This neat and well-illustrated booklet put out by the Moluks Historisch Museum or the Museum Sedjarah Maluku located in Utrecht, the Netherlands, tells the complex, politically charged, and often messy tale of Malukans in the Netherlands. More precisely, it focuses on one particular group that forms the bulk of the Malukan community in this country—the 12,500 soldiers of the Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger (KNIL) and their families who arrived in the Netherlands from Indonesia in the spring and summer of 1951 for what they thought would be a brief and temporary residence and ended up staying until the present day. The booklet details how the evacuation of Malukan KNIL personnel came to pass in the political turmoil of the recently decolonized, brand-new nation-state of Indonesia and in the context of the move on the part of some Malukans to found a separate Malukan state—the so-called Republik Maluku Selatan or RMS. By extension, it describes why, contrary to both their own expectations and to those of the Dutch government, these men and their families were never repatriated to Indonesia. It also tells how, once in the Netherlands, the soldiers and their families were housed haphazardly in special camps that were deliberately isolated from the Dutch population and adapted from an odd assortment of structures that formerly served other—and, perhaps ironically—often disciplinary purposes: military barracks, prisons, convents, and even two former Nazi concentration camps.

The final sections of the booklet focus on the complex politics of the Malukan community, both within the community and in relation to their former colonial ruler and employer, the Dutch government. For instance, a major point of contention with the latter that repeatedly troubled Dutch–Malukan relations was that, upon arrival to the Netherlands in 1951, KNIL personnel were told without further ado that they had been discharged from the Dutch army. In the museum, a long, narrow hallway stacked to the ceiling with the worn suitcases of former KNIL members—labeled with names like Wattimena, Manuputty, and Manuhutu, and containing the never-unpacked uniforms these men had worn when they served in the colonial army—bears poignant testimony to the feel-
ings of betrayal and disenchantment shared more widely in the Malukan community. In addition to Dutch–Malukan relations, this final section also touches upon conflicts within the Malukan community itself such as those which at times flared up between people from Ambon and the surrounding islands, on the one hand, and those from Southeast Maluku, especially the Kei Islands, on the other. It also describes the politicization of the second generation of Malukans, for the most part born and raised in the camps, which in part followed from the execution of the RMS leader Soumokil by the Indonesian authorities in 1966, and resulted during the mid-1970s in militant actions such as the occupation of the Indonesian consulate in Amsterdam and several train hijackings.

The booklet concludes on a conciliatory note with the so-called Mutual Statement signed by the Dutch government and representatives of the Malukan community in 1986. This statement established programs to alleviate Malukan housing and employment problems (after the move out of the camps), and also included measures aimed at providing some compensation to the first generation of Malukans. Among the latter was funding for the creation of the Malukan Historical Museum, which put out this useful introduction to the complex history and ongoing situation of Malukans in the Netherlands.


Reviewed by G. G. WEIX, University of Montana

This slim volume is representative of a reflexive turn in the study of material culture of the Indonesian archipelago. It contrasts the forces placing traditions and objects “in jeopardy” with the efforts of anthropologists, museum specialists, art historians, and others to document the aesthetic and intrinsic worth of cultural resources as art. Focused on current transformations, the essays reflect concern for and attention to Indonesian “cultural resource policy” in preserving diversity of local traditions even as national goals work to Indonesianize the many societies present. The contributors are equally sensitive to the growing Indonesian art market—coupled with global demand—which is often capricious in its effects as it locates and seeks to acquire “primitive art” throughout the world.
A fine historical sensibility governs the volume. As Suwati Kartiwa, Director of the National Museum of Indonesia, notes in the foreword, Indonesian traditions have been shaped by colonial, missionary, and postcolonial interests of tourism and commodity production. The case studies here explore the framing discourse as well as the market forces generating new forms of art. They also provide a broader comparative framework for notions of authenticity, indigenous rights, religious meaning, cultural context, and alienation, as well as the institutional conditions in which Indonesians are actively appropriating means to preserve cultural resources and display local traditions.

While I cannot comment on all the essays fully, these highlights speak to the strengths of looking outward past Java and Bali and inward to the ethics of the study of cultural traditions as art. Ruth Barnes’s essay on Lamaholot textiles notes her ethical dilemma in publicly speaking about the ikat weaving of East Flores as collectors seek to remove it from the local context of bridewealth exchange where it is an essential marker of marriage. With the advent of international dealers approaching village weavers in the 1970s, the older forms of “proper cloth” became lineage treasures while newer forms began to circulate. As these circular textiles are fully displayed, the “living threads” or “thread of life” are cut, rendering the object lifeless in local terms. Aesthetics here is intimately linked to a social production of death. This is most evident in Eric Crystal’s essay on ancestral statuary of Tana Toraja. “Tau tau statues ... project both the shadow of death ... and the image of life” representing “the hidden soul of the deceased” (30). Crystal describes the virtual decimation of tau tau from Tana Toraja between 1968, when 83 villages maintained thousands of these statues, and the present, although 50,000 Toraja continue to practice the aluk ta dolo religion. He notes that international tourism facilitated this with new roads, the paths by which Toraja accomplices helped spirit the statues, or parts, out of the burial sites. One of the most poignant photographs in the volume is a man standing with a headless tau tau: evidence that soon the object of the tourists’ desire will be disfigured in part by the infrastructure that brings them to Tana Toraja.

Jerome Feldman writes about the ingenious disguises of sculpture images on Nias as one strategy to counter the effects of global markets, in some cases influenced by Christian imagery replacing older human figures, thus “clothing [distinctive Nias tradition] in western (and Chris-
tian) style” (50). Nias artist-entrepreneurs continue to innovate forms for auctions at Sotheby’s (53). Jean-Paul Barbier and Laurence Moss offer similar queries about the desire to collect, to display, or to inventory in the face of local guardianship of the dead and the possibility that communities will replace older treasures with commodities that they take as equivalent in value. In this light, what is the responsibility of museum specialists?

Paul Taylor, Lawrence Moss, and Michael Heppell all speak to the paradox that, in establishing museums as a reservoir against the destruction of cultural resources, “a market for good, genuine objects stimulates a traffic in fakes” (MacClancy 1988: 171, cited on 102). The issue of deception and its alter-ego, commemoration, fuels the overarching opposition of this volume: cultural traditions eroded by the incessant demands of/for cash. Yet we are left wondering about the equally troubling set of questions implied by these stimulating essays: What of the people who make objects of art? At what point does our concern for their traditions further obfuscate our common plight, albeit from vastly different positions, as exchange becomes the medium for experiencing aesthetic appeal?