



Exhibition Report

Melihat di Balik Wajah Ono Niha
Looking Behind the Faces of Ono Niha

12 November 2024—ongoing
Museum Pusaka Nias
Gunungsitoli, Nias, North Sumatra

Research by Pressing Matter
Exhibition by CultureLab

Data as of 2 December 2025

Executive Summary

Melihat di Balik Wajah Ono Niha

12 November 2024 – ongoing
Report period: 12 Nov 2024 – 30 Nov 2025
Museum Pusaka Nias, Gunungsitoli, N Sumatra

Total visitors

Total registered visitors: 4,765 pax
(average per month: 397 pax)

Demography majority:

Adult from general public. Mostly Nias inhabitants.
School pupils from all education level and university students.

International visitors who visit Nias for leisure.

Peak visits usually during December-January when Nias diaspora return home for Christmas and New Year.

Participatory Surveys

52.4% of visitors had never heard of the plaster casts made by Kleiweg de Zwaan before.

When encountering the plaster casts, visitors reported a range of emotional responses: **pride (25.5%)**, happiness (16.4%), sadness (15.9%), anger (14.6%), neutrality (14.2%), and surprise (13.5%).

Additionally, 23% of visitors felt a **personal connection to the individuals** represented in the casts, perceiving them as their ancestors. This sense of connection strengthened their belief that the casts should be treated with respect and remembrance.

Regarding the future of the plaster casts, 49.2% of respondents preferred that they be **returned to Nias**, 35.6% believed they should be returned to the descendants of the individuals, and 15.2% felt they should remain in the Netherlands.

Social Media & Media Analysis

CultureLab produced 15 posts in collaboration with Museum Pusaka Nias, UNIRAYA, UMU, and artist Syaura Qotrunadha.

Exhibition teaser	3 posts
Exhibition content	11 posts
Opening clip	1 post

Average engagement: **8.95** (very high)

Engagement with the public, especially the Nias community, has also been high on one of the museum curator's TikTok platforms, where followers requested the curator to share photos of people who have the same surnames as the cast individuals.



Social Media Analysis



Social Media Analysis

Post	Topic	Engagement Rate (%)
1	Teaser 1	4.8
2	Teaser 2	7.0
3	Official poster	9.2
4	Introduction: Katumbukha	9.0
5	Colonial infrastructure	15.1
6	Physical anthropology	12.9
7	JP Kleiweg de Zwaan	4.1
8	Plaster cast making process	10.6
9	Plaster casts in Dutch museums	11.6
10	Effect of physical anthropology	10.4
11	Mbawa bekhu	6.4
12	Bringing plaster casts back to life	12.4
13	Exhibition opening reels	3.72
14	Your voice matters!	9.6
15	Exhibition situation	7.4

Average: 8.95

Exhibition teaser	3 posts
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The **topics with highest engagement** are typically those related to the plaster casts and the colonial histories behind them. In contrast, posts about the exhibition setting, teasers, and posters show lower engagement, possibly due to the limited presence of faces or images (algorithm preference), or external factors such as changes in the algorithm formula.

In terms of **content**, one social media user drew a connection between the Nias plaster casts in the Netherlands and similar collections at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence, as well as Nias artifacts collected by Elio Modigliani.

The content also resonates **emotionally**. One audience member reacted to a post describing the violent methods used to create the plaster casts with the comment, "Ngeri juga ya!" ("It's pretty unsettling!"). This indicates that the posts successfully evoke empathy and raise awareness about past violence.

Although not achieving the highest engagement rate, the post with the **most interactions** is "Bringing Plaster Casts Back to Life", which received 1,337 likes, 57 shares, and 217 saves. Content-wise, it is one of the strongest posts, as it presents full images of the plaster casts and invites the public to help identify the individuals and recover their personal histories.



