

Revisiting Rizal's 1888 Gift to the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin

Material Analysis, Access, and Collaboration

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Abstract. This essay revisits José Rizal's 1888 donation of 21 ethnographic objects to the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (EMB) through the lens of contemporary museum studies, drawing on collaborative research conducted in 2025 with curators and conservators from both the Philippines and Germany. Although long cited as evidence of Rizal's engagement with European anthropology, the material, classificatory, and institutional dimensions of the donation have been largely overlooked.

Combining object-based analysis, archival research, and sustained curatorial exchange, the study foregrounds the methodological and epistemological challenges of working with fragmentary collections. Rizal's inconsistent labelling and use of generic regional descriptors are interpreted not as simple lapses, but as symptomatic of the entangled processes of colonial-era collecting, translation, and museological negotiation.

The essay argues for a recontextualization of the Rizal collection as a provisional, relational archive—one that reveals the limits of ethnographic authority and the potential of collaborative, dialogical approaches to museum research. It contributes to ongoing debates in museum studies around access, provenance, and the ethical responsibilities of institutions in addressing historical collections.

[Philippines, collecting, networks, material culture analysis, archival research, recontextualization, collaboration]

In March 2025, a research team from the National Museum of the Philippines and Philippine Studies at SOAS, in collaboration with the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (EMB), undertook a comprehensive analysis of a collection of ethnographic objects—21 items of Philippine material culture—donated by José Rizal (1861–1896) to the EMB in 1888. The significance of this collection lies largely in its association with Rizal, one of the Philippines' most revered national heroes. A physician, artist, and multilingual writer and thinker of exceptional range, Rizal's creative and scholarly work helped ignite one of the earliest republican movements in Southeast Asia. His first novel, "Noli Me Tangere", a searing critique of Spanish colonial rule, was published in Berlin in 1887 and became a lightning rod for anti-colonial sentiment in the Philippines, and ultimately leading to his execution by Spanish authorities in 1896.

While Rizal was in Berlin from November 1886 to May 1887, he immersed himself in the city's vibrant scientific and intellectual circles. He formed personal connections with key figures in German anthropology, including Rudolf Virchow, Adolf Bastian, Wilhelm Joest and Fedor Jagor. By January 1887, Rizal was extended an invitation to join the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory and was subsequently nominated as a fellow of the Berlin Geographical Society. He engaged actively in the city's scholarly milieu, attending academic lectures and on 23 April 1887, delivered a paper in German on the Tagalog art of versification before the Berlin Ethnological Society.¹ Even after leaving Germany, Rizal continued corresponding with some of these scholars—letters between Rizal, Adolf Bernhard Meyer and Joest are preserved in German archives. After his execution in 1896, Rizal's death was formally acknowledged and mourned at the Berlin Society. At its January 16, 1897 meeting, Virchow paid tribute to Rizal's scientific abilities, moral courage as well as his artistic sensitivity.²

Following his martyrdom and subsequent elevation to fame and heroic status, Rizal's collection in Berlin has become a symbolic site of pilgrimage for Filipinos seeking material connections to his life and legacy. But while the historical and symbolic value of the collection has long been recognized—whether as a reflection of Rizal's polymathic stat-

¹ Rizal's lecture, entitled *Tagalisch-versifikation* [The art of Tagalog versification] was published in *Verhandlungen der Berliner Anthropologischen Gesellschaft. Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 19: 293–95.

² Virchow's obituary and consequent note on Rizal's death are both recorded in *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnographie und Urgeschichte*, meeting of January 16, 1897. Berlin: A. Asher & Co., 1897.

ure, his nationalist vision, or his engagement with 19th-century German anthropology,³ the objects themselves have remained underexamined in both scholarly literature and museum practice.

This essay reflects on the collaborative and methodological dimensions of this object analysis—foregrounding not only the materials in question but also the institutional conditions that enabled access. In doing so, it argues for a recontextualization of Rizal's collection as a fragmentary yet vital archive of Philippine material culture, shaped equally by scientific curiosity, relational networks, and museological negotiations. A key component of this approach was the sustained collaboration with staff at the EMB, in particular Sonja Mohr, curator in the Department for South and Southeast Asia, whose curatorial expertise and guidance were critical not only in enabling access to the collection but also in shaping its interpretive framing.

