

# Research on the historical, cultural and religious significance of a religious object in a museum

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## **Abstract**

*The focus of this article is an ancestor figure from Nias, western Indonesia, which has been in the Museum of Religions of the Philipps University Marburg since 1932. A missionary from the Rhenish Mission Society Barmen-Wuppertal, Johannes Noll, gave it to the collection on permanent loan at a time when Indonesia was still a Dutch colony. Essentially, my research has two principal foci. One focus is on the Museum of Religions' archive in Marburg and the missionary who donated the object to the Museum. The other focus is on the island of Nias, where I conducted research for two weeks in March 2023. I was particularly interested in how the time in which ancestor figures disappeared from everyday life and rituals is remembered today. It was a time when the people of Nias had adopted the Christian faith. A third focus of my research was to find out if there is still interest in such figures and whether there is hope of their repatriation. The article opens insight in object studies in the field of religion.*

## **Keywords**

*Indonesia, ancestor figure, museum, Christian missionary, repatriation, Nias*

## **Introduction**

The object I am using as case study is an ancestor figure from the western part of Indonesia, an Adu Zatus<sup>1</sup> from the island of Nias. It has been part of the collection of the Marburg Museum of Religions / Religionskundliche Sammlung (Franke and Runge 2017)<sup>2</sup> since 1932 and was given to the Museum as a permanent loan by Johannes Noll (1869–1954). He lived and worked as a missionary on the island of Nias in the "Dutch East Indies", nowadays Indonesia, as did many German missionaries. He was sent there from 1898 to 1930, with a seven-year break, on behalf of the Rhenish Missionary Society in Barmen-Wuppertal, Germany.<sup>3</sup>

My first question is why this object is in a museum's collection focused on religious objects. For this reason, my literature and archival research in Marburg focused on the meaning and ritual use of the object. But it is also worth looking at an object's donor, asking

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<sup>1</sup> Today, the people of Nias write Adu Zatus instead of Adu Satua, because in the Indonesian language the "z" is pronounced as a soft sibilant sound.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uni-marburg.de/en/relsamm>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vemission.org/en/museum/archives/archives/library-and-written-archives>.

how that person is related to the object and to its previous owners. Why did he own this object to begin with? The Christian missionary apparently viewed every Adu Zatus as religious. I conclude this from the fact that he made their disappearance from private property, whether through destruction or handing them over to a missionary, a prerequisite for accepting someone into the Christian community.

With the results of this research, I had enough background knowledge for a research trip to Nias in March 2023. I was hoping to find out how the people of today talk about the time when most Adu Zatus figures left the island, what the people remember when they talk to a German woman. And, to be honest, I was also hoping to find people who could still remember this particular Adu Zatus and the last time it was used in a ritual. This was not possible. But I learned a lot about the pre-Christian past, about the time of the conversion, and what the people of Nias think about the return of an Adu Zatus.



Adu Zatus (inv. no. Ar 006) brought to Marburg by Johannes Noll (Foto © Museum of Religions Marburg)

## 1. Adu Zatus, a religious object?

Fortunately, Johannes Noll offered the Adu Zatus to the Museum of Religions in Marburg by sending a drawing (Rodemeier 2022, 126) of the "idol", as he called it. Otherwise, I would not

have recognized his letters because they are written in the old German handwriting Sütterlin, which I don't read fluently. Together with his drawings, the missionary sent further manuscripts to the Museum of Religions before donating the Adu Zatia in December 1932. In one of the manuscripts, he explains a pre-Christian death ritual. The ritual is intimately connected with the belief in *mökömökö* (a certain kind of "soul"), the Adu Zatia, and the belief that living people are intimately connected with their ancestors. (Noll n.d.) These descriptions explain the local belief in the existence of different kinds of "souls". According to Noll, a few days after death, the *mökömökö* evaporates. This *mökömökö* must be connected to the *mökömökö* of the ancestors. That is why, in Noll's times, from the buried corpse a long tube reaches the surface. On the surface, the *mökömökö* is represented by a small spider. A drum-beating and dancing local priest conducts a ritual in which such spiders are caught, placed in a bamboo tube and then taken to the group's traditional (*adat*) house. The Adu Zatia is placed inside the house, and the spiders are transferred into the Adu Zatia. The spiders that are carriers of the *mökömökö* are not allowed to enter the house through the door but must enter through an opening in the roof. The bamboo tube is passed through this opening and the spiders glide towards the Adu Zatia as if they were the transport vehicle for *mökömökö*.