Media Coverage

<i>Post</i>	<i>Media</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Title</i>
1	RRI	5 Dec 2024	<u>Pameran Cetakan Wajah Orang Nias Masa Kolonial di Museum Pusaka Nias: Mengungkap Sejarah dan Budaya Leluhur</u>
2	RRI	29 Dec 2024	<u>Asyiknya Main Alat Musik Tradisional Nias Saat Libur</u>
3	Tempo	16 Mar 2025	<u>Katumbukha Zebua Pulang ke Nias</u>
4	Tempo	16 Mar 2025	<u>Bagaimana Pemerintah Kolonial Belanda Meneliti Orang Nias</u>
5	Tempo	16 Mar 2025	<u>Artefak Orang Nias di Negeri Kincir Angin</u>

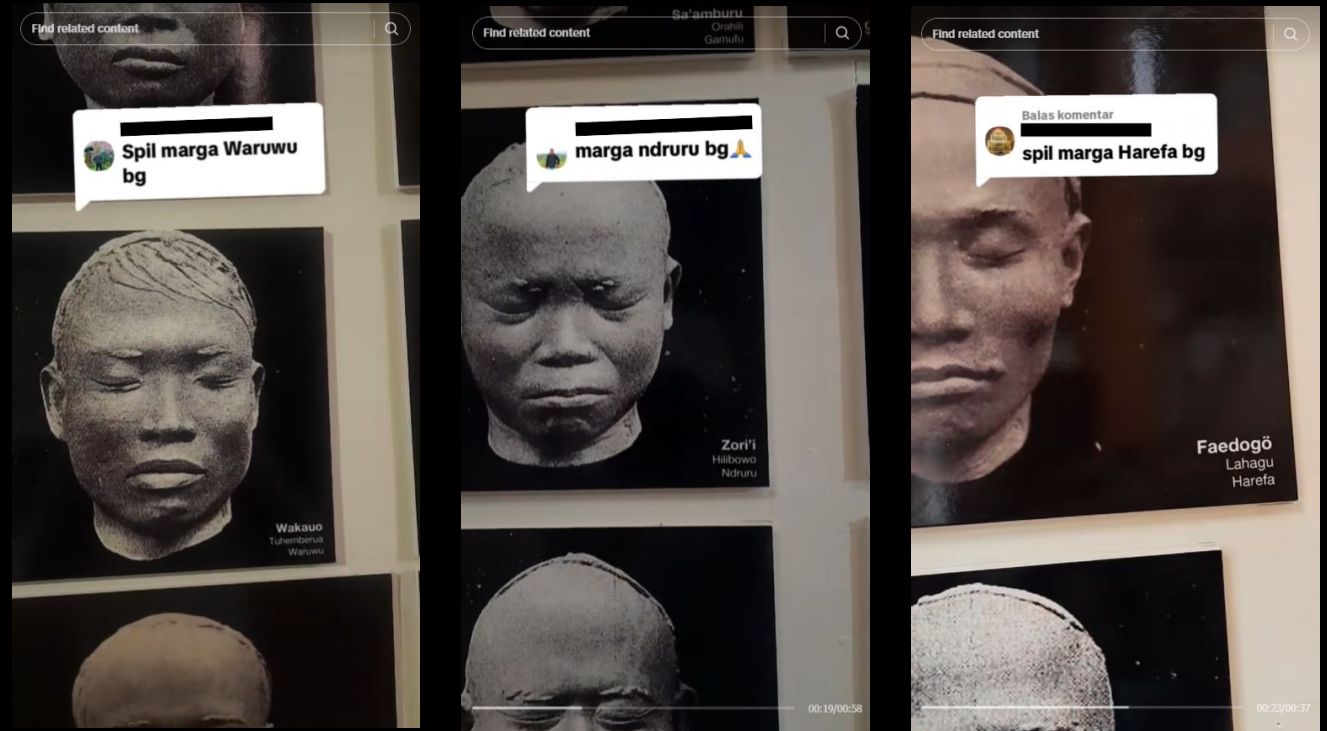
In news article number 2, a visitor reflected on the casting process and how the individuals might have endured the pain, asking: "Did they die after their faces were cast? Since I believe they could not breathe with the gypsum all over their face." This shows that the exhibition successfully prompts **critical reflection** and **emotional engagement**, encouraging visitors to question historical practices, empathize with the individuals involved, and recognize the violence embedded in colonial scientific methods.



Social Media

On TikTok, the curator of Museum Pusaka Nias, Faosisökhi Laia (also known as Ama Detra), created [a video](#) that gained significant public attention, reaching **120.2K** views. This was followed by additional videos responding to viewers' curiosity about whether any of the individuals whose faces were cast shared the same family names as them.

This demonstrates the potential of using **social media as a participatory tool** to actively involve the public in identifying living descendants of the individuals depicted.



