Museums, Heritage and International Development

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13 Cultural Heritage, Humanitarianism and Development
Critical Links

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INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian assistance has historically concentrated on getting aid to victims as soon as possible to meet their basic needs, such as food, water, shelter and medical care, after a disaster or during times of war and conflict. Meeting basic needs remains a primary focus of many aid organizations. However, some are thinking beyond the immediate and recognizing the cultural impact of disasters and its long-term effects on people's ability to recover from emergencies and, in turn, the need to integrate the protection of cultural heritage into humanitarian aid efforts.

The Cultural Emergency Response (CER) programme of the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development in the Netherlands, for example, offers 'first aid' for culture in the form of funding to restore damaged heritage or protect that which is threatened by natural or human-created disasters. CER promotes awareness of how humanitarian emergencies can also be 'cultural emergencies', and how cultural emergencies can become humanitarian crises (Pronk 2011: 28). The International Committee of the Blue Shield sends cultural experts to war zones and areas devastated by natural disasters to help recover, restore and conserve heritage sites and resources. More specifically, the Haiti Cultural Recovery Project was organized by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, in collaboration with the government of Haiti to rescue, recover, safeguard and help restore Haiti's cultural heritage in the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake of January 2010 (see Kurin 2011). We see in such initiatives an increasing willingness on the part of the international community to come together to address the many implications of heritage loss.

Cultural heritage, in the form of tangible material culture (objects of art, architecture, archaeological sites and monuments) and intangible culture (music, performance, ritual, dance, theater, knowledge, skills, oral history, language and memory), is not a fixed or static phenomenon. Like culture in general, it is constantly in flux, undergoing change and being reinvented as it is given different or new purposes, values and meanings over time. Historic buildings are torn down in the course of modernization and development.

Traditions undergo transformation or are abandoned when they become out-moded or conflict with contemporary ideals of human rights, social justice and democracy. And while ethnocide and the pillaging and destruction of people's artistic and cultural treasures are age-old strategies of war and conquest, what is different today is the degree to which we can monitor, stand witness to and respond more rapidly and effectively through coordinated efforts.

In recent years, we have witnessed deliberate destructive acts, such as the Taliban's dynamiting of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and the loot-ing of the national museums in Baghdad and Kabul. We have also seen the damage wrought by tsunamis in the Indian Ocean and Japan, hurricanes in the Caribbean and southern United States and earthquakes in Haiti and Italy. While we can be critical of the unevenness of responses to these vari-ous disasters, we can acknowledge how responses have generated greater awareness of the cultural impact of human-made and natural disasters.

Despite this growing awareness of the value of cultural heritage and the need to protect it, unlike humanitarian emergencies, cultural emergencies are often forgotten and ignored at the time of a crisis even though 'their impact is woven into the very fabric of conflict and disaster and the identity of those affected' (Frerks, Goldewijk and van der Plas 2011: 9).

Frerks, Goldewijk and van der Plas, in their introduction to the book *Cultural Emergency in Conflict and Disaster* (2011), published through the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, assert that, far from being superfluous, it is precisely at times of crisis and emergency that cultural heritage can be of the utmost importance:

> The importance of cultural heritage is clearest in moments of stress or crisis. People turn to their history, identity and culture in times of disas-ter or in violent conflict; culture allows them a degree of transcendence, it helps them cope with the aftermath of crises. Saving and protecting culture threatened by disaster or civil war can contribute to restoring the self-respect and identity of affected communities.
>
> (2011: 10)

Oliver-Smith, an anthropologist who has done extensive research and con-sultancy work on disaster-related issues, emphasizes how disasters are mul-tidimensional, complex, material events that also have multiple, interwoven, social and cultural aspects that require holistic, integrated approaches to recovery and reconstruction. He emphasizes that there is an inextricable link between material and social reconstruction after a disaster:

> In addition to material losses inflicted by disasters, serious losses are also inflicted on the social and cultural life of survivors. In the destruc-tion of important cultural sites and elements, disasters also endanger the loss of identity, community cohesion, and cultural heritage.
>
> (Oliver-Smith 2011: 224)

However, disasters and humanitarian aid have been historically approached primarily as economic and material matters in which efficiency, cost effectiveness and donor interests have taken precedent over the cultural and social reconstruction of a community. In reaction to this strategy, Oliver-Smith suggests that 'perhaps our most pressing need at this juncture is to achieve a greater balance between addressing the material needs of impacted communities and acting in a way that supports rather than undermines their struggle to reconstitute their social and cultural bases' (2011: 225).

Growing recognition of what I term 'cultural humanitarianism', or the integration of cultural heritage work into humanitarian efforts, reflects an increased appreciation for what gives meaning to people's lives and what is vital for their recovery after a great loss. It is now widely acknowledged that the destruction or loss of cultural heritage can erode a people's sense of identity, self-confidence and sense of place in the world. While loss and destruction can engender despair, reconstruction and renewal can engender hope and the emotional capacity to rebuild and recover. Yet, as Oliver-Smith has observed, 'the quality of reconstruction itself can play a major role in the capacity of the community to recover . . . and the material and social rebuilding processes must be mutually reinforcing' (2011: 225).

