

Mirrors of Time and Agents of Action

Indonesia's Claimed Cultural Objects and Decolonisation, 1947-1978

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In this article I will contend that decolonisation of colonial collections is not only about repatriation of cultural objects or researching object's provenance. A few years ago, historian Claire Wintle argued how material culture both reflected and exercised agency on processes of decolonization. Here will be shown how decolonisation, the attempts of undoing colonialism, the repositioning of political relations and reformulation of identities and attitudes, was already stimulated, in both Indonesia and the Netherlands, by Indonesia's nationalistic claims on Netherlands owned objects. These claims and resulting discussion on object's possible restitution were more than anything else about political and cultural ownership, representation, legitimation and authorization. This will be illustrated by the history and background of one of Indonesia's earliest claims on return of cultural patrimony: the Nāgarakrtāgama, Prajñāpāramitā and the Dubois collection of fossils.

In dit artikel wordt gesteld dat dekolonisatie van koloniale collecties niet enkel begrepen moet worden als zijnde de teruggave van cultureel erfgoed naar het land van herkomst of als een onderzoek naar de herkomst van objecten. Claire Wintle betoogde enkele jaren geleden dat materiële cultuur niet enkel dekolonisatieprocessen reflecteerde, maar er ook invloed op uitoefende. Ik laat zien hoe dekolonisatie, als de poging tot het ongedaan maken van kolonialisme, de herpositionering van politieke relaties en herbepaling van identiteiten en mentaliteiten, reeds gestimuleerd werd door nationalistisch geïnspireerde Indonesische claims op objecten die zich in Nederlands bezit bevonden. Deze claims en de daaruit voortvloeiende restitutie-discussies draaiden om niets anders dan politiek en cultureel eigenaarschap, representatie, legitimatie en autorisatie. Dit wordt geïllustreerd aan de hand van de geschiedenis en achtergrond van één van de vroegste claims van Indonesië op teruggave van cultureel erfgoed: de Nāgarakrtāgama, Prajñāpāramitā en collectie fossielen van Dubois.

Introduction

All authors in this forum demonstrate how a myriad of objects, collected in colonial times and through questionable methods in many cases, travelled from Dutch or Belgian colonies to the metropole. Discussions on the future of these objects, burdened by a provenance that Maarten Couttenier and Jos van Beurden rightly advocate investigating, are still more complex and sensitive.

Jos van Beurden considers the restitution of objects to be important in decolonisation, in recent historiography perceived as an open, long-term dynamic and complex political and social process in the former metropole and colony alike.¹ Like Ajeng Ayu Arainikasih and Hafnidar, I believe that the decolonisation of colonial collections is broader than repatriating cultural patrimony or researching provenance. In keeping with the suggestion by Claire Wintle and the contribution from Maarten Couttenier in this forum,² I will argue that objects, even without being returned, can evoke changes in society and thus bring about decolonisation.

After all, people sense a special bond with objects and ascribe meaning in certain social-political contexts, narratives, places and other people with shared or conflicting experiences. In decolonising countries trying to undo or come to terms with the colonial past and reformulating identities, belonging and citizenship previously brought about in imperial settings, objects may therefore become highly politicised and even political tools in 'nationalising' states. By communicating stories and histories objects have influenced and defined identities and belonging in both Indonesia and the Netherlands between 1945 and 1975, thereby achieving some measure of decolonisation. As a result, the objects (without necessarily being returned) were ultimately conducive to decolonisation.

The nationalist politics (possibly even 'nationalisation of culture') underlying most restitution claims and ideological purpose associated with objects has led some, including former museum director James Cuno, to refuse to consider such claims.³ Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has also denounced these nationalist trends and has noted that the sense of connection

1 Claire Wintle, 'Decolonising the Museum'. The Case of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes', *Museum & Society* 11:2 (2013); Marc Frey, *Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: The United States and the Dissolution of European Empires, 1930-1961* (Oldenbourg/Munich 2006); Els Bogaerts and Remco Raben (eds.), *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonisation of African*

and Asian Societies, 1930s-1960s (Leiden 2012); Els Bogaerts and Remco Raben (eds.), *Van Indië tot Indonesië. Herschikking van de Indonesische samenleving* (Amsterdam 2007).

