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# Bridging Legacies: Multiperspective Insights of Local Stakeholders on the Decolonisation of Nias Ethnographic Collections in Italian Museums

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*Abstract*

A significant number of ethnographic artefacts from Southeast Asia were acquired by European institutions during the colonial period through various means, including scientific expeditions, missionary activities, and the art market. In recent years, the fate of these collections – particularly in the context of decolonisation, repatriation, and restitution –

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has been the subject of growing academic and institutional debate. This article examines the case of the Nias ethnographic collections from Indonesia, currently held in several Italian museums. Nias, a small island west of Sumatra, became a focal point of anthropological interest in the late 19th century and a target of illicit artefact trade in the 20th century. As a result, Nias cultural objects are widely dispersed across European collections. Despite their significance, these collections have received little attention in Indonesia's national restitution agenda. This study explores the decolonisation of Nias objects in the Italian museums context, drawing on archival research, interviews with key stakeholders, museum fieldwork, and community-based discussions in Nias. The findings reveal diverse perspectives among stakeholders – including museum professionals, local academics, and source communities – on restitution, representation, education, and the role of digital technologies in cultural revitalisation. While preferences vary, all stakeholders express a shared desire to reconnect with Nias heritage. The article argues that decolonisation efforts must go beyond physical repatriation and instead embrace inclusive, collaborative, and context-sensitive approaches that centre the voices and needs of originating communities.

Un numero significativo di manufatti etnografici provenienti dal Sud-Est asiatico è stato acquisito da istituzioni europee durante il periodo coloniale attraverso diverse modalità, tra cui spedizioni scientifiche, attività missionarie e il mercato dell'arte. Negli ultimi anni, il destino di queste collezioni – soprattutto nel contesto della decolonizzazione, della restituzione e del rimpatrio – è stato oggetto di un crescente dibattito accademico e istituzionale. Questo articolo esamina il caso delle collezioni etnografiche di Nias (Indonesia), attualmente conservate in diversi musei italiani. Nias, una piccola isola situata a ovest di Sumatra, divenne un punto focale per gli studi antropologici alla fine del XIX secolo e successivamente un obiettivo del commercio illecito di oggetti d'arte nel XX secolo. Di conseguenza, gli oggetti culturali di Nias risultano ampiamente dispersi nelle collezioni museali europee. Nonostante la loro rilevanza storica e culturale, tali collezioni hanno ricevuto scarsa attenzione nell'ambito dell'agenda nazionale indonesiana per la restituzione del patrimonio. Questo studio esplora i processi di decolonizzazione delle collezioni di Nias nel contesto museale italiano, basandosi su ricerche d'archivio, interviste con attori chiave, osservazioni museali e discussioni con le comunità locali sull'isola di Nias. I risultati evidenziano prospettive eterogenee tra i diversi stakeholder – including professionisti museali, accademici locali e comunità d'origine – sui temi della restituzione, rappresentazione, educazione e sull'uso delle tecnologie digitali per la rivitalizzazione culturale. Sebbene le preferenze varino, tutti gli attori coinvolti esprimono un desiderio condiviso di riconnettersi con il proprio patrimonio. L'articolo sostiene che i processi di decolonizzazione debbano andare oltre la semplice restituzione fisica, abbracciando approcci inclusivi, collaborativi e sensibili al contesto, che pongano al centro le voci e i bisogni delle comunità d'origine.

## 1. *Introduction*

Throughout the history of European museum development, ethnographic collections from the so-called "others" have consistently attracted considerable attention. In the early era of the *Cabinet of Curiosities* or *Wunderkammer*, private collections emphasised the exoticism of foreign objects from so-

cieties categorised as indigenous, traditional, or even "savage", positioning them as prestigious acquisitions for the European elites. These cultural objects functioned as tangible evidence of the collectors' dominion over other ethnic groups and cultures[1]. Such collections symbolised not only the breadth of the elite's knowledge, but also their power and wealth – particularly within nations possessing colonial ties to Africa and Asia. These early assemblages subsequently formed the foundations of many European anthropological and ethnographic museums, many of which were established during the 19th century or earlier[2]. Despite contemporary efforts by numerous institutions to rebrand themselves as museums of "world culture" in order to attract broader audiences and disassociate from their colonial legacies[3], the structural remnants of these histories persist. Ethnographic collections continue to reflect legacies of cultural exploitation, misrepresentation, exoticisation, and the subjugation of cultures historically regarded as inferior.

These objects have been variously described in the literature – as colonial objects[4], diasporic objects[5], displaced objects[6], orphaned objects[7], or even as accidental refugees[8]. Regardless of their classification, such objects have assumed new roles in foreign settings – roles that often diverge significantly from their original cultural functions. In well-curated museums, they may be prominently displayed and appreciated as exemplary works of Indigenous art, occupying central places in exhibitions. In other cases, they remain in storage or are marginalised within displays, lacking adequate context or interpretive frameworks. In such instances, they risk becoming a "dead" collection.

In recent decades, growing global discussions around decolonisation have brought ethnographic objects back into the spotlight of scholarly and public debate. The 2017 speech by French President Emmanuel Macron in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, marked a turning point, as he pledged to return African heritage to the continent[9]. This declaration catalysed a series of restitution efforts across European institutions. France has since returned 26 objects to Benin, and one object each to Senegal and Madagascar. Nonetheless, broader restitution efforts remain constrained by legal and institutional barriers[10]. Similar challenges have affected the restitution of the Ashanti Gold from the

[1] Appadurai 2020.
[2] Fromm 2016.
[3] Kreps 2020, p. 6.
[4] Stahn 2020.
[5] Basu 2011.
[6] Loumpet-Galitzine 2009.
[7] Leventhal and Daniels 2013.
[8] Appadurai 2017.
[9] Opoku 2017, p. 2.
[10] Noce 2022.

British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) to Ghana, where negotiations have resulted in a temporary loan agreement lasting until 2027[11].

While these efforts have been widely welcomed as positive steps in redressing colonial-era injustices, Indonesia – despite being one of the world's largest archipelagic nations with vast and diverse Indigenous cultures and ex colony of the Netherlands – has taken a more cautious and complex approach. In 2016, Indonesia engaged in prolonged negotiations regarding the return of cultural objects from the Netherlands, following the closure of Museum Nusantara in Delft in January 2013. When the museum offered to repatriate approximately 18,000 objects, the initial response from Indonesian authorities was positive. However, a subsequent change in leadership and institutional priorities altered this stance. Perceiving that the offer comprised mainly residual or less significant items, Hilmar Farid, then Secretary General of the Ministry of Education and Culture, ultimately rejected the initial restitution offer[12]. Only after an extensive and meticulous process – including provenance research and the establishment of a dedicated Indonesian restitution expert team – did the Ministry agree to accept a curated selection of 1,500 objects[13].

The Indonesian government's approach to cultural restitution raises important questions regarding national priorities and the perceived value of heritage objects. Hilmar Farid noted that not all artefacts held by the former Delft Museum were considered significant, even referring to some of them as "junk"[14]. The government has chosen to prioritise the return of specific cultural objects, particularly those deemed to hold historical and symbolic value in the national narrative. These include looted artefacts from Bali and Lombok – seized during the 1894 Dutch military expedition[15] – four classical Singasari statues from 13th-century East Java, and hundreds of artworks produced by the Pita Maha artist collective, founded in 1936 in Bali by Tjokorda Gde Agung Sukawati, I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, Walter Spies, and Rudolf Bonnet[16].

According to Farid, the selection is based on the objects' strong association with Indonesian historical identity and their symbolic role in resisting colonialism. He described restitution as a symbolic act to restore "pride and identity" to the Indonesian people[17]. However, the majority of restituted objects to date have been associated with Java and Bali, prompting concerns about regional and cultural bias. Indonesia is home to over 600 ethnic groups[18], yet

[11] Folk 2024.
[12] Sudarto 2016.
[13] *Ibidem*.
[14] Van Beurden 2021, p. 154.
[15] Van Beurden 2017, p. 74.
[16] Adnyana 2015.
[17] Hilmar Farid, interview with BBC Indonesia, 13 March 2020.
[18] Ananta *et al.* 2022.

restitution efforts involving the state have predominantly focused on Javanese and Balinese cultural heritage. The appointment of I Gusti Agung Wesaka Puja, a Balinese diplomat, as the head of the restitution team has also raised questions regarding potential preferential treatment toward heritage objects from Bali and the surrounding regions, such as Lombok, which has historically fallen under Balinese influence.