My research on Nias helps to understand this process. When a person dies, people open the roof window to allow the soul to leave the house. At the end of all funeral rituals, the newly evolved soul (*mökömökö*) returns to the house and finds its new body in the wooden Adu Zatia. This also makes it easy to understand why the Adu Zatia figures in a clan house were placed at about the same height as the windows in the roof of the house. All the souls of the person's close ancestors had been transferred into this figure for many generations. With its new soul, the newly deceased person is now becoming part of the ancestor community. It is important to ensure that a soul does not hang around discontentedly and cause unrest among the living. In addition, those who have been dead for a long time remember their descendants again. They are believed to remain in an Adu Zatia for a long time, perhaps even for years. Figures who are regularly supplied with *mökömökö* are therefore particularly good places to contact the ancestors if their descendants need help.

This description of the death ritual clearly shows that Adu Zatia were strongly linked to local ideas of "souls" and the interaction between living people and ancestors. In this sense, Adu Zatia are religious objects.

## 2. Johannes Noll on Nias, Indonesia

In the following, I will introduce the missionary Johannes Noll and his organization, the Rhenish Missionary Society, as well as the living circumstances on Nias in the early 19th century. However, as long as the people feel that they are responsible for maintaining good contact with their ancestors, they will not easily turn to Christianity. The fear of being punished by the dissatisfied ancestors is just too great. Adu Zatia figures visualize the presence of the ancestors and the interaction between the ancestors and their descendants.

Therefore, this inner conflict must first be resolved before someone can be a convert to a monotheistic religion.

Missionary efforts (Tjoa-Bonatz 2009, 105–28) on Nias started in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with little success. That changed when missionaries from the German Rhenish Mission society were supported by the Dutch colonial government, and various measures were taken to persuade people to convert. These measures were meant to demonstrate the strength of the Christian faith by bringing medicines for diseases that the local priests could not cure, such as diarrhoea and malaria. The missionaries had access to charcoal tablets and quinine. Some missionaries, including Johannes Noll, additionally sought to demonstrate the strength of the Christian faith by publicly destroying ancestor figures. Usually, the destruction of local heritage had no immediate consequences neither for the destroyer nor for the owners of the figures. This was regarded as proof for the missionaries' argument that the interaction between humans and ancestors is imaginary and does not, in fact, exist. Missionaries thought the destruction of the ancestors' wooden bodies would convince those that still believed in the existence of ancestors that the Christian faith was stronger than any ancestral power.

There was, however, an additional reason why conversion to Christianity was attractive to many people. To understand this reason, it is necessary to understand the local hierarchical social structure. Each village is divided into two social classes, the *si'ulu* and the *sato*. People belong to these classes by birth. The *si'ulu* are the members of the small upper class and the *sato* are the many, the people. The two classes have different rights and responsibilities. The duties of the *si'ulu* include organizing festivals and rituals and administering justice. They are always paid by the *sato* in the form of pigs and often in gold, as well. Until Indonesian independence, the *si'ulu* also had the privilege of owning and selling slaves. When slaves worked in the household, they spent most of their time with the women. Through the women, the slaves were able to influence the *si'ulus'* decisions. However, a slave could not leave this status to become a *sato*. This meant that the children of a slave were also slaves. If you were not *si'ulu*, you could become a slave in three ways: by birth, you were in too much debt to a *si'ulu*, or by being pardoned for a crime punishable by death. A slave was not considered a human being. The most obvious sign of this was the fact that he was living with the pigs. However, the slave still had so much potential power that when a new village was founded, the severed head of a slave was placed under the steps of the village as a building sacrifice. Or the head could be placed under the body of a deceased *si'ulu* as his pillow to rest on (Marschall 1976, 56–60). By converting to Christianity, *sato* became self-sufficient and were freed from the danger of becoming slaves. If someone was already a slave, however, he could not be a Christian by choice. It was not until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Dutch colonial government actively campaigned against slavery, that this possibility arose. This development was certainly a source of strength for the missionaries. After all, the former slaves were no longer part of the local social network which meant that they had to rely on the social support of the Christian community. However, to this day (author's note after a

