

Berichte und Kommentare

The Limitations of a Discipline:

A Reply to Peter Suzuki

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In a recent issue of *Anthropos* (1984: 47-53), Peter Suzuki entered into an extended criticism of structuralism and my studies of the island of Nias in particular. I do not wish to engage in any attempt to denigrate a discipline of Anthropology such as structuralism, but I do feel bound to reply to unfair and inaccurate criticism of my own work.

Suzuki claims to have been "substantiated as essentially correct" by my fieldwork. This is definitely not the case. The contribution made by Dr. Suzuki consists only of the observation that binary structures exist in Nias. His dissertation, more than any other study I am aware of, demonstrates the limits of structuralism. What Suzuki did was to gather library materials from all regions of Nias, to mix them together, and to produce a social structure. There simply is no such culture in Nias.

The island of Nias is divided into three cultural regions, North, Central, and South. Each area has its own dialect of the Nias language, its own version of the ancient religion, its own *adat*, and its own art and architectural styles. Indeed, even within a region each village prefers to maintain its own variation of the culture area. Until very recently, students of Nias culture have not been very careful to document the locations of their field information, and sorting out the literature as to the origin of the information is very difficult. Some of the keys one looks for in such an endeavor are the mention of village and district names, the use of regional language, and the mention

of local family names. For example, the term for a type of sword found only in North Nias is *gari*. If a writer is discussing South Nias and uses the term *saita gari* (a hook for the *gari* sword) to describe a vertical stone (Suzuki 1959: 112), then material is being misapplied between regions.

Nearly all information on Nias religion is based upon North Nias sources. The missionary writer J.W. Thomas was the most influential. His treatise on Nias religion (Chatelin 1881) was used by field researchers and armchair anthropologists alike to describe the belief system for the entire island, yet it was collected entirely in the North with only occasional references to "the South"¹. In his chapter on religion Schröder cited Thomas (Chatelin 1881) at least 24 times on different pages (1917: 496, 497, 506, 518, 519, 520, 527, 539, 542, 548, 554, 570, 574, 585, 586, 590, 591, 596, 599, 600, 606, 609, 610).

The second most influential writer on Nias religion also did his work in North Nias. Kramer (1890) was cited repeatedly by Schröder and others as a source to describe the religion of all of Nias (1917: 538, 566, 569, 578, 588, 594, 596, 598, 600, 610).

The tendency to use North Nias sources to explain the religion is best illustrated with Nias wooden images (*adu*). The same photo of a set of North Nias images appears at least five times in major writings dealing with different culture areas (Fehr 1901: 12 – North Nias; Sundermann 1905: 77 – North Nias; Lett 1901: 16 – West

¹ Thomas, and most other early missionaries, did not always perceive the difference between Central and South Nias and considered them both as "the South." Thomas sometimes mentioned the Mazingö district which is in the South, but he mixed information which came from the North (see Feldmann 1977: 12).