Historical Context and Provenance

Rizal's 21-item donation—formally accessioned between July 6 and 8, 1888—consisted of textiles, tools, personal accessories, and implements from both the Tagalog region in the island of Luzon and South-Central regions of the island of Mindanao. Acquisition records preserved in the EMB's *Erwerbungsbuch* (Acquisition Book), *Hauptkatalog* (Main Catalogue), and *Erwerbungsakte* (Acquisition File) confirm that the items were mailed from London and addressed not to museum director Adolph Bastian, but to Fedor Jagor, an ethnologist and earlier traveller to the Philippines whose influence on Rizal is well documented. This fact, recorded in Rizal's letter of transmittal, complicates interpretations of the donation as an autonomous nationalistic gesture, instead situating it within a network of personal and intellectual affiliations with German scholars such as Jagor, Rudolf Virchow, and Ferdinand Blumentritt.

While Rizal's motivations were undoubtedly multiple—ranging from representational concerns about Philippine absence in European ethnographic displays to a desire to align himself with the empirical traditions of German ethnology—the collection also reveals considerable ambivalence. His inconsistent use of indigenous terms, generic geographic labels (e.g., bracketing several items as simply from “Mindanao”), and hesitations in classifying objects (e.g., when Rizal writes “calzón?” in his packing list) suggest both a self-awareness of his limitations as a field collector and a deferential stance toward European systems of ethnological authority at this early stage of his career.

Methodology and Access

The 2025 examination of Rizal's objects at the EMB was carried out over five consecutive days, during which each artefact was studied using non-invasive methods. The research prioritized close material description, provenance triangulation (via archival documents and correspondence), and comparative analysis with analogous objects in other collections (notably those in Leiden, Chicago, and Vienna). EMB's conservation staff and photographer provided high-resolution imaging and, where appropriate, material handling support using mock-ups and even replicas.

Crucially, this in-person research was preceded by several months of remote collaboration. Even before the physical visit, I was in regular contact with Sonja Mohr via online meetings sharing updates and seeking clarification on the correlations between Rizal's object list and the corresponding German acquisition entries. These preparatory conversations often involved working line-by-line through Rizal's letter to Adolph Bastian and the accompanying packing list, comparing them with the EMB's *Hauptkatalog* to deter-

3 Several scholars have explored what is referred to as José Rizal's ethnological and anthropological scholarship. In his 1961 monograph *Rizal: Scholar and Scientist*, J.P. Bantug highlighted Rizal's significant contributions to both the natural and social sciences, mapping the museums to which he donated various artefacts and specimens. The discovery of Rizal's 1888 letter to Adolph Bastian, Lucien Spittaël's (2011) and Ambeth Ocampo's articles (2023) on the survival of the associated artefacts at the EMB prompted considerable interest in Rizal's anthropological work. Resil Mojares (2013, 2023: 69–77) situates Rizal's intellectual development within the broader anthropological currents of 19th-century Germany while Nathaniel Parker Weston (2021) and Meghan Thomas (2012) look at Rizal's scholarship and Philippine Nationalist movements in the context of imperialist rivalry between Germany and Spain.