Oliver-Smith, and many others, has now shown that aspects of people's culture can be a resource in disaster recovery, reconstruction and long-term development rather than an obstacle or luxury as it is often perceived. And in fact, to some, culture is a 'basic human need' (Frerks, Goldewijk and van der Plas 2011).

In this chapter, I describe disaster response and reconstruction on the Indonesian island of Nias after an earthquake measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale struck the island on March 28, 2005. Nias is situated approximately 120 kilometers off the northwest coast of Sumatra in the Indian Ocean, a region that received worldwide attention in December 2004 when coastal areas were devastated by one of the largest tsunamis in recorded history. Because Nias is located near the epicenter of the earthquake that caused the tsunami, the island received comparatively little damage and suffered fewer fatalities than other locales. But the March earthquake and its aftershocks killed nearly one thousand people and injured close to twelve thousand. It devastated much of the island's infrastructure, especially in the largest town of Genungsitoli. Some 16,000 homes were destroyed and 61,193 were damaged, leaving about 70,000 people homeless (Lang 2010: 143).

My focus is on the work of the Museum Pusaka Nias (Nias Heritage Museum), located in Genungsitoli, in the restoration and preservation of the traditional architecture of Nias before and after the quake. This work became especially significant in the aftermath of the quake because, while some 80 percent of modern, concrete houses were completely destroyed, houses built in the traditional style proved to be remarkably earthquake resistant, continuing to provide housing for many of the island's residents. Subsequently, interest in Nias's vernacular architecture rose dramatically.

The Nias story is an example of how heritage, in this case traditional houses, can fulfill a basic need, in other words, shelter, and be a vital resource in disaster relief and reconstruction efforts.

The chapter is based on research conducted on Nias in 2002, 2003 and 2008 (see Kreps 2008). I begin with a review of the literature that addresses the importance of the cultural dimensions of humanitarianism and development in addition to specific initiatives like CER, which is one of the many international aid organizations that have supported the Museum Pusaka Nias. I suggest that the schema of human rights is a conceptual framework under which all these fields work since they are all dedicated to respecting human life, dignity and diversity. My aim is to illuminate the critical links among cultural heritage, humanitarianism, development and human rights, and the need for their continuing convergence.

THE RISE OF CULTURAL HUMANITARIANISM

The 'cultural turn' in humanitarian aid comes at a time when our understandings of and approaches to humanitarianism, heritage and development are being critically rethought and expanded. Historically, these fields have been seen as separate domains of scholarship and practice. However, they are increasingly beginning to overlap and coalesce around common interests and concerns. Fundamental to all is the quest to find better and more effective approaches to not only saving lives but improving the quality of people's lives and honoring their human rights.

In the introduction to the book *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, editors Barnett and Weiss state that, while there is a growing willingness and ability of outsiders to help those at risk, the humanitarian aid community is simultaneously experiencing a period of 'soul searching about who they are, what they do, how they do it, and what impact their efforts have' (2008: 3). Part of this anxiety, they contend, is a result of a growing appreciation of the complexities of humanitarian crises and responses to them. Because there is now greater recognition that humanitarianism does not end with the termination of an emergency, the field has broadened to encompass a wide range of efforts:

> No longer satisfied with saving individuals today only to have them be in jeopardy tomorrow . . . many organizations now aspire to transform the structural conditions that endanger populations. Their work includes development, democracy promotion, establishing the rule of law, respect for human rights, and post-conflict peace building.
>
> (Barnett and Weiss 2008: 3)

Barnett and Weiss, as well as other scholars, have pointed out that as the boundaries of humanitarian work have expanded, long-standing principles

that served to define humanitarianism and its purposes are no longer self-evident or sacrosanct. Since the 1980s, the International Committee of the Red Cross's definition of humanitarianism—'the impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those in immediate need because of conflict and natural disasters' (quoted in Gabiam 2012: 102)—has served as the standard. In a contemporary light, however, this definition appears narrow and outdated.

Humanitarian aid has traditionally been distinguished from development within the aid industry. Humanitarian aid tends to be associated with alleviating suffering and saving lives within the context of an emergency, typically occurring as a result of a natural or human-made disaster, conflict or violence. Development, alternatively, is generally about improving the normal state of affairs. Distances between these short-term and long-term goals are shortening, however. Distinctions between the two fields are increasingly breaking down as aid agencies place increasing emphasis on development as an important element of assistance (Fearon 2008: 51–52).

Gabiam, in the article 'When "Humanitarianism" Becomes "Development"' (2012), discusses this trend as it relates to United Nations agencies' relief work with Palestinian refugees. Gabiam maintains that the agencies' recent focus on development 'can be understood as part of a broader shift within the United Nations . . . and as part of a broader global shift characterized by the expansion of the field of humanitarianism' (2012: 103).

