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An object of real value?

Transformation from *Adu Satua* to Idol to Ar 006

1 Introduction

In March 2019, the German Museums Association published “Guidelines for German Museums: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts”.¹ The association urged museums to research the provenance of holdings originating from colonial contexts, and, based on their findings, to work with communities of origin, e.g. for the exchange of knowledge, joint projects or the return of objects.² The guidelines also list a number of points that are of special importance, including missionaries and their activities in colonies.³ The Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung, RS) at Philipps-University Marburg is a valuable platform for researching such objects because Heinrich Frick, a former director of the RS, explicitly asked Protestant missionaries to donate objects to the museum. From 1931 to 1941, Frick regularly published the *Supplement for Studies on Religions (Religionskundliches Beiblatt, RB)*, in which he called on both the Rhenish Missionary Society at Wuppertal-Barmen and the Basel Mission to donate “mission art”⁴ as well as religious objects that had lost their ritual use after their owners had converted to Christianity. Missionaries around the world reacted by sending objects, photographs, and narratives that they had collected while living in Asia, Oceania or Africa. At the RS, these objects became part of the ‘foreign sacred sites’ (‘Fremde Heiligtümer’) collection, a term that was also the title of the first RS exhibition in 1929.⁵

1 German Museums Association, *Guidelines for German Museums: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: German Museums Association, 2019), <https://www.museumsbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/dmb-guidelines-colonial-context-2019.pdf>.

2 Ibid., foreword to the 2nd ed. 2019, 6–8.

3 Ibid., 131. In 2019, there were several German institutions stressing that missionaries had to be included in that research focus: Minister of State for Culture and the Media and Others, 13 March 2019; Kulturstiftung der Länder 2019; German Lost Art Foundation 2019; German Cultural Council 2019, 17–29; Zimmermann 2019, 17.

4 Heinrich Frick, *Religionskundliches Beiblatt* (Marburg: no publisher, October 1931), 4, 15.

5 Konstanze Runge, “Studying, Teaching, and Exhibiting Religion: The Marburg Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung),” in *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Gretchen Buggeln et al. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 155–62.

This article traces the history of an *adu satua* ancestor figure from Nias, Indonesia, which German missionary Johannes Noll of the Rhenish Missionary Society, gave the RS on permanent loan in 1932. Noll lived on Nias for over twenty years, and acquired the figure during his time there. In the following, I will use the RS's archive material to reconstruct the original use of the figure, the circumstances of its appropriation by Noll, and its subsequent inclusion in the RS collection. This provenance research is a helpful prerequisite for establishing contact with the descendants of the object's former owners in order to discuss and implement a plan for what to do with the object, and where it should be held.

2 *Adu Satua* or 'Idol': Dynamics of transition in the context of proselytising activities

On Nias, Indonesia, an anthropomorphic figure carved from wood becomes an ancestor figure (*adu satua* / *adu zatua*) when the souls of deceased relatives are transferred into it during a death ritual. Being an *adu satua* (literally 'already old person') gives the figure a particularly high ritual value. Johannes Noll, who gave Marburg an *adu satua*, also sent several letters in which he explained his understanding of local concepts of the soul, and associated traditional beliefs. He explains that the "soul (*noso*) is a material something that every individual human being has been assigned by God, as it were, before he was born."⁶ Noll's explanation of the connection between *noso* and the ancestor figure *adu satua* also mentions the idea that *noso* can be multiplied by the appropriation of foreign soul material⁷ or by sacrifice. It can also be removed and lost through illness and death. He explains that *noso* survives death but people do not know where it goes. One possible residence of the soul of the deceased is the *adu satua* figure. Noll explains that it is in front of an *adu satua* that justice is spoken, oaths are taken, people are wed, and the dignity of a chief is recognised. Conducting these ceremonies in front of an *adu satua* ensures the ancestors are involved in their descendants' decisions.⁸