2 Wintle, 'Decolonising the Museum', 185-201.

3 James B. Cuno (ed.), *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities* (Princeton 2006) 28.

with such a national identity is imaginary.⁴ Previous studies on the restitution of objects, as well as in some measure contributions to this forum, often fail to address the politics driving restitution claims and the political and social consequences of the claims. Claims and discussions about restitution of objects are above all about ownership, representation, legitimation and authorisation, implicated in formal imperial and national structures of power in which objects are not only passive but may also be active players.

How politicised objects have manifested and have reflected and driven the Indonesian decolonisation process in a political, cultural and social sense between 1945 and 1978 will be examined in this article. I will discuss the three earliest post-colonial Indonesian restitution claims (1951) to objects once collected in colonial Indonesia and transported to the Netherlands. The artefacts concerned are the Buddhist statue *Prajñāpāramitā* (thirteenth century), the palm-leaf manuscript *Nāgarakṛtāgama* (1365) and the Dubois collection of fossilised human skulls, including that of Java Man (*Pithecanthropus Erectus*, one of the earliest known fossils of the *homo erectus*) found by Eugene Dubois on the Island of Java in 1891-1892. The *Nāgarakṛtāgama* was returned to Indonesia in 1970, and the *Prajñāpāramitā* followed eight years later. The Dubois collection has yet to be returned by the Dutch state.

These case studies give us insight into the complicated decolonisation and revived nationalisation, in both Indonesia and the Netherlands, in which objects but not necessarily their restitution to Indonesia are significant aspects.

A new nation state and culture

After 1945, many Dutch were not aware of the ending of Dutch hegemony in Indonesia. Two Dutch military campaigns brought no change in the prevailing situation. In 1949 following pressure from the United Nations and the United States and Dutch political ingenuity, the deadlock was finally broken.⁵

On 7 May 1949 Mohamed Roem and Jan Herman van Roijen reached an agreement that meant the official end of all violence and restored Indonesian authority in the archipelago. This agreement envisioning the end of Dutch rule in Indonesia in the near future may have led the civilian D. Schurink from Winschoten in the Netherlands to write to the Dutch Minister of Overseas Territories J.H. van Maarseveen. In his letter he suggested that the

4 Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Whose Culture is it?', in: James B. Cuno (ed.), *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities* (Princeton 2006) 71-86, 85.

5 J.J.P. de Jong, *Avondschoot. Hoe Nederland zich terugtrok uit zijn Aziatisch imperium* (Amsterdam 2011).

Dutch government should return the Indonesian crown jewels located in the Netherlands,⁶ although he did not specify these ‘crown jewels’.

This letter reflected the dominant premise of nationalism that led cultural property in the West to be seen as public patrimony.⁷ Control of such patrimony was viewed as a right of independent countries. Restitution of objects was thus related to validating a new nation and in the present case to acknowledging the loss of a colony and the birth of a nation state.

Although Schurink by virtue of his suggestion recognised the new state of Indonesia and its authority to act independently, most members of the Dutch government had not reached this stage in the spring and summer of 1949. When repatriation was mentioned in the council of ministers, the suggestion was rejected and dismissed as bad timing. If objects were to be returned, the Dutch government preferred that such a measure be regarded by Indonesia and the world as an act of generosity. Nor did high-ranking officials believe there was any problem, as they assumed that all Indonesian objects in the Netherlands had been received as gifts or purchased. None of the cultural artefacts were acquired illegally or unethically. Entrusting the objects at the museum in Jakarta to the authorities in the new Indonesian republic was considered sufficient.⁸ In other words, cultural decolonisation concerned the former colony, not the Dutch state.