Further archival research reveals a consistent pattern: since Indonesia's independence in 1945, restitution efforts from the Netherlands to Indonesia have largely centred on artefacts originating from Java, Bali, and Lombok. These efforts began in the 1970s with the return of a painting by Raden Saleh Sjarif Bastaman (1811–1880), one of Indonesia's most prominent historical painters. This was followed by the restitution of the *Negarakertagama* manuscript (1973), personal belongings of Prince Diponegoro (1977, 2015, and 2020), and 243 artefacts from Lombok returned by the Rijksmuseum and the Museum Volkenkunde in 1977[19]. Other restituted items include the *Prajnaparamita* statue and additional Hindu statues (1978, 2003), as well as shadow puppets (2005) – all of which are rooted in the classical Javanese and Balinese civilisations. Additionally, several scientific artefacts – such as fossils of prehistoric humans and animals – were repatriated in 1975 and 1978[20].

Notably, these cases overwhelmingly prioritise objects from Java and Bali, reflecting a broader pattern of selective restitution. Only in rare instances were ethnographic collections from regions beyond these islands returned. One such exception occurred in 1975 with the restitution of Papuan artefacts[21], and another in 2009 with the return of Indigenous heritage from Kalimantan and Sumatra – including 33 objects of Nias origin – delivered to the Nias Heritage Museum (Museum Pusaka Nias, MPN)[22]. Significantly, this 2009 restitution was facilitated by the Order of Capuchin in Tilburg, in collaboration with the Tropenmuseum and local communities in the respective regions. It occurred independently of any direct involvement from the Indonesian government, highlighting the potential of community-led and institution-to-institution restitution models.

The marginalisation of Indigenous heritage continues to persist. In the recent case of the Museum Nusantara's closure, significant Indigenous artefacts from Nias were among those excluded from the priority list for restitution. According to the Museum Nusantara Repurposing Project[23], at least 187 Nias cultural objects have been relocated outside Indonesia, specifically to the Asia

[19] Van Beurden 2017, p. 138.
[20] Van Beurden 2021.
[21] *Ibidem*.
[22] According to museum records and an interview with the Head of the museum (May 2024), these restituted objects are now displayed in the first pavilion of MPN.
[23] <https://collectie-nusantara.nl/>

Culture Centre in Gwangju, South Korea, along with approximately 7,000 other Indonesian objects from the museum's collection[24].

In a separate incident in mid-2024, the Indonesian Embassy in Paris was notified of the attempted illicit transport of a Nias stone ancestral statue (*gowe*) from Brussels to Paris[25]. The statue was intended for auction at the Giquello Auction House. Documentation revealed that the object entered Paris via intermediaries in Denpasar (Bali) and Brussels (Belgium). While it was initially declared as a garden ornament when leaving Indonesia, its classification changed to a cultural object upon arrival in Paris. This discrepancy in documentation raised suspicions and prompted an investigation by the local police. As of this writing, the *gowe* has been withdrawn from the auction and secured by the Paris police.

In response, the Indonesian Embassy in Paris, through Cultural Attaché Luh Anik Mayani, requested the central government to assert ownership of the statue through an official declaration of authenticity. The request was met with a statement asserting the object was a replica, based solely on photographic assessment. In contrast, an Indonesian museologist working at the La Rochelle Museum, along with three experts appointed by the French police, verified the statue's authenticity. At the time of writing, the status and future of the *gowe* remain unresolved[26]. This case underscores the urgent need for a more inclusive and representative restitution strategy – one that reflects the cultural plurality of the Indonesian archipelago and addresses the marginalisation of non-majority Indigenous heritage within both national and international restitution frameworks.

Before proceeding further, it is essential to contextualise the situation of Nias cultural objects and to recognise their broader significance. Nias is a small island situated to the west of Sumatra (see Figure 1), renowned for its rich and distinctive cultural heritage. Historically, Nias communities were characterised by complex social hierarchies, including fortified settlements governed by kings and nobles, and by a profound reverence for ancestors, materialised in the form of elaborately carved stone and wooden statues. Martial traditions, including inter-village warfare and ritual headhunting, also played a significant role in shaping social and ceremonial life[27].

The arrival of colonial administrators and Christian missionaries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought about considerable cultural change, resulting in the gradual erosion of traditional belief systems and practices. As a consequence, many elements of Nias's cultural heritage were either abandoned or transformed. A substantial number of Nias artefacts dating from the 19th

[24] Van Beurden 2021, p. 156.
[25] Luh Anik Mayani, interview, June 2024.
[26] Purnawibawa 2025a.
[27] Scarduelli 1990.

and early 20th centuries are now housed in Western institutions. Acquired through various channels – including ethnographic expeditions, missionary activities, and colonial exchanges – these objects serve as crucial sources for understanding the historical cultural landscape of Nias, elements of which have since evolved or, in some instances, disappeared altogether.

The case of Nias objects presents a particularly distinctive scenario. Even within Indonesia, ethnographic artefacts from Nias are relatively rare. Aside from a limited number of items held by private collectors, only a few Indonesian institutions preserve such objects. These include the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta, the North Sumatra Provincial Museum in Medan, and the Nias Heritage Museum (Museum Pusaka Nias/MPN) located on the island itself. Additionally, two other artefacts have been identified in the collections of the Museum Keris Nusantara in Surakarta and the Museum of Ethnography at Airlangga University in Surabaya. In contrast, Nias objects are well-documented and widely dispersed in international collections (see Figure 2). Research into the diaspora of Nias objects has identified 54 museums in 18 countries – including those in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia – that currently house such collections[28].

The global dispersion of Nias artefacts can be attributed to three primary historical dynamics. The first involved the collecting activities of scholars and explorers, particularly during the late 19th century. One of the earliest recorded collectors was Pavel Durdík (1843–1903), a Czech physician employed by the Dutch colonial administration between 1880 and 1882[29]. He was followed by Elio Modigliani (1860–1932), a Florentine anthropologist, and Giovanni Battista Cerruti (1850–1914), an antiquities dealer, both of whom conducted expeditions to Nias in 1886. The last notable figure from this period was Joachim Freiherr von Brenner-Felsach (1859–1927), an Austrian nobleman who visited Nias in 1887[30]. These individuals returned to Europe with ethnographic objects, photographs, and natural specimens, many of which entered museum collections or academic archives.

The second phase of dispersion occurred in the 20th century, driven by colonial-era collecting under the Dutch administration and by iconoclastic campaigns led by Christian missionaries between 1916 and 1930. These efforts often resulted in the destruction, confiscation, or removal of ritual objects and other culturally significant materials. A third wave began in the 1970s, when the growing international art market facilitated the commodification and sale of Nias artefacts, further accelerating their displacement[31]. These historical developments have contributed to the widespread dispersal of Nias cultural

[28] Purnawibawa 2025a.
[29] Mrazek 2024.
[30] Mittersakschmöller 1998.
[31] Bakker 2004; Tjoa-Bonatz 2009.

heritage, much of which is now held in foreign museums and private collections. More recently, the closure of the Museum Nusantara in Delft has also played a role in this transnational movement, with institutions such as the Asia Culture Centre in South Korea among the recipients of relocated collections[32].

Among international holdings, one of the most comprehensive and well-documented collections of Nias objects can be found in Italy. These collections primarily stem from the expeditions of Modigliani and Cerruti in 1886, predating the height of missionary-led iconoclasm between 1916 and 1930 – a period locally referred to as *Fangesa Sebua* or "The Great Repentance"[33]. This era marked the mass conversion of the Nias population to Christianity and the systematic abandonment or destruction of traditional religious practices and associated material culture. Consequently, objects collected prior to 1916 tend to reflect cultural forms and values that differ markedly from those produced or retained after the widespread adoption of Christianity and the growing influence of Western norms. These earlier objects are thus of particular ethnographic and historical significance, providing critical insights into pre-conversion Nias society.

Today, Nias artefacts in Italy are held across several key institutions: the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence, the Museum of Civilizations in Rome (formerly the Pigorini Museum), the Vatican Museums (*Musei Vaticani*), and a single specimen housed in the Museum of Cultures (MUDEC) in Milan. These collections are part of a broader assemblage of ethnographic and natural history materials gathered during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period characterized by growing Italian scholarly interest in the Malay Archipelago and Papua (encompassing present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Papua New Guinea). Notable figures such as Giacomo Doria[34], Luigi D'Albertis[35], Odoardo Beccari[36], and Elio Modigliani[37] made substantial contributions to Italian collections during this time.

