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Adu from Nias: how sacred figures became subsumed into idols by missionaries and anthropologists

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Abstract. This article focuses, for the first time, on the wooden sculptures of Nias (Adu) included in Elio Modigliani's collection conserved at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence. Catalogued as «idols», Adu represent an opportunity to investigate how these objects were interpreted in the anthropological framework of Modigliani's time. They are an important case study for investigating two important issues. First, what impact did the imposition of colonial power have on indigenous societies and on cultural production within them. Secondly, what impact did the power relationships imposed by colonialism have on the interpretation of objects. Another goal of this report is to make Modigliani's work more fully accessible to both the scientific community and the people of Nias.

Keywords: Elio Modigliani, decolonization, collecting, museology, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Nias is an island approximately 130 km west of Sumatra and straddling the equator, today part of Indonesia. The native Nias culture had unique features and is documented in various European museal collections (Purnawibawa, 2025). One of the most important and diversified ethnological collections was brought from Nias to Florence, Italy, by Elio Modigliani. He spent several months during his 1886 expedition on Nias. Elio Modigliani is an emblematic figure of both the scientific explorer and collector and was very influential during the second part of the 19th century (Bigoni and Barbagli, 2023, 2024).

Modigliani can be considered as a representative of the Florentine school of anthropology and had two important mentors in Florence: Paolo Mantegazza and Enrico H. Giglioli. Notably, Modigliani's collecting followed their «Istruzioni per lo studio della psicologia comparata delle razze umane», a manual of instruction for inquiries on the field during expeditions among indigenous people. The first point in this manual concerning the study of «Religion», was to answer the question: «*Do they have any fetishes, idols, any cult, any prayers?*» (translated from Mantegazza *et al.*, 1873, 326). A very pertinent question as we will see in when it came to Modigliani's collection on Nias.

Importantly, Modigliani not only collected artifacts and samples in the field, but researched information both in the literature and directly from natives. Finally, he published a great deal of materials on the artifacts and many aspects of the original collection context. Modigliani published a number of scientific letters, articles (Modigliani, 1886, 1887abc, 1889abc) on Nias, and the ponderous monograph «Viaggio a Nias» (Modigliani, 1890). Modigliani documented extensively in this book not just his journey, but also historical events and the international literature available at that time.

Modigliani's collections are internationally recognized as an important testimony of Nias and of other Indonesian traditional material cultures (Taylor, 1995) before the long history of colonization that irreparably modified the life of its inhabitants. However, we should also note that he published exclusively in Italian, which represents a barrier for the general acknowledgment of the full importance of Modigliani's work among scholars as well as the general public. No doubt publishing in Italian certainly limited the wide diffusion of his scientific findings. Modigliani, when critically studied as a man of his time and his specific context, can be a vital source of information not only for anthropologists but also for the living descendants of the people he studied. Indeed, today there is an increased interest among the people of Nias in their cultural heritage and in the importance of protecting it for future generations.

Elio Modigliani has been described as an adventurous traveler, often in a simple and stereotypical manner, without doing justice to his complex work as a scholar and field researcher. This article is part of a broader study that aims to understanding Modigliani's complex and multifaceted figure as an ethnologist, anthropologist, and collector immersed in a colonial context (Bigoni *et al.* 2019a, 2019b; Bigoni and Barbagli 2023, 2024; Barbagli and Bigoni 2023). One goal of this report is to make his work more fully accessible to both the scientific community, the people of Nias and others. Our study here focuses on the wooden sculptures of Nias. These wooden sculptures are a very meaningful group of artifacts included in Modigliani's collection conserved at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence that were originally catalogued as «idols». For decades they were presented

in exhibit to the public with the same word. Importantly, Modigliani also used the term *Adù* for these sculptures, which he adopted directly from the people of Nias. In this report we will refer generally to these artifacts as Adu, the word currently used in the literature, leaving in direct citations from Modigliani the form *Adú* with an accent.