6 Johannes Noll, *Die Welt und Lebensanschauung der Niasser* (archived: RS Schenkungen m-z, n.d.), (translation: SR).

7 Noll does not explain how the appropriation of foreign soul material took place. He avoids mentioning headhunting.

8 Noll, *Die Welt*.

Noll explained in a further short text⁹ that during the death ritual, the ‘heart soul’ (*mökömökö*) is transferred into the *adu satua* figure. The *mökömökö*, he writes, develops only about four days after a burial and rises from the corpse to the surface of the grave through a tube that is installed for the purpose. Here this ‘heart soul’ enters a small spider, which runs around in the graveyard. A ritual should take place to collect the spiders and bring them to the house where the *adu satua* are. In the house, the spiders are ritually led into an *adu satua*, thus transferring the souls into a new body, a wooden place where ancestors can stay for generations.¹⁰ This guarantees the physical presence of ancestors of a community, thus giving their living descendants access to strength and power.

Noll tries to describe the ritual in a neutral way, but his displeasure is noticeable. He uses the term ‘hocus-pocus’ when describing the local priests’ dancing and singing while the community is catching the spiders. He exhibits the same feeling of superiority when speaking of an ‘idol’ (German: ‘Götze’) rather than an *adu satua* or ancestor figure. ‘Götze’ is a short version of the term ‘Göttchen’ (small god), which stresses not only the small size of the figure, but also suggests that it is meaningless when compared with the ‘real’ (i. e. Christian) god.¹¹

Christian missionaries believed that everything linked to ‘idolatry’ had to be renounced in order to open the way for Christianity. The ancestor figures were seen as ‘idolatry’ as it was thought that direct contact with ancestors and deities could be established through them. Noll knew that it was not easy for local people to renounce ‘idolatry’ and become Christian believers. In his short text on *mökömökö*,¹² he illustrates this problem by referring to the *adu satua* that he donated to Marburg. His text suggests that the local community of Bouso, a village in Northern Nias, did not share his opinion about the insignificance of the figures for Christians. The villagers, who had not long converted to Christianity, did not consider performing a ritual with an *adu satua* to be a contradiction. As Noll reports,¹³ the villagers felt obliged to ritually perform the transfer of the

9 Johannes Noll, *Mökömökö die Herzseele (Ein Stück heidnischen Aberglaubens der Niasser)* (archived: RS Schenkungen m-z, n.d.).

10 Noll, *Mökömökö*; Peter T. Suzuki (1958) and Johannes M. Hämmerle (2013) are further publications concerning Nias’ local pre-colonial and pre-Christian history, tradition and religion: Peter T. Suzuki, *Critical Survey of Studies on the Anthropology of Nias, Mentawai and Enggano* (The Hague: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 1958) and Johannes M. Hämmerle, “150 Years of Ethnological Interpretation and Misinterpretation on the Example of Nias, Indonesia,” *Anthropos* 108, no. 1 (2013): 173–204.

11 Johannes Woyke, *Götter, ‘Götzen’, Götterbilder: Aspekte einer paulinischen ‘Theologie der Religionen’* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2012), 82.

12 Noll, *Mökömökö*.

13 *Ibid.*



Figure 2: Sketch by Johannes Noll. A man, his wife and his priest being lowered to the ground from above. Photo: Heike Luu, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Philipps-Universität Marburg.

This request was special as Noll had destroyed hundreds of *adu satua* in front of the local community only a little earlier.¹⁵ Nevertheless, everyone knew that he had kept one and placed it in his home. In his notes sent to Marburg, Noll apologises for not being able to refuse the villagers' request for the *adu satua* to be used for one final ritual.¹⁶ Only a short time later, in 1932, he offered this very *adu satua* to Heinrich Frick in Marburg as a permanent loan.¹⁷

Noll's letters and notes were difficult to locate as they are not documented in the RS. I had suspected that there was correspondence, because Frick mentioned in several supplements of the RB that letters and objects from non-European mis-

15 Cf. Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz who refers to Noll's report to the Rhenish Missionary Society in Barmen. (Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz, "Idols and Art: Missionary Attitudes toward Indigenous Worship and the Material Culture on Nias, Indonesia, 1904–1920," in *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Thomas David DuBois (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 112).