The presence of Nias objects in Italian museums presents a nuanced case within current decolonisation debates. As previously noted, many of these objects were acquired by individual travellers and scholars, rather than through direct acts of colonial plunder, forced acquisition, or illicit trade commonly associated with colonial exploitation. Furthermore, Italy had no colonial involvement in the territories that now constitute Indonesia. Outside of Europe, Italy's colonial ventures were concentrated in North and part of East Africa – namely Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia – and included a brief concession in Tien-

[32] Van Beurden 2021, Purnawibawa 2025a.
[33] Tjoa-Bonatz 2009.
[34] Doria 2010.
[35] Gnecchi-Ruscone 2011.
[36] Viciani *et al.* 2021.
[37] Bigoni 2019a; Bigoni 2019b; Dionisio et al. 2020.

tsin, China[38]. Consequently, Nias objects in Italian collections have received comparatively less attention than those in Dutch institutions, whose holdings are directly tied to Indonesia's colonial past.

This distinction introduces complexity into the discourse on decolonising the Nias objects held in Italy. During EuroSEAS Masterclass forum in Malang, Indonesia attended by the author in May 2023[39], the notion of "decolonising" these objects elicited a range of perspectives. Grace Tjandra Laksana, a historian from the State University of Malang, critically engaged with the concept by raising important questions regarding its applicability in the Italian context. She asked, "What can be done to the Nias objects in Italy, given that Italy never colonised Indonesia? What exactly should be decolonised?"

It is evident that the presence of Nias heritage in Italian museums warrants closer scholarly attention. Laksana's remarks underscore the need for broader and more inclusive debates on the scope and relevance of decolonisation, particularly in contexts that do not fit within conventional colonial frameworks. The current stance of the Indonesian government regarding cultural heritage restitution further highlights the necessity of exploring alternative approaches to decolonisation – beyond bilateral state-to-state repatriation models. This article seeks to illuminate the (de)colonial dimensions of the Nias collections in Italian museums and their connections to the communities of origin on Nias Island, Indonesia. In light of the limited governmental engagement with the restitution of Nias Indigenous objects, this research aims to foreground perspectives from the grassroots Nias community, offering insights into how these objects are perceived and what forms of reconnection are deemed meaningful by the source communities themselves.

## 2. *Methods*

This research employed a multi-method approach to address the issues under investigation, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the problem and enabling well-substantiated responses to the research questions. Primary data were collected through an exploratory strategy that involved site visits and surveys of Nias objects across various museums. Archival research was undertaken to trace the journeys of Italian explorers to Nias and to document the movement of artefacts sent to Europe as a result of these expeditions. In addition to physical visits, online surveys of museum catalogues and databases were conducted to complement the provenance study. The archival investiga-

[38] Labanca 2018; Visconti 2021.

[39] <https://www.euroseas.org/first-euroseas-masterclass-in-southeast-asia/>

tion also contributed to the provenance research, serving as a foundation for constructing the cultural biographies of the objects. Drawing on Kopytoff's concept of "cultural biography of things"[40], this study approaches objects not as static entities, but as artefacts that undergo shifting phases of value and meaning depending on their socio-historical contexts and human agency.

Interviews constituted a key method within the qualitative approach employed in this research. A variety of interview formats were utilised, including email correspondence, in-depth interviews, and group interviews. Qualitative research, by nature, aims to purposefully sample participants who can most effectively contribute to the researcher's understanding of the problem and central research questions[41]. To support this objective, a targeted selection of informants and strategies was implemented. This included communication – both in person and via email – with curators from the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence[42] and the Museum of Civilizations in Rome[43].

From the perspective of the originating community, interviews and discussions were conducted with representatives from the Nias Heritage Museum[44], the University of Nias Raya (Teluk Dalam, South Nias), and members of local communities[45] in Gunungsitoli, Bawömataluo, and Hilisimaetanö (South Nias) during May–June 2024. These locations were chosen as they represent the places of origin of the Nias objects in question and are communities where cultural traditions continue to be actively maintained. Interviews were carried out with the head and staff of the Nias Heritage Museum (MPN), as well as with representatives from the villages. The interviews were semi-structured, enabling open-ended responses and fluid conversation to elicit deeper insights from the informants.

To further enhance the depth of the research process, focus group discussions were conducted at the University of Nias Raya[46]. These sessions involved four lecturers[47], who served as key informants. Both the interviews and focus

[40] Kopytoff 1986.

[41] Creswell, Creswell 2023.

[42] Personal communication with the curator, Monica Zavattaro through email and interview during pre-fieldwork (June 2023) and during fieldwork in museum from September to October 2023.

[43] Personal communication with the curator, Loretta Paderni through email from July 2020 to October 2024.

[44] Nata'alui Duha (Head of Museum), Filemon Hulu and Temazisokhi Hulu (museum staff), during fieldwork in Nias between March (2023) and May–June (2024).

[45] Involving Oktavianus Fau (local historian), Hiburan Zagötö and Virdolin Manaö (craftsmen), Nitrasori Fau (local guide), Sopan Nehe and Franciscus Dakhi (collectors).

[46] The activities including General Lecture with more than 300 students from the university (30th May 2024) and focus group discussion (31st May 2024).

[47] Bambowo Laiya (Chairperson of South Nias Higher Education Foundation), Sitasi Zagötö, Rebecca Evelyn Laiya, Agustinus Sukses Dakhi (University of Nias Raya), and additional informants Martiman S. Sarumaha, Juang Solala Laiya and Noventinus Zagötö.

group discussions aimed to explore the nature of Nias collections held in museums, their connections to communities of origin, and potential avenues for future engagement. The findings were subsequently compiled and cross-referenced with recent restitution cases in Indonesia, and analysed against current regulatory frameworks to inform recommendations concerning the Nias collections.

## 3. *Results*

This study identified a significant diaspora of Indonesian ethnographic objects across various Italian museums. At least ten museums house Indonesian ethnographic artefacts (fig. 3), with collections ranging from a single object to hundreds. Most of these objects originate from prominent cultural regions in Indonesia, such as Java, Sumatra and Bali. The objects from these areas often relate to Indonesia's classical period, for example, the 8th-century jewellery from Central Java displayed in the Museum of Civilizations in Rome. Many ethnographic collections also stem from indigenous communities in Sumatra, Borneo, Papua and other eastern parts of Indonesia. Preliminary provenance research indicates that these objects were collected between the 19th and 20th centuries through various means. Upon closer examination, the data revealed that most Nias objects are preserved in three major institutions: the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence, the Museum of Civilizations in Rome, and the Vatican Museums. Furthermore, one additional Nias object has been identified in the Museum of Culture (MUDEC) in Milan.

### 3.1. *The Nias Collections in Italian Museums*

To gain a deeper understanding of the status of the Nias collection in Italian museums and establish a basis for further discussion, it is essential to examine the biography or provenance of these objects. The Nias collections currently housed in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence, the Museum of Civilizations in Rome, and the Vatican Museums originate from various sources, methods of acquisition, and periods. The most recent addition to these collections is a single object held at MUDEC in Milan. This item, a short sword known as a *balato* (fig. 4), is on loan from the Alessandro Passaré Foundation[48]. Passaré, a Milanese doctor and traveller (1927-2006), began collecting contemporary art in the 1950s before developing an interest

[48] MUDEC Collection No. 00355, Passaré Foundation Loan.

in what he termed "primary art,"[49] which he primarily acquired from Africa and Asia. He sourced these pieces either directly from their places of origin or through the art market. Unfortunately, there is limited information about the provenance of this particular object. Given the significant demand for Nias artefacts in the art market between 1970 and 1990, which coincides with Passaré's period of enthusiasm for "primary art," it is plausible that this object was acquired during that time.

This type of artefact became highly sought after by European and North American collectors during the 1970s-1990s, with many objects originating from South Nias (Bawömataluo, Hilisimaetanö and surrounding villages). In Nias culture, the *balato*, more commonly known as *tolögu*, symbolises warrior's identity, pride and social status. The significance of the *tolögu* is evident in the decorative *ragö* (adornments at the base of the sheath), typically made from wood, rattan, animal fangs, and intricately designed small figures. The larger and more "exotic" the *ragö*, the more prestigious the owner, signifying their importance or noble lineage within the village. Unfortunately, following Indonesia's decolonisation and independence, the *tolögu* became scarce due to the declining practice of sword-making, as many blacksmiths aged and the tradition was not passed on. For instance, in Bawömataluo, a village in South Nias that still maintains certain traditions, only four blacksmiths remain active[50].

The second collection of Nias objects is housed in Rome (fig. 5). According to the curator Loretta Paderni, the Nias artefacts at the Museum of Civilizations were collected by Elio Modigliani[51], a trained anthropologist who visited Nias in 1886, accompanied by Cerruti. Modigliani conducted this expedition under the auspices of the Society of Anthropologists of Florence. His objectives included studying Nias society and acquiring human skulls for the collection at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence[52]. Skulls were considered crucial subjects for anthropometry – the systematic measurement of physical features – used to identify 'racial' characteristics during the formative period of physical anthropology[53]. For anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, skulls were regarded as equally important as material culture. For instances, the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence records a total of 3,400 skulls in its collections[54].