The question of the restitution of cultural objects resurfaced during the resulting Round Table Conference (RTC) in the summer and autumn of 1949, when Indonesia demanded the return of its as yet unspecified material culture in the Netherlands. Here, the Indonesian authorities invoked the Western conception of control of a national patrimony as a political right and mark of equality. The ensuing draft Cultural Agreement stipulated the return of cultural objects, but the Netherlands and Indonesia did not come to a mutual understanding of the complete Agreement, and it was never ratified.⁹ Indonesia, however, continued to consider the return of what they now regarded as their national cultural heritage as an important matter.

As Jennifer Lindsay and Maya Liem have noted, nationhood was negotiated ‘on the wide cultural front’ for Indonesia as a new nation state.¹⁰

6 National Archives (hereafter: NA), The Hague, 2.05.188. Archives of the Dutch Embassy in Indonesia, 1962-1974. Inv.nr. 863. Secret memorandum, the Dutch Foreign Minister to the High Representative of the Crown in Indonesia, 9 April 1968.

7 Elazar Barkan, ‘Amending Historical Injustices: The Restitution of Cultural Property – an Overview’, in: Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (eds.), *Claiming the Stones, Naming the Bones: Cultural Property and the Negotiation of National and Ethnic Identity* (Los Angeles 2002) 16-45, 18.

8 NA, The Hague, 2.05.188. Archives of the Dutch Embassy in Indonesia, 1962-1974. Inv.nr. 863. Secret memorandum, the Dutch Foreign Minister to the High Representative of the Crown in Indonesia, 9 April 1968. Jos van Beurden, *Treasures in Trusted Hands: Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects* (Leiden 2017) 128.

9 Van Beurden, *Treasures*, 127.

10 Jennifer Lindsay and Maya Liem (eds.), *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian 1950-1965* (Leiden 2012) 5, 9.

In 1948 and 1949 Indonesian intellectuals organised cultural congresses that culminated in a cultural manifest stating that the spirit of Indonesians had to be renewed to create a new people of Indonesia, with their own new society and culture. Indonesian culture needed to be very distinctive, irrespective of whether it already existed or had to be created. All remnants and traces of a feudal and colonial culture had to be erased, explained the influential nationalist Ki Hadjar Dewantara. Indonesian culture was intended to set an example for the rest of the world.¹¹ The idea of ‘having a culture’ provided crucial ‘proof of national existence’, as anthropologist Handler had asserted.¹² Being Indonesian thus became ‘an issue of culture’ and of overriding political importance.¹³

The importance of national symbols, 1945-1955

The struggle for the return of cultural patrimony therefore has two interrelated aspects. One is the pursuit of political legitimacy by the nation state. The other is a political ‘race’ to appropriate a certain identity. Both were conducive to Indonesia’s foundation of its national existence and were consequently rooted in nationalist politics. This cultural nationalism created and maintained a national cultural awareness and identification that is vital to political nationalism. In this sense, Indonesian legitimation and identification as an independent and full-fledged nation state was thus largely negotiated through culture and cultural manifestations since the late 1940s.

Although rumours had circulated since the failure of the Cultural Agreement, Indonesian claims to cultural objects in the Netherlands became more concrete only in 1951. That spring, Mohamed Yamin, member of parliament and later Minister of Education and Culture of the Indonesian Republic, notified the Indonesian press that a great many Indonesian artefacts (which he described as scientifically and culturally ‘invaluable’) were still overseas, especially in the Netherlands. It was, Yamin claimed, ‘in the interest of the Indonesian nation and its people’ that these objects be reclaimed by the Indonesian government.¹⁴ The objects that Yamin listed as being scientifically and culturally invaluable for Indonesia comprised several fossilised skulls and human remains found on Java, the Nāgarakrtāgama, a fourteenth century Javanese palm-leaf manuscript that had been part of the booty from the Lombok War of 1894 and the beautiful thirteenth century Buddhist statue of Prajñāpāramitā (the goddess of wisdom).