We contend that a case study of wooden «idols», Adu, represents an opportunity to investigate how these objects were interpreted in the anthropological framework of Modigliani's time. As Roux (2022) points out *«The “idol” and the “primitive” are one of those ideologically problematic notions – linked to an aesthetic that is more normative than descriptive-which cannot be addressed through a univocal and shared definition. In both cases, however, taking into consideration their historical entanglement opens the way to an investigation into the imagination of the images forged by Europe in its relations with the Other»* (Translated from Roux 2022, 104):

L'idole et le primitif sont de ces notions idéologiquement problématiques-liées à une esthétique plus normative que descriptive-qui ne se laissent pas aborder au travers d'une définition univoque et partagée. Dans les deux cas pourtant, la prise en considération de leur enchevêtrement historique ouvre la voie à une enquête sur l'imaginaire des images forgées par l'Europe dans ses relations à l'Autre.

Adu are also important for investigating two important questions. First, what impact did the imposition of colonial power have on indigenous societies and on cultural production within them. Secondly, what impact did the power relation of colonialism have on the interpretation of objects? (Keurs, 2009).

NIAS: A LONG HISTORY OF COLONIZATION

The Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, founded in 1602 and liquidated in 1795) arrived in the territories today named Indonesia, in 1603. In 1668 VOC started a phase of contracts with inhabitants from Nias, limited to the area of Gunungsitoli, where a first base was established. VOC wanted to develop commercial activities using natural resources of the island, therefore a harbor and store houses were built. In 1740 the VOC left Nias for good as the companies influence in Southeast Asia was waning. After the VOC left Nias in 1776 there were no Europeans on Nias until 1821, when the British tried to establish themselves on Nias.

Sir Stamford Raffles (1781-1826), was nominated Governor of Benkulen (Sumatra) in 1818 and established a trading post on Nias. The British took

over the trading post in Gunungsitoli. The British only stayed until 1825 when the Dutch returned to officially take control over Nias. By this time Indonesia was occupied by the Dutch and known as the Dutch East Indies, but in Nias the situation was far from pacified. For decades the Dutch only controlled a small area around the town of Gunungsitoli. For Europeans it was considered extremely dangerous to dwell in other territories. In 1840 the Dutch decided to try to take control of the whole island. A number of bases were set up around the island in order to increased trade as well as establish military control of all of Nias.

However, the control was limited to the forts and their immediate surroundings, in a general situation of continuous warfare. Whole villages were often burnt to the ground as retaliation for attacks. This unstable, violent, situation is well described by Modigliani in his book «Viaggio a Nias» (1890), a chronicle of his expedition, but also a very interesting account of the situation in different part of the island and of interactions by Europeans and Chinese with the inhabitants (Bigoni and Barbagli, 2023).

Along with the colonization process came the efforts of missionaries trying to convert the population. Among 1821-32 French Catholic priests Vallon and Berard, were the first in a long series of missionaries who came to Nias. Both of them died from disease within 3 months of arriving on the island. The first protestant missionary, German E.L. Denninger arrived in Nias in 1865. He is widely credited with bringing Christianity to Nias. The first years saw very slow progress, as it was almost impossible to travel safely out of Gunungsitoli. It took nine years before the first locals were baptised. After 25 years there were only 706 indigenous converts, but Christianity had got a foothold on the Island. As the north of Nias was the first area to be put under colonial control, the missionaries were more successful there than in the restive south (Hummel and Telaumbanua, 2007).

ELIO MODIGLIANI

Modigliani arrived in the bay of Gunungsitoli (at the time Gunúŋ Sítoli) on 22 April 1886, and left the island on 15 September of the same year. Elio Modigliani's collections arrived in the Florentine museum in two phases and were cataloged in two different periods. The first group of objects, all coming from the trip to Nias in 1886, were donated by Modigliani to the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence in 1887. They were catalogued by Paolo Mantegazza (founder and first director of the museum) in the Second Volume of the Inventory of Ethnographic Collections.

Modigliani continued his journeys to other Indonesian Islands adding more collections of artifacts to document his encounters with local cultures.

On 4 November 1904, Aldobrandino Mochi, successor of Mantegazza at the direction of the Museum, catalogued a second acquisition by Modigliani. It included, in addition to collections from following expeditions to Sumatra, Engano and the Mentawai archipelago, also another group of objects from the previous expedition to Nias (Bigoni *et al.*, 2019). These Nias objects were first kept by Modigliani for his own studies, and only later given to the Museum. Notably, a good part of the Nias objects that had been retained were identified in catalogues as «idols». Modigliani reported also, both in his publication then in his handwritten list of objects destined to the museum, the original name in Nias language: Adú.