Just as distinctions between humanitarianism and development have begun to dissolve, so too have the lines between these fields and human rights work. Increasingly, 'the schema of human rights . . . is the common practical framework for elaborating values which underpin both humanitarian action and development work' (Slim 2001: 291). According to Minear, humanitarianism and human rights organizations defined themselves in contradistinction to each other for several decades, emphasizing different mandates and different strategies (2002: 38). But 'humanitarian action is now understood in more inclusive terms to encompass *both* the delivery of relief and other life-saving and life-supporting assistance *and* the protection of basic human rights' (Minear 2002: 42).

Slim, in his often-cited piece, 'Dissolving the Difference between Humanitarianism and Development: The Mixing of a Rights-based Solution', makes the same claim:

> The development of universal human rights, whose fundamental value is human dignity founded in individual equality, personal freedom, and social and economic justice, easily encompasses humanitarian and development activity and shows them to have common ends. The (re)discovery in the 1990s that both humanitarianism and development are 'rights-based' ended, once and for all, the distracting dichotomy set up between the two.
>
> (2001: 291)

The emerging field of cultural humanitarianism can be seen as a further example of the expansion and convergences described above as it overlaps with many of the interests and values embodied in humanitarianism and development, including a concern for human rights. And despite persistent debates on what constitutes 'culture' and its value in human affairs, culture has long been an element of human rights discourse.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), both adopted in 1966, are the leading international human rights documents (Shyllon 1998: 110). The UDHR makes provisions for 'cultural rights' in Articles 22 and 27. Article 22 states that everyone 'is entitled to realization . . . of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality', and Article 27 provides that: 'Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits' (quoted in Shyllon 1998: 110). Article 15 of the ICESCR similarly recognizes the right of everyone 'to take part in [the] cultural life' of his or her community, and Article 27 of the ICCPR specifically addresses the rights of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities to 'enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language' (quoted in Shyllon 1998: 110). Even though these documents do not refer to 'cultural heritage' per se and the UDHR and ICESCR only refer to 'culture' in a narrow sense, they introduced the idea that culture is an important aspect of human rights.

Silverman and Ruggles (2007) assert that, although cultural heritage has not figured prominently in the extensive literature on human rights, it should rank among other human rights concerns such as freedom of religion, political expression and movement, as well as freedom from repression, violence, torture and hunger. They write: 'The very concept of heritage demands that individual and group identities be respected and protected. Heritage insists on the recognition of a person or community's essential worth' (Silverman and Ruggles 2007: 5). In fact, as these authors note, heritage can promote tolerance since a lack of tolerance for others' identity often leads to the repression of cultural expressions, especially those of minority groups. This repression can take the form of the 'suppression of intangible manifestations of culture, such as language, dress, and ritual, or the outright physical destruction of material objects and buildings' (Silverman and Ruggles 2007: 5).

Respect for cultural heritage as an element of human rights is encoded in UNESCO's Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage (2003). It states, in reference to monuments, that 'cultural heritage is an important component of the cultural identity of communities, groups, and individuals, and or social cohesion, so that its intentional destruction may have adverse consequences on human dignity and human rights' (quoted in Silverman and Ruggles 2007: 5).

UNESCO's (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage connects the protection of cultural heritage with human rights in the sense that its mandate is to safeguard living cultural expressions as 'inalienable rights', which are often the most threatened on a day-to-day basis. It directly associates intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with human rights by referencing the UDHR, the ICESCR and the ICCPR in its opening paragraph, and declares that ICH is a 'mainspring of cultural diversity' (UNESCO 2003).

The Convention on ICH was adopted by the United Nations General Conference in 2003 and entered into force in 2006. It grew out of a concern within the international community that globalization and global mass culture were leading to the widespread loss of traditional cultures, languages, performing arts and, in general, the world's diversity of living cultural expressions. In this regard, it advanced the concerns expressed in the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which proclaimed: 'cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biological diversity is for nature' (quoted in Ruggles and Silverman 2009: 9). The Convention was also the culmination of years of debate over how to correct the imbalance in previous United Nations' approaches that favored the protection of tangible heritage in the form of monuments and sites over popular, folkloric and living traditions, especially those of countries in the southern hemisphere as well as historically marginalized communities such as indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities (Aikawa-Faure 2009: 14–15; Kurin 2004).

According to the Convention, 'intangible cultural heritage' is:

> The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.
>
> (UNESCO 2003: 2)

> Intangible cultural heritage is manifested in oral traditions, including language; performing arts (traditional dance, music, and theatre); social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge and practices; and traditional craftsmanship.
>
> (UNESCO 2003: 2)

One of the purposes of the Convention is to raise awareness and appreciation of intangible cultural heritage and support conditions under which it can be perpetuated. An important requirement is that local communities

and the 'culture bearers' themselves are involved in identifying their ICH and developing and implementing measures for its protection. Finally, the Convention stresses that its directives are 'compatible with existing international human rights instruments' (Article 2.1, Definitions). In all cases, individual human rights must take precedence over the cultural rights of a group (see Silverman and Ruggles 2007; Stavenhagen 1998).

UNESCO remains the most powerful organization for promoting and establishing worldwide policies for heritage protection and management (Silverman and Ruggles 2007: 18). However, nongovernmental organizations, such as the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, have also entered the stage in protecting world cultural heritage, especially in the context of disasters. The Cultural Emergency Response programme works within the conceptual framework of humanitarianism and human rights in its view of cultural heritage as a basic human need.