11 *Indonesië Cultureel* 2 (1949).

12 Richard Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Madison 1988) 141-142.

13 Lindsay, *Heirs to World Culture*, 2.

14 National Archives The Hague (NA), 2.10.54.

Ministry of Colonies – Files archive, inv.nr. 1684.

Letter of the Department of Communications of the High Commissioner in Indonesia to the Ministry of Union Affairs and the Overseas Territories, The Hague, 16 April 1951.

These objects were not a random selection. Yamin listed artefacts that had acquired powerful political significance in Indonesian nationalist circles in recent decades. Especially in Yogyakarta, and also elsewhere, a self-awareness deriving from Javanese culture had emerged around 1910. The mighty pre-colonial Javanese-based kingdoms of Majapahit and Singosari, revealed mainly by Dutch scholars in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries promoted the rise of nationalist cultural awareness and influenced Indonesian political nationalism.¹⁵ From the perception of Yamin and others, not the Dutch colonial state but Majapahit's geographic and cultural contours defined the Indonesian nation state. Yamin believed that the kingdom had extended to Malaysia, Papua and beyond: the borders of Majapahit had corresponded to some degree with those of the new nation state. Like the new state, the Majapahit era was depicted as prosperous.¹⁶

Both the Nāgarakṛtāgama manuscript and the statue of Prajñāpāramitā symbolised these Javanese kingdoms of Majapahit and Singosari and thus the pre-colonial power and grandeur of Indonesia. The early twentieth century translation of the Nāgarakṛtāgama by the linguist H. Kern had revealed the legendary glory of the Majapahit Kingdom and the veneration of its most important ruler Hayam Wuruk (1350-1389). In addition to being evidence of the contemporary extraordinary craftsmanship, this statue of Prajñāpāramitā, according to popular belief, displayed the beautiful Queen Ken Dedes, from whom all powerful Majapahit kings descended. Both objects were instrumentalised to resist the colonial structures of historical and political domination and to highlight Javanese grandeur.

Finally, the list compiled by Yamin includes five fossilised skulls and human remains. He and many Indonesians considered these fossils to be scientific evidence that Java was the oldest island in the world and the place where humans originated. The objects that Yamin claimed consequently served the new Indonesian national historical narrative of pre-colonial domestic strength, in which strong political-administrative influences (e.g. colonial rule) were downplayed, and a predominantly Javanese culture was transformed into an important Indonesian one.¹⁷ Moreover, these fossils, found in colonial Indonesia and studied and brought to Europe by Western scientists,

15 Caroline Drieënhuizen, *Koloniale collecties, Europees aanzien. De Europese elite van Nederlands-Indië belicht door haar verzamelingen, 1811-1957* (Amsterdam, Universiteit van Amsterdam, PhD thesis 2012).

16 Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, *Dutch Scholarship in the Age of Empire and Beyond. கிபி: the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, 1851-2011* (Leiden 2013) 92;

Michael Wood, 'Archaeology, National Histories, and National Borders in Southeast Asia', in: James Clad, Sean M. McDonald, Bruce Vaughn (eds.), *The Borderlands of Southeast Asia: Geopolitics, Terrorism, and Globalization* (Washington D.C. 2011) 23-57, 36-37, 39.

