regarding the specific motivations for a grand feast (such as an elevation in social caste or the completion of a communal house).



5. *Samòzi Gònda*



This carving depicts a human figure beating a drum. This act serves as a liturgical signifier that all preparatory phases leading to the Owasa have been completed, and the pinnacle of the customary ceremony has officially commenced. From the perspective of sonic semiotics, the beating of the drum (Samozi Gondra) serves as a 'pivotal threshold,' marking the transition from the silent period of preparation to the vibrant commencement of the festive celebration.

- Left Side (Narrative of Heroism)

  The left side displays visualizations of warfare, hunting, the Mangai Högö (headhunting) tradition, and weaponry. This narrative represents bravery and military readiness. Its primary function is to instill respect and signify territorial sovereignty, showcasing the owner's resilience as a protector.

  1. *Manga'i Binu*

     This motif serves as a visual representation of the headhunting tradition, which was once an integral component of the social and defensive systems in ancient Nias. In deconstructing this motif, it is essential to semiotically distinguish between the terms *Högö* and *Binu*. While both refer to the head, Binu specifically denotes a severed head obtained as a trophy in warfare or ritual contexts. In contrast, Högö refers to the human head as a symbol of dignity, honor, and the center of glory—evidenced by the placement of the most esteemed regalia, such as the ceremonial crown *(Rai Högö),* upon it.



     Semiotically, these carvings do not merely document the history of warfare; they function as symbols of cosmic energy restoration. The community believed that the spiritual essence of the captured head (Binu) would reside within the traditional house to protect the honor and lives (Högö) of its inhabitants from supernatural harm. Beyond serving as a symbol of bravery and military supremacy, this motif reinforces territorial sovereignty; the more victories documented through these carvings, the greater the prestige and political bargaining power of that community in the eyes of neighboring regions.

  2. *Doho*



     This motif depicts the *Doho*, or spear, the primary weapon of the Nias people, which served a dual function as a hunting instrument and a defensive tool in warfare. Denotatively, the carving displays a stylized spear with a sharp tip and a long shaft. However, semiotically, the presence of the Doho on the walls of the Balugu traditional

house symbolizes readiness, protection, and masculine strength.

Within the Fondrakö customary law, the spear is more than a physical weapon; it is a symbol of the guardian of order and territorial sovereignty. The presence of this motif conveys a message of authority, indicating that the homeowner possesses the power to uphold justice and protect the entire village from external threats. Furthermore, the Doho represents sharpness of intellect and the decisiveness of a leader in making judgments for the community's welfare.

- Front and Rear Sides: Cosmological and Absolute Identity Zone

  These areas are philosophical and sacred. Front side represents an absolute social hierarchy. The depiction of the Balugu and his Queen, surrounded by sacred animals, semiotically reinforces the owner's position as the supreme customary authority. The strategic placement of human figures manifests a sovereignty supported by symbolic spiritual power.While the rear side focuses on sacred animals embodying philosophical values, internal household protection, and the continuous connection with ancestral spirits.

1. *Fondahe*

   This carving signifies the capabilities, achievements, and social standing of the homeowner. The complexity of the motifs is directly correlated with the number of livestock (pigs) sacrificed during the traditional house-building ceremony.

2. *Sigòlu*



   This pangolin motif symbolizes ingenuity, survival skills, and protection for the household. In Nias local wisdom, the pangolin serves as a metaphor for a capable and resourceful individual. There is a Nias expression, "I bali'ö fangandrö gö nia lela nia" (he makes his tongue the means to seek his sustenance), which likens the pangolin's behavior to a person who survives and prospers through eloquence and cleverness. This concept is further reinforced by the proverb "Niha sanau lela" or "I lela ni mano niha", referring to someone skilled in diplomacy or persuasive communication. Semiotically, the presence of the pangolin motif on the Balugu traditional house underscores that a leader must possess not only physical strength but also intellectual cunning and communicative flexibility to ensure the welfare of their community.

3. *Kawa-kawa*



This butterfly motif serves as a symbol of supernatural protection, tranquility, and prosperity for the household inhabitants. Semiotically, the butterfly represents the homeowner's creativity and aesthetic sensibility. In local belief systems, the butterfly is often regarded as a messenger or a symbol of positive energy that maintains domestic harmony. The presence of this motif in the Balugu traditional house balances the narratives of masculinity (warfare and hunting) with values of serenity and beauty. It underscores that the prosperity of a noble family is built not only upon physical strength but also through spiritual peace and creative ingenuity.

4. *Ni'oboroe*



The Bifurcated Monitor Lizard Motif *(Boroe si dua rozi i'o, si dua rozi lela)* motif represents a unique monitor lizard characterized by two tails and two tongues. Semiotically, its presence in the Balugu house functions as an instrument of social control and a moral deterrent for the leader.

- The Dual Tails: Symbolize failure in resource management or leadership, reflected in the proverb: *"Hulö latawi boroe, abua gi'o moroi ba högö"* (Like snaring a lizard where the tail is heavier than the head). In economic and customary contexts, this illustrates a deficit—where losses outweigh gains, or where a feast (Owasa) is poorly planned, ultimately burdening the family and the community.
- The Dual Tongues: Symbolize inconsistency, deceit, or untrustworthiness—being "double-tongued."

Why is this "negative" motif present in a Balugu house? Its inclusion is not to glorify these traits but to serve as an absolute warning for the Balugu. Amidst carvings of grandeur, this motif acts as a moral mirror, cautioning the leader against becoming a liability to their people (the heavy tail) or being dishonest in customary adjudications (the dual tongues). Its presence reaffirms that the Balugu's power must be exercised with integrity and strategic foresight to preserve the dignity of the lineage.