CER seeks to raise awareness of the importance of culture in emergencies and to strengthen the effectiveness of cultural emergency response among policy makers, donors and the public at large. Its 'primary aim is to provide emergency aid to international cultural heritage that is destroyed, damaged or threatened in the event of violent conflict and disaster so as to prevent further loss (Frerks, Goldewijk and van der Plas 2011: 9). CER was established in 2003 in reaction to the looting and destruction of artworks from the National Museum of Iraq. In his foreword to *Cultural Emergency in Conflict and Disaster*, H. R. H. Prince Constantijn of the Netherlands makes clear that:

> cultural emergency response operates *alongside* funds and organizations that respond to basic humanitarian needs, human rights atrocities and human suffering. It is not about preserving objects rather than people, but about saving *both*. Thus, not: either-or but and-and. Such complementarities must also be reflected in the way in which cultural emergency relief is delivered: through strong cooperation between heritage and emergency relief organisations, and through the integration of heritage into humanitarian aid initiatives on the ground.
>
> (2011: 4)

One of the fundamental tenets of CER is that culture is a basic need:

> Like food, shelter, or health, culture is then seen as indispensable in human existence. Culture connects individuals to their communities and histories, rituals and traditions. Culture, in this approach, sits at the heart of community identities and provides people with strength and cultural resilience.
>
> (Frerks, Goldewijk and van der Plas 2011: 8)

CER uses a broad definition of cultural heritage, expanding on previous definitions that identified heritage as property to include moveable and immovable

objects, tangible and intangible forms as well as cultural and natural legacies. CER recognizes the 'all pervasiveness of culture', its intrinsic value as a basic human need and its relevance as a factor of human resilience (Frerks, Goldewijk and van der Plas 2011: 11).

In September 2006, CER sponsored an international conference held in the Netherlands entitled 'Culture Is a Basic Need: Responding to Cultural Emergencies'. The purpose of the conference was to draw attention to the importance of culture in humanitarian relief, address the impact of disasters on culture and identity, and encourage dialogue on why culture should be regarded as a basic human need and part of humanitarian assistance. CER representatives stressed that it is not enough to just focus on saving lives during and after a disaster. It is also imperative to think about how lives become meaningful again in the aftermath of a disaster. And because culture gives meaning to people's lives and is critical to their psychological well-being, it is also necessary to understand culture in the broadest sense beyond its tangible manifestations. As Jan Pronk in his opening address declared, 'culture is more than matter. Culture is the spirit, soul, and mind of a community. Destruction of that culture is an attack on life itself' (2006). Another conference participant, Georg Frerks, chair of disaster studies at Wageningen University, stressed furthermore that 'good, effective aid requires that the workers understand the culture, the standards and values, all the ways of the victim's society' (2006).

CER and cultural humanitarianism accept on principle that heritage has value and that its preservation is a shared common good for individuals, communities and humanity as a whole. However, this does not mean that the idea of heritage is unproblematic or that the organizations involved in its protection and management as well as the policies enacted to do so are above criticism. To date, volumes have been written that critically analyze the heritage concept and UNESCO. Numerous authors have reported on the mismanagement of sites, the ineffectiveness of policies and laws and the deployment of culture and heritage for political purposes. In general, they have illuminated the uses and abuses of heritage. At the core of these critiques are issues of power and questions regarding 'who defines cultural heritage and who should control stewardship and the benefits of cultural heritage' (Silverman and Ruggles 2007: 3). While the protection and promotion of heritage can foster cross-cultural understanding and awareness, help meet basic human needs, serve as a lucrative economic resource for communities and governments and preserve world cultural diversity, they can also create tensions and be a source of conflict. Consequently, 'heritage produces a contested and "dissonant" space because its dominant representations are open to different interpretations and appropriations' (De Cesari 2010: 626).

Indeed, today heritage is perceived, at least within the scholarly community, more and more as a social construct, and is analyzed from a 'present-centered' perspective. Lowenthal observed in 1998 that 'in domesticating the past we enlist [heritage] for present causes . . . [it] clarifies pasts so

as to infuse them with present purposes' (quoted in Graham and Howard 2008: 2). It follows, then, that heritage is less about tangible and intangible cultural forms than it is about 'the meanings placed upon them and the representations which are created from them' (quoted in Graham and Howard 2008: 2). From this viewpoint, heritage has no intrinsic value.

This constructivist and instrumentalist view of the present-centeredness of heritage is practical for illuminating the various lenses through which heritage is seen and employed. It also raises the question of heritage's contingency and relativism, or, rather, the notion that the concept of heritage is perceived and defined differently in different historical, cultural and national contexts and that strategies devised for its protection thought to be appropriate in one setting may not be in others. Moreover, what people value and choose to hold onto differs among individuals, groups and governments. In fact, much criticism of the heritage paradigm rests on its purported universality and the Eurocentric nature of many heritage-safeguarding measures (see Kreps 2003, 2008, 2009, 2012).

