

# Dutch colonialism and role of zending in healthcare services in Nias Island, 1865-1915

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**Abstract.** In the 19th century, Dutch colonialism played a significant role in shaping the history and development of Nias Island, located in Indonesia. During this period, the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC) established control over the island, exploiting its resources and imposing its cultural and political influence on the local population. One aspect of Dutch colonial rule that had a lasting impact on Nias Island was the introduction of zending, which refers to the Christian missionary activities aimed at converting the local population to Christianity. The Dutch saw zending as a tool for civilizing and controlling the Indigenous people, using religion as a means of exerting authority. The role of zending in health services on Nias Island was particularly significant, as the missionaries were often the only source of medical care available to the local population.

**Key words:** christian missionary, Dutch colonialism, health services, Nias Island, zending

## Introduction

The term ‘Zending’ originates from Dutch, meaning the work or task of individuals who propagate religion beyond their country’s borders. *Zending* is an institution tasked with spreading the teachings of Christianity. The mission of zending is carried out by *zendeling* (missionaries), whose duties, goals, and obligations have been established (1). Zending is also defined as a movement of Christianization, largely occurring within simple, small-scale environments, yet undertaking and generating a service work encompassing the entire world (2).

The mission of zending reaching colonial Indonesia was closely associated with the arrival of Western nations in the 16th century. Initially, missionary (zending) missions were brought by Portuguese and French *zendeling*, spreading Catholic teachings to Indigenous populations in the areas they had colonized. By the late 16th century, entering the 17th century, it was the turn of the Dutch (VOC) to arrive in this region. Their arrival also brought a mission of spreading religion, namely Protestant Christianity. The Protestant

missionary mission, disseminated by *zendeling*, was also facilitated through VOC officials (3).

Entering the 18th century, the economic situation of the Portuguese in Asia began to decline. This problematic situation eventually impacted the mission of spreading Catholic teachings. Many Catholic missionaries returned to their countries aboard Portuguese ships, leaving the missionaries unable to advance their mission. This situation was quickly seized upon by Protestant *zending*. Protestant *zendeling* were then dispatched to various regions, initially pioneered by Catholic missionaries, so that when the Protestant *zendeling* arrived, they did not encounter as much rejection as the Catholic missionaries did at the beginning of their mission (3).

In the mid-19th century, *zending* missions in the Dutch East Indies began to escalate. Protestant Christian congregations began to rival and surpass Catholic congregations. This Protestant *zending* mission then experienced rapid development, resulting in many regions that were initially unfamiliar with Protestant teachings (although previously visited by Catholic missionaries) subsequently converting to Protestant Christianity.

Therefore, considering the numerous regions that served as mission sites in western, central, and eastern Indonesia, it is necessary to conduct scientific research studies on the history of *zending*. Perhaps there have been many similar research findings, stating that these studies are part of the history of *zending*, such as the history of Dutch East Indies churches in Indonesia. However, there is a differing statement from S.C. Graaf van Randwijck, who believes that the history of *zending* is no longer linked to the history of the Dutch church. This began with the conflicts between churches and denominations within the Dutch church, which no longer determine the subject matter of *zending* history. In other words, *zending* has opened its history by acting independently in making decisions regarding *zending* policies. Therefore, *zending* engages in spontaneous activities (spreading Christian missions) without expecting rewards (4).

Based on the background above, this article focuses on the role of missions said to 'civilize' the indigenous people of Nias through healthcare services, where this *zending* role also serves as a pioneer in the expansion of colonial territories or as part of the colonial state formation of the Dutch East Indies.

## Methods

This research employs a historical method. In data collection, the author examined records of missionaries or *zendeling* who served on Nias Island within the timeframe of the research. In addition, information related to the research was also obtained from archives of the Dutch colonial government, travel logs of anthropologists, and magazines published contemporaneously with the research period. The gathered data were then verified and interpreted in a manner conducive to producing a well-narrated historiography concerning the history of Dutch colonialism and the role of *zending* in healthcare provision to the population of Nias Island in the 19th century.