17 J. van der Kroef, 'On the writing of Indonesian history', *Public Affairs* 21 (1958) 352-371, 353.

symbolised scientific imperialism. The exodus of these paleontological objects, Yamin stated, had deeply harmed Indonesian scientific interests.¹⁸

By proclaiming these artefacts as Indonesian cultural patrimony, Yamin enshrined them in historical and political memory evoking national historical imagination and turned them into national symbols and ‘the essence of the nation’.¹⁹ He emphasised that these objects belonged to the communal culture and history of Indonesia as a whole and thus had to be returned inside the physical confines of the state where they originated. The Nāgarakṛtāgama, the Prajñāpāramitā and the fossils became the historical, aesthetic and spiritual embodiment of the Indonesian people. By stressing that Indonesia was heir to cultures that thrived and united a significant part of the archipelago before Indonesia existed as a nation state, he also symbolically claimed the history of the nation ‘back’ to the Dutch occupying powers. In these emerging national historical narratives, as Benedict Anderson noted long ago, some aspects have to be remembered and others forgotten.²⁰ Through historical objects, the past came to be resisted but at the same time claimed, appropriated and possessed,²¹ all framed to offset the role of the Dutch.

Yamin was one of the most ardent nationalist proponents of this definition of Indonesian history and identification. In 1951 he served on the Indonesian-Dutch committee by Sukarno to write a national Indonesian history, to be ‘imbued with the national spirit’,²² presenting a united and politically stable country that would appeal to the people.²³ This nationalist historiography, known as being Indonesiasentris, was part of the overall ‘indonesianisasi’ of the new nation state, the re-orientation of Indonesian

18 NA, 2.10.54. Ministry of Colonies – Files archive, inv.nr. 1684. Letter of the Department of Communications of the High Commissioner in Indonesia to the Ministry of Union Affairs and the Overseas Territories The Hague, 16 April 1951.

19 Barkan, ‘Amending Historical Injustices’, 22.

20 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1991) 204-206.

21 Claire L. Lyons, ‘Objects and Identities: Claiming and Reclaiming the Past’, in: Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (eds.), *Claiming the Stones, Naming the Bones: Cultural Property and the Negotiation of National and Ethnic Identity* (Los Angeles 2002) 116-137, 116.

22 NA, 2.10.54. Ministry of Colonies, Files archive, inv.nr. 2344. Report High Commissioner of the

Kingdom of the Netherlands in Indonesia to the Minister of Union Affairs and Overseas Parts, Jakarta, 19 September 1951.

23 Rommel Curaming, ‘Towards Reinventing Indonesian Nationalist Historiography’, *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 3 (2003): <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-3-nations-and-stories/an-introduction-to-indonesian-historiography/>. Accessed 13 November 2017; Katherine McGregor, ‘Representing the Indonesian: The National Monument History Museum from Guided Democracy to the New Order’, *Indonesia* 75 (2003) 91-122, 93; Tular Sudarmadi, *Between Colonial Legacies and Grassroots Movements: Exploring Cultural Heritage Practice in the Ngadha and Manggarai Region of Flores* (Amsterdam, Free University Amsterdam, PhD thesis 2014) 64-66.

society.²⁴ By virtue of their symbolism and the restitution claims, the objects became instruments of nation building in this ‘indonesianisasi’.

Yamin’s views on the past were institutionalised and made visible by Indonesia’s national museum (Museum Nasional Indonesia), formerly the museum of the colonial Bataviaasch Genootschap van Wetenschappen. In this period, museums were considered didactical institutions, where the public could learn Indonesian citizenship (thereby renouncing Dutch imperial ideas) and civilisations could be advanced. By 1954, consistent with the focus of Indonesian historiography, the most important collection was the prehistorical collection and the Dutch colonial period rooms from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been removed from the museum. The ‘Indonesianised’ view of the past reached out to visitors, helping them identify and become Indonesian citizens with a specific national fixed identity.²⁵ Featuring symbolic objects like the Prajñāpramitā (which was placed in the museum after 1978) led the nation to be imagined and thus constructed through representation, symbolism and a sense of shared history and knowledge.²⁶

A sensitive cultural quest with consequences, 1951-1978

The Dutch authorities in Indonesia understood the political message in the claims by Yamin to the Nāgaraktāgama, the Prajñāpāramitā and the paleontological objects²⁷: efforts to take possession of the patrimony from the former colony were seen as a quest for recognition of Indonesia as an independent and equal state with a distinct and deep-seated history and identification, in which the Dutch were ‘an intermezzo, external to the essence of Indonesia’s identity’.²⁸ The meaning the Dutch associated with the disputed objects and their response to the claims reveals (as historians Bloembergen and Eickhoff have observed) lack of awareness and understanding of the new relations and situation.²⁹

24 Bogaerts and Raben (eds.), *Van Indië tot Indonesië*, 16.

25 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, ‘Beyond identity’, *Theory and Society* 29 (2000) 1-47.