Similar criticisms have also been leveled against the concept of humanitarianism. Although the idea of saving lives and relieving suffering are scarcely Western or Christian creations, the origins of modern humanitarianism are rooted in Western history and Christian thought. The Western, liberal roots of humanitarianism have always created tensions and roused suspicion (Barnett and Weiss 2008; Kennedy 2004). According to Barnett and Weiss:

> Humanitarians have frequently used their goals and principles as evidence of their universal orientation and appeal. They have aspired to save lives regardless of their own nationalities, religions, cultures, or other identity markers. They have operated according to the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence to underscore their depoliticized and universal character. This claim to universality was never stable [however] . . . it was constantly challenged by countervailing forces that viewed universal claims as a move by the wealthy and powerful to impose their worldviews on the weak and vulnerable.
>
> (2008: 7)

NIAS TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

I first went to Nias in 2002 to work with the Museum Pusaka Nias as a consultant for the Ford Foundation, which was providing funding for museum projects. The museum was founded in the early 1990s under the leadership of Father Johannes Hämmerle, a German Catholic missionary who has been working on the island since 1971. Over the past forty years, Father Hämmerle has been conducting research on Nias history and culture, and collecting examples of its tangible and intangible culture. The museum

functions under the auspices of a private foundation, the Yayasan Pusaka Nias, and has been supported by private donations and grants from international governmental and nongovernmental organizations and Indonesian national and regional government agencies. The mission of the museum is to foster awareness and appreciation of the island's natural and cultural history; to serve as a study, research and recreation center; to promote the education and socioeconomic development of local people; and to aid the regional government in tourism development (see Kreps 2008).

On my first visit to Nias in 2002, I was taken around the island and shown its spectacular and unique architecture. The museum, for nearly ten years now, has been involved in helping restore traditional houses in villages throughout the island as part of its cultural heritage preservation work.

Nias is well known for its extraordinary vernacular architecture and megalithic monuments, which have received much scholarly attention (Feldman 1979; Fox 1993; Gruber and Herbig 2009; Viaro 1990; Waterson 1990, 1993). Waterson, in *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in Southeast Asia*, suggests that, 'in the whole of South-East Asia it is perhaps in the southern part of Nias that vernacular architecture has found its most monumental expression' (1990: 82). Monumental architecture and megalithic sculptures are also one of island's main draws for tourists.

Traditional houses are quintessential features of Nias culture, because they are connected to nearly every aspect of life, including social organization, political structure, art, cosmology, religious beliefs and technology (Figure 13.1). They typify what Levi-Strauss termed 'house societies', whereby the house is the focus of a group or community's social organization. Houses in this kind of society share a number of features:

> They have a name, which may be inspired by the location or some other feature; they are perpetuated over time and not allowed to disappear, at least from memory; they may be elaborately decorated, especially on the façade; and they are the sites for the performance of ceremonies
> (Levi-Strauss cited in Waterson 1990: 139)

Waterson further maintains that 'attitudes toward houses themselves are an integral part of people's worldviews and need to be understood in this wider context' (1993: 223).

In former times, a man's social standing and success was measured by his ability to construct a fine house and give great feasts (Hämmerle 2009: 13). This was especially true for noble families, since large, elaborate houses demonstrated their power and capacity to mobilize a substantial labor force and amass the wealth to undertake impressive construction projects (Waterson 1990: 140). These feats also showed that a nobleman embodied qualities of the ancestors and had mastered social and cosmic forces (Feldman 1979).

The chief's house (*omo sebua*) tended to be the principal feature of the village, serving as a communal house, a space where ancestor figures (*adu*)
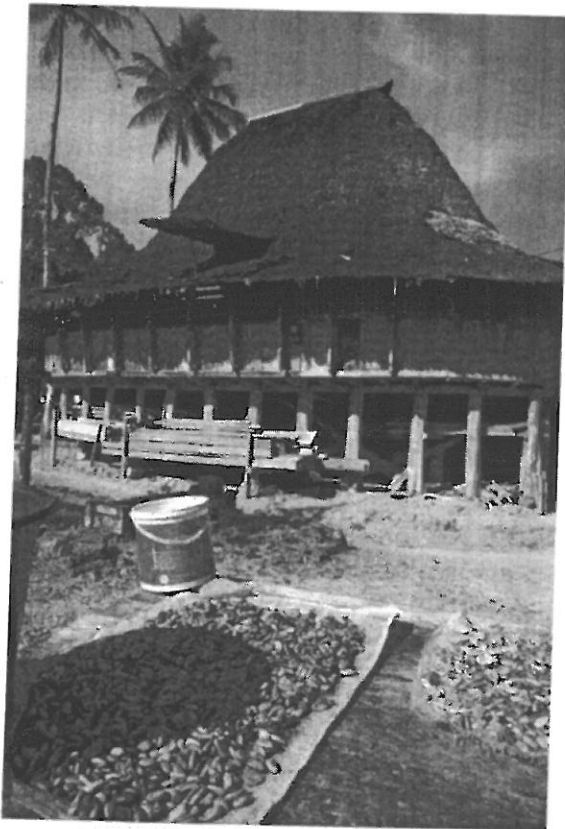
Figure 13.1 An example of a traditional Nias commoner's house. (Photograph by Christina Kreps.)

were displayed and honored and a place to retreat to if the village came under attack. The village assembly square was generally found in front of the chief's house, and this is also where feasting and dancing took place. The village meetinghouse generally was located close to the chief's house, where customary law, or *adat*, was established and implemented (Viaro 1990).