16 Noll, *Die Welt*.

17 Johannes Noll, *Letter 2*, written December 12, 1932 (archived: RS Auslandskorrespondenz).

sion areas had been sent to the RS. I might well have overlooked Noll's letters and notes had it not been for the sketch of the *adu satua* that Noll added to a letter he wrote to Heinrich Frick in Marburg in November 1932.

Noll's letter, written in the old German Sütterlin script, indicates that he held Professor Heinrich Frick in high esteem, and enjoyed reading the RB, which he even regarded as a place to publish his own contributions. In his letter, he mentions a destroyed "idol temple". It remains unclear what this refers to. Perhaps he is referring to his own demolition of ancestor figures in that place. Noll also provided a second sketch that he explains in some text fragments alongside the sketch: "Börönadu // start of idolatry // *Oseli* temple of idols // here the first human being, his wife and his priest *nidadu*. Lowered to the ground from above."¹⁸

A month later, Noll sent a further letter¹⁹ mentioning that he was sending an *adu satua*, another sketch and more writings. So far, I have only located the *adu satua*, which now has the object number 'Ar 006'. In this second letter, Noll writes of "Börönadu: Beginning of idols",²⁰ which corresponds to Nias people's current understanding of the term *börönadu* as the place where the first inhabitant of Nias came ashore and made the first *adu satua* by planting his boat vertically in the ground.²¹ Noll also mentioned *börönadu* in his first letter, as well as *oseli*, which once denoted an ancestor shrine. Today, *oseli* is the local term for a church building. Noll does not mention this directly but one imagines that it was not easy to redefine a local ritual place as a Christian religious place – an appropriation that would ultimately be long lasting. In his explanation of his second sketch, we see evidence of the challenge Noll must have faced in his efforts to convert the people of Nias to Christianity. He explains that the people of Nias believed that "the first human being, his wife and his priest *nidadu*" were created at the same time and therefore constitute a unity.²²

18 Johannes Noll, *Letter 1*, written November 2, 1931 in Wuppertal-Barmen (archived: RS Schenkungen m-z), (translation SR).

19 Noll, *Letter 2*.

20 I thank Sabine Roark for her help with transcribing Sütterlin.

21 The explanation of *börönadu* and *oseli* is the result of Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz's email communication with a friend at the Nias Heritage Museum. She kindly contacted him when reading my first manuscript.

22 I will not explore the problems Noll raises here in detail: Women are seen as part of the man who is the human being. In addition, there is a three-part unity formed by a man, a woman and their priest. This must contradict the Protestant missionary's worldview and certainly influenced his daily mission work. As my contribution focuses on texts by Noll that are available in the RS, I am not yet able to comment on how Noll dealt with this contradiction.

Johannes Noll's ideas and actions are only one example of a broader current within the Protestant missionary community of his time. There were remarkable varieties in Protestant and Catholic ways of dealing with ritual objects, as well as significant differences in the ways individuals were proselytised.²³ Noll tried to explain his view and behaviour in his note on 'The world and philosophy concerning the life of the Niasser',²⁴ in which he describes converting local people as an act of humanity. In a short paragraph, Noll mentions the rivalry between local and Christian faith. He was very aware that it was difficult for Christian converts to permanently turn away from their previous faith. However, he saw this as necessary for the individuals to convert to Christianity. Noll decided which elements of local tradition constituted 'idolatry', and determined that the *adu satua* fell within that remit. He would only baptise local people if they first handed their inherited ancestral images to him or destroyed them. Noll regarded this as a way of supporting local people, and not as a demonstration of his power. He also sought to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith over the local faith. It must be noted that Noll did not shy away from excluding converts from the Christian community as a sanction if they turned to the ancestors for help in a crisis, even after baptism. From the content of his letter, it is evident that he took advantage of unequal power relations to achieve his goal of baptising local people. While Noll's primary goal was not the appropriation of heirlooms, ritual objects, including the *adu satua*, evidently were appropriated. As such, the *adu satua* must be regarded as an object that found its way to the RS as a result of the exploitation of unequal power relations.