Images: TikTok users express interest in the identities of the plaster-cast faces



Exhibition Walkthrough



Exhibition Walkthrough

1. My Name is Katumbukha

The exhibition opens with a fictional prologue in which Katumbukha's plaster cast introduces himself to visitors, recounts the brief history of their journey to the Netherlands, and invites the audience to contribute their voices to the future of the plaster casts.

Object displayed:
One replica of Katumbukha's plaster cast.



Exhibition Walkthrough

2. The Colonial Encounter

This section outlines the early entrenchment of colonialism in Nias in the 17th century and the subsequent development of colonial infrastructure visible in colonial maps from 1857 to 1917. It also highlights the roles of missionaries and Dutch officials in shaping cultural shifts. In addition, the section examines the emergence of physical anthropology and how these colonial infrastructures paved the way for the discipline to develop, using the people of Nias as research subjects.

Objects displayed:

- Agreement between Nias leaders and VOC officials (1693)
- Various maps (1857 to 1917)
- Photographs of colonial infrastructures: roads, schools, churches, military expeditions, and the reorganization of village structures



Exhibition Walkthrough

3. Plaster Casts of Niassers

This section opens by introducing J.P. Kleiweg de Zwaan and his fieldwork in Nias, followed by an overview of his publications on Nias anthropology.

It then identifies the villages where he conducted measurements on research subjects, along with their contextual backgrounds. The names, origins, and the photos of the individuals whose faces were cast in plaster are also displayed, together with the photos of the end products. Parts of this section describe in detail the entire casting process from beginning to end.

The section further highlights signs of both violence and resistance uncovered during the research, such as the use of pseudonyms, traces of hair embedded in the casts, the cutting of hair (considered sacred) before casting began, and the lack of adequate measures to ensure the subjects' comfort throughout the procedure.



Exhibition Walkthrough

4. Plaster Casts in European Museums

This section explores the reproduction of plaster casts of Nias individuals and traces their distribution across museums, research institutions, and exhibitions throughout Europe.

Through historical photographs, it reconstructs when and how these casts were displayed in the European museums from the early 20th century to the present day.

In addition, the section includes video documentation showing the emotional responses of researchers from Universitas Nias Raya (UNIRAYA) as they encountered the plaster casts stored at the Utrecht University Museum.



Exhibition Walkthrough

5. Dialogue and Discussion

This participatory section invites the visitors to contemplate on the history and suggesting them to contribute their perspectives and opinions in formulating the future of these plaster casts.

This section is divided into four questions:

Question 1

Have you heard about the story of these plaster casts before? (Yes/No question)

Question 2

How do you feel after hearing about the story of plaster casts in this exhibition?

Question 3

What these plaster casts mean to you?

Question 4

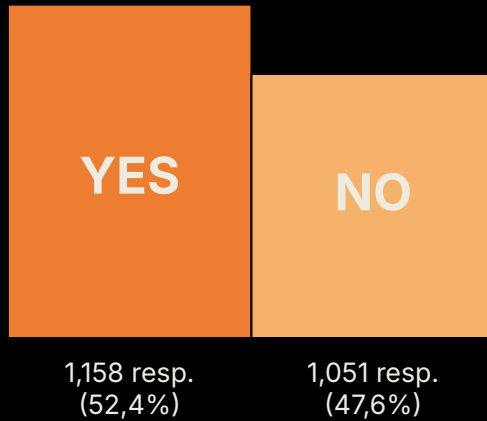
What should happen to the plaster casts of Ono Niha in the Netherlands?