As in other Southeast Asian house societies, Nias houses were laid out and decorated to reflect images of the cosmic order in which there were three layers: the lower, middle and upper worlds. The lower part of the house symbolized the world of brutish desires, inferior beings and animals. The middle section was associated with the earthly realm and the living space of humans and the upper part of the house was the sacred sphere where spirits, ancestors and gods dwelled (Lehner 2009: 72). In this sense, the house was not just a physical structure with a practical function. It also held strong spiritual significance. Houses possessed a vitality, power and 'soul' of their own and apart from that of their inhabitants (Waterson 1993).

The traditional, hierarchical class structure of chiefs, noblemen and commoners, and the religious beliefs that inspired the construction of monumental chief houses have weakened over the years due to modernization and conversion to Christianity and Islam. But descendants of some noble families still live in the houses, and they remain the site of rituals and ceremonies, village council meetings and other important gatherings.

I found this to be the case when I visited what is perhaps one of the most famous and widely photographed *omo sebua*, or chief's house, located in the southern village of Bawömataluo. The house is still inhabited, and while in need of repair due to termite infestation and the typical aging that occurs in tropical climates, it remains in remarkably good shape. We entered the house from below by walking through a lattice of diagonal piles some half-meter in diameter and by climbing steep, hand-hewn steps. Upstairs, the house opened up into a great room where we could see finely carved wooden ancestor figures; hundreds of pig jaws hanging from the rafters (relics from former feasts); and carved and polished hardwood panels decorated with figures in bas-relief of plants, animals and family heirlooms (elaborate headdresses, necklaces and earrings). The depiction of an early Dutch steamship, along with other images, illustrates what Taylor and Aragon suggest is a Nias affinity for recording historical events through artwork. In their view, artwork inside the house, including family portraits, has long served as a means of recording and transmitting Nias history and culture to the younger generation (1992: 87). During my visits, I also visited several villages where *omo hada* ('commoner' houses) were still the most prevalent, especially in the interior of the island.

In 2002, traditional houses clearly remained an important aspect of Nias tangible and intangible cultural heritage, yet fewer were being constructed for a number of reasons. First and foremost was the growing popularity of concrete houses, which were seen as modern status symbols. In the course of my first visit, I learned that it was difficult for families to adequately maintain the old houses due to the high cost and unavailability of building materials such as hardwoods and thatched roofing. These materials were not only difficult to obtain but their collection and processing was more labor intensive than the use of concrete and zinc roofing. What's more, it was becoming increasingly difficult to find local craftsmen who still knew how to build in the traditional style.

Ritual obligations, which continued to be observed, added to the cost of constructing a house. In addition to sponsoring a feast upon its completion, the owner of the house was required to slaughter numerous pigs at each stage of its construction. In 1997, a pig pestilence killed hundreds of pigs on the island and subsequently the price of pigs escalated. These ritual obligations and the high cost of pigs led government officials to discourage villagers from building traditional houses and, instead, invest their money in the education of their children (Hämmerle 2009: 14).

In an effort to counter these trends and preserve traditional houses on Nias, the museum was providing villagers with funds to repair and restore

old houses in addition to training carpenters and craftsmen in the old techniques. It also was encouraging people to build new homes in the traditional style with added modern amenities.

Alongside these efforts, Father Hämmerle and museum staff, in collaboration with other researchers, including from the Institute for Comparative Research in Architecture in Vienna, Austria, had been conducting studies of Nias vernacular architecture for several years. They were documenting the different styles of houses in different regions of the island, indigenous knowledge of building techniques as well as the iconography, customs and traditions associated with the houses (see Gruber and Herbig 2009).

Ironically, the 2005 earthquake disaster that wrought so much damage on the island turned out to be, in Father Hämmerle's words, a 'blessing in disguise', because it generated new appreciation and respect for Nias architecture. In the following section, I describe the role traditional houses played in humanitarian relief efforts and lessons learned regarding the cultural dimensions of humanitarian and development efforts.

THE CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF DISASTER RECOVERY

As noted earlier, the earthquake destroyed more than 80 percent of the modern, concrete houses and public buildings on Nias, while houses built in the traditional style proved to be quite resilient (Viaro and Ziegler 2009: 140). This is because Nias traditional architecture is a building style highly adapted to Nias's specific geological conditions. The island sits in one of the most seismically active areas of the world. Due to regularly occurring earthquakes, construction techniques have been developed over the centuries to withstand the steady threat of seismic shocks. This characteristic of Nias and north Sumatran architecture was noted by European observers as early as 1811 (Waterson 1990: 80).