However, the Nias objects in Rome primarily consist of bronze and gold jewellery[55]. In traditional Nias society, jewellery and gold were deeply connect-

[49] Armorouche, Arnaldi 2007.
[50] Oktavianus Fau (local historian) and Virdolin Manaö (craftsperson), in interview 2024.
[51] personal communication, July 2022 and confirmed by the museum database.
[52] Modigliani 1890.
[53] McMahon 2007.
[54] Cecchi 2014, pp. 183–196.
[55] Rispoli 2000.

ed to social hierarchy and nobility. Gold was typically acquired through the slave trade, with slaves captured from village conflicts or as prisoners of war. Skilled artisans and blacksmiths then fashioned the gold into various styles of jewellery, while poorer versions were made from brass and worn by people of lower status. After the Dutch colonial authorities prohibited the slave trade, the Nias nobility fell into poverty, losing their gold and jewellery. Consequently, with no demand for these items, the blacksmiths abandoned the tradition and skills necessary to produce such jewellery[56].

The most extensive collection of Nias artefacts is housed in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence (fig. 6), also originating from the expedition of Elio Modigliani. During his visit, he meticulously documented his observations and interactions with Nias culture in his journal, *Un viaggio a Nias*[57]. While staying in Gunung Sitoli (now the capital of Nias) and visiting numerous villages, particularly in southern Nias, Modigliani systematically collected material culture through trade and exchanges with local people. His collection was subsequently shipped to Italy, with almost all of the Nias artefacts donated to the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence. The museum now holds approximately 180 Nias objects[58], alongside other Modigliani collections, totalling 1,949 items[59]. This study successfully identified and categorised the Nias objects into 41 types across eight categories[60]: ancestral workship, war equipments, musical instruments, measurement tools and scales, clothing and jewelleries, household equipments, guest welcoming equipments, miniatures. The diversity within Modigliani's Nias collection makes it one of the most comprehensive and valuable Nias collections in Europe.

The final collection of Nias artefacts identified so far is located in the Vatican. This collection includes at least 50 Nias objects, primarily ancestral statues, stored in the Vatican Museums. These objects were sent to the museum in 1925 as part of the Vatican Exposition organised by Pope Pius XI[61]. The purpose of the exposition was to present and highlight the cultural, artistic, and spiritual traditions of people from around the world. The exposition featured over 100,000 objects from various regions and attracted more than one million visitors. This monumental event eventually led to the establishment of the Missionary Ethnological Museum in 1927, now known as the Ethnological Museum Anima Mundi[62]. As of the writing of this article, the author has

[56] *Ibidem*.
[57] Modigliani 1890.
[58] Although the museum database records 189 Nias objects, fieldwork observations and identification conducted in 2023 confirmed the presence of only 180 items (Purnawibawa 2025b).
[59] Bigoni 2019a.
[60] Purnawibawa 2025b, p. 44-46.
[61] Jatta 2022
[62] Dries 2016

been unable to access the objects in question due to scheduling conflicts with the museum. Additionally, the museum required a fee for providing digital images of the artefacts, further complicating research efforts.

### 3.2. *Are They Colonial Objects?*

The unique character of Nias objects in Italian museums presents a challenge in decolonisation discourse, raising the question of whether they should be classified as colonial objects. Unlike many artefacts acquired through colonisation or aggression, majority of Nias objects in Italian museums were obtained through trade or missionary activities. This nuance complicates their classification within conventional definitions of (de)colonial objects.

But what precisely constitutes a colonial object? Scholars offer differing definitions on this matter. Van Beurden[63], for instance, defines colonial objects as artefacts of cultural or historical significance that were acquired without fair compensation or that were involuntarily lost during the European colonial period. This definition hinges on the presence of unequal power relations and coercion in the acquisition process, thereby restricting the term to objects obtained through interactions between colonisers and their former colonies. Van Beurden identifies three primary modes of acquisition: through equitable purchase, in which local craftspeople engaged in transactions on relatively equal terms with foreign collectors; under colonial legislation, albeit within an inherently unequal framework; and in violation of local or colonial laws – objects he terms 'tainted' – collected through methods now widely regarded as unethical[64].

Other scholars adopt broader frameworks. Stahn[65], for example, describes colonial objects as culturally significant material artefacts collected within colonial contexts, encompassing both formal and informal colonial structures from the 16th to the 20th centuries. This definition permits a more expansive interpretation, allowing for the classification of objects as colonial even in the absence of a direct colonial relationship between the collecting and source or originating communities. Institutional perspectives further elaborate on these definitions. The German Museum Association, for instance, distinguishes between three categories of colonial objects: those acquired under formal colonial rule; those collected outside formal colonial governance but within informal colonial systems of power; and symbolic objects that represent colonialism, such as propaganda materials[66].

[63] Van Beurden 2017
[64] *Ivi*, p. 41.
[65] Stahn 2023.
[66] Lang 2018.

Some scholars also include in the category of colonial objects those items created or used in the study of colonies[67] – for example, scientific instruments, clothing, and academic publications. For example during the Fascist regime in Italy, anthropology was appropriated and transformed into a racial science to justify the colonisation of Africa. The anthropological work of figures such as Lidio Cipriani (1892–1962) was widely employed to support racist publications and colonial policies[68] could also be considered as colonial objects.

The central question arises: *Are the Nias objects in Italian museums colonial objects?* The simple answer is – *yes*. When applying the aforementioned frameworks, these artefacts can indeed be considered colonial objects. They were collected within colonial contexts, albeit outside formal colonial rule. Although Italy did not colonise Indonesia directly, collectors such as Elio Modigliani and church-affiliated missionaries operated within, and benefitted from, the Dutch colonial administration's presence in Nias. Modigliani, for instance, received official support and permits from Dutch authorities in Batavia and Gunung Sitoli to collect both natural and ethnographic materials[69]. Similarly, Christian missionaries played a central role in the Dutch colonial administration's educational agenda in Nias during the early 20th century[70]. While their collecting activities were not overtly violent, they occurred in a context marked by stark power imbalances between European actors and local communities.

Nonetheless, the classification of Nias objects as colonial should be approached with caution. Some items were likely acquired through trade and cultural exchange under relatively consensual circumstances. In contrast to many contested or tainted artefacts in Dutch museums – acquired through plunder or coercion – a considerable portion of the Nias objects in Italian collections appears to have been obtained through more 'moderate' means. That said, Modigliani himself recorded having taken several items without permission, including a *tolögu* sword and a few betle nut pouches[71]. Furthermore, missionary records indicate instances of iconoclasm and the confiscation of Indigenous objects during proselytising efforts[72]. These complexities underscore the necessity of conducting rigorous provenance research to assess each object's history before categorising it as a tainted colonial object.

In the context of European museum collections, provenance research is increasingly understood as a process of knowledge production, aimed at reconstructing the movement of objects and the meanings ascribed to them over

[67] Lopes 2024, p. 4.
[68] See also Landi, Cecchi 2014; Righettoni 2022.
[69] Modigliani 1890.
[70] Purnawibawa 2025a.
[71] Modigliani 1890.
[72] Purnawibawa 2025a.

time[73]. Tracking provenance not only involves mapping the physical movement of objects but also uncovering the transfer of ownership and the relationships between involved parties. In its narrower application, provenance research typically focuses on identifying successive owners, the timing of acquisition, and the legal or informal processes through which ownership was asserted. However, such an approach often results in a superficial, sequential list of holders with limited interpretive depth[74].

Today, provenance research is increasingly viewed not merely as a tool for verifying ownership or authenticity, but as a critical first step toward interrogating the broader systems and power structures in which these objects are embedded[75]. It provides a vital framework for situating colonial-era collections within their historical, ethical, and political contexts, and for rethinking future strategies for engagement, restitution, or digital restitution.

In the Netherlands, the publication of the report by the Advisory Committee on the National Policy Framework for Colonial Collections marked a turning point in the role of provenance research within museum practices. The committee emphasised that the Netherlands must acknowledge that many cultural objects were acquired during the colonial period against the will of their original owners. It urged the Dutch government to take responsibility for its colonial past and to demonstrate a clear willingness to return stolen colonial objects unconditionally, should the country of origin submit a request[76].

The committee further recommended the establishment of a Centre of Expertise on the Provenance of Colonial Objects, tasked with conducting additional provenance research and developing a publicly accessible database of colonial-era collections held in Dutch museums[77]. Under these new policy directions, provenance research is no longer viewed merely as a procedural tool for justifying restitution claims. Instead, it is increasingly recognised as a fundamental and embedded component of museum operations – central to ethical stewardship, curatorial responsibility, and institutional transparency.