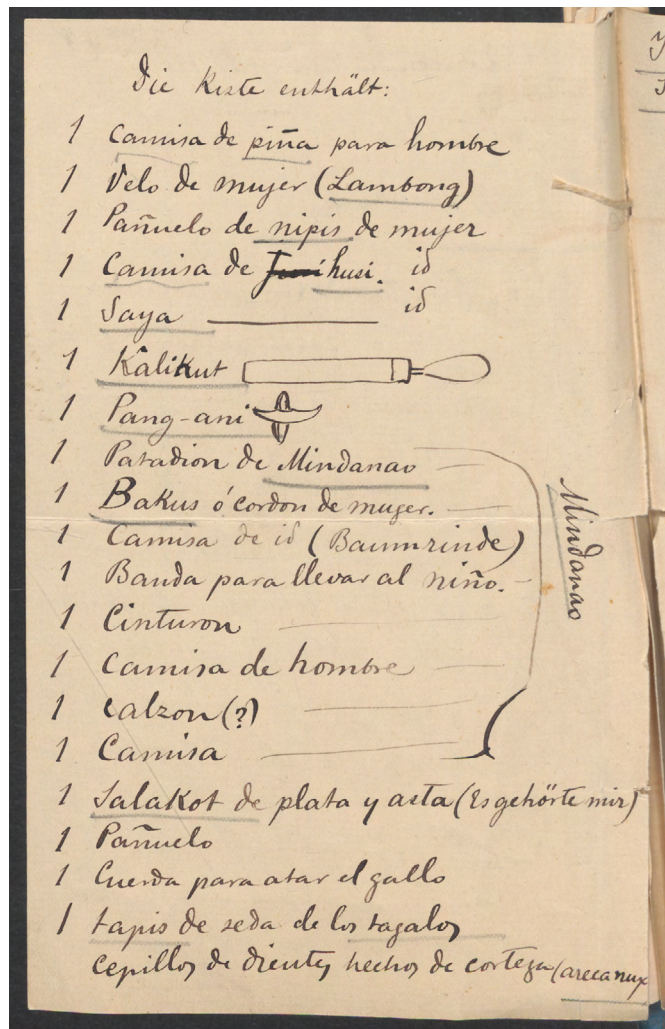


Fig. 1 Rizal's object list in the EMB's acquisition file (Erwerbungsakte E 568/1888).

mine which descriptions applied to which extant artefacts. The fact that all the historical documentation/documents are accessible online was a tremendous help. The process demanded both linguistic dexterity and curatorial intuition, as mismatches between Spanish, Tagalog, and German terminologies often led to ambiguity in identification. This early exchange laid the groundwork for a more precise and focused object analysis during the onsite research, and it exemplified the museum's commitment to reciprocal and transparent scholarship.

The digital access to catalogue entries, acquisition files, and relevant correspondence, offered contextual interpretations of museum registration practices in the late 19th century. Sonja Mohr's meticulous translation of the German texts – including her critical appraisal of German acquisition descriptions and imposed categories helped in parsing what was important to consider from the archival records. Additionally, the EMB's curatorial approach extended well beyond standard object handling and was extensively supported by the conservators: when the unusual shape and construction of Rizal's *lambong* (mourning veil) defied conventional classification, and the original veil proved too fragile for handling, EMB's textile conservator Irina Seekamp took the time to create a full-scale cloth reconstruction based on Rizal's original donation. This allowed us to test various hypotheses about how the veil might have been worn, revealing key design features – including a blue facial lining and arm-like appendages – that were later confirmed through archival visual sources. The material experiment not only clarified the function of the

lambong, but also highlighted the value of embodied, experimental methods in object-based research.

Material Observations: Processual Objects and Incomplete Provenance

The heterogeneity of José Rizal's 1888 donation is immediately apparent. Born in Calamba, Laguna, in the Tagalog region of Luzon, Rizal demonstrated place-based familiarity in the way he labelled certain objects. Tagalog items—such as the *sulpakan* (fire piston) and *kalikut* (betel mortar and pestle)—are identified with relative precision, reflecting his firsthand knowledge of the cultural context they came from. In contrast, the Mindanao subset reveals significant gaps. Rizal grouped eight items under the broad label “Mindanao,” without distinguishing between ethnolinguistic communities such as the Bagobo, Blaan, or Kulaman, despite having translated Ferdinand Blumentritt's ethnographic classifications just two years earlier. Blumentritt, an Austrian ethnologist and close friend of Rizal, is known for his comprehensive work on the classification of Philippine peoples, especially through his 1882 essay “Versuch einer Ethnographie der Philippinen”. Rizal's broad labeling suggests either an unfamiliarity with what was becoming standard practice in German ethnological collecting or a certain indifference toward provenance research. It reflects a collection shaped more by the desire to gesture at cultural diversity than by careful attention to ethnographic specificity.