3 Why an 'Idol' from Nias is now in Marburg

Given the relationship between the Rhenish Missionary Society and the Netherlands, it is remarkable that the *adu satua* was sent to the RS.²⁵ As Tjoa-Bonatz

23 Kathleen M. Adams, "Theologians, Tourists and Thieves: The Toraja Effigy of the Dead in Modernizing Indonesia," *Kyoto Journal* 22 (1993): 38–45; Raymond Corbey, *Headhunters from the Swamps: The Marind Anim of New Guinea as Seen by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, 1905–1925* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2010); Raymond Corbey and Frans Karel Weener, "Collecting while Converting: Missionaries and Ethnographics," *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (June 2015): 1–14 and A. A. van Dalen, *Van strijd en overwinning op Alor* (Amsterdam: H.J. Spruyt, 1928).

24 Noll, *Die Welt*.

25 There are three more *adu satua* in the ethnographic collection at Philipps-University Marburg. The ancestor figures were received as part of 'Nassauische Altertümer', a political connection between the Dutch dukedom Orania and the German dukedom Nassau (personal communication with the curator Dagmar Schweitzer de Palacios, June 2020). This connection is also the reason why German missionaries were working in the Dutch East Indies.

notes, Nias has been known in Europe for its material culture since the 19th century, and “especially the skilfully made stone and wooden sculptures were (and remain) highly esteemed among collectors and museums today”.²⁶ Tjoa-Bonatz further explains that in 1918, the Prince-Hendrik Maritime Museum in Rotterdam contacted German Protestant missionaries on Nias directly and asked them to collect ritual objects and send them to Rotterdam. This request was supported by missionary Eduard Fries (1903–1920 on Nias), who, like Johannes Noll (1903–1931 on Nias), was a member of the Rhenish Missionary Society. He passed it on to his colleagues and asked them to ensure that “the Prince-Hendrik Maritime Museum does not have to complain about a lack of ‘idols of real value’ from Nias”.²⁷ Interestingly, Noll did not follow that request but instead gave the only *adu satua* that he had kept to the RS. I find it remarkable that as a missionary working in a Dutch colony, he did not comply with the wishes of a Dutch museum. Noll would also have had the option of giving ‘his idol’ to the museum of his mission station in Barmen. The Rhenish Missionary Society collected objects in order to show “concrete material evidence for the successes of the missionary work, their trophies on paganism, so to speak”.²⁸ Noll served this interest in Barmen with letters concerning his missionary successes, rather than sending objects.

Other museums were also interested in a gift of “real value” from mission areas, as the Rotterdam Museum phrased it. Noll’s second letter makes it clear that he was aware of these desires in Europe. He wanted to keep the option of lending the *adu satua* to other exhibitions. Indeed, the figure is still on permanent loan to the RS today rather than being a donation.²⁹

Why did Noll give the figure to the RS? In one letter, he mentions the RB that Heinrich Frick, a Protestant theologian with a special interest in Mission Theology, circulated several times a year from 1931 to 1941. Frick made it very clear that his main interest was not in collecting expensive exotic objects but in understanding how objects were used in rituals by local people prior to their conversion to Christianity. He thought this knowledge would help missionaries when providing pastoral care and advice, and also be helpful for studies on religions in Marburg. His plan was to open a study centre to prepare missionaries and others for their

26 Tjoa-Bonatz *Idols and Art*, 111. In recent years, auction houses have sold *adu satua* for several thousand euros each (Dorotheum in Vienna 2019: Dorotheum Auction House, “A monumental Nias Adu Zatua Figure, 19th century,” accessed September 25, 2020, <https://www.dorotheum.com/de/l/6268968/>).