## Dominance of Aceh, VOC, and England

From the Dutch colonial perspective, it was important to emphasize that the northern and southern

parts of Nias Island were distinct. The island's northern region was more receptive and open to external influences than the dangerous and inhospitable southern region. Such assessments stemmed from the Dutch military's historical experiences conquering the island.

Long before the Dutch arrived on Nias Island, the indigenous people of Nias had already interacted with various other ethnic groups in commercial activities and according to John Crawfurd, trade routes in the Nusantara Archipelago had existed since ancient times, as evidenced by the trading routes of Tamil and Gujarati in the 2nd century AD. These trade routes were connected to the classical world of Sumatra's western coast maritime region. Concurrently, Chinese ships were also active in the area (5). Likewise, sailors from Aceh, Minangkabau, Java, Bugis, and later Europe contributed to the bustling trade activities in the maritime coastal region of western Sumatra. These trade activities facilitated direct interaction between outsiders and the inhabitants of Nias Island. During that time, major ports on Nias Island, such as Gunung Sitoli, Teluk Dalam, and Lagundri, were frequently visited by foreign nationals (6-7).

In source analysis, the earliest information about Nias Island appeared in the treatises of Arab and Persian geographers between 850 CE and 1310 CE. In these treatises, Nias Island was mentioned as Al Neyan, El Neyan, El Binan, and Darband Nias. These references were also found in the navigation maps they produced (8-9). Subsequently, descriptions of Nias Island could be found in the records of European explorers. The first European account of Nias Island was written by Agostino de Beaulieu, a French general who, in 1620, led three sailing ships from the East India Company to Sumatra to explore trading opportunities. In his work, Beaulieu marked the geographic position of Nias Island, which he referred to as Nyas (10).

In 1660, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) visited Nias Island. However, shortly after, the VOC left the island as they felt that trade activities there were not profitable. In 1669, the VOC revisited Nias Island and succeeded in establishing agreements, contracts, and trade agreements with the ruling village heads there. The areas covered by these contracts included Larago, Bode, and 33 other villages on the east coast and the Hinako Islands off the west coast of Nias

Island. After 24 years (1693), the contract was ratified by including more villages, including Teluk Dalam in southern Nias. Regarding these contractual rights, some Malay (Acehnese and Minangkabau) residents of the villages mentioned in the contract were also bound by them. The content of the agreements, contracts, and agreements was a declaration of the willingness of the Nias people to trade exclusively with the VOC (11).

For the village heads in Nias, the agreement with the VOC initially represented hope for freedom from the dominance of Aceh, which almost controlled all aspects of trade on the island, including the slave trade, which was the main source of income for the village heads in Nias. Aceh's influence on Nias Island began with Aceh's military expedition invading Nias in 1624/25 under the command of Sultan Iskandar Muda. The invasion aimed to bring Nias Island under Aceh's rule and to control the slave trade. This lasted until the 19th century (9, 12).

The narrative depicted above indeed appears highly colonial-centric. Regardless of its accuracy, according to Domis, Malay people (Acehnese and Minangkabau) had indeed settled and established agreements with village heads on Nias Island (13). Furthermore, some Acehnese individuals even married Nias women. One such example is Pavan, an Acehnese who married a sister of Raja Sarahili from the village of Buruassi (14). Through marriage, it was easy for Acehnese people to exert their influence in various aspects of life on Nias Island (15).

Dutch naval expeditions systematically visited Nias Island throughout the spring and early summer of 1755. During this year, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) renewed agreements and contracts with village heads on Nias, and the Dutch flag was raised there as an official indication that the area was under VOC control (16). The VOC did this to protect their interests on Nias Island from British influence, as the British also sought to establish trade relations with the islanders.

