

Textiles and Dragon-Snakes

The Vatter Collection in Frankfurt

By Ruth Barnes



Fig. 1: Hanna Vatter playing with a tame cockatoo. Eastern Flores, 1929.

Fig. 2: The clan elders of Leloba near Ili Mandiri: Basa Doke Hurint, Igo Subang Hurint, Peku Koten, unknown, Laba Kelen, unknown, Motok Balan (behind Laba Kelen), November, 1928.

One of the finest and best documented early collections of ethnographic material from eastern Indonesia is found in the Museum der Weltkulturen in Frankfurt, Germany.¹ Yet until now this remarkable group of objects—more than 1,000 items—has been largely ignored, its existence known only to a small number of experts with a particular interest in the village societies of Indonesia's Lesser Sunda Islands. The entire collection and an assessment of the collector's work has recently been published in catalogue form² and hopefully this will bring it the attention it deserves. This short article provides an introduction to the collection and its collector, and briefly introduces the cultural context in which the material was once situated.

On the morning of November 9, 1928, the small steamship *De Clerq*, one of the ships of the Netherlands Indies' government shipping company, was approaching the narrow Solor Strait east of Flores in eastern Indonesia. On board were Ernst and Hanna Vatter, who were traveling as far as

Larantuka, a small town at the foot of the Ili Mandiri volcano in East Flores. This was going to be their base for an expedition that would last seven months and take them to the islands of Solor, Adonara, Lembata, Pantar, and Alor. At the time, Vatter was curator at the Ethnographic Museum in Frankfurt, and he had been sent to collect on behalf of the museum and provide an initial survey of the region.

Vatter had been working at the museum since 1913 and had gained considerable experience in the relatively new field of museum ethnology, but this journey was to be his first field experience. His publications before this trip show that he had a keen and well-established interest in ethnographic art and material culture. Of particular importance was his book, *Religiöse Plastik der Naturvölker*, published in 1926. At the time, the Frankfurt Museum already had a considerable Indonesian collection, of which the most substantial part had been assembled by Johannes Elbert in 1909–10 when he visited



Fig. 3: Armed warriors, adonara. February 1929.

Fig. 4: Young women fetching water. Leloba, Ili Mandiri, November 1928.

Sulawesi and the western part of the Lesser Sunda Islands. To complement this material, Vatter intended to travel to the islands east of Elbert's itinerary. He was accompanied by his young wife, his second, whom he had married earlier that year.

The first month of their time in the islands was spent entirely in one village, Leloba, at the north-western base of Ili Mandiri, in order to acquaint themselves with the local culture and language. Although the objective of the journey was primarily to collect for the museum, Vatter was a trained ethnologist and he also wanted to gain information about the social context that produced these objects. In addition to objects of material culture, he also collected oral history, myths, and religious and agricultural chants. In addition, he noted—and occasionally was bemused by—the complex kinship systems that governed clan affiliations and marriage rules in the western region of his expedition. During the month in Leloba, he accumulated more information and in greater detail than he would be able



Fig. 5: Shield, *senapu*. Lembata, Lamatukang.

Painted wood. 110 x 32 cm
cat. no. 1094. N.S. 28062a.





to do in any subsequent location, since he and his wife were able to spend only a few days at each. His book, *Ata Kuean: unbekannte Bergvölker im tropischen Holland* (1932), was the result of this ethnological survey and it remained the only source of its kind for many years.

After Leloba, they visited all of East Flores and the islands Solor, Adonara, and Lembata, always returning briefly to Larantuka between excursions to store and record their rapidly growing collection. The eastern part of the expedition, covering Pantar and Alor, was explored using the regional capital of Kalabahi on the latter island as a base. The western part of this area, from East Flores to Lembata, is called Lamaholot and is united by language and social structure, although differences of dialect and local custom exist, sometimes changing from village to village. Pantar and Alor, in contrast, have a bewildering number of languages, although certain cultural traits are shared.³

Despite variations in social structure and language, the islands have much in common. Geographically they are mountainous and, except for Alor, volcanic. Their climate is dry, with virtually no rain outside the months of the west monsoon from December to March. Their population practices swidden agriculture and grows maize, tubers, and rice, mainly in dry cultivation. Coffee and cashew nuts are cash crops and are now economically significant, although they played only a small role in the 1920s. Fish are nutritionally important, although few communities specialize exclusively in maritime activities.⁴ The regional towns more than doubled in size during the early twentieth century, but most people still live in small villages and tend their fields. Kinship is traced through patrilineal descent, and the community is usually divided into clans, the members of which share a common ancestor.⁵

In his documentation, Vatter notes and somewhat romantically disapproves of the conversion to Christianity or Islam. Larantuka has an old Catholic tradition that goes back to Portuguese influences in the sixteenth century, and the Lamaholot region at large had Catholic missionaries from the late nineteenth century onwards. Islamic coastal settlements were already well established when Europeans first

Fig. 6: Two roof gable figures, *dlo*, Lewohokeng, Solor. cat. no. 164, 165.