27 Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz, “Missionare und Kunst. Ein Spannungsfeld zwischen Kulturzerstörung und Kulturerhalt,” *Indonesien Magazin Online* (May 2016): 2.

28 Ibid.

29 The RS inventory states incorrectly that it was a donation.

work overseas. He encouraged Marburg's authorities to open such a centre together with a museum of artefacts from various religions in Marburg Castle. Noll also explicitly supported this plan with his donation and his writings.³⁰

In the RB, Frick encourages missionaries to send him objects and texts about pre-Christian customs, and states that he is interested in anything missionaries consider remarkable, regardless of the reason. He also mentions previous donations to the RS in order to encourage others to send comparable objects. He rarely mentions the donors' names, which makes it difficult today to assign certain donations to the references in the RB. From the undertone in letters that the missionaries sent to Frick, it seems they were happy to donate to the RS because Frick appreciated their work. They were happy to be included in a programme that would give future missionaries an insight into worldviews and beliefs that had disappeared as a result of Christianisation. Frick suggested that missionaries as pastors could provide psychological support more easily on the basis of this knowledge. While the missionaries considered themselves to be bringing civilisation to people around the world, they responded positively to Frick's suggestion that knowledge about traditional local beliefs, even if outdated, could help them with their pastoral work.

4 Object Ar 006: Dynamics within the Religionskundliche Sammlung

When the *adu satua* ancestor figure arrived at the RS in Marburg, it was given two numbers: '724' and 'Ar 006', both of which were written on the object. '724' indicates that the figure is the 724th object to arrive at the RS. 'Ar 006' indicates that the item is the sixth object of those collected from local traditions in South-east Asia, making it of particular value. Today, it is one of more than 10,000 museum objects in a museum collection that is renowned around the world. The value of this object as part of the RS's collection is in no way lessened by the fact that the written documentation about it is very rudimentary. In fact, valuable information about the object can be gleaned if the documentation is read carefully. The museum database contains several notes: the numbers; the object's name ("ancestor figure"); its local name ("*takula*"); its origin ("Nias in the primitive South Seas"); its last owner ("Noll missionary Barmen"); the date the item was acquired (31 December 1932); the fact that correspondence pertaining to the item exists. These notes raise many questions: What is *takula*? Why is Nias regarded as being

30 Noll, *Letter 1*.

part of the South Seas? Where is the correspondence stored? Who was the object's first owner? How did the missionary receive the figure?

I was able to answer at least some of these questions by conducting further research at the RS. Such research always starts with the objects' arrival book. This simply stated that the missionary Noll had donated something from Nias. It did not state what this item was or when it arrived. I then looked at the object's index card (until 2001, all items arriving at the museum were entered on an index card). The index card states that the object is an "idol from Nias" ("Götze von Nias"), which was stored at an "idol temple" ("Götzentempel"). These terms were altered subsequently: "Idol" ("Götze") was crossed out and replaced by "ancestor figure" ("Ahnenfigur"), and the word "idol" in "idol temple" was also crossed out. It is not known who made these changes and when. The changes on the index cards probably occurred when the information from the cards was transferred to the museum's computer program in 2001. By then, the term 'Götze' was no longer being used by scholars. It is likely that this is also why the term does not appear in the digital inventory. The local term for the figure, *adu satua*, is not mentioned in any of the museum documentation. The museum database lists the local word *takula*.³¹

The use of the term *takula* in the museum database highlights a deficiency of the program: Changes can be made on the system which do not include the name of the person making the change, the date the change was made or why it was made. It can be assumed that somebody noticed that *takula* masks closely resemble the face and headgear of the *adu satua* at the RS. Unfortunately, they are not the same. *Takula* is a term used for wooden masks and metal helmets, both part of the ritual dress of a warrior and head-hunter on Nias.