Modigliani was well aware that these anthropomorphic wooden statues had a central role in the traditional Nias culture, and he was clearly fascinated by them. He referred to these special artifacts many times in his book «Viaggio a Nias» (1890) using the words idol/idols 84 times and Adú 126 times. For a comparison, the words knife/knives appears 71 times and ornament/ornaments a total of 62. We will see that he tried to explain the meanings of Adú crossing information directly obtained by local informants with others from missionaries who had previously visited the island.

MISSIONARIES AND IDOLS

The traditional Nias culture related to a huge variety of wooden statues referred to as Adu. These statues from Nias are traditional anthropomorphic wooden sculptures of variable dimensions. They are also stylistically diverse representations that range from high realism, rich in details, to completely abstract sculptures. Adu can be of single identities to large associations of individuals united together, even exceeding 100 units. They are linked to the cult of the ancestors, an important motif of Nias culture. Statues like these were usually present in traditional homes or close to dwellings.

The history of colonization, and of the correlated missionary's penetration in Nias villages, is critically important to understand what happened to Adu. Also the collectors' quest for these highly appreciated items impacted their production from native artisans (or artists) and their diaspora in collections around world. Their presence was so emblematic that in 1929 Paul Wirtz wrote the book «Nias, die Insel der Götzen» (Nias, the island of idols). Feldman (1994) studied Adu considering them the most abundant and perhaps interesting form of art in the island.

There are different interpretation of events that happened on the island in the 18th hundreds. A great source of information is represented by the website of the Nias Heritage Museum, part of the project of a social and non-profit organization managed by the Nias Heritage Foundation. The foundation was

founded in 1991 and its activities are focused on the preservation of Nias culture. The web site explains that *«After the Dutch had pacified all of Nias and roads were improved the missionaries could reach all areas of the Island. The number of Christians converts was slowly increasing. The year 1916 saw a huge jump in converts due to an unusual event known as The Great Penitence (Fangesa sebua). The Great Penitence was a mass conversion movement that began in Helefanikha village near Gunungsitoli and then spread rapidly throughout the island. The prime movers behind this movement were not the missionaries but local converts. During the initial religious fervor many traditional practices were banned. Headhunting and slavery had already been outlawed by the Dutch. But other aspects of Nias culture such as the raising of megaliths and carving of wooden statues were now also banned by Nias priests who went from village to village spreading Christianity. Many cultural artifacts that were seen as connected with the religion were destroyed»* (from websites Nias Museum).

Another interpretation of the same events was published in the study by Tjoa-Bonatz: *«The missionaries recognized the importance of these icons to indigenous ancestral worship, and condemned all wooden figures as an embodiment of superstition and idolatry. They believed in purifying houses by removing the images. Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century missionaries were energetic in the destruction of these images, either personally or by persuading the Nias people to destroy them as proof of their obedient conversion or as precondition for the development of a cooperative relationship between the local aristocrats and the missionaries. Initially, the rejection of the wooden images was a form of theatre that accompanied conversion. The missionary Heinrich Sunderman (1949-1919) performed baptism by praising God and kneeling in front of the piled wooden sculptures which would later be set alight»* (Tjoa-Bonatz, 2009, 112). Tjoa-Bonatz gave a historical vision of missionary activities in Nias and the impact on production, use and finally destruction of these artifacts focusing on the activities of the German Protestant missionary Eduard Fries (1877-1923) who spent on the island sixteen years, from 1904 till 1920. Tjoa-Bonatz describes the responsibility of The Great Penitence events from missionaries and differentiates the effect of their impact on the statues on the island. She explains that stone statues were reinterpreted in the new religious frame and kept, while the wooden figures were massively destroyed as part of the process of conversion, a trend that was already started in earlier times by the first missionaries.