Survey Results: Question 1

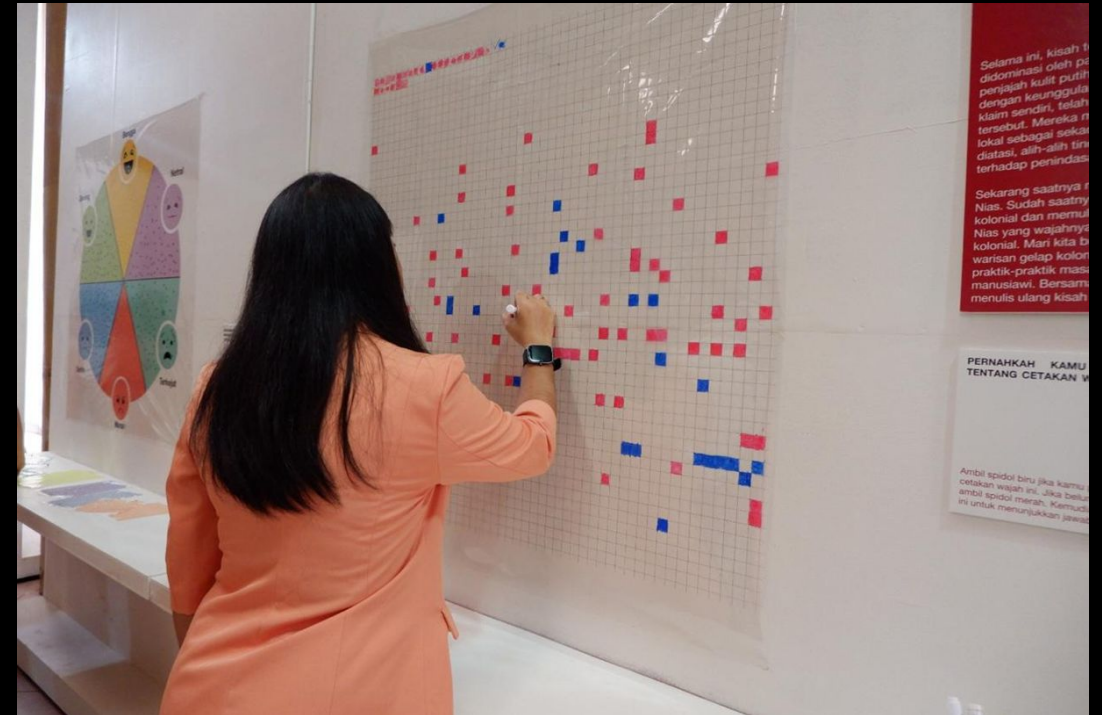
Have you heard about the story of these plaster casts before?

Responses:



Conclusion







More than half of the visitors reported that they had previously heard about the Nias plaster casts made by Kleiweg de Zwaan in Dutch museums. This awareness is likely due to the extensive media coverage from 2022–2025 during the research and exhibition period, although it may also stem from collective memory within the community, passed down through generations.



Survey Results: Question 2

How do you feel after hearing about the story of plaster casts in this exhibition?

Responses:

	PRIDE	1,482 resp. (25.5%)
	HAPPY	951 resp. (16.4%)
	SAD	925 resp. (15.9%)
	ANGRY	847 resp. (14.6%)
	NEUTRAL	826 resp. (14.2%)
	SURPRISED	783 resp. (13.5%)

Conclusion

Most visitors reported feeling proud and happy after viewing the exhibition because they had the chance see the faces of their ancestors. They emphasized that Nias culture is rich and diverse, which they believe explains why researchers have long been interested in studying Nias and its people. While at the same time, visitors also expressed feelings of sadness and anger towards the violent treatment of Nias individuals by foreign researchers in the past.



Survey Results: Question 3

What these plaster casts mean to you?

Responses:

OPTION 1	<i>Keys to the Past</i> These casts offer a unique window into the lives of our ancestors, revealing fascinating insights into history and culture.	80 resp. (19%)
OPTION 2	<i>Sculptures of Time</i> These casts are timeless sculptures, capturing the beauty and complexity of the human form.	80 resp. (19%)
OPTION 3	<i>Scientific Marvels</i> These casts are invaluable scientific objects, providing crucial information about human evolution and anatomy.	83 resp. (19.8%)
OPTION 4	<i>Our Ancestors</i> These casts are tangible connections to our ancestors, allowing us to honor and remember them.	96 resp. (22.9%)
OPTION 5	Other opinions	80 resp. (19%)

