



University of Naples L'Orientale
Department of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean

PhD in Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean Studies
XXXVIII cycle (2022-2023)

**Digital Heritage as Decolonial Practice: The Case of the
Nias Ethnographic Collection in the Museum of
Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence**

Candidate

Ahmad Ginanjar Purnawibawa
DAAM/00159

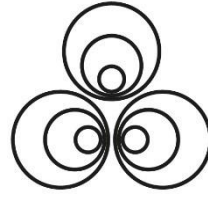
Supervisor

Prof. Chiara Zazzaro

Co-supervisor

Prof. Antonia Soriente

Napoli, 2025



Dottorato
Asia
Africa
e Mediterraneo

University of Naples L'Orientale
Department of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean

PhD in Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean Studies
XXXVIII cycle (2022-2023)

DOCTORAL THESIS

Title:

**Digital Heritage as Decolonial Practice:
The Case of the Nias Ethnographic Collection in the
Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence**

Candidate

Ahmad Ginanjar Purnawibawa
DAAM/00159

Research Director

Prof. Chiara Zazzaro

Co-Director of Research

Prof. Antonia Soriente

Coordinator

Prof. Ignazio Tantillo

Academic Year 2025

Abstract

This research departs from a question of how and what to decolonise from a diasporic ethnographic collection in a museum located in a country that is not directly related to the community of origin through formal colonisation. This thesis, through a case study of the Nias ethnographic collection held at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence, Italy, tried to explore the answer. Collected by Elio Modigliani in 1886, the Nias collection, comprising 180 ethnographic objects and 26 human remains, stands today as both a testament to Modigliani's scientific endeavours and as a fragmented record of Nias' cultural heritage before the profound transformations brought by colonialism and missionary intervention.

This research investigates how decolonisation can be performed through digital restitution, focusing on the reactivation of these displaced objects and their reconnection with the Nias communities of origin. It examines how local stakeholders, including museum personnel, scholars, community leaders, and craftspeople, perceive restitution not merely as the physical return of artefacts, but as the restoration of knowledge, access, and cultural agency. Fieldwork conducted in 2023 and 2024 revealed that communities in Nias prioritise visibility and engagement over ownership, emphasising digital reconnection as a meaningful and pragmatic alternative to repatriation.

The findings demonstrate that digital restitution, when conducted collaboratively and ethically, can operate as a decolonising practice, redistributing authority and enabling shared narratives between institutions and source communities. Through the creation of open-access resources via Wikimedia, Sketchfab, and YouTube, this project facilitated both scholarly and community access to the collection, promoting cross-cultural dialogue and the revitalisation of traditional knowledge.

This thesis argues that the Nias collection represents a form of shared heritage, where digital access functions as a bridge for reinterpreting colonial archives and supporting intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. By digitally returning the Nias objects, the project has allowed the community to reclaim their voice and reinterpret their heritage on their own terms. Ultimately, this study shows that restitution, whether physical or digital, is not an endpoint but part of an ongoing process of decolonisation.