Hämmerle (2013) focused on the ethnological interpretation and misinterpretations of the religious tradition in Nias: *«Prior to the arrival of the Dutch colonial power (1846) Nias treasured a lively tradition. The oral tradition usually took place between grandparents and their grandchildren while the parents worked in the field. In front of the house to the right and left on a long window ledge sat the grandparents telling stories or singing songs to their grandchildren who sat*

between them listening. Then a new period began. Some Dutch colonial civil servants and some German missionaries started with written records of the tradition. They also began to interpret the Nias tradition from their point of view. But misconceptions on the part of the Whites (niha safusi uli) resulted in a partial falsification of the Nias tradition. The first Protestant missionary, Denninger (1865) interpreted the name Lowalangi as god's name in the belief that he would be the supreme deity of the upper world. But actually this is only the glorious name of father Hia: Hia Walangi Adu, Hia Walangi Luo» (2013, 175).

The quotation below (Hämmerle, 2013, 178) shows how Hämmerle attempted to explain Modigliani's point of view on religious beliefs in Nias:

«On his expedition to Nias (1886) the Italian anthropologist, zoologist, and plant collector Modigliani came to the conclusion: "For me they are just admirers of their ancestors" (Per me i Nias sono puramente idolatri). As to the different versions of the two genealogical trees, which Modigliani had taken from the two missionaries Sundermann and Thomas, he noticed: "Although the information of these proficient researchers rather remain in the dark, but when comparing them they contain good information on the religious faith of the Niassians nevertheless" (...che fino ad oggi, erano assai confuse, anche per me che avevo attinto informazioni sul posto). But he cannot accept Sundermann's view postulating "a practical theism" on Nias, and acknowledging "polytheism" at the same time (Modigliani, 1890, 612-614: Deismo e idolatria)».

MODIGLIANI'S VIEW

It is difficult to summarize in the brief space of this article the hundreds of pages dedicated by Modigliani to aspects of the immaterial and material culture of the inhabitants of Nias, but we attempt nevertheless to summarize some of Modigliani's major points at least in regards to Adu. Modigliani's detailed descriptions of these ritual objects that he called Adú and of their use, were contextualized within the immaterial and material culture of Nias. Modigliani's approach demonstrates his attempt to compare and merge two types of information sources on the production of artifacts, ceremonies and cosmology of the inhabitants of Nias. Modigliani used both the literature already available at the time, especially the writings of missionaries who had frequented the island, and his own personal experience:

«I will tell in this chapter of the genealogy of the first beings (incorporeal and corporeal) to arrive at the creation of the world and after having narrated how

this occurred, I will speak of the various spirits invoked and feared by the Nías, of the idols, Adú, of the spells and of many beliefs that are annexed to them. For greater brevity and clarity I will group in two genealogical trees the lineages of the first beings as given by the Rev. Sundermann and Thomas. In the remainder of the narration on the religion of the Nías, supporting the precious information of the missionaries with explanations that can reconcile them in doubtful cases, adding clarifications collected by the natives and my own observations, validated by the graphic demonstration of the idols, I will try to put this information in an orderly fashion, which up to now has been very confusing, even for me who had obtained information on the spot by collecting artifacts and information directly from the inhabitants of the island» (Translated from 1890, 614).

Modigliani again stressed that: *«I already said and now I repeat that I took the most part of this information from the already cited publications by the two missionaries Thomas and Sundermann»* (translated from 1890, Nota 1, 615). Modigliani cites J.W. Thomas (articles between 1881 and 1887), and H. Sundermann's *«Die Insel Nias und die Mission daselbst»* (1884), shortly published before his journey. We know that Modigliani had also direct contact with both individuals during his journey:

«The Mission of Nías was found by the evangelical missionaries from Barmen (Vestfalia), in 1866 with Denninger and today counts five missionaries; among them the Decano Kramer who lived a Sítoli, Mr. Fehr and Mr. Sundermann in Ombaláta e Dahána, nearby villages.. Mr. Thomas and Mr. Lageman tried to found another station in the South, but after one year they had to leave to save their lives. When I arrived in Nías they were already back, waiting for permission to build a new Mission; I met again Mr. Thomas later in Europe» (Translated from 1890, 130).