Nonetheless, the repatriation of colonial objects from Italian museums to their countries of origin remains a complex and unresolved issue. Italy, in adherence to the Latin museological tradition, strongly upholds the principle of the inalienability of museum collections[78]. As a result, there are no clear legal provisions regulating the deaccessioning or restitution of museum objects. The

[73] Kuever 2024.
[74] Tompkins 2020, p. 18.
[75] Lai 2023, p. 572.
[76] Mooren *et al*. 2022.
[77] *Ivi*., p. 12.
[78] Wijsmuller 2017.

Legislative Decree of 22 January 2004, No. 42 *Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape*, in accordance with Article 10 of Law No. 137–154 of 16 July 2002, reinforces this principle by allowing the transfer of objects only between public institutions within Italy[79]. A recent development in this area is the Ministerial Decree UDCM/18/10/2021 No. 365 by Minister of Culture, which established a *Working Group on Colonial Collections*. The group has been tasked with surveying, researching, identifying, and studying colonial-era collections[80]. However, no clear policy guidelines or recommendations have yet been issued by this working group.

Another significant initiative is the formation of the ICOM Italy Working Group – *Provenienza*. This group is composed of a coordinator, seven members, and a dedicated task force for cataloguing. The members include university researchers and curators from anthropology and ethnography museums, supported by at least 61 affiliates from both local and international institutions[81]. As its name suggests, *Provenienza* focuses on bringing together professionals from various disciplines and institutions who share an interest in provenance research on objects housed in Italian museums and archives that reflect global histories. While the group acknowledges the significance of provenance and the importance of collaboration with source communities, its engagement with restitution remains limited. The group's manifesto draws a distinction between *return* – defined as the repatriation of objects exported illegally, regardless of their original mode of acquisition – and *restitution*, referring specifically to objects obtained through theft, looting, coercion, or other unethical means, aligning with Van Beurden's[82] definition of 'tainted objects'. Despite this conceptual clarity, the manifesto primarily advocates for digital returns and stresses the need to assess restitution claims on a case-by-case basis, rather than establishing a standardised approach[83].

Italy's complex and, at times, contradictory position on cultural restitution is, to some extent, understandable. In the international context, Italy is often regarded as a "source country," having experienced the loss of substantial cultural property during the Napoleonic occupation and the Second World War[84]. In recent years, Italy has also successfully secured the repatriation of cultural heritage items from Canada and the United States. Notably, on 19 March 2025, three reliquaries were returned by Canadian authorities[85], while

[79] *Ibidem*.
[80] DM/18/10/2021 Decreto 365.
[81] <https://www.icom-italia.org/gruppo-di-lavoro-provenienza/>
[82] Van Beurden 2017.
[83] Provenienza publication in collaboration with the Swiss Museum Association/ICOM Switzerland 2022.
[84] Visconti 2021.
[85] Canadian Heritage 2025.

a particularly significant restitution from the United States took place on 28 May 2024, involving 600 artefacts dating from 900 BCE to 200 CE[86].

Italy is also an active member of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property (ICPRCP), a permanent UNESCO body that supports the implementation of the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Italy's engagement with the ICPRCP has facilitated the return of numerous cultural objects removed from its territory as a result of illegal trade.

Despite these achievements, Italy's approach to restitution has drawn criticism. Some scholars and commentators have described its policies as a form of "trophy hunting"[87] and as emblematic of a broader retentionist attitude[88]. Critics argue that the Italian government exhibits an excessive preoccupation with reclaiming every artwork or artefact linked to Italian heritage, often without adequately substantiating the cultural or national significance of each object. Critics further questions whether all repatriated artefacts genuinely contribute to the national identity or self-esteem of the Italian public[89].

This pattern reveals a broader "double standard" in Italy's cultural heritage policy. While the state maintains a vigorous stance in advocating for the return of its own cultural property from abroad, it remains significantly more conservative in addressing the restitution of colonial-era artefacts within its domestic museum collections. This contradiction reflects a deeper tension between Italy's historical experiences as both a victim and a beneficiary of cultural displacement[90]. Countries such as Germany and the Netherlands are currently at the forefront of the restitution discourse concerning cultural heritage. France has also made significant progress through the publication of the Sarr-Savoy Report, which marked a pivotal shift in its approach to colonial collections. Even the United Kingdom has begun to engage with the issue, albeit within the constraints of its existing legal framework. Italy, however, continues to lag behind. Despite the establishment of working groups at both governmental and professional levels, the absence of clear policy guidance, a coherent legal framework, and standardised procedures for handling restitution claims remains a significant limitation within the Italian museum sector[91].

[86] Schrader 2024.
[87] Eakin 2013 in Rose-Greenland 2016, p. 143.
[88] Cuno in Rose-Greenland 2016, p. 144.
[89] Rose-Greenland 2016.
[90] Visconti 2021.
[91] *Ibidem*.

### 3.3. *The multiple local stakeholders' perspectives on decolonisation issues*

On the other side of the discussion are the communities of origin on Nias Island, Indonesia. In the context of the central government's limited engagement in conversations surrounding the restitution of Nias cultural objects, this study seeks to amplify voices from the grassroots level. To gain a deeper understanding of local perspectives on the issue, key stakeholders were identified and included in the research. Three main stakeholder groups were selected to provide diverse viewpoints: the local museum in Nias, local academics and scholars, and members of the local communities in South Nias. The findings presented below are based on interviews and focus group discussions conducted with representatives from each of these stakeholder groups.

#### 3.3.a. *Nias Heritage Museum (Museum Pusaka Nias)*

The Nias Heritage Museum, or *Museum Pusaka Nias* (MPN), is actively engaged in the decolonisation of Nias cultural heritage and maintains ongoing collaborations with international institutions in relation to restitution efforts. A notable example occurred in 2007, when Horst Krank[92] voluntarily returned a rare artefact – a crocodile skin battle vest (*oroba buaya*) – to the museum. Further restitution followed in 2009, when 30 artefacts, including jewellery and ancestral statues (*adu*), were repatriated to MPN by the Volkenkundig Museum of Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. At present, MPN is engaged in discussions with a museum in Utrecht and the Ethnology Museum in Dresden regarding the potential return of additional objects[93].

These restitution efforts have been facilitated in part by the historical connection between MPN's founder, R.P. Johannes Hammerle, and the Order of Capuchins. As early as the 1980s, the Order began to consider the return of cultural objects acquired during the colonial era. Logistics played a central role in this decision-making process, particularly in relation to the limitations of storage and display capacity[94]. More importantly, there was a growing awareness within the Order of the significance of returning cultural objects once local communities had begun to recognise their historical and cultural value[95].

Beyond the discourse on physical restitution, the Museum Pusaka Nias (MPN) is actively engaged in broader decolonisation efforts through joint exhibitions and collaborative research initiatives. In 2023, the museum part-

[92] Private collector.
[93] Head of MPN, Nata'alui Duha, interview, May 2024.
[94] Van Beurden 2017.
[95] *Met Kap en Koord: Het Missiemuseum van de Kapucijnen* 1979, in Van Beurden 2021, p. 188.

nered with the Embassy of Denmark in Jakarta to host a temporary exhibition titled *Jejak Denmark di Pulau Nias* (*Traces of Denmark on Nias Island*), which remained on display at MPN as of May 2024. The exhibition showcased photographs taken by Dr A. Møller, a Danish physician who served in Nias under the Dutch colonial administration between 1923 and 1927. These photographs, along with hundreds of artefacts collected by Dr Møller, are currently held by the National Museum of Denmark. In addition, MPN is participating in an ongoing international research project titled *Pressing Matter*, funded by the Dutch National Science Agenda (NWA) and conducted in collaboration with Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. This project critically examines the colonial history and significance of plaster casts of Nias individuals held in Dutch museum collections.

In an interview, Nata'alui Duha, the Head of the Museum Pusaka Nias (MPN), offered a pragmatic perspective on the issue of Nias cultural heritage held in Italy. While expressing hope for the eventual return of Nias artefacts, he highlighted the considerable bureaucratic and logistical challenges that the museum has already faced in previous restitution efforts. Issues related to transportation, permits, and taxation proved complex, and the museum currently contends with limited storage capacity due to ongoing renovations. In light of these constraints, Duha proposed alternative approaches to decolonisation, such as joint exhibitions, digital displays, training programmes, and digital restitution. He emphasised that such efforts must involve meaningful collaboration with the Nias communities at every stage, cautioning against top-down initiatives that impose objects or programmes on local institutions without consultation. He advocated for "decolonisation as an actual practice, rather than meaningless meetings and empty dialogue."