conversation with a young *si'ulu* in southern Nias in 2023), they have not been able to rid themselves of their stigma, which is still evident in village disputes.

In 1903, Johannes Noll established a new mission station at Bo'usö in northern Nias. In a report to the Rhenish Missionary Society, he also stated that he had removed 2000 Adu Zatus from a house in front of their owners (Bonatz 2001, 112; Noll 1930, 303). He took only one, which he described as bird-headed, as a toy for his young son. In the same year, Noll apparently lent this figure back to Börönadu, a village in the interior of southern Nias, from which he had recently removed it. This was done to fulfil a request made by the village chief. The statue was required for the final portion of the traditional funeral rites. The village community felt it was necessary because without this part of the ritual, some families would not have peace of mind. Although all the villagers were baptized, twelve families had deceased relatives who were neither baptized nor given a traditional funeral. It was only through this last ritual that they could become ancestors and leave the world of their descendants forever. Noll complied and agreed to lend the figure. Since the figure has been in Marburg since 1932, he apparently received it back. Noll was not one of the missionaries who collected local religious objects (Tjoa-Bonatz 2009, 105–29) to sell to museums or collectors. However, he was aware of the great interest in such objects in Europe. This is the reason, as he noted in his letter to the Museum of Religions, that he did not want to give it as a gift, but rather as a permanent loan in order to keep open the possibility of lending it to other museums.

### 3. Researching Provenience

My trip to Nias in March 2023 followed in the footsteps of Johannes Noll. The mission station, which he called Bo'usö, is now a larger village with a church and a bell tower, just a few minutes' drive from the island's capital, Gunung Sitoli. The year 1903 is inscribed on the church bell that he brought to Nias from Germany, but the activities of Johannes Noll are only vaguely remembered. I was told that the local people were reluctant to hand over their Adu Zatus statues as a pre-condition for being baptized. But as time passed, more and more people complied with this requirement for baptism. However, I was also told that there are still individual Niassers who continue to keep their ancestor figures in secret. My interviewees in Bo'usö, who were all male employees of the church, assumed that their forefathers had converted in order to gain access to medicine. No further personal motives or details about the conversion were given. Because I specifically asked about the circumstances under which the Adu Zatus from Marburg might have left Nias, our conversation was quite brief.

The most important piece of information I received was that the figure clearly came from the south of Nias and not from the north, where Bo'usö is located. The most important difference between figures from these two parts of the island is the placement of the hands. Northern figures show the hands bent over the chest holding a small container. In the south, each hand rests on a leg as if holding something but it was unclear what the hands were

holding. Some said it was a container for the ingredients of the betel chew (Geirnaert 1992, 56–75), others said it was a spear in one hand and a human skull in the other.

In all the villages that I visited, I was told that if you wanted to be baptized, you had to give the Adu Zatus to the missionaries. The missionaries often threw them all into a hole. The hole was then covered with earth. In Susua, a village in the south, I was shown a house that was built on the spot where the Adu Zatus were buried. In all other villages, nobody had any details of what the missionaries did with the figures. However, it did not surprise anyone that Adu Zatus are found in museums all over the world, including Marburg.