The local term *adu satua* is not noted in the museum records at all. There is also no written description of Ar 006 *adu satua*. The figure's collar is a sign that the man was a successful head-hunter; the shape of its earring indicates the region the figure is from.³² Its erect penis shows that the *adu satua* is particularly 'potent', like a powerful and successful man. The RS inventory does mention that Ar 006 has a vertical crack. This seems to have been caused by the dry conditions in the RS's storage facility. Noll provides an alternative explanation: He states

31 Traditional *takula gere* mask: "Wooden Mask 'Takula Gere,'" Nias Heritage Museum, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://museum-nias.org/en/?artwork=wooden-mask-takula-gere>. For an image of a warrior's ritual dress, including *takula tefaö*, see "Pakaian Perang," Google, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://images.app.goo.gl/ZChzNAoWFdnDXhox9>.

32 Anne Richter and Bruce W. Carpenter, *Gold Jewellery of the Indonesian Archipelago* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2012).



Figure 3: Ancestor figure adu satua now Ar 006 at Religionskundliche Sammlung in Marburg. Photo: Georg Dörr, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Philipps-Universität Marburg.

that if an *adu satua* has not been provided with souls of deceased people for a long time, the ancestors are no longer there, which leads to the figure being torn apart.³³ It is not known whether the figure cracked in Marburg or before arriving there.

5 Outlook: Discussing restitution

Before local people converted to Christianity, an *adu satua* was essential on Nias not only during traditional death rituals but also at key moments in life, such as birth, and marriage. Ancestors could be contacted by talking to them in front of an *adu satua*. People sought help from their ancestors in any situation of misfortune, such as sickness or infertility of humans or nature. *Adu satua* were very highly valued. This changed after the local people converted to Christianity and *adu satua* lost their ritual specificity. Local people agreed to the *adu satua* being taken away by missionaries like Johannes Noll. For Noll, these figures were never more than 'idols' that had to be taken away from local people in order to stop 'idolatry' and lead them to Christianity and 'civilisation'. By destroying a large number of ancestor figures, Noll demonstrated that the local ancestors had lost their power as they did not even bring misfortune to the person who had destroyed them or to the descendants of the ancestors who supposedly resided inside the figures. By destroying the figures in public, Noll underlined their insignificance. Despite his disdain for ancestor figures, he accepted that the only figure that he did not destroy but kept in his private home would be used one last time in a traditional death ritual. The *adu satua* regained its unquantifiable high ritual value for a short period. Later, the missionary removed it from Nias for good. Noll probably did not know the exact commodity value of *adu satua* on the international art market, but he knew that European museums and art dealers were interested in adding them to their collections. We can only guess why Noll decided to give the figure to Marburg. There it became part of the internationally renowned Religionskundliche Sammlung, now museumised with the object number Ar 006. After reaching Marburg, the object lost its ties to Nias for several decades. The RS plans to re-establish those ties.

The provenance research presented in this article is a very good basis for re-establishing the ties between the *adu satua* and Nias. The research was mainly carried out at the RS in order to establish what could be learned from the RS's own collection about the object's history. The research considered changes of

33 Noll, *Mökömökö*.

ownership, first from a local ritual community to a Protestant missionary, and then from the missionary to the RS. It also considered the object's change of location from Nias to Marburg.

Having understood more about the object's provenance, we will now endeavour to establish contact between the RS and Nias. Finding the descendants of the former owners of this *adu satua* figure will likely require the support of various institutions such as the city administration, the local church or the Nias Heritage Museum.³⁴ It can only be hoped that some of these institutions will be interested in working with the RS. The RS plans to discuss the future location and treatment of the *adu satua* figure with all sides in order to find a solution that is acceptable to the descendants of its former owners.

It remains to be seen what, if anything, will come of establishing contact between the RS and Nias to discuss the *adu satua*. Returning the object to Nias will certainly be an option. Regardless of whether the object is ultimately returned, that initial contact could conceivably lead to other forms of exchange, and be the beginning of a varied, long-term dialogue on a variety of topics across national borders on equal terms.

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³⁴ Nias Heritage Museum, accessed September 17, 2020, <https://museum-nias.org/en/>.

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