A complementary perspective was offered by museum staff member Filemon Hulu[96], who raised concerns about the accessibility of Nias objects held in foreign collections. While acknowledging the challenges associated with physical repatriation, he expressed cautious optimism about future restitutions. In the interim, he welcomed the prospect of digital access and digital restitutions from partner museums, viewing them as valuable tools for enabling local communities to reconnect with their cultural heritage.

3.3.b. *Local University and Scholars*

From the perspective of other stakeholders, particularly local academics and cultural practitioners, a focus group discussion held at the University of Nias Raya in May 2024 (fig. 7) revealed significant concerns regarding the decolonisation of Nias objects – particularly with respect to the younger generation's sense of identity. Participants highlighted that the removal of a sub-

[96] Interview, May 2024.

stantial number of material culture items to museums in Europe and North America has contributed to a growing disconnect between younger Niassans and their cultural heritage. Many traditional songs, folktales, and oral histories have become increasingly difficult for younger generations to comprehend in the absence of visual and tangible cultural references[97].

During general lectures linked to this research – attended by more than 300 students – it became evident that many participants were unfamiliar with traditional Nias cultural objects such as *adu* (ancestral statues), traditional jewellery, and musical instruments. This observation corresponds with earlier research that has noted the disappearance of *adu* and other 'archaic' objects from the living memory of the Nias people[98]. In the past, elaborately ornamented coffins were held in high esteem[99], and they remain symbolic of the deceased's social status. However, contemporary representations of Nias culture, particularly in tourism and public events, have prioritised more martial objects – such as shields, spears, and battle vests – resulting in a shift in cultural symbolism. The group discussion concluded that younger generations in Nias have experienced a disconnection from older cultural values, due in large part to the socio-cultural transformations of the early 20th century. The group emphasised the importance of restituting Nias cultural objects – physically or digitally – for educational purposes, to help bridge this widening gap in cultural understanding.

Furthermore, participants agreed that even in cases where physical restitution is not feasible, sustained dialogue between museums and local communities remains essential. Such dialogue should prioritise collaborative decision-making on the use of Nias objects, including which items are appropriate for exhibition and how interpretive narratives are developed to reflect the values and perspectives of the originating communities. This approach aligns with the concept of indigenisation in museum practice, which advocates for creating spaces that acknowledge, respect, and integrate the knowledge systems and worldviews of source communities.

At present, the University of Nias Raya – like the Nias Heritage Museum (MPN) – is actively involved in the *Pressing Matter* provenance research project, funded by the Dutch National Science Agenda (NWA) and conducted in collaboration with Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. This initiative reflects growing academic engagement from Nias institutions in international discussions surrounding colonial collections and restitution.

Should repatriation occur, the group proposed that the objects be housed in South Nias – ideally in their villages of origin or in a new facility at the Univer-

[97] Sitasi Zagötö, local scholar, focus group discussion, May 2024.
[98] Yamamoto 1986; Bakker 2004.
[99] Yamamoto 1986.

sity of Nias Raya. This location holds particular significance, as the majority of the artefacts in question originate from the southern part of the island. Locating the objects there would enhance their accessibility to the communities that produced them and ensure that the repatriated collections contribute meaningfully to education, cultural revitalisation, and local tourism. This was seen as a more appropriate and impactful solution than housing them in the Nias Heritage Museum (MPN), which is located in the northern part of the island.

3.3.c. *Local Communities of South Nias*

Local communities share similar views with University of Nias Raya regarding the preferred location for restituted Nias cultural objects. Interviews conducted with village representatives, craftspersons, and cultural practitioners from the respective villages (fig. 8) revealed a strong consensus: all informants advocated for the return of these objects to their places of origin. Two key reasons were consistently cited.

The first reason relates to the depletion of cultural artefacts in villages due to the long-standing influence of the antique trade, which has been active since the 1970s. Many villagers have sold, and in some cases continue to sell, cultural objects to tourists in exchange for income. Middlemen often capitalise on this trade by purchasing artefacts at low prices from other villages and reselling them to foreign collectors at significantly higher prices. Local historian Oktavianus Fau[100] described this process as having "drained the villages of their cultural soul," resulting in a loss of identity and connection to ancestral traditions among the local population.

Craftspersons similarly expressed concern, noting that the absence of original objects hinders their ability to produce culturally accurate works. Hiburan Zagötö – also known as Ama Sufi, a master sculptor of *adu* (ancestral statues) in South Nias – explained that he now relies on the few remaining artefacts in his village and on images from academic publications to inform his practice. This phenomenon has been discussed in previous studies[101], which highlight how the disappearance of *adu* and growing interest from the art market have led to the creation of contemporary styles that no longer align with regional traditions. These "new *adu*" are no longer imbued with ancestral or ritual significance, but instead serve as commercial art objects.

Jewellers reported similar frustrations. Many traditional designs recorded in historical photographs and archives have vanished from the villages. In the past, the crafting and wearing of gold jewellery were privileges reserved for nobility, and the knowledge of goldsmithing was closely guarded. However,

[100] Interview, June 2024.
[101] Yamamoto 1986; Feldman 1994; Bakker 2004.

the decline of the noble class – brought about by the end of the slave trade, the spread of new religious influences, and increased economic pressures – led to widespread dispersal of such jewellery into foreign collections. Today, the lack of surviving examples and the secrecy surrounding traditional techniques make it exceedingly difficult to recreate these cultural expressions. With many skilled artisans now elderly and few younger individuals willing or able to learn the craft, the continuation of material culture production in South Nias is under threat[102]. In this context, digital restitutions or access to high-quality digital archives – such as photographs or 3D models – could support local artisans in reviving lost techniques and designs.

The second reason consistently emphasised by local stakeholders was the potential role of returned objects in developing sustainable cultural tourism. Many villages in South Nias are actively seeking strategies to attract more visitors. Since the central government designated Bawömataluo as a national-level cultural heritage site in 2017, interest in cultural tourism has grown. However, current offerings are largely limited to performances – such as war dances and *ombo batu* (stone jumping) – as well as traditional architecture. Due to the large-scale outflow of material heritage to private collectors and foreign museums, many traditional houses have been left devoid of their original objects.

According to local tour guide Nitrasori Fau[103], the absence of authentic cultural artefacts negatively affects the quality of the visitor experience and has contributed to a decline in both domestic and international tourist numbers. This, in turn, creates economic pressures that perpetuate the cycle of heritage commodification. Many villagers view the establishment of small, community-based museums as a viable solution to this challenge. However, such an initiative would require not only appropriate infrastructure and conservation facilities, but also a fundamental shift in local attitudes – towards valuing cultural heritage as a legacy to be protected and shared, rather than a commodity to be sold. While such a view may appear commonplace among academics and scholars, community members strongly believe that the restitution of Nias objects – whether physical or digital – holds the potential to restore cultural identity and act as a catalyst for sustainable, locally driven economic development through heritage-based tourism.

[102] Virdolin Manaö, interview, June 2024.
[103] Interview, June 2024

| | *Physical Restitution* | *Objects remain in Europe* | *Digital Restitution* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Local museum | The objects should be restituted to the local museum for safeguarding | Acceptable, with sharing data and other collaboration programs | Access and digital returns are acceptable |
| Local scholars and academicians | The objects should be returned to their origin in South Nias (either to the university or villages) | Acceptable. However, the narrative and story should be communicated between museums and local communities of origin. | Digital returns in the forms of photographs and digital 3D objects as learning media and cultural identity for younger generations |
| Local communities (South Nias) | The objects should be returned to the villages as sources of identity and sustainable tourism development. | Acceptable. The objects will serve as ambassadors with promotional value for foreign audiences. However, narrative and representation should involve local communities. | Digital returns in the forms of photographs and digital 3D objects as art inspiration and models to revitalise the lost techniques |

Tab. 1. Opinions of local stakeholders on the issues regarding the decolonisation of Nias objects in Italian museums

Table 1 provides a brief overview of local stakeholders' perspective on the central issues explored in this study: the restitution of Nias objects, the possibility of retaining these objects in European museums, and the concept of digital restitution. Overall, stakeholder positions exhibit a high degree of convergence. With regard to restitution, all stakeholders agree that the objects should ultimately be returned to Indonesia. However, their preferences diverge in terms of the objects' final destination. The Nias Heritage Museum (MPN) advocates for the return of objects to the museum for purposes of safekeeping and conservation. In contrast, university representatives propose that the objects be returned either to the villages of origin in South Nias – acknowledging the original custodians – or to the university itself, where they could serve as valuable educational resources. Members of the originating communities express a clear preference for the objects to be returned directly to their respective villages.