In 1757, the VOC strengthened security on Nias Island by establishing its first military outpost at Mount Sitoli. Mount Sitoli was chosen as the main outpost because it was considered safer and had long been inhabited by a colony of Malay people, who were deemed more civilized. However, after one year, Dutch

forces were withdrawn back to Sumatra. The British and Acehnese exploited the security vacuum on Nias Island to resume trading with the indigenous people of Nias. Although the VOC continuously protested their actions, this situation persisted until the end of the VOC's rule in the Dutch East Indies colony (10-11).

Soon after the bankruptcy of the VOC, the British seized the opportunity to explore Nias Island. In 1820, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the British governor stationed in Bengkulu, dispatched John Prince and William Jack to negotiate agreements with village heads on Nias Island. During their time on Nias Island, Prince, and Jack successfully entered into contracts with several village heads, abolished the slave trade, and designated the status of Teluk Dalam port as a duty-free port for export and import goods (17-18).

After the 1824 Treaty of London, Britain relinquished all claims in its colonial territories in Sumatra. Subsequently, these areas were transferred to the Dutch East Indies government. Thus, Nias Island once again fell under Dutch rule. However, representatives of the colonial Dutch government only arrived on Nias Island in 1840, accompanied by one officer and 50 soldiers to defend the military post at Gunung Sitoli (19).

## Dutch colonialism

In 1842, Nias Island was incorporated into the administrative structure of the Dutch East Indies based on a decision by the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies dated December 7, 1842. Nias Island became part of the Tapanuli Residency, which administered seven *afdeelingen* (sub-districts): Singkel, Barus, Sibolga, Ankola, Mandheling, Natal, and Nias. The Nias *Afdeeling* was further divided into five *onderafdeelingen* (sub-sub-districts): Gunung Sitoli, West Nias, North Nias, East Nias, South Nias, and Hinako Island. However, in reality, at that time Nias Island was not fully under Dutch control. Dutch colonies were limited to the fortress of Mount Sitoli, while other areas remained independent (19-20).

From the 1840s to the 1850s, the Dutch colonial government, with grand ambitions, periodically sent military forces to various regions of Nias Island, especially to the western and southern parts, as these

areas were the most difficult to subdue. However, the Dutch forces often faced defeat. In the southern part of Nias, Dutch troops hardly ever experienced victory. More often, they were repelled and humiliated by Nias warriors (10).

Learning from these defeats, the Dutch colonial government refrained from sending troops to the southern regions of Nias. Instead, they pursued a different strategy by sending two explorers to South Nias: Nieuwenhuisen (a naturalist-anthropologist) and Rosenberg (a geographer), to map the area and explore the lives of the inhabitants from September 1854 to September 1855. From the reports of these two experts, the Dutch colonial government obtained valuable information, especially regarding internal conflicts between villages in southern Nias, particularly between the Fadoro village (now Hilisimaetano) and the Orahili village (now Bowomataluo) (10).

Upon learning about the internal conflict in South Nias, the Dutch colonial government then implemented the *facite ammuina* (make a fuss) strategy by providing military assistance to the Fadoro village to jointly combat the Orahili village. Commander De Vos, the head of the Dutch military forces in Gunung Sitoli, informed General J. van Swieten, the governor of Sumatra's Westkust based in Padang, about this. The governor then instructed to send a much larger force to South Nias. This battle lasted for a year, from January 6, 1856, to December 1856. Fadoro village, along with its ally Sendrekasi village, was assisted by Dutch forces, while on the opposing side were Orahili village, along with its allies Botohossi village, Lahusa village, Hilibobo village, Hilidjekono village, and Hilidjomboi village. The battle resulted in numerous casualties on both sides. On the Dutch side, two soldiers died, and 18 others were seriously injured. Some of those seriously injured included Lieutenant Hamers, Lieutenant Schuurman, Lieutenant Ravallet, Sergeant Soplá, Sergeant Dungeman, Sergeant Strey, and Major Schwenk (21).