5. *Ni'o Afi Afi*



Afi literally translates to "wing." This motif is visually rendered as a fan-like arrangement or overlapping bird feathers that converge at a single pole. Semiotically, the Ni'o Afi-Afi symbolizes noble sovereignty and the consolidation of wealth through ancestral lineage or inheritance. The circular pattern, which mimics the clockwise movement of a dial, represents the dimension of time; it serves as a signifier that the homeowner's power and wealth are not transient, but are the result of a long and established family history. Hierarchically, this motif serves as an indicator of the highest caste, signifying that the owner holds the rank of *Bosi Si Felendrua* (The 12th Level).

Within this traditional house, the Ni'o Afi-Afi is strategically positioned above the head of the carved royal figure (Balugu) to validate the family's noble legitimacy. Furthermore, this motif is utilized on both exterior and interior walls as a decorative element that consistently carries a symbolic message of unwavering status and authority.

6. *Zimbi Bawi*



Zimbi Bawi refers to the lower jawbones of pigs, which are collected and displayed within the interior of the traditional house. Semiotically, Zimbi Bawi functions as a visual archive and empirical evidence of the homeowner's generosity and financial prowess. Legitimization of Status (*Bosi*): Each jawbone represents one pig slaughtered during a customary feast (Owasa). A large accumulation of Zimbi Bawi serves as social validation of the homeowner's status, proving that they

have successfully fulfilled the mandates of the Fondrakö customary law. Social Certification: While carvings serve as permanent "visual certificates," the Zimbi Bawi provides tangible proof of the scale of past ceremonies. In Nias cosmology, these displays are believed to project an aura of prosperity, indicating that the house is a place where "pig blood has flowed"—a powerful symbol of an abundant and thriving life.

7. *Hulu*





Main (Center) Hulu



Left Hulu



Right Hulu

The *Hulu* is the primary support pillar located at the center of the house, serving as the vertical axis that sustains the entire structural integrity. Since Nias traditional architecture is constructed without the use of nails, this element is vital for structural stability. Semiotically, the carvings at the ends of these pillars symbolize the power, protection, wealth, and absolute glory of the homeowner. The philosophical significance of the Hulu is reflected in the expression: "*Sebolo hulu zo'agö föna, i lu'i manö*" (The one with the broad back who stands at the front, he is the one who carries the load). This serves as a metaphor for the moral responsibility of a leader; he is the one who shoulders the burdens of the entire community, where all consequences—both good and bad—are ultimately directed toward him. The visual manifestation of this responsibility is evident in the placement of nearly all animal motifs and other symbols, which are depicted beneath the back, shoulders, and even the feet of the Hulu figure. This house contains three Hulu pillars with similar characteristics, collectively affirming that the physical structure of the house is a metaphor for a leadership structure characterized by strength and integrity.

B. Comparison Between the Balugu and Banua Sato Houses

There is a sharp semiotic contrast between noble and commoner residences across three primary aspects:

- Exclusivity and Customary Regulations: Although literature (Rev. Dal Zendratö) theoretically suggests that the Ni'olasara motif could be placed on a Banua Sato house, the reality in Orahili Sibohou reveals clear social boundaries. Commoners' houses tend to be plain or feature minimal carving due to unwritten yet strictly observed customary regulations.
- Economy as a Symbolic Constraint: The exorbitant cost of commissioned carvings compels commoners to prioritize their resources for daily subsistence. Conversely, for the nobility or the wealthy, the immense expenditure on carvings is viewed as a necessary investment in social status.
- Building Dimensions: The Balugu house is characterized by its larger scale and elevated structure, complemented by megalithic stones in its courtyard. Semiotically, the height of the building symbolizes a higher bargaining position in customary decision-making compared to the inhabitants of the Omo Pareses (commoner houses).

C. Shifting Meanings in the Modern Era

Interviews reveal that a shift in values is currently occurring within the Orahili Sibohou community. While carvings once functioned as a rigid class differentiator between the elite/nobility and the common people, contemporary society is no longer strictly focused on such hierarchies. Nevertheless, the Balugu traditional house in this village remains a monumental cultural landmark, affirming that Orahili Sibohou is a pivotal site in the megalithic history of South Nias.

CONCLUSION

Based on the semiotic analysis of the carvings and physical structure of the traditional houses in Orahili Sibohou Village, it can be concluded that the carvings on the Balugu house are not merely decorative elements but serve as a complex and structured instrument of visual communication. Denotatively, these carvings depict the richness of local fauna and the social activities of the Nias people; however, connotatively, each motif functions as a "visual certificate" that legitimizes power, caste achievement *(Bosi),* and adherence to the *Fondrakö* customary law.

This study identifies a distinct zoning of visual communication: the right side serves as a zone for social legitimacy *(Owasa),* the left side functions as a narrative of heroism and territorial sovereignty, while the front and rear sections act as the center of cosmological-spiritual identity. The disparity between the *Balugu* and *Banua Sato* houses indicates that the complexity of carvings serves as a rigid class differentiator, where the use of high-quality materials such as *Siholi* wood and exclusive motifs like Ni'olasara reinforces the homeowner's political bargaining position within the customary structure.

Despite a shift in hierarchical values in the modern era, these traditional houses remain vital monuments of cultural identity. The presence of elements such as the *Hulu* (main pillar) and moral-reminder motifs (the bifurcated monitor lizard) reaffirms that leadership in the Gomo tradition demands absolute responsibility, integrity, and transparency from the leader toward their people.

REFERENCES

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