



**Pospíšilová, D., Hladká, I., Jezberová, A. Pavel Durdík. *Life and Work. Ethnological Collection from the Island of Nias*. Prague: National Museum, 2010. 120 p., ISBN 978-80-7036-272-3**

Reviewed by Laurens Bakker

As historical collections go, there is a time when one assumes that most –if not all- important collections are known and published. In the case of the culture of the Indonesian island of Nias considerable historical collections can be found in museums in Leiden, Delft, Kopenhagen, Zurich, Gunung Sitoli and Jakarta. The contents of the Nias collection brought together by Pavel Durdík in Prague's Náprstek Museum was, however, quite poorly known outside of the Czech Republic and for remedying that fact alone the English language and full-colour book by Pospíšilová, Hladká and Jezberová already deserves praise.

The book provides a biography of Durdík, who spent over two years as a military doctor in the garrison of the Royal Dutch East Indies Army at Gunung Sitoli in Northern Nias in the 1880s, at which time he build up a sizeable and diverse collection of objects for his friends Vojta and Josefa Náprstek. The Colonial authorities had subjugated and Christianized a major part of the island at the time of Durdík's stay, causing a crisis in indigenous culture and rendering numerous Niassan religious and symbolic artifacts meaningless or even sacrilegious in the eyes of newly found Christianity. Durdík's collection thus was brought together at a time when Niassan culture was on the brink of irreversible change, and many of the collection's objects are nowadays no longer to be encountered beyond a few museums and private collections. Pospíšilová, Hladká and Jezberová deal as much as possible with the collection and its collector in their temporal contexts; we come to know a lot about Durdík's (hard) life in the Indies, and his thoughts on colonial society. This is what sets the book apart from other such collections; an overview of the objects and a discussion of their meanings and usages is –however interesting since they concern a 'new' collection- not unique. The way in which the authors use fragments of Durdík's letters and other writings to illustrate their text, however, is. It prevents these ancient objects from being 'just' exotic objects and tells us, twenty-first century readers, how Durdík experienced the place and era where the collection was brought together. Unfortunately, Durdík wrote preciously little of his pursuit of collecting. We gain very little insight into his personal experiences of obtaining these objects, or his thoughts and impressions of them. Neither the authors nor Durdík himself, who passed away in 1903, can alter that, however. Historical research often inspires desires for more information in its readers that must remain unfulfilled.

The book's great forte is the combination of historical insight into a now largely altered culture, collection catalogue, personal biography and a contextual discussion of the presence

and activities of Czechs in both the colonial Dutch army and the Dutch Indies at large. This attention for the collector and his background addresses the Náprstek Museum's Nias collection in an original and explanatory manner that illustrates the movement of the objects from one context –Nias' disappearing traditions and beliefs- to another in which the objects became museum pieces in the capital city of a Central European country. This expands the objects' identities beyond their existence in nineteenth century Nias, giving them a continued history in Czechia. An element that certainly adds to the reader's understanding of the collection and its contents in the twenty-first century.

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