Thus, in contrast to Bastian's desiderata for clearly labelled collections, Rizal's documentation for this subset appears deliberately cautious. There are no native terms offered, and the use of Spanish descriptors (e.g., *pañuelo*, *cinturón*, *camisa de mujer*) further distances these objects from specific cultural attribution. This omission suggests a recognition of epistemic limits on Rizal's part—likely the result of his not having travelled to Mindanao at the time of donation. It was only later, during his exile in Dapitan enforced by Spanish colonial power, that Rizal would develop sustained contact with indigenous communities of southern Mindanao.

Yet, despite its taxonomic imprecision, the Mindanao set is remarkably rich. Among the most significant items are a *tritik*-dyed blouse and infant carrier, a *ginayan*-style *ikat* skirt, and an unfinished three-piece male *plangi* ensemble. These garments, while partially constructed or modest in form, offer rare early examples of all three textile techniques prevalent at that time in South Central Mindanao: *ikat*, *tritik*, and *plangi*.

Material Culture Analysis

1. Domestic Tools and Implements

The following is a catalogue of José Rizal's 1888 donation to EMB, presented as a brief synopsis and introduction rather than a full analysis. The more extensive output of this research will be presented in a forthcoming digital exhibit, co-curated by the National Museum of the Philippines and Cristina Juan, with a preview at the Frankfurt Book Fair, where the Philippines will be this year's Guest of Honour.

a) *Sulpakan* (Portable Fire Piston)

This intricately crafted fire piston from the Tagalog region is made from carabao horn, likely turned on a lathe, featuring symmetrical ends and precision-drilled holes. The item reflects Rizal's fascination with indigenous engineering and is one of the few accompanied by his own written description. Though the accompanying *yesca* (tinder) is now missing, Rizal's sketch and annotations suggest he appreciated its potential as a portable and sophisticated example of native ingenuity.

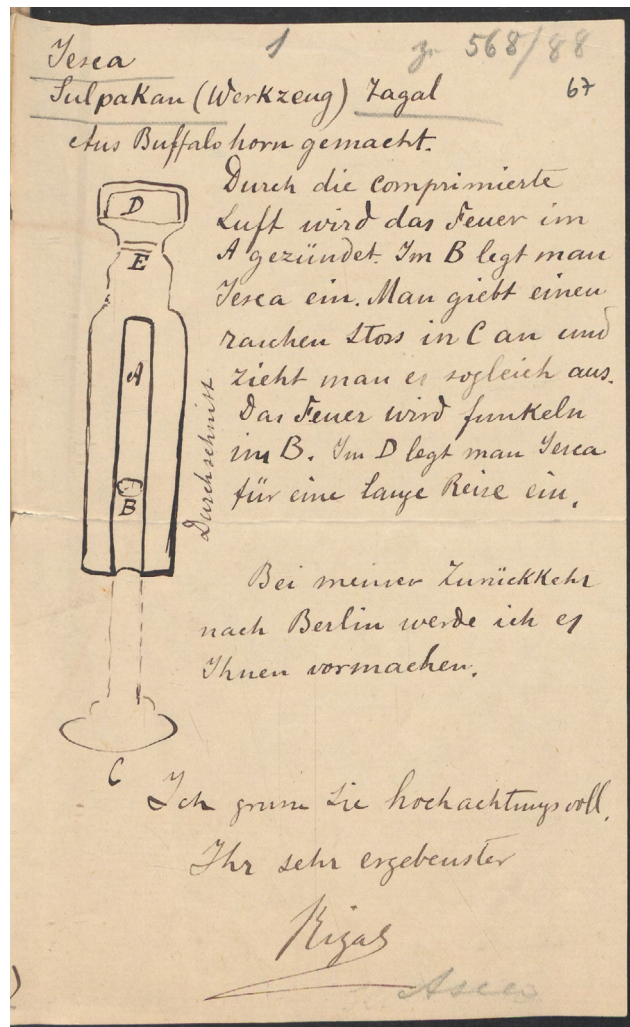


Fig. 2 Rizal's description in the EMB's acquisition file (Erwerbungsakte E 568/1888).