Modigliani was openly fascinated by Adu:

«The Adú are idols almost always made of wood, sometimes of stone, which are found in great numbers in the villages and houses of the Nías. Sometimes they are carefully carved (...) but often they only have traces of roughly sketched human features; they can also be simple pieces of wood decorated with coconut leaves, or images of some animal» (Translated from 1890, 631).

Modigliani tried to understand the deep meaning of these intriguing artifacts:

«The Adú, whatever their form, are usually placed in the house, or in the village in places established by custom; however, while some always remain in the location where they were first placed, others, once the purpose for which they were made has been exhausted, are thrown away as useless. This contempt is explained by their own beliefs. An Adú, a piece of wood effigy for a given circumstance, is not a fetish for the Nías, it does not have the power to grant what is asked of it, but it is an idol respected as an intermediary who is responsible for transmitting to the superior spirits the desires of men revealed to it by the magicians» (Translated from 1890, 631).

Modigliani tried also to understand the role of Adu in Nias cosmology:

«Human gave origin to the Adú; but they draw their great power from the supernatural qualities with which their mystical parents Lou mewona and Selèwe Nazaráta are endowed. The latter, as can be seen from the various beliefs of the Nias, has always maintained a benevolent influence on terrestrial events, (...): because of her the world was created; because of her an immense serpent circles the earth and by unwinding its coils or by opening its jaws causes earthquakes or tidal waves; for her the ears produce grains of rice, nourishment for humans, and have a protector in Maliga; for her finally the Adú were created, as help and guardians of humans» (Translated from 1890, 632).

Modigliani investigated the relationship between Adu and the «erè», explaining the meaning of faetósa and Bèla:

«And it is precisely these pieces of wood in human effigy, called Adú, that the magicians, erè, must invoke; but since they cannot know in advance which of them is the most suitable in each individual case, so following the advice given by Selèwe Nazaráta to Sinói and then communicated by her to her husband and the first erè, beating the drum they invoke that Bèla from whom they took the priestly dignity and who remained a secret advisor or friend of the magician, so that he indicates which of the many Adú is useful in the circumstance. (...) The exorcisms, faetósa, with which the magician manages to have the Bèla indicate which Adú is suitable for the case, are performed by him in private, and then to perform the spell, he goes to the house of the applicant, who is responsible for preparing the wood and the leaves with which the idol will be made and adorned. Here are the various means with which the eré manage to have the Bèla reveal the suitable Adú (...)» (Translated from 1890, 633).

Modigliani describes in detail five types of «exorcisms» or rites that the *eré* perform to establish which *Adú* should be created and used for this purpose. Modigliani also lists a series of 24 events or circumstances in which this process must be put into action: when hunting for human heads, the birth of a child, when giving a name to a child, at the time of circumcision, weddings, pregnancies, when during pregnancy the spouses have not been separated according to the rules, a bad dream, dream of having the shadow of a deceased person nearby, if the ghost of someone appears, to invoke a prosperous rice harvest, so that the chickens and pigs grow prosperous, when the inhabitants of a village go to settle in another site and want to honor the *Bèla* of the place, celebrations in honor of the Chiefs, when one makes gold ornaments, building a house, when one gets a gung, funerals, hunting expeditions, to avoid an epidemic that has already broken out elsewhere, judgments of God [*giudizi di Dio!*], any case of illness, because of the superstition that the bad *Bèla* are perched in the trees, outside the village. Furthermore, «*when a stranger arrives in a village and before they allow a stranger to settle in the village*»: for these last two cases Modigliani himself was the object and witness of these rites. In cases among these that involve matters of common interest, the whole village takes part in the search for the *Adú* and in the sacrificial offerings.

MODIGLIANI'S *ADÚ*

Modigliani described and reported in detail the information collected in the field for individual *Adu* starting from the name communicated to him by the natives, furthermore each case was accompanied by a drawing of the artifact. This documentation allows us to easily trace the objects in the collection, and to reconnect his explanation to the specific objects (Bigoni and Barbagli, 2024).

With a simplification, we can affirm that the Florentine collection includes 24 objects catalogued as *Adu*, but we add here that some of these artifacts include series of single sculptures connected together, from few individuals to even more than 100 (Fig. 1).