A typical house is elevated about six feet above the ground, and a chief's house can reach over sixty-five feet above the ground. A distinctive feature of Nias houses is the use of diagonal and vertical piles arranged in V-shaped pairs. These arrangements reduce stress from tremors and add stability to the structure because supporting piles rest on flat foundation stones, allowing the house to sway without being damaged (Gruber 2009; Viaro and Ziegler 2009; Waterson 1990). This ingenious design makes Nias architecture an excellent example of 'appropriate technology', or, technology that is compatible with local environmental, cultural and economic conditions and that utilizes locally available material, tools and energy resources (Hazeltine and Bull 2003: 3–4).

Museum Pusaka Nias suffered damage as a result of the quake, but relatively little compared to the rest of Genungsitoli, which was nearly flattened. At the museum, glass display cases and more than one hundred artifacts were damaged or destroyed. Three buildings used for storage and housing staff collapsed, and a wall surrounding the museum compound also
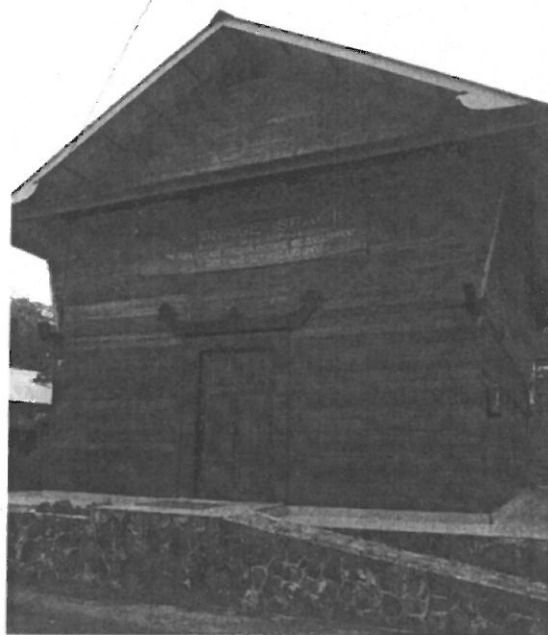
Figure 13.2 New storage facility at Museum Pusaka Nias, built with funds provided by the Prince Claus Fund. (Photograph by Christina Kreps.)

came down. The museum began rebuilding soon after the earthquake with assistance from a number of international and national aid organizations, including CER, which initially donated 17,000 euros for reconstruction.

I returned to Nias in August 2008, three years after the quake. Although I had been in regular communication with museum staff since the disaster and was aware of their reconstruction efforts, I was astounded by the remarkable recovery the museum had made in just a few years. In addition to restoring buildings damaged in the earthquake, the museum had constructed a new storage building with funds from CER (Figure 13.2), three life-size models of Nias traditional style houses as well as an outdoor café (Figure 13.3). Contrary to what I expected to see, the museum was doing better than ever and was continuing to serve the public as a popular educational, cultural and recreational center.

It was also making contributions to disaster recovery efforts throughout the island by working with families on rebuilding and restoring traditional houses. As of 2008, the museum had helped rebuild more than one hundred houses with aid from private donors and numerous governmental and nongovernmental organizations from Indonesia, Europe, Asia and the United States.

Figure 13.3 One of the life-size models of traditional Nias houses built in the compound of Museum Pusaka Nias. The models were used to house disaster relief workers during the reconstruction. (Photograph by Christina Kreps.)

Nevertheless, in conversation with museum staff, I learned that responses to its work and all the attention Nias traditional architecture was receiving had been mixed. Many residents, government officials and NGOs favored the construction of new modern, concrete houses, and these construction projects received the lion's share of funding. The museum staff understood the politics and economics behind aid distribution but was concerned about its long-term effects. To staff members, it was not just that the new houses were poorly constructed and made with low-quality materials, making them unsafe, but they were also culturally inappropriate since they were modeled after Western-style, single-family dwellings. Finally, they said, there were those who believed, in principle, that scarce resources should not be spent on 'culture', while many people remained lacking in basic needs.

As I toured the island on this trip, I saw examples of houses being built by humanitarian aid and development agencies in villages and resettlement sites. What I saw confirmed much of what the museum staff had told me as well as what I later read about housing rehabilitation and reconstruction on Nias.

Viaro and Ziegler state in their essay 'Nias Reconstruction in the Respect of the Tradition' (2009) that, although the new houses conformed to international

standards of humanitarian relief housing and provided adequate shelter, their design did not take into account the way in which Nias people organized and used living spaces. Thus, they did not allow them to continue using these spaces in the manner to which they are accustomed (Viaro and Ziegler 2009: 140). For example, the traditional oval-shaped houses found in the north are built to accommodate extended families and have an open layout with few internal walls or partitions (see Figure 13.1). Viaro and Ziegler also point out how the materials used in the construction of new houses—wood, aluminum, zinc, concrete and prefabricated slabs—were not appropriate for Nias's environmental conditions. They calculated, furthermore, that the cost of building one humanitarian aid shelter was nearly the same as building a house in the traditional style (Viaro and Ziegler 2009: 140). In short, the new houses were neither culturally nor environmentally appropriate to the Nias context.