Fig. 3 The sulpakan (IC 18686). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines.



Fig. 4 The *pang-tali* (I C 18683). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines.



Fig. 5 The *pang-ani* (I C 18672). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/ Martin Franken

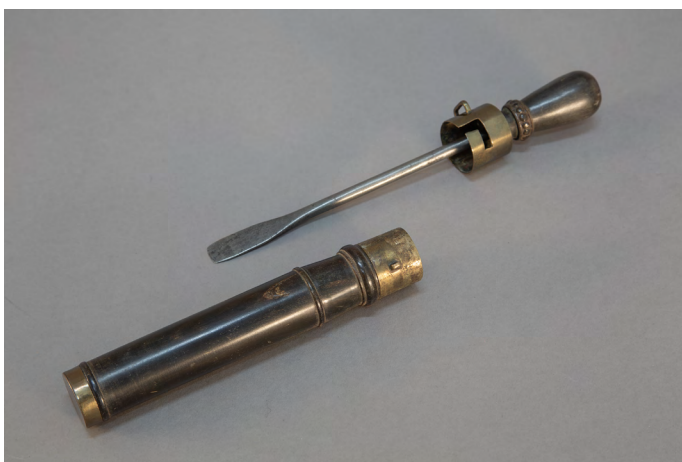


Fig. 6 The *kalikut* (I C 18671). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines.



Fig. 7 The *sipan* (I C 18685). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/ Martin Franken

b) *Pang-tali* (or a Gamecock's Cord)

A three-strand plant-fibre cord used to restrain roosters during cockfighting, complete with a tortoise-shell disc for adjusting length and a bone spike for anchoring. Rather than submitting a violent spur or blade, Rizal's choice of this quieter yet essential element of cockfighting hints at his ethnographic awareness of everyday technologies tied to deeply rooted cultural practices.

c) *Pang-ani* (Rice Harvester)

A small, hand-held cutter with a transverse blade and forked ends used for stalk-by-stalk rice harvesting. While Rizal identifies the implement using a general Austronesian term, the distinctive design hints at regional variations and the possibility of use in ritual seed selection. Its unique form prompted questions about scraping or selection uses that remain understudied.

d) *Kalikut* (Betel Mortar and Pestle)

A slim bamboo vessel with horn cladding and brass components, paired with a horn-handled pestle. Used for preparing betel quid, the *kalikut* reflects Rizal's engagement with



Fig. 8 The *patadion* (I C 18668).
Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Ethnologisches Museum/National
Museum of the Philippines/Martin
Franken



Fig. 9 The *bakus* (I C 18674). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines.



Fig. 10 The *sinalapid* (I C 18677).
Credit: Staatliche Museen
zu Berlin, Ethnologisches
Museum/National Museum of
the Philippines.

Blumentritt's ethnographic terminology and his own interest in standardizing Tagalog spelling. Noceda's dictionary and Rizal's letters provide insight into its function and cultural importance among older Tagalog men.

e) *Sipan* (Toothbrush made of the husk of an areca nut)

This toothbrush, made from the fibrous bark of the areca nut, exemplifies the resourcefulness of daily hygiene practices among Filipinos. Referenced in Jesuit and German ethnographies, the *sipan* illustrates the intersection of bodily care and local material knowledge. Rizal likely offered it to counter colonial stereotypes and document tools often overlooked in anthropological collections.

2. Mindanao Subcollection (Textiles and Dress)

Whether through design or collecting instinct, Rizal curated a representative sampling of textile techniques from South Central Mindanao—what Marian Pastor Roces calls the *bě bėd* heartland, home to Bagobo, Tagakaolo, Blaan, Tboli, and Kulaman groups renowned for resist-dyeing methods: *ikat*, *tritik*, and *plangi* (Roces 1991: 80).