In Börönadu, the village from which the Adu Zatus in Marburg is said to originate, no one was certain that it came from there. On the other hand, there was also no one who would rule out the possibility that it came from this village. It was more important for the three men who greeted my small team to explain to us that the people of Börönadu were the first humans, descendants of a man named Hia, and that they had settled near the *fösi* tree. The *fösi* tree was destroyed in the last major earthquake in 2005 and has never regrown. In the village there is a grave for the man Hia. There I was told in detail about the duties that, in pre-Christian times, the descendants of a high-ranking deceased person would have taken immediately after his death. This included headhunting and cruelly killing slaves to obtain heads, of which at least five were required. The deceased was said to be laid on heads that had to be placed under his limbs and head. It was in dreams that the deceased would pass on the details of the burial ritual to his or her descendants. As people recalled this period, I felt that they were glad to no longer be faced with these atrocities. I also felt that their descriptions were particularly gruesome to demonstrate the benefits of Christianity not only to me, but also to themselves and all other listeners.

In the neighbouring village of Börönadu, in Susua, I visited a traditional house of a *si'ulu*. The earthquake mentioned above destroyed this house to such an extent that no one lives there anymore. It was here that I specifically asked where the Adu Zatus would be kept or placed in such a house. I asked in Indonesian language and the old man, who showed me around answered in the local language. This was translated by Pastor Edison, who accompanied me.<sup>4</sup>

I was told that the figures were placed to the left and right of the gallery where the inhabitants used to sit. Further on, Pastor Edison was told in detail how outside visitors to this house were murdered and their heads cut off in a small chamber of the house. This was followed by descriptions of how many heads were needed for a burial ceremony and how many heads were needed to build the house. All these stories culminated in the explanation

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<sup>4</sup> The pastor was in charge for 45 Churches in central Nias. Eferus Tuhoni Telaumbanua from Gunung Sitoli arranged that I could stay in pastor Efendi's house in the highlands of Nias, in Gomo. Pastor Efendi regarded my visit as an advantage to accompany me, as I paid the transport to his places of duty, he did not have to go on his own, and has had the privilege to become interpreter of local tradition. As I do not understand the local language, I was unable to control his translation. But the people in the village seemed to accept the explanations that he gave to me.

that the deceased's heads were cut off to be kept in a special place in the house. The body of the dead was then buried without the head or the headless body was hung in a tree positioned on a kind of platform until nothing was left of him. It seemed these stories, in the spirit of the former missionaries and colonial officials, were meant to show the pastor and me the successful evolution of the villagers into civilized Christians.

As I was trying to learn more about the past and present significance of Adu Zatus, I talked to an employee at the Nias Heritage Museum<sup>5</sup> in Gunung Sitoli. As a wood carver he was in charge of restoring objects from the museum collection and is from the south of Nias. We were talking about his working material as a carver and he nonchalantly mentioned that Adu Zatus are carved from two different types of wood. After examining it, he decided that the Adu Zatus in Marburg were carved from *kayu ma'usö* (the *ma'usö* wood)<sup>6</sup>, which is the same type of wood that, according to a local myth, the very first Adu Zatus was carved out of. He then told me the myth of a mother, known as Silewe, who would not comply with Acehnese men's wishes to marry her daughter. So she carved an anthropomorphic figure. She hid her daughter and gave the wooden figure life. She gave the figure to the Acehnese, but not before impressing upon the figure that it must not turn around on its way to Aceh in West Sumatra. The carved figure ignored the instruction and at some point turned around. When it turned, it suddenly turned back into a wooden figure that had never left the woodcarver's home. The men from Aceh were enraged by this deception. They made their way back to the girl's mother. On the way, they were struck by a bolt of lightning and turned to stone. At that spot in the mountains of South Nias, you can still find these first megaliths of the island.

Further research could be done by visiting this place and asking others about the origin of the Adu Zatus and the megaliths of Nias (Marschall 2022, 533–39). All research results summarized here are based on individual statements and could not be verified by further discussions or by visiting the mentioned sites. Apart from this limitation, it must also be taken into account that almost all of my interviewees were aware of my work in a museum in Germany and that my local contacts were influential church workers. Staying in each location for only a few hours was too short to build trust. It was an advantage, however, that I spoke Indonesian well and rarely needed an interpreter. This was only necessary when talking to the old man in Susua, who preferred to express his thoughts on headhunting in his native language and accepted the offer of the pastor accompanying me to translate for me.

