

The True Spirit of the Adu Zatua

Exploring the origins of traditional Nias woodcarvings

By Dinesh Sathisan

A friend showed me a woodcarving she had bought in Indonesia because it was “so tribal, so beautiful,” but she had no idea of its traditional purpose. “That’s an *adu zatua*,” I explained, adding that the figures from the island of Nias (off the west coast of Sumatra) traditionally housed the spirits of one’s ancestors and had to be appeased with offerings from time to time. She wasn’t too pleased to hear that – until I assured her that her ‘souvenir’ was made for the tourist market and was therefore, (hopefully) spirit-free.

Anthropomorphic figures of humans carved out of wood played a significant social role in Nias culture. Legend has it that Silewe Nazarata, an important goddess in the Nias pantheon, introduced the tradition of creating wooden idols to mark certain crucial events. Ancestor worship was at the core of Nias beliefs (*‘adu’* means ‘carving’ and *‘zatua’* means ‘elder’). Remaining in good communication and favour with the dead was thought to improve the destinies of the living. In other words, the *adu zatua* served as prophylactics against misfortune!

Adu zatua were carved by specialists who were commissioned by the family just after the death of a loved one. The wood considered to be perfect for the job, said to resemble the skin colour of the Nias people, was called *ma’usō*, for the place the Nias believed the dead resided. The carvings were not exact copies of the deceased but rather of a general human form.

The deceased was encouraged to inhabit the carved figure, sometimes through a specific ceremony performed by a ritual specialist, sometimes by a bamboo tube used to capture the last breath of the dying (and thus his heart-soul or *moko-moko*) and transfer it to the idol. Another belief was that the soul of the deceased left the body and emerged later in the form of a small spider. The relatives then looked around the grave for a spider to bring home so the soul could be passed into the statue. If a statue cracked, it was believed the spirit had disappeared and so a new carving had to be created and a new ritual performed.

The Nias made offerings to the *adu zatua*, often eggshells or innards from a pig’s liver or heart, to appease the ancestors during important events such as births, weddings and deaths. This important task was usually performed by the eldest son. The *adu zatua* were commonly placed on the right wall of the main room of the house and a new figure was added each time another family member passed away.

There were male and female versions of *adu zatua*. The females were carved with earrings, while the males were often carved with a single ear pendant and an armband. (Adornment is missing from the male *adu zatua*s in the Southeast Asia gallery at the ACM.) Bodies were carved with the legs bent at the knees, possibly in a sitting position, and the arms bent at the elbow, hands clasped under the chest. The figures were sometimes depicted holding a betel mortar and pestle, sometimes shown holding onto a peg.

By the 1920s, Dutch missionaries in Nias had outlawed the carving of idols, which led to severe policing of the *adu zatua*. They were collected by civil servants or confiscated in other ways and destroyed. Most Nias have since converted to Christianity and the practise of ancestral woodcarving has become a thing of the past on the island. Today, *adu zatua* are created solely for

the tourist market and can be easily found at the Antiques Market in Jakarta and handicraft emporiums in Bali. Not only are they now made of inferior woods by less exacting craftsmen but sadly, these souvenirs have also lost their original meaning.

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Photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum



Nias Ancestral Carving