At its peak in 2005, more than 200 aid agencies, mostly NGOs, were working on Nias, and nearly 120 NGOs contributed specifically to housing construction. Within six weeks after the earthquake, a consortium of donor agencies in conjunction with Indonesian government agencies (the National Development Planning Agency and the Ministry of Public Works) jointly assessed the damage and concluded that housing was the biggest and most obvious basic need. It was estimated that some 16,161 houses needed to be replaced and some 24,000 needed to be rehabilitated (Steinberg 2007: 151–157).

Given the magnitude of the need, Museum Pusaka Nias's contribution to disaster relief and reconstruction was minor in terms of the *quantity* of houses provided. But if we recall Oliver-Smith's contention that the *quality* of reconstruction should also be considered, its work was remarkable because it modeled culturally appropriate, community-based approaches to housing.

Prior to the disaster, the majority of houses on Nias, particularly in more remote areas, were constructed incrementally on communal land by individual family and village members rather than by contractors through commercial avenues. In contrast, the main Indonesian government agency responsible for housing reconstruction, the Baden Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi (Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency), along with most donor agencies, used professional contractors for housing delivery. However, according to Lang, in 'Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in South Nias Heritage Villages' (2010), after discovering that houses built by contractors were often poorly constructed and in some cases uninhabitable, aid agencies (for example, the Asian Development Bank) shifted to community-based approaches to housing, an approach that involves community members in the planning, design and construction of their own homes. These approaches were seen as more sustainable and effective because they insist on the use of local labor and materials. They also acknowledge the value of indigenous building knowledge as a local cultural resource.

Twigg recounts how indigenous building knowledge is often devalued by outsiders in housing reconstruction, and indeed by local people, who prize

modern-style houses as symbols of development. Modern houses are also believed to be more secure against natural hazards. 'Yet modern building methods do not automatically provide greater safety. . . . Some indigenous building technologies are well adapted to hazards' (Twigg 2006: 2). Twigg points out how, in many cases, the use of outside contractors displaces local builders and traditional skills, marginalizing local artisans in ways that actually increase vulnerability to hazards. For example, once a reconstruction project is over and the imported laborers leave, local people may revert to traditional methods because they lack the skills needed to extend, modify and repair houses using the new technologies. This often leads to the construction of dangerous, hybrid structures (Twigg 2006: 3).

In Twigg's view, we still do not know enough about the long-term impact of reconstruction initiatives. What we do know, however, is that current approaches to 'safe' housing reconstruction usually do not increase people's livelihood resilience due to a narrowly defined technical approach to housing and the artificial lines aid agencies draw between relief and development programming (Twigg 2006: 2). In general, he maintains, 'in reconstruction programmes the focus is on *houses* (physical structures/capital) rather than on *housing* (the arena of social and economic life). Homes are seen merely as items of physical capital, not as places of work, learning, communication and relationship building' (Twigg 2006: 4).

Barenstein and Pittet, reporting on postdisaster housing reconstruction in Tamil Nadu after the 2004 tsunami, have reached similar conclusions, especially regarding the need to preserve the predisaster built environment, because 'human settlements reflect peoples' history and cultural identity' (2007: 15). Therefore, they argue:

> Agencies involved in housing reconstruction . . . [should make] informed and contextually appropriate technological choice[s] and pay more attention to preserve the design, materials and construction practices related to local housing. Indeed, our comparative analysis of the comfort, cost and environmental impact of different housing types indicated that from a comfort and sustainability perspective vernacular houses are significantly more appropriate than so-called multi-hazard resistant houses built by agencies involved in post-tsunami reconstruction
>
> (Barenstein and Pittet 2007: 15).

CONCLUSIONS

The Nias story demonstrates how heritage can be a vital resource in disaster relief and recovery, and, in fact, help meet basic human needs. It also exemplifies how the fields of humanitarianism, heritage and development are converging, creating more holistic, integrated and culturally appropriate approaches to meeting human needs during and after disasters. The

heritage work of Museum Pusaka Nias provides not only a model of such approaches but a better understanding of what gives meaning to people's lives after a disaster.

During my 2008 visit to Nias, I visited a village with Father Hämmerle and museum staff where the museum had helped restore several houses. Much to our surprise, villagers had prepared a grand ceremony, complete with dances, speeches and a pig feast, in keeping with Nias cultural traditions, to thank Father Hämmerle and staff for their assistance. It was clear that the villagers were genuinely grateful for being able to continue living in their houses and maintain a way of life that they valued.

Thankfully, today, Museum Pusaka Nias is still being supported in its efforts to preserve the island's rich cultural heritage. In June 2012, in the midst of writing this chapter, I received a copy of the museum's latest newsletter reporting on the museum's latest accomplishments. The museum recently aided villagers in the construction of four houses, including an *omo sebua* (a 'nobleman's' house), in the southern part of the island and one in the north supported by funds from the Tirto Foundation in Jakarta. It also rehabilitated the famous *omo bale* (village assembly hall) in Bawömataluo with support from the Multi Donor Fund and International Labor Organization.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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