#### 4. A glimpse into the future

As with many such artefacts, the question of repatriation of this Adu Zatus remains. When I asked the villagers in Börönadu if they wanted the figure back, they seemed surprised. However, they immediately mentioned two figures they wanted back in the village, but not

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<sup>5</sup> <https://museum-nias.org/en/>.

<sup>6</sup> The same wood is mentioned concerning an object from Nias that is kept in a museum in Dresden: <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/1646658>.

the Marburg one. The two Adu Zatus they want have the individual names of village persons written on them. It is said that the figures are currently in a museum in Medan, a large city in the north-east of Sumatra. In Bawömataluo, another village in the south of Nias, people are also interested in only one particular Adu Zatus. It was carved on the occasion of the death of the village founder, who also built the largest traditional house. Inside, on the "men's side" of the house, its right side, there was a very fine carving of a chair with a carved lotus umbrella. It was part of the house's wall, made from the extremely hard tropical ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwageri* also known as *ulin*). It was on this chair that an Adu Zatus once stood, and Jerome Feldman (Feldmann, Ziegler, Viaro 1990, page 34 fig. 12)<sup>7</sup> published a photograph of it while the figure was still in place. This photo was shown to me in Bawömataluo and the wish expressed that this figure be returned to Bawömataluo.

The situation was different when I visited the Nias Heritage Museum in the island's capital Gunung Sitoli. One staff member there asked me if it would be possible for us to donate Marburg's Adu Zatus to their museum. This would facilitate the efforts of museum personnel in raising awareness of their own history and heritage to visitors from Nias – mainly school-children. This has already happened with some objects in the museum, which were donated to the museum from a private collector in Europe. However, since the Marburg collection of religious artefacts is a university collection under the ownership of the state of Hesse and thus indirectly under the ownership of the Federal Republic of Germany, we – as staff members – cannot take objects to Indonesia without the involvement of political institutions. The objects would first be transferred to the National Museum in Jakarta if the restitution were to be handled by the German Foreign Ministry. What would happen to such an object later on is not yet clear. According to the staff of the Jakarta National Museum, the object would remain in Jakarta for the time being. If so, the Nias Heritage Museum is currently preferring not to apply for restitution but, instead, to cooperate with museums all over the world<sup>8</sup> by providing web links to help them access work done abroad on objects from Nias. In doing this, the Nias Heritage Museum hopes that Nias will continue to receive international attention.

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<sup>7</sup> There it is shown a photography from 1906. It is online published here:

<https://fowler.ucla.edu/product/x85-1072-ancestor-figure-for-house-altar/>

It is the same figure as the one on colour plate 4 that was in 1990 at the 'Jerome L. Joss Collection' in UCLA.

<sup>8</sup> <https://museum-nias.org/en/other-museums/>.





Chair in Bawömataluo where the Adu Zatus is missing (Foto © Susanne Rodemeier, March 2023)

## Acknowledgements

This research and publication was only possible with the help of many people. I would like to express special thanks to the curator of the Rhenish Missionary Society's archive, Christoph Schwab. Whenever new questions arose during my research trip, he sent me important scans of texts and letters about Johannes Noll and from Noll's notes on Nias. Special thanks also go to Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz for bringing my attention to Noll's note on the "bird headed" Adu Zatus that he kept as puppet for his son. Most likely, this is the exact figure that found its way into the Museum of Religions in Marburg almost 30 years later. My thank also goes to Tuhoni Telaumbanua (Hummel and Telaumbanua 2007) who arranged the talks in Bo'usö and helped me get in contact with Pdt. Edison in Gomo, in the inland of southern Nias. I would also like to thank Faozisökhi Laia for sharing his thoughts on the materiality of Adu Zatus. His recent publication is on traditional music instruments from Nias: Faozisökhi Laia (2019). Last but not least special thanks go to Christiane Haupts-Beier, who accompanied me as a research assistant.

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