Fig. 7: Skull of a deer, a *'usa baka*, Central Alor, Tanglapui, Gomufe. The skull was kept as a house trophy after its use for ceremonies and offerings.

Painted skull of a deer with horns, inserted wooden eyes and wreaths of bamboo and reed at the end of the horns. 71 x 42 x 19 cm. cat. no. 1027: N.S. 28592

arrived in the early sixteenth century and have continued to flourish. Alor started to convert to Protestant Christianity in the early twentieth century, with a particularly destructive effect on indigenous culture, material and otherwise. Today more than ninety percent belong to one or the other of the two world religions, but the role of ancestors and the ceremonies held on their behalf remain important. Agricultural rites are also generally still carried out.

Although the twentieth century brought major changes, indigenous social and religious beliefs are still strong and have often found their niche in a syncretic form of religion. The material culture of the islands has changed considerably over the years, with many functional objects that once were commonly made from bamboo, coconut, or palm leaf now replaced by plastic, glass, or porcelain. The village environment looks different today. People use different utensils in their kitchens and to serve food, and they certainly dress differently. For that reason, the Frankfurt collection has an important part in recording and preserving the history of the people visited during Vatter's expedition.

The Collection

Throughout his travels, Vatter tried to gather objects that were representative of any given location, and, to a point, he was successful in assembling a collection that is an effective survey of the material culture of the islands. He should be credited with collecting both finished objects and the tools and implements that were used in their production. Prior to the expedition, the major focus of his interest had been in artistic creation, aesthetics, and the role of the artist in non-Western societies. As a collector in the field, he took a much broader perspective and tried to include objects of everyday use, as well as items that had a religious or ceremonial function. In his collection, plain and ordinary objects are found side-by-side with objects that obviously give evidence of artistic talent and express a specific aesthetic approach. All of the items are recorded with meticulous detail, including the object's function, indigenous name, and place of origin and purchase. Occasionally, and especially for some of the high-quality textiles, the name of the maker is also included.

Fig. 8: Arm and bracelet from an ancestral offering pole, *ngadu*. Central Flores, Ngada, Bajawa. The stone bracelet represents an ivory example worn by nobles.

Wood, limestone. Length of arm, 30.5 cm; diameter of bangle, 12 cm; cat. no. 1028. N.S. 27535a,b



Facing page, clockwise from upper left:

Fig. 9: Man with a cylindrical hair ornament. Pantar, May 1929.

Fig. 10: Two side combs, *kir*. Pantar, Miriabang region, Tolab.

Bamboo, mother of pearl, vegetal fiber. 18.5 x 5 cm and 16.2 x 4.3 cm; N.S. 28149 and N.S. 28150

Fig. 12: Man in dance costume. Tanjung Bunga, December 1928. Vatter collected similar material in Mandiri.

Fig. 11: Hair pin, *isak*. Lebang, Pantar.

The highlights of the collection differ between the western and eastern part of the expedition. From East Flores to Lembata, exceptionally fine warp ikat textiles are produced, woven from cotton. Best in quality are women's cloths from Ili Mandiri and Lobe Tobi in East Flores, western Solor, and Ili Api, Lamalera, and Lerek on Lembata. These are all elaborately worked in the ikat technique and dyed with natural dyes, mainly *Morinda citrifolia* for red and indigo for dark blue. At the time they were collected, the cloths were used as prestige wear, but they also had (and still have) an important ceremonial function as gifts between clans on the occasion of marriage and other life cycle rituals. Vatter fully recognized the importance of these textiles and he recorded the names of their particular designs as far as possible. He also appreciated their exceptionally high aesthetic quality.

On Pantar and Alor, on the other hand, textiles were produced only in coastal communities of non-indigenous origin, and they had an entirely utilitarian function. There artistic production focused on carved and incised objects, most spectacularly developed in the wooden *naga* figures of Alor, a form of dragon-snake that had (and often still has) a protective function for the individual and ensures the fertility of the community. Small objects—betel-boxes, cups, spoons, and decorative combs—are also ornamented with intricate spiral motifs and sometimes include *naga* representations set into an abstract setting.

These two groups of the collection are visually the most striking. But items of personal adornment—necklaces, earrings, belts, and the distinctive hair cylinders from Alor—and baskets used for a variety of purposes are also carefully worked and often exquisitely decorated. The basketry of eastern Indonesia is technically among the most versatile found anywhere. A conceptually complex, hexagonal basketry weave is prominently represented from the western part of the expedition, used in particularly elaborate form for holding tobacco and the ingredients that are part of the betel quid. Baskets from Alor excel in fine twill weave, often highlighted with different colors. Much of the raw material for these was locally found, and the weavers were imaginative in their utilization of palm leaf, bamboo, coconut shell, and seeds.