a) *Ikat* with *Bakus*

Rizal's *patadion de Mindanao* is likely a Bagobo Tagabawa *ginayan* skirt—distinguished by a three-panel construction with intricate *ikat* on the central *ina* panel, flanked by narrower *ampa*. This piece's bold red palette and preservation of loom ends indicate careful construction and unusual dimensions. The accompanying *bakus*, a plaited *abaca* waist belt with tassels and horsehair, likely helped fasten the garment. A second belt, the beaded *cinturón*, was initially misclassified. Later comparison with items in Leiden and Chicago confirmed it as a *sinalapid*, a sash worn across the torso as part of Bagobo ceremonial wear.

b) *Tritik* Pair

Two *tritik*-dyed *abaca* items—a woman's blouse and infant carrier—show rare early examples of this Kulaman-associated technique. Stitch-resist dyeing creates crisp geometric motifs, but inconsistencies in dye absorption and seam alignment revealed that these



Fig. 11 The woman's blouse (I C 18666). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken



Fig. 12 The baby carrier (I C 18676). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken



Fig. 13 The *umpak-ka-mama* (I C 18678). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken.



Fig. 14 The *sawal* (I C 18679). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken



Fig. 15 The *tangkulu* (I C 18682). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken



Fig. 16 The *umpak-ka-baye* (I C 18675). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken.

were sewn from fabric dyed while folded—a technical insight into textile production. The blouse’s inside-out construction was particularly revelatory. The carrier, likely called a *salucboy*⁴ is richly patterned and functionally tailored, demonstrating both aesthetic complexity and domestic practicality.

c) *Plangi* Set

Three red *plangi*-dyed garments—an upper garment (*umpak-ka-mama*), trousers (*sawal*), and headcloth (*tangkulu*)—form a man’s ceremonial suit, usually related to the Bagobo. Though unfinished, these show key features: puckered *bulan-bulan* motifs, misplaced nodes, and loose threads, suggesting garments in transition. The *sawal* features decorative edging (*tutuk*), while all three items display traces of prior use, raising questions about acquisition context.

d) *Umpak-ka-Baye* (Blouse)

Rizal’s final textile is a richly embroidered red-and-black *abaca* blouse, most likely Blaen. Its intricate threadwork and polished finish align with examples collected by early 20th-century ethnographers. Though slightly worn, the garment completes the range of embellishment techniques Rizal may have sought to document.

3. Tagalog Ensembles

a) Tagalog Man’s *Camisa de Piña* and *Salakot*

A formal men’s shirt made from fine pineapple fibre, intricately embroidered and reflecting the elite status associated with *piña* cloth. Rizal’s donation of this shirt appears to directly counter criticisms of Filipino artistry in Jagor’s writings and reinforces his pride in native textile traditions, particularly in response to stereotypes of ‘mindless imitation’ of Spanish designs.

Added to the ensemble is a *salakot*, an elaborate headgear made of horn plates and silver embellishments. A note in Rizal’s object list emphasizes that it was once worn by Rizal himself. The *salakot* stands as a powerful counter-narrative to colonial caricatures of Filipino dress and projects an image of dignified indigenous identity. It may also have been intended to complement the *piña* shirt, presenting a Tagalog male ensemble of refinement and authority.

⁴ The name *salucboy* appears in Alexander Schadenberg’s 1885 ethnographic account of the Bagobos where he describes it as a “breite Binde zum Tragen der Kinder” (a wide band for carrying children, 1885: 135) in a vocabulary of Bagobo words.



Fig. 17 The *camisa de piña* (I C 18680). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken.



Fig. 18 Rizal’s *salakot* (I C 18681). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines.



Fig. 19 The *camisa* and *saya* (I C 18669, I C 18670). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken.



Fig. 20 The *pañuelo* (I C 18667). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken.



Fig. 21 The *tapis* (I C 18684). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken.