26 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163-185.

27 By 1973 Dutch officials still maintained that restitution claims were more political slogans than based on ‘facts’. NA, 2.27.19. Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, inv.nr. 1425. Confidential memorandum on Indonesian items of cultural value (no archives) as Dutch public property, probably 1973.

28 Susan Legêne, Bambang Purwanto and Henk Schulte Nordholt (eds.), *Sites, Bodies and Stories: Imagining Indonesian History* (Singapore 2015) 6.

29 Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff, ‘Decolonizing Borobudur: Moral Engagements and the Fear of Loss. The Netherlands, Japan and (Post)Colonial Heritage Politics in Indonesia’, in: Susan Legêne, Bambang Purwanto and Henk Schulte Nordholt (eds.), *Sites, Bodies and Stories: Imagining Indonesian History* (Singapore 2015) 33-66, 56-57.

For a long time, the Dutch believed that their cultural influence and language might remain significant in the new Indonesian nation state. In 1951 the Dutch authorities were still convinced that because of Western influences Indonesia having its own culture was inconceivable.³⁰ A policy was even drafted to ensure the continuing influence of Dutch language and culture in Indonesia. Dutch diplomats and politicians condemned the ‘anti-Dutch moral reign of terror’ prevalent in Indonesia,³¹ and although the Dutch Department of Cultural Affairs had advised restitution in 1951,³² the remarks by Yamin on the restitution of the Prajñāpāramitā, the Nāgarakṛtāgama and fossilised skulls and human remains were commonly regarded as unsympathetic and offensive.³³ The Dutch authorities did not even respond to requests for information about other Indonesian objects of artistic or historical value in the Netherlands in 1956.³⁴ Overall, the Dutch did not truly understand Indonesia’s need to identify politically and socially through narratives that represented and at the same time constituted their own nation state.

Indonesian ministers and later President Suharto appealed to Dutch officials to return the Nāgarakṛtāgama, the Prajñāpāramitā and other objects, such as manuscripts and documents, to Indonesia. About fifteen years after the initial requests by Yamin, Indonesian scholars, such as Teuku Jacob, requested the return of the paleontological collections.³⁵ These efforts were largely ineffective. Teuku Jacob never received collections from the Dutch state. The objects that were returned were presented to him personally, including the Ngandong skulls and the *Homo Modjokertensis*, which Teuku Jacob received from his mentor G.H.R. von Koenigswald in 1975 and 1978.³⁶ Presumably, the continuous Indonesian requests not only fostered Indonesian identification

30 NA, 2.10.35.05. Department of Cultural Affairs, 1950-1952, inv.nr. 1. Collected minutes of outgoing letters and memorandums of the Department of Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Union Affairs and the Overseas Territories. Memorandum department of Cultural Affairs to the secretary of State, 22 December 1951.

31 Op. cit. Memorandum department of Cultural Affairs to the Minister without portfolio, undated.

32 Op. cit. Memorandum department of Cultural Affairs to the Minister without portfolio, undated [probably January 1951].

33 NA, 2.10.54. Ministry of Colonies – Files archive, inv.nr. 1684. Letter of the Department of Communications of the High Commissioner in Indonesia to Ministry of Union Affairs and the Overseas Territories, The Hague, 16 April 1951.