On the issue of retaining Nias objects in European museums, stakeholders generally do not express strong opposition. MPN raised concerns regarding the financial and spatial constraints associated with restitution, particularly in light of ongoing renovations and limited resources. Meanwhile, some community members view the continued presence of Nias objects in European institutions as potentially beneficial for promoting Nias culture internationally and for encouraging tourism to the island. Nevertheless, all stakeholders agree that, should the collections remain in Europe, museums must engage

in meaningful collaboration with local institutions and ensure that the originating communities have an active role in shaping the narratives surrounding these objects.

Regarding digital restitution, most stakeholders are supportive of the concept as a viable alternative to physical restitution. University representatives see digital restitution as a valuable tool for education and cultural revitalisation in South Nias. While the originating communities express some scepticism – largely due to a lack of infrastructure such as cultural centres or village museums – craftspersons are notably more receptive. They view digital access to Nias objects as a source of artistic inspiration and a means of reviving lost artisanal techniques.

The openness of stakeholders to the continued presence of Nias collections in European museums is noteworthy and presents a promising opportunity for initiating constructive dialogue with European institutions around decolonisation and equitable heritage stewardship. Ultimately, the key question remains: what is the future of the Nias collections held in Italian museums?

### 3.4 *The Possible Future for Nias Objects*

Decolonisation does not necessarily need to focus solely on physical restitution. While the legal aspects and path to repatriation remain unclear, there are still many steps that can be taken in the discussion of decolonising Nias collections in Italian museums. Museum decolonisation, in broad terms, can be understood as the process of recognising the historical, colonial contexts under which collections were acquired; uncovering Eurocentric ideologies and biases within Western museum concepts, discourse, and practices; acknowledging and incorporating diverse voices and multiple perspectives; and transforming museums through sustained critical analysis and concrete actions[104]. Within this framework, Italian museums have many opportunities to pursue decolonisation initiatives.

In the practice of decoloniality within museums[105], several core values can be implemented, such as increasing visibility, promoting inclusivity, decentering, fostering empathy, enhancing transparency, and embracing vulnerability. These values can be realised through programs that more actively support the indigenous communities from which the collections originated, provide open access to collections and databases, and create spaces for indigenous perspectives within museum settings.

An illustrative example of this broader decolonial approach is the process

[104] Kreps 2011.
[105] Ariese, Wroblewska 2022.

of decolonising museum databases – a practice already adopted by institutions such as the Swedish National Museum of World Culture. This process involves incorporating Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and languages into museum database systems, while also ensuring access for source communities[106]. Decolonising databases yields multiple benefits; it empowers both museum technical teams and Indigenous communities by enabling shared cultural and conceptual decision-making in the documentation and interpretation of collections. Such initiatives promote freedom of expression and foster collaborative knowledge production, enriching understandings of the cultural significance of objects[107]. This approach offers mutual advantages: it not only benefits source communities but also strengthens the museums' ethical and curatorial practices.

Building upon this, providing open access – or ideally, digital restitution – represents another promising avenue for decolonial engagement. Recent technological advancements have made digital restitution increasingly viable, allowing cultural artefacts held in museums to be digitised and shared widely[108]. While digital returns cannot fully substitute for physical repatriation, they offer distinct value and objectives centred on preserving, revitalising, and sustaining cultural knowledge[109]. This aligns with the perspectives of stakeholders in Nias, who view digital restitution – through photographs and 3D models – as a meaningful alternative. Such digital resources can function as educational tools, sources of artistic inspiration, and catalysts for cultural revitalisation efforts within Nias communities.

There are several viable options for sharing digital collections and creating engaging online exhibitions to improve open-access catalogues or digital accessibility for Nias objects held in Italian museums. Platforms such as Sketchfab[110], Omeka[111], and Wikimedia[112] provide valuable opportunities for institutions to make their collections more accessible to the public.

While challenges remain – such as technological infrastructure requirements and the long-term sustainability of many digital projects – these platforms have demonstrated notable benefits. These include increased visibility, enriched metadata, multilingual capabilities through automatic translation, and broader audience engagement[113]. Moreover, they offer accessible entry

[106] Sprague 2021, p. 52.
[107] Muñoz *et al.* 2022.
[108] Lazzeretti, Sartori 2016.
[109] Christen 2011, p. 187.
[110] A digital platform for 3D models; <https://sketchfab.com/>; Spiess *et al.* 2024.
[111] An open-source online exhibition tool for galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM); Hardesty 2014.
[112] A user-generated, free online encyclopaedia, including content for museums, libraries, and archives; Villaespesa, Navarrete 2019.
[113] Villaespesa. Navarrete 2019.

points for institutions engaged in decolonisation initiatives to develop their online exhibition presence and enable public participation in the co-curation of displayed objects[114].

A successful example of such an initiative is the *Mapping Philippine Material Culture* project, developed by the Philippine Studies team at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London[115]. The project aimed to create an open-access repository of Philippine material culture dispersed across global institutions. Led by Maria Cristina Juan, the team utilised the Omeka platform for its practicality in building and managing a large-scale digital database[116]. As of 2024, the project hosts 8,690 items from museums and collections across North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia[117].

An earlier example of digital repatriation can be seen in the establishment of the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts & Cultures (GRASAC). This collaborative network comprises Indigenous researchers, academics, and museum professionals, united in their goal to use information technology to digitally reunite Great Lakes heritage that is currently dispersed across museums and archives in North America and Europe with the source communities. GRASAC provides secure online access to digital materials for its research collaborators and affiliated source communities, supporting their use in education, exhibitions, teaching, and scholarly research. To date, the platform has registered over 450 members – including both individuals and institutions – and hosts more than 4,000 digital assets[118].

Another, and arguably more complex, step in the decolonisation process is decentring. Decentring requires a fundamental transformation of the traditions, norms, and narratives that Italian museums have maintained for decades – if not centuries[119]. This transformation can be advanced by restoring Indigenous worldviews, cultural practices, and traditional lifeways, thereby replacing dominant Western historical interpretations with those rooted in Indigenous perspectives[120]. A related pathway is indigenisation, which involves recognising the legitimacy of Indigenous epistemologies and integrating these ways of knowing and doing within institutional structures. This process calls for treating Indigenous communities not as passive informants but as equal partners in curatorial and interpretive practices[121]. A recent example of this shift can be observed at the Museum of Civilization in Rome, which, through

[114] Hardesty 2014.
[115] <https://philippinestudies.uk/mapping/>
[116] Maria Cristina Juan, personal communication, June 2024.
[117] <https://philippinestudies.uk/mapping/items/browse>
[118] Rossi 2017.
[119] Ariese, Wroblewska 2022, p. 51.
[120] Rivet 2020a.
[121] Rivet 2020b, p. 205.

its *EUR_Asia* exhibition – opened in October 2024 – adopted a novel approach to curating cultural objects. Departing from the traditional model of regional groupings, the exhibition instead foregrounds the diverse relationships between material culture and the daily or ritual functions of objects. This curatorial strategy aims to redefine cultural boundaries and offer alternative, more nuanced perspectives on Asian cultures[122].

### 3.5 *Conclusion*

The case of the Nias ethnographic collections in Italian museums presents a unique and complex challenge within the broader discourse of decolonisation and restitution. While Italy was not a colonial power in Indonesia, the presence of Nias objects in its museum collections – acquired during the Dutch colonial period through figures such as Elio Modigliani and missionary networks – highlights the entangled nature of colonial influence, informal power structures, and the production of ethnographic knowledge. Although many of these objects were not obtained through direct acts of looting or conquest, their acquisition took place within asymmetrical colonial relationships, raising ethical concerns surrounding ownership, representation, and curatorial authority.

Despite Italy's current legal and institutional constraints on restitution, opportunities for meaningful decolonial action remain. Stakeholder perspectives from the Nias Heritage Museum, University of Nias Raya, and communities in South Nias reveal a shared interest in reclaiming agency over cultural heritage – whether through physical repatriation or alternative models such as digital restitution, collaborative exhibitions, and shared curatorial narratives. Importantly, digital restitution – enabled by platforms like Sketchfab, Omeka, and Wikimedia – offers immediate, scalable tools for cultural revitalisation, artistic inspiration, and education. International initiatives such as *Pressing Matter*, GRASAC, and *Mapping Philippine Material Culture* provide valuable models for engaging in ethical, community-centred digital heritage practices.

Ultimately, the future of the Nias diaspora collections in Italian museums should not hinge solely on national legal reforms but on the proactive willingness of museums to reimagine their roles, embrace transparency, and engage with source communities as equal partners. Decolonisation, in this context, must extend beyond symbolic gestures and become embedded in the daily operations and institutional ethos of museums – manifesting through shared

[122] Museum of Civilization 2024, exhibition description available at: <https://www.museodellecivilta.it/events/eur_asia/?occurrence= 2024.10.02>

authority, co-produced knowledge, and critical self-reflection. The Nias case offers Italian museums a timely and significant opportunity to lead by example, setting a precedent for more equitable and inclusive approaches to cultural heritage stewardship.