5 Historian Ambeth Ocampo highlights this connection by reproducing an advertisement for a shop owned by Neneng Rizal, located on the upper floor of House No. 182, Lacoste Street, Sta. Cruz, Manila. The shop offered jewelry made of diamond, pearl, pure gold, and silver, alongside “Sinamay fabrics from Legazpi, Kalibo, Iloilo, and others—all very beautiful and affordable” Ocampo, A. R. (in press). An extraordinary eye: Rizal as collector. In M. Cameron (Ed.), *Philippine textiles* (Introduction).

b) Tagalog Woman’s Ensemble

Comprising an upper garment (*camisa*) and a skirt (*saya*), both made of *jusi*, the ensemble also includes a translucent *pañuelo* referred to by Rizal simply as *nipis*—and a dark-colored *tapis*, a rectangular overskirt or wrap typically worn over the *saya* for modesty, especially when the underlying fabric is sheer. This ensemble typifies Tagalog women’s dress of the late 19th century. Rizal’s documentation of materials is significant—he identifies *jusi*, often a blend of pineapple fiber with silk or other more workable threads, as a more affordable alternative to pure pineapple fabric. Uncertain about the exact composition of the *pañuelo*, he uses the generic term *nipis*, meaning “very thin” or “translucent.” His strategic use of both Tagalog and Spanish terminology suggests an effort to convey the cultural specificity of middle-class Tagalog women’s attire. It points to a deep awareness of local textile traditions—perhaps shaped by his sisters’ involvement in a textile shop in Malate⁵—and a deliberate engagement with the vernacular logic by which fabrics were named, valued, and understood in his time.

c) Lambong (Veil)

The *lambong* is not typically part of a Tagalog woman’s everyday attire but is added to her ensemble on special occasions—whether attending Mass, observing a period of mourning, or when *beatas* or women educated within convents take to the streets. This black



Fig. 22 An undated watercolour signed Por M. Ortega, depicting a Holy Week procession in Luzon. Philippine MS II LMC 1808 at the Lilly Library, Indiana University.



Fig. 23 The *lambong* (I C 18673). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken



Fig. 24 The copy of the *lambong*. Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum/National Museum of the Philippines/Martin Franken

mourning veil is unusually shaped and partially constructed with arm-like flaps, a blue lining, and decorative pom-poms. Its function remained obscure and it was first inventoried as an *Umhang* or cape. A measure of clarity was achieved when museum conservators re-created the piece in cloth, allowing for closer study of its structure and wearability. This reconstruction was further supported by visual narratives found in 19th-century watercolours by artists such as Damian Domingo and Justiniano Asuncion. However, the decisive piece of evidence came from a painting by M. Ortega, which depicts a *Semana Santa* procession and clearly shows how the *lambong* was worn—offering compelling visual confirmation of its ceremonial use. Possibly the only surviving example of its kind from the 19th century, the *lambong* embodies both religious devotion and gendered expressions of Tagalog identity.

Institutional Reflection: Collaboration as Reconstitution

Throughout the research period, what became increasingly apparent was the generative potential of collaboration. The EMB's willingness to open its archives and collections not only advanced scholarship but also facilitated a reconstitution of knowledge that had long been partial or obscured. The engagement was not merely transactional but dialogical: German conservators, Philippine scholars, and museum practitioners jointly produced new understandings of the collection through dialogue, debate, and material engagement.

This iterative process—handling, reading, discussing—foregrounded the need to treat museum collections not as static repositories but as dynamic knowledge systems. The Rizal donation, in this light, emerges not only as a nationalist gesture or proto-ethnographic portfolio but as a collaborative, if uneven, assemblage shaped by shifting epistemic, political, and personal forces.

Conclusion: Towards a Relational Archive

In revisiting Rizal's 1888 donation, what becomes clear is the multiplicity of registers at play. The objects are artefacts of Philippine history, embodiments of indigenous material

practices, and indexes of Rizal's intellectual formation. But they are also archives of museological decision-making, of personal relationships, and of institutional memory. The 2025 research project made this visible—not through any single act of interpretation, but through a collective process of careful looking, sustained questioning, and reciprocal engagement.

As movements for digitization, repatriation, and decolonization continue to transform museum practices, collections like Rizal's take on new relevance. They offer more than just historical content—they serve as a model for collaboration across borders, disciplines, and generations. The 21 objects he sent from London to Berlin in 1888 are no longer just artefacts; they've become ongoing sites of inquiry, still revealing new layers of meaning today.

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