34 Van Beurden, *Treasures*, 127.

35 Op. cit, 131. NA, 2.05.188. Archives of the Dutch Embassy in Indonesia, 1962-1974. Inv.nr. 863. Papers concerning the possible transfer of Indonesian cultural treasures and archives in the Netherlands, 1968-1971. Memorandum on the possible restitution of Indonesian cultural artefacts; NA, 2.27.19. Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, inv.nr. 1425. Deliberations between the Netherlands and Indonesia on the collection M.E.F.T. Dubois, 1977-1979. Undated press release.

36 According to Teuku Jacob, his former mentor G.H.R. von Koenigswald returned part of his collection to Java in the 1970s. Teuku Jacob also brought home skulls that had been ‘smuggled away’. Phillip V. Tobias, ‘Hominid Fossils as Universal and National Cultural Heritage: An Essay on Past and Present Attitudes Towards the Ownership of Hominid Fossils and the Questions

with a certain anti-Dutch history and thus national identity but stirred up public sentiment in the Netherlands as well. From 1949, when the Dutch cautiously started discussing the possible return of artefacts, until the 1970s,³⁷ when the partial restitution of cultural property such as the Prajñāpāramitā and the Nāgarakṛtāgama was finally realised, staff from the Dutch Ministry of Culture, Dutch museum directors and newspapers frequently mentioned how few ‘treasures’ were ‘stolen’ from Indonesia, and that the Dutch had in fact rescued many from destruction. After all, they argued, people in Indonesia had never cared for these items.³⁸ Newspapers also quoted a Dutch historian, who reassured the anxious Dutch public and dismissed the question as ‘a problem, unduly exaggerated’.³⁹ The son of somebody who had donated items to the Ethnographic Museum in Leiden wrote an angry letter to both director Pott and the Dutch prime minister demanding a guarantee that his father’s ethnographic collections would not be returned.⁴⁰ These reactions were common at the time.

The Dutch museum directors that housed the Prajñāpāramitā and the fossilised remains of Java Man commented angrily on the Indonesian restitution claims in the 1970s. Pieter Pott (of the National Ethnographic Museum) and Willem Vervoort (of the Natural History Museum) gave interviews to Dutch newspapers, and Vervoort sent concerned letters to the Dutch Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work.⁴¹ Both men considered the Indonesian claims unlawful: in their opinion, these objects were not obtained illegally and were thus the legitimate property of the Dutch state. Whereas in Indonesia these objects acquired a patriotic significance, these Dutchmen associated the objects primarily with the Dutch salvation paradigm and scholarship on Dutch colonial matters. ‘Emotional concerns have suddenly made that little statue very important,’⁴² was the irritated response from Pott to the Indonesian demand for the return of the

of Repatriation’, in: M. Montagnari Kokelj, M. Budinich, C. Tuniz, *Science for Cultural Heritage. Technological Innovation and Case Studies in Marine and Land Archaeology in the Adriatic Region and Inland* (Singapore 2010) 258-279, 268-269.

37 Van Beurden, *Treasures*, 127.

38 J.J.P. de Jong, ‘Er zijn weinig schatten uit Indonesië geroofd’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 31 January 1975; *Leeuwarder Courant*, 12 October 1963; NA, 2.05.188. Archives of the Dutch embassy in Indonesia, 1962-1974. Inv.nr. 863. Papers concerning the possible transfer of Indonesian cultural treasures and archives in the Netherlands, 1968-1971.

39 J.J.P. de Jong, ‘Er zijn weinig schatten uit Indonesië geroofd’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 31 January 1975.

40 NA, 2.03.01. General Affairs/Cabinet of the Prime Minister, inv.nr. 9512. Letter of J.W. Lieftrinck to Prime Minister Den Uyl and director of the National Ethnography Museum Pott, Sterkel, 7 November 1974.

41 NA, 2.27.19. Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, inv.nr. 1425. Deliberations between the Netherlands and Indonesia on the collection M.E.F.T. Dubois, 1977-1979. Letter of W. Vervoort to R. Hotke, director-general of the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, Leiden, 2 March 1976.