Conclusion

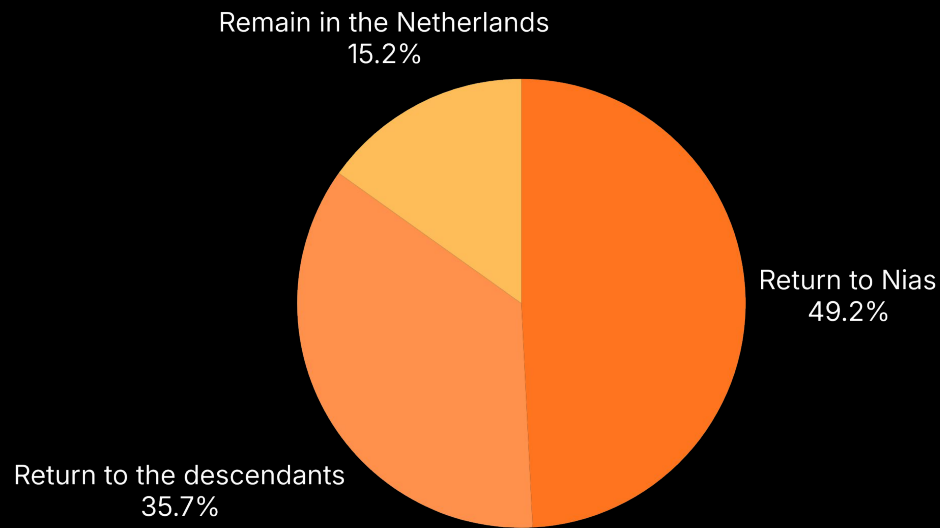
A large majority of visitors felt a personal connection to the individuals represented in the casts, perceiving them as their ancestors. This sense of connection strengthened their belief that the casts should be treated with respect and remembrance.



Survey Results: Question 4

What should happen to the plaster casts of Ono Niha in the Netherlands?

Responses:



Conclusion

Nearly half (49.2%) of the visitors believe the casts should be returned to Nias, indicating **strong support for repatriation to the origins**, with the specific destination to be determined through further discussions among stakeholders.. Another 35.7% think they should be returned specifically to the descendants, reflecting an emphasis on family and lineage. Only 15.2% prefer that the casts remain in the Netherlands, suggesting limited facilities for keeping them in their current institutional context.



Supporting Facilities

Kids Zine
Exhibition Catalogue



Kids Facilities

A. MENAMATI EKSPRESI WAJAH ONO NIHA

Siapa yang pernah mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha? Apakah kamu pernah melihat gambar Ono Niha? Bagaimana perasaanmu saat melihat gambar Ono Niha? Apakah kamu pernah mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha? Bagaimana perasaanmu saat mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha?

B. MENCARI NAMA DESA ASAL ONO NIHA

Apakah kamu bisa mencari nama-nama desa di pulau Borneo? Apakah kamu bisa mencari nama-nama desa di pulau Borneo? Apakah kamu bisa mencari nama-nama desa di pulau Borneo?

C. MENCARI NAMA DESA KAMU DAN LELUKUR DI PETA

1. Sekarang, mari kita kembali melihat peta tahun 1930 dan 1977. Apakah kamu bisa menemukan nama desa kamu di peta PT Mangrove pada perbatasan Marawa atau sekitar tersebut. Jika tidak, coba tanya kepada orang tua atau temanmu.

D. MENDESAIN TOPENG MBAWA BEKHU

Sebelumnya, kita kembali melihat daftar Ono Niha yang diteliti Wageningen. Apakah ada yang membuatmu tertarik atau penasaran? Jika ada, apakah kamu sudah orang itu dan bagaimana perasaanmu saat melihatnya? Jika tidak, coba tanya kepada orang tua atau temanmu.

MELIHAT DI BALIK WAJAH ONO NIHA

Ya'áshowul!
Selamat datang di pameran
Melihat di Balik Wajah Ono Niha!

Hari ini, kamu akan berperan sebagai dibalik budayanya, meneliti catatan wajah Ono Niha yang diteliti Kleiweg de Zwaan, mengungkap cerita, dan juga memahami perspektif dalam pameran ini.

Cara bermain:
1. Carilah label anak-anak berbentuk gelombang berwarna kuning.
2. Apabila di rumah tersebut kamu diminta untuk melihat atau membaca karakterlah Kegiatan A hingga F di buku kegiatan ini, sesuai petunjuk.
3. Kamu boleh beresapa sepeka mandiri atau bersama teman-teman.

Selamat bermain dan belajar!

PONOH KELUARGA

F. MEMBUAT

Apakah kamu pernah mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha? Bagaimana perasaanmu saat mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha? Apakah kamu pernah mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha? Bagaimana perasaanmu saat mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha?

E. BERTANYA PADA KLEIWEG DE ZWAAN & ONO NIHA

Apakah kamu pernah mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha? Bagaimana perasaanmu saat mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha? Apakah kamu pernah mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha? Bagaimana perasaanmu saat mendengar cerita tentang Ono Niha?