The Collection's Further History

Why did this exceptional collection remain obscure for so long? There are two reasons. The first is tied to the history of scholarship in eastern Indonesia, which neglected the region visited by Ernst Vatter until the 1970s. After the expedition of 1928–29, the Lamaholot region was ignored by professional anthropologists for twenty years, until Raymond Kennedy briefly visited Flores. The Catholic missionary Paul Arndt published several extensive works on East Flores, Solor, and Adonara, which are especially valuable for their linguistic information and records of oral history.⁷ Except for the works of Martha Nicolspeyer (1940) and Cora Dubois (1944), Alor and Pantar remained relatively uncharted territory for ethnological research until quite recently. Only with the growing interest in Indonesian textiles, starting in the 1970s, did this part of the collection eventually gain prominence. The first ikat cloth to be exhibited and published (except for in Vatter's book) was a textile from Solor, which was part of the 1979 show at the Textile Museum in Washington.⁸ My own research on the textiles of Lamalera was enriched by the comparison to early twentieth century textiles in the collection.⁹ Eventually an exhibition in Los Angeles in 1994 paid considerable tribute to the quality of the collection and its outstanding documentation.¹⁰ Since the first display of the collection shortly after its arrival in 1929, which was held on the occasion of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary, no exhibition has presented the full breadth of Vatter's material.

The second reason for its relative obscurity is related to the history of the Frankfurt Museum in the 1930s and its effect on Vatter's life. He was granted only a few years of active scholarly life after his return from Indonesia. In 1932, his book about the expedition appeared, and he published only one further ethnological paper in 1934, which discussed the *naga* figures of Alor. Early in the decade, the Africa scholar Leo Frobenius assumed an important role in the museum and in 1934 he was made its director. Frobenius and Vatter were opposites in academic and personal terms, and it was impossible for them to work together. In his method of analysis, Vatter was empirically meticulous, while Frobenius tended to come to sweeping conclusions. Politically they also were in opposite camps during these turbulent years. Frobenius did not join the Nazi party, but he was ultra-conserva-





Fig. 13: Three pendants, *polarinu*, Keloreama, Solor.

tive, while Vatter was comfortable with a liberal political spectrum. His wife Hanna came from a well-to-do Jewish family and they felt at home in the urbane intellectual and artistic setting of the late 1920s.

Vatter asked to be transferred from the museum after Frobenius' appointment and he moved to the Municipal Library in 1935. Matters were to get worse. Because of his Jewish wife, in June 1937 he lost his right to teach at the university and he was forced into retirement from his post at the library a few months later. He had just turned forty-nine. Very abruptly, late in the summer of 1939, he emigrated to Chile with his wife and their three sons. World War II broke out as their ship was leaving Rotterdam for South America.

The emigration finalized the end of Ernst Vatter's academic work. In Chile he and his wife started a chicken farm, which soon failed. The buildings were refurbished into a children's home, and it became quite popular for emigrant families in Santiago to send their offspring there for the school holidays. Vatter by then was not a healthy man. He had suffered from angina pectoris during the crossing from Europe and he never fully recovered. He died of heart failure on April 22, 1943.

His wife eventually returned to Germany in the 1970s. With luck and a bit of detective work, I established contact with her in 1986. It was a surprise for me to find her still alive, and for her this meeting was the first inkling she had had of any interest in her husband's work and the collections he had brought back to Frankfurt. She made a great contribution to further research on their expedition and findings, by making available all of her photographic material from the expedition, as well as her field diary. The photographs and notes were invaluable when their travels from 1928–29 were retraced more than seventy-five years later, just in time to find some people still alive who had been photographed as children at the time of the expedition, and to identify by name several men and women who had appeared in the expedition accounts.

Ethnographic collections allow for a glimpse of life at a particular moment in history. If they are well documented, this pastiche can be especially valuable. It is rare that a link can be established to the past, but the recent work on the Vatter collection provides an exception. It gives access to the history of people in eastern Indonesia by making both personal and historical links that are meaningful and important to the present. The collection of artifacts comes alive again to those whose ancestors produced it, and to the scholars and collectors who now appreciate the effort and skill that went into making the objects.

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NOTES

1. The museum houses the city's ethnographic collections. It started life as the Völkermuseum in 1904, eventually became Völkerkundemuseum, and most recently changed its name to Museum der Weltkulturen (Museum of World Cultures).
2. Barnes, 2004.
3. The linguist Stokhof (1975, 1977) counts nine languages for Alor and six for Pantar.
4. Notable exceptions are Lamalera on Lembata and Lamakera on Solor, which have traditionally engaged in hunting of whales and other large sea animals, such as manta ray.
5. Kinship and clan relations have been studied in some detail for the Lamaholot from East Flores to Lembata, but at present the information for Pantar and Alor remains incomplete.
6. These are tubes made from palm leaf sheaths, formerly worn by men to hold together their frizzy mane of hair.
7. Arndt, 1937, 1938, 1940, 1951.
8. Gittinger, 1979.
9. Barnes, 1989.
10. Hamilton, 1994.



Fig. 14 (above): Three spoons, *tadi*, Tafuikadeli, Kalaisi, Central Alor.

Fig. 15: Original file card written by Ernst Vatter showing his method of documentation.

Fig. 16: Four spoons, *hsi*, Pantar, region of Muriabang, Tolab.

Coconut shell, 12.3 x 5 cm, 11.1 x 6.5 cm, 10.9 x 5.8 cm, 11.8 x 7.5 cm. N.S. 28152a-d.