After the battle, the Dutch colonial government became more cautious in taking positions. Their subsequent actions were no more than mediation. Representatives of the Dutch colonial government in South Nias attempted to reconcile the situation by inviting all kings or village heads in South Nias and giving

them a mandate to create a binding peace agreement between the conflicting parties. This approach was quite successful, as several villages eventually acknowledged the Dutch government's status quo. Lieutenant Heijligers, with 75 troops at the Lagundri fortress as a representative of the Dutch colonial government there, successfully maintained peace and ensured the safety of South Nias. Heijligers implemented Dutch law, so any conflict had to be resolved through Dutch colonial government arbitration, not war (22).

The success of Lieutenant Heijligers in quelling the conflict in South Nias was praised by General van Swieten, the governor of Sumatra's Westkust. In 1857, Van Swieten visited Lagundri to inspect the Dutch fortresses there. However, this success did not last long, as South Nias was hit by a smallpox and malaria epidemic. Almost half of the Dutch troops were affected by malaria and smallpox (23). Lieutenant Heijligers then instructed the healthy troops to build separate barracks outside the fortress to accommodate those afflicted with smallpox, dig trenches around the fortress, and light large fires to purify the air. However, Heijligers' efforts were eventually halted, as more Dutch troops became ill and succumbed to the diseases. Lieutenant Heijligers himself suffered from fever and was evacuated to Sumatra (21).

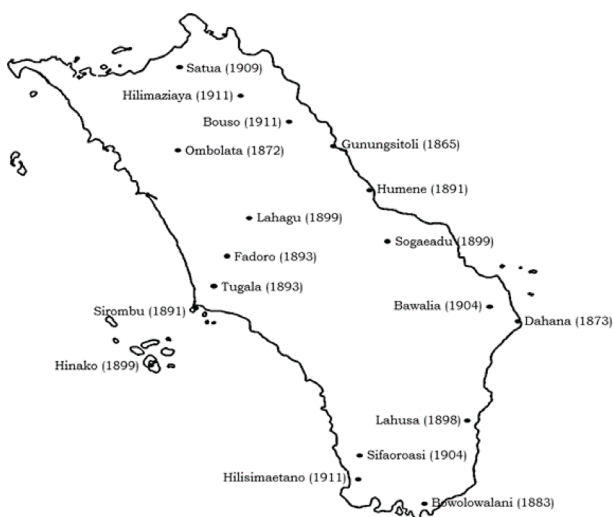
The Orahili and Botohosi villages then exploited the leadership vacuum in the Dutch forces at Lagundri to reignite resistance against the Dutch by burning down the Fadoro village. Furthermore, Orahili village soldiers often left the bodies of Fadoro village soldiers near the fortress as a warning to the Dutch to leave the area. There was little the Dutch forces could do except defend themselves inside the fortress. Eventually, on February 16, 1861, an earthquake and tsunami struck, destroying the Dutch fortress at Lagundri. Dutch forces who managed to escape took refuge in Hilibobo village, but due to threats from the King of Orahili village, they headed to Gunung Sitoli by boarding Malay boats (8, 10, 21).

From these experiences, the Dutch colonial government learned a great deal about the reality of Nias Island, especially in the southern part of Nias. The colonial government realized that physical warfare was not sufficient to subdue the island's inhabitants. Therefore, the Dutch colonial government changed

its strategy by supporting missionary activities. In this regard, the colonial government believed that if the people of Nias embraced Christianity, it would change their views or mindset toward Westerners.

### Role of zending in healthcare service

From the previous explanations, it is evident that the Dutch army experienced defeat after defeat in attempting to subjugate Nias Island. Therefore, in the subsequent period, the subjugation of Nias Island followed the development of zending activities taking place on the island (Figure 1). This means that whenever a *zending* post was established in a certain area on Nias Island, that area directly became part of the expansion of Dutch colonial power, even though no government representatives or troops were stationed there. Each *zending* post typically consisted of *zendingeling* and their families and teachers who assisted the *zendingeling* in teaching reading and writing to the inhabitants. Meanwhile, government officials and troops remained in Mount Sitoli. However, if unrest occurred in an area where a missionary post was located, the government authorities in Mount Sitoli would send military assistance to secure that area.