In one case only (n. cat. 9596), a figurine is not made of wood, but molded from a much more fragile material: «*Adú Ono aláve, is the name of a figurine made of kneaded earth that hangs in the room of women giving birth to protect the children. The example I obtained in fact represents a pregnant woman with turgid breasts and a pregnant woman also sacrifices to it when she fears being persecuted by the Bèchu matidna, which, as I said, is the spirit of another woman who died in childbirth*» (Modigliani, 1890, 641). Among the more abstract figures we can include *Adú Falávgi Hóro* (n. cat. 5747, Fig. 2) «*made up of two wooden sticks into which a stick is inserted*» (translated from 1990, 641, fig. 188).



Fig. 1. Part of the Adu collected by Modigliani, showing a great variety of styles and sizes. On the first shelf, in the middle the only figurine made from «kneaded earth». Also visible the detail of a very long Adu present in the Florentine collection.



Fig. 2. Adu (n. cat. 5747) that we identified as the artefact described by Modigliani as Adú Falávgi Hóro and represented in his book by the drawing fig. 188 (1890).

Other Adu are very detailed, with a care for particular traits, as the elongated ear lobe, a body modification obtained with the use of dilators and heavy earrings, sometimes dressed with vegetable fibers and red cotton fabric strips (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Adu formed by the sequence of four ancestors, decorated with vegetal fibres and red cotton fabric strips (n. cat. 9597).

Adú zatúa n. cat. 5755 (described by Modigliani 1990, 647 and fig. 193) is composed by 6 figures, representing a sequence of ancestors (Fig. 4). Modigliani claimed that this kind of Adu was the cornerstone of Nias religion. Every figurine was carved and added to the sequence at the death of a parent. These sculptures were collocated close to the fireplaces or suspended from the ceiling in the interior of traditional houses. Modigliani studied the location of the ritual objects inside houses and transcribed the sacred formulas pronounced every time a new figure was added to the sequence.



Fig. 4. Adu formed by the association of six ancestor representations (n. cat. 5755).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We need to highlight a crucial paradox surrounding Adu. On the one hand, they were destroyed by Christian missionaries who considered them very threatening, but on the other hand, they became the Nias artifact most in demand by the art and curio market. Perhaps surprisingly, despite of the fact that Adu were considered «images of idolatry» or «devices of superstition», these «idols» were often brought to Europe by the same missionaries and included in Museum exhibits to propagate the successful evangelization work among indigenous (Taylor, 1994; Feldman, 1994; Tjoa-Bonatz, 2009, 2024; Rodemeier, 2024). A complicated, entangled history involving sensitive religious objects from Nias was created.

Modigliani tried to identify and transcribe as many indigenous terms and names as possible to define the ritual sculptures and their connection with situations, ceremonies and characters linked to the myths and cosmology of the inhabitants of Nias. It should also be noted that Elio Modigliani was of Jewish heritage which may have provided him with a somewhat different

perspective. However, looking for definitions and linguistic solutions to communicate various aspects of spiritual life and artifacts, his main solution was the use of terms extrapolated from the European Christian religious context such as idols, exorcisms, God etc. In the Florence of his time, two theoretical orientations were in opposition: the scientific materialist culture to which Mantegazza, Giglioli and Modigliani himself belonged, and a traditionalist culture that would never have used scientific discoveries to contrast religion. The positivist approach from anthropologists of the time was supposed to be deliberately detached from the Christian point of view, but we can affirm that they used the same missionary vocabulary in their instructions and reports.

This commonality was well expressed by Mantegazza (even if he was also censored by the Catholic Church with many of his publications on the list of prohibited books) and Giglioli, who grew up in England and was a student and follower of T.H. Huxley (well known for his agnostic positions). We can conclude that the «scientific» evolutionary and positivist cultural background of the time shared a great deal of common prejudices against traditional peoples, often described as «savages» and «primitives». Today we know that the understanding (and representation) by the Europeans was certainly very partial and misleading. The discussion about these noteworthy artifacts is an important case study to better understand these dynamics.