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Selamat bermain dan belajar!

Kids' Zine (200 pcs) is an activity booklet designed for children aged 5 to 15 to engage more actively with the exhibition. Each section of the exhibition includes one to two activities that encourage closer observation and participation. For example, in the section on plaster casts, children are invited to search for selected plaster casts and imagine what the individuals experienced, or work through a word search by matching geographic names with the exhibition's database. In a separate section, after listening to stories about Kleiweg de Zwaan and the practice of plaster casting, children are asked to consider what they would say if they could meet him and the people involved in his research. The exercise leaves space for their own reactions and thoughts. Creative activities such as designing masks inspired by mbawa bekhru open up space for expression. The zine can be taken home and continued through a simple family tree, encouraging conversations with parents or grandparents and grounding the exhibition in personal histories.



Kids Facilities

Cetakan wajah Ono Niha dibawa Kleiweg de Zwaan ke Belanda lalu dipamerkan di banyak museum selama 100 tahun terakhir.

Di sana, cetakan ini digunakan untuk membandingkan Suku Nias dengan suku lainnya. Hal ini bisa memecah belah masyarakat dan dinilai tidak benar. Selain di museum, cetakan juga dipajang di kantor Kleiweg sebagai trofi atau piala keberhasilannya. Ini membuat para peneliti merasa lebih hebat dari orang yang mereka teliti.

Kini, museum Belanda tidak lagi menampilkan cetakan wajah Ono Niha karena merasa malu atas cara pembuatannya yang penuh kekerasan. Mereka sedang bertanya kepada keturunan Ono Niha, apa yang harus dilakukan dengan cetakan ini.

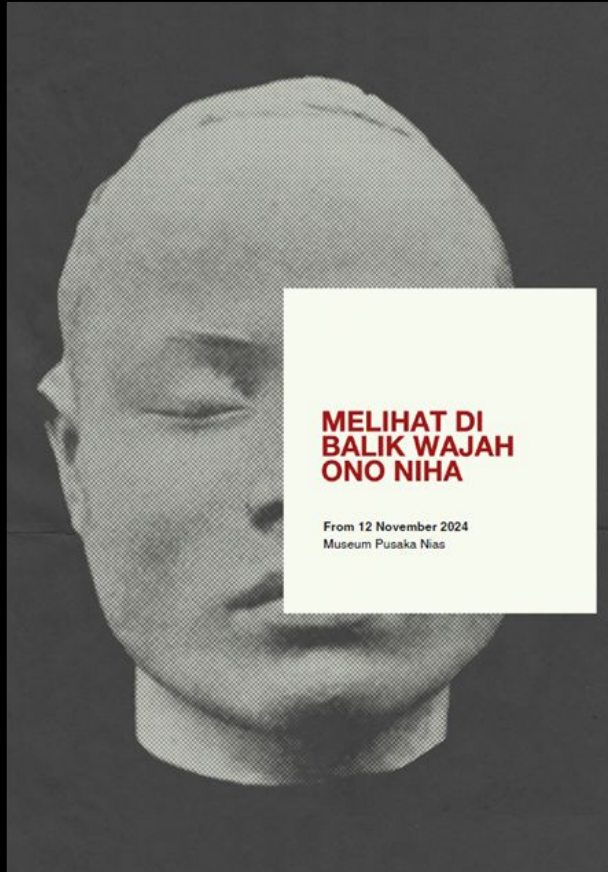
Apa pendapatmu? Mari lanjut ke nomor berikutnya untuk menjawab!

Kids' Labels are exhibition texts adjusted in tone and language to make the content more accessible for younger audiences. These labels translate important ideas from the exhibition into clearer, more direct language while maintaining the core narratives of the exhibition. They guide children to focus on specific details, ask questions, and form their own interpretations of the works on display. By offering an alternative entry point, the labels support independent exploration and help younger visitors engage with themes such as history, identity, and representation in ways that feel approachable and relevant.



Exhibition Catalogue

The exhibition catalogue compiles the images and texts presented in the exhibition. It allows those who are unable to visit Museum Pusaka Nias to engage with the material and potentially contribute to the ongoing research.



click [here](#) to download the exhibition e-catalogue



Thank you