**Figure 1.** Zending Posts on Nias Island, 1865-1911. Source: Reconstructed from <https://asiapacific-archive.anu.edu.au/mapsonline/base-maps/nias-and-batu-islands>

Since the establishment of the first zending post in Mount Sitoli in 1865, there had been no significant physical warfare between Dutch forces and Nias warriors. With their mission of ‘civilization’, the *zendingeling* gradually changed the local population’s perception of Westerners. However, this does not imply that *zending* activities on the island of Nias did not encounter obstacles. Many challenges were faced by the missionaries, including resistance from the local population and threats from headhunters. Nevertheless, through diligent efforts and mediations with the headhunters, the *zendingeling* managed to bring them under Dutch authority. This was achieved after an agreement wherein all prior occurrences would be exempt from legal prosecution (24).

On Nias Island, the *zendingeling* also had to struggle to adapt to the hot tropical climate and poor living conditions. It was not uncommon for them to be afflicted with diseases, especially malaria and dysentery (25). As a result of these diseases, some *zendingeling* died while on duty. However, if they were still strong enough to travel to Sumatra, they would usually be taken to Air Bangis, Fort de Kock, or Padang for better medical treatment (21, 24, 26).

During their work on Nias Island, the *zendingeling* usually stocked medicines. These medicines sometimes became their most potent weapon in approaching the local population. Missionary Krumm described it as follows:

“... our medical assistance opens doors for us, and our medicines are weapons for us to destroy the old paganism... if I do not give medicine to the people, many will surely return to their gods ...” (27).

Sick individuals would typically visit the *zending* posts to request medicines. Common medicines provided by the missionaries included quinine for malaria and homeopathy medicines (27). If someone was seriously ill, they would usually be asked to stay temporarily at the missionary post for medical care (28). During epidemics, the *zendingeling* would visit the houses where sick people lay, provide them with medicines, and pray for their recovery (29).

The inclusion of Christian prayers with each provision of medicines to the population was intended to



bless the medicines and bring healing to the sick (27). These approaches successfully attracted the hearts of the Nias people to learn more about Christianity. Consequently, when they recovered from their illnesses, they would approach the *zendeling* to be guided into becoming Christians. Such conditions persisted until Nias Island became fully integrated into the colonial state in the early decades of the 20th century.

From the discussion above, we can understand that the people of Nias have long been interacting with the outside world through trade activities with various nations. Therefore, Nias Island cannot be separated from the trading competition among major powers that sought to control trade routes in the western coastal areas of Sumatra, such as Aceh, the Netherlands, and England. However, it was the Netherlands that ultimately emerged as the primary owner of Nias Island under the Dutch East Indies government. This was achieved through a lengthy process that cost the lives of many soldiers and Europeans during the subjugation of the island. Nonetheless, the Dutch colonial government had to consider not only subduing the Nias people but also ensuring the survival of Europeans amidst the natural environment of Nias, where contagious diseases such as smallpox could outbreak at any time (23).

## Conclusion

This article presents preliminary knowledge of Dutch colonialism and *zending's* role in healthcare services in Nias Island. The role of *zending* in healthcare services in Nias Island was crucial, as *zendeling* often served as the sole source of healthcare for the local population at that time. The *zendeling* had to provide treatment for various diseases and promote hygiene and sanitation practices to improve the population's health. Meanwhile, the Dutch colonial government was still reluctant to develop the Nias community significantly during that time.

Overall, the impact of Dutch colonialism and *zending* on healthcare services in Nias Island in the 19th century was complex and varied. Although *zendeling* undoubtedly made significant contributions to the health of the population, their activities also raised questions about cultural imperialism and ethics

in imposing foreign beliefs on the indigenous population. Therefore, the conclusion is that the role of *zending* in healthcare services on Nias Island in the 19th century highlights the complex relationship between colonialism, religion, and the population's health. The legacy of the Dutch colonial government and *zendeling* activities continues to shape the cultural and social landscape of Nias Island to this day, reaffirming the enduring impact of history on contemporary life.

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