Surely, Modigliani relied on different kinds of information already collected by missionaries, not just about idols and beliefs of natives, but also linguistics, geographical knowledge of the island, social customs. It is revealing that Modigliani himself (1890) wrote how it was difficult to understand the meaning and customs of the Nias people and that often his informants' explanations disoriented him. In the chapter dedicated to the Adu, he clearly stated that sometimes to obtain explanations he had had to rely also on the knowledge of the missionaries who had frequented the island in previous years (although at the time with still very limited success).

The main problem lies precisely in a series of misunderstandings that arose from the meanings that the missionaries attributed to these representations, and which ended up spreading incorrect interpretations of cosmology, of the relationship with the ancestors and with the world of spirits that were typical of the Nias culture. The missionaries interpreted the local spiritual and material culture through their own theological lens. While Modigliani was guided by his own particular cultural background, in which the positive approach developed by Mantegazza and Giglioli in the study rules of the «psychology of primitive peoples» played a large part.

We should also add that Adu had for Modigliani a double role: they could be seen (and judged) also as eventual proof of local artistic abilities and

esthetic sensibility:

«This does not mean, however, that among the idols, many of which are rough and poorly depicted, there are some truly remarkable proofs of sculpture, which effectively convey the type of man and sometimes succeed in seeking out even special details (...), such as the long pierced ear. When the Nías artist is not bound by traditional rites, he knows how to rise to independence of design and manages to offer us works that are beautiful for us too» (1890, 72).

These two typology of sculptures are well documented in the Florentine collections (Fig. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5. *Adu* composed by three stylized figures (n. cat. 9595).



Fig. 6. Precious details of a carefully carved Adu (n. cat. 5748).

Despite these problematic approaches, Modigliani is a phenomenal and precious source. The relevance of taking in account what Modigliani collected and wrote is related to the fact that he visited the island and collected artifacts when missionary activities were still limited, and traditional beliefs still very strong. Modigliani provides a detailed account of the myths and cosmological views of the Nias people. He connected single statues to special needs, meanings and rituals. Modigliani tried to catch and transcribe names and terms related to these material and immaterial heritage in the original

native language. Unfortunately, the ponderous book written by Modigliani in Italian and published in 1890, though having a huge resonance nationally, was not widely circulated internationally.

Today, we can certainly appreciate that the Adu are sensitive artifacts, emblematic of a complicated history of colonialism, the impact of missionaries and misleading interpretations. The question of how Adu were described, collected, explained, and ultimately catalogued and communicated in the museum is a topic that needs to be addressed because it can shed light on a series of current anthropological issues.

We hypothesis that many of the considerations and conclusions raised in this case study are relevant to other anthropological collectors of the 19th century. A first step to determine to what extent Modigliani is typical or particular for this historic period of anthropology would be to compare the Modigliani collections with other collections from Nias and specifically Adu. Such comparisons would provide a more inclusive framework and understanding. We can note here again that Modigliani was not the only one to collect artifacts in 1886 from Nias. Giovanni Battista Cerruti (Varazze 1850-Penang 1914) was another Italian explorer who traveled extensively in the Dutch East Indies. In 1886 the two shared a part of the exploration of Nias. Their 1886 trip to the island of Nias proved most fruitful in the amount of ethnographic objects collected, which included shields, lances, war knives and wooden carvings. Cerruti initially donated his findings to the Perak Museum in Malaysia. However, all were sent to the Raffles Museum in 1909. *«It is unknown why Cerruti, an Italian, donated a large portion of his findings to a British colonial museum. Nevertheless, the Raffles Museum was fortunate to have the collection end up in their possession. Cerruti was so taken by Southeast Asia and its peoples that he became Superintendent of the Sakais (Orang Asli) and held this position for sixteen years. In 1908, he wrote a book about his experiences titled My Friends the Savages. As the Perak Museum now restricts itself in Ethnology to the Malay Peninsula, the greater part of its collections from outside that area was acquired by the Raffles Museum, including a collection from Nias, made by Mr. G. B. Cerruti in 1887 when he accompanied by Professor Modigliani. (Raffles Museum and Library Annual Report 1909). Some of Cerruti's pieces from Nias are on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum, including wooden ancestral statues known as adu zatua»* (Osborne, 2008, 8-9). It would be most helpful to make comparison of the Modigliani collection and that of Perak Museum. Perhaps in a future research we will be able to do just that.

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