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## *Appendix*

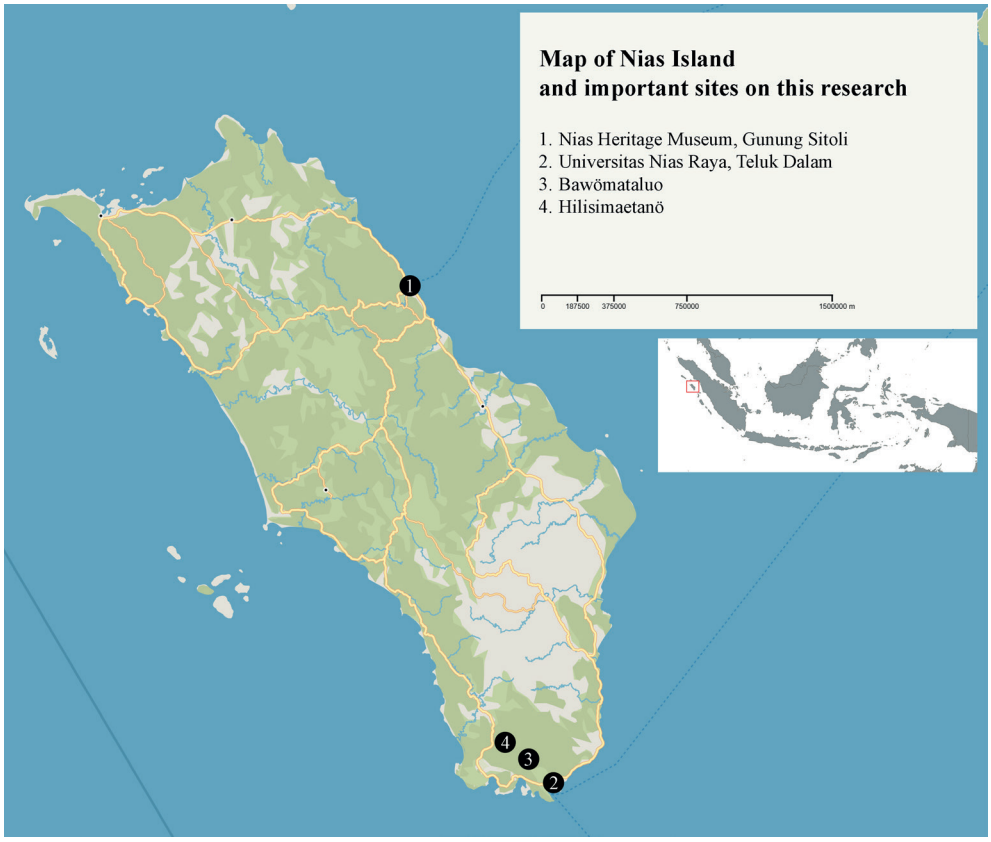



Fig. 1. Map of Nias Island (Insert: Sumatra), highlighting the important locations of this project in Gunungsitoli, Bawömataluo and Hilisimaetanö (Source: Author)

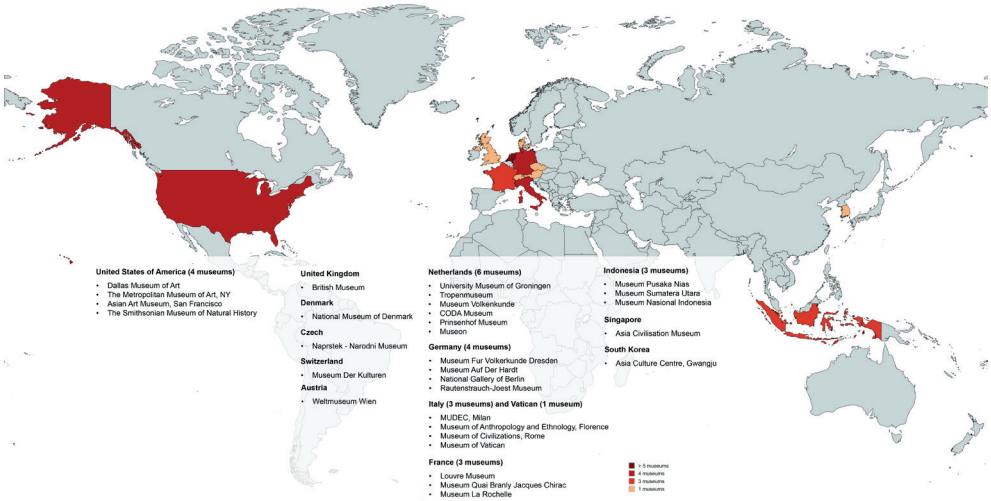
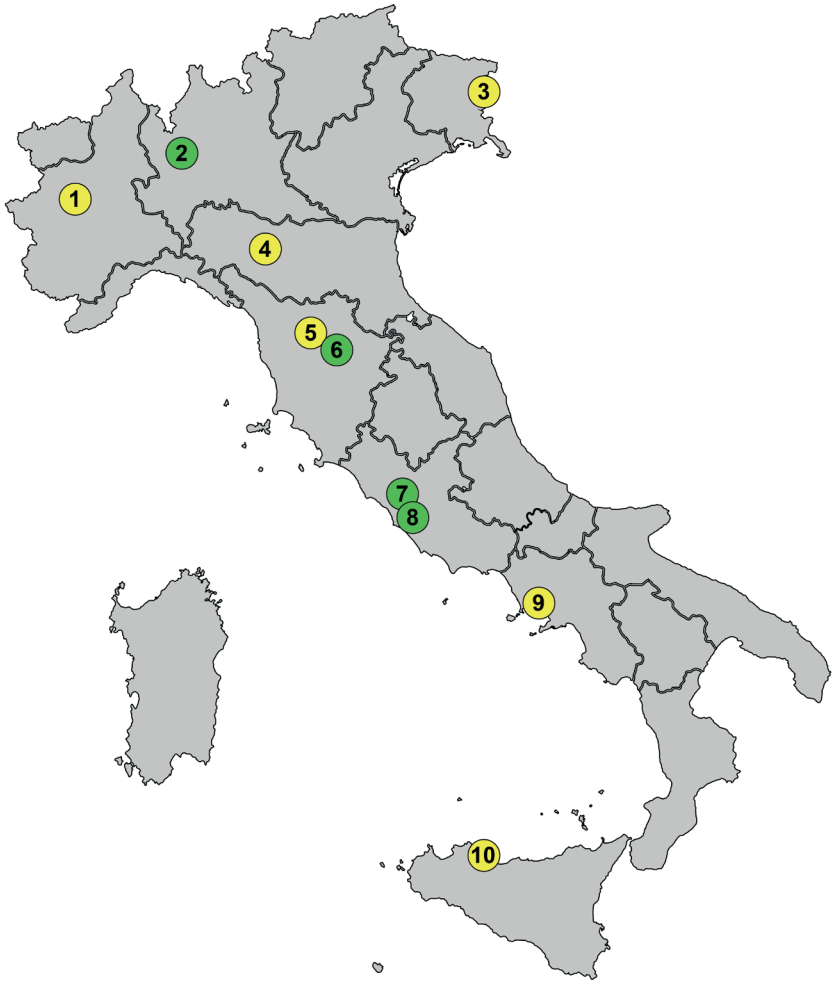



Fig. 2. Provisional map of the diaspora of the Nias objects in world museums




## Legend

1. Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Turin
2. MUDEC, Milan
3. Museum of Oriental Art, Venice
4. Museum of Chinese Art and Ethnography, Parma
5. Museum of Textile, Prato
6. Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology, Florence
7. Museum of Vatican
8. Museum of Civilisation, Rome
9. Museum of Paleobotany and Ethnobotany, Naples
10. International Museum of Puppet, Palermo

Museum(s) with Indonesian objects

Museum(s) with Indonesian and Nias objects

Fig. 3. Provisional map of the diaspora of Indonesia's objects in Italian and Vatican museums

Fig. 4. Tolögu, collection of MUDEC no. 00355 (MUDEC no date)

Fig. 5. Nias Jewellery collection of Museum of Civilization of Rome (Museo Nazionale D'Arte Orientale 2000)


Fig. 6. Showcase of the Nias collection of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology Florence (the picture was taken by the author in June 2023, in September 2023 the museum renovated the showcase)


Fig. 7. Focus group discussion with the University of Nias Raya (documented by Noventinus Zagötö, May 2024)

Fig. 8. Interviews in Hilisimaetanö and Bawömataluo villages (documented by Nitrasori Fau, June 2024)

Fig. 9. Interviews and discussions with craftspersons in Bawömataluo village (June 2024)

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