42 ‘Moeten de Indonesische cultuurschatten terug?’ *Leeuwarder Courant*, 28 August 1970.

Prajñāpāramitā. His choice of terminology showed not only his fondness for the statue but also downplayed its general artistic and historical value and size (at 1m26, the statue is not little). In highlighting the emotional aspect, he moreover resorted to colonial conceptions of the character of the colonised people. In 1949, for example, Dutch official documents still indicated that ‘words, symbols and feelings’ were of great value to the ‘Oriental’.⁴³ With these characterisations and his remark that several ‘comparable items’ were present in the museum in Jakarta,⁴⁴ Pott reduced the importance of the object for Indonesians and the validity of their claim.

While in the 1960s the Dutch took a more critical view of their colonial past and discussed justifications for returning objects, by the 1970s many Dutchmen’s identification with the Dutch narrative of Dutch imperialism as ‘efficient but judicious imperial management’ made them not responsive to restitution of Indonesian objects.⁴⁵ Dutch imperialism had always been framed as ‘reluctant’ and as such, as Gloria Wekker recently wrote, ‘a mixture of innocent, unplanned actions that forced the Dutch, almost against their wish, to become colonisers, coupled with strong moral overtones of superiority and of a sacred mission’.⁴⁶ As a result of this self-image, the loss of former privileged positions and responsibilities as guardians of cultural heritage, together with the loss of the tangible objects⁴⁷, led Dutch officials and institutions to defer claims as long as possible (the strategic delay was officially advised⁴⁸) to preserve their illusion as colonial benefactors. Their irritation even in the late 1970s at Indonesian officials who continued to mention the ‘return’ of the Prajñāpāramitā and the Nāgarakṛtāgama (the Dutch described it as a ‘transfer’⁴⁹) and the ongoing emphasis by Dutch officials on the willingness and kindness of the Netherlands to donate the objects confirms this disposition.⁵⁰

43 Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, 2.27.19, inv.nr. 4193. Minute on the letter of D. Schurink to the Minister, no date, 1949.

44 Van Beurden, *Treasures*, 146.

45 Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900-1942* (Amsterdam 1995).

46 Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham 2016) 161.

47 Bloembergen and Eickhoff, ‘Decolonizing Borobudur’, 56-57.

48 NA, 2.05.188. Archives of the Dutch embassy in Indonesia, 1962-1974. Inv.nr. 863. Papers concerning the possible transfer of Indonesian

cultural treasures and archives in the Netherlands, 1968-1971. Memorandum head of General Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Dutch ambassador in Jakarta, 8 December 1967.

49 Bloembergen and Eickhoff, ‘Decolonizing Borobudur’, 53; NA, 2.03.01. Archives of the Minister of War and of General Affairs; Cabinet of the Prime Minister, inventory no. 9221: ‘Report of the Dutch Delegation Regarding Cultural Collaboration Between Indonesia and the Netherlands’, 10 to 22 November 1975.

50 *Leeuwarder Courant*, 12 October 1963; De Jong, ‘Er zijn weinig schatten’.

When the Dutch government returned the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Nāgarakṛtāgama* to Indonesia (the two most recurrent Indonesian claims concerning Dutch semi state-owned objects of national symbolic importance), stakeholders in the former colonising country had difficulty accepting that the objects returned to their country of origin were considered the national cultural patrimony of that other, independent, country and had lost their former colonial identities. When Pott learned that the returned Majapahit manuscript *Nāgarakṛtāgama* was not displayed at a public institution (as it had been in the Leiden University library) but was rumoured to be kept at the Presidential Palace, where Mrs Suharto considered it an ancient heirloom (*pusaka*) and burned incense nearby, his anger became greater still. He contested once again whether returning the object had been lawful.⁵¹ Perhaps the Western idea that objects belonged inside the physical borders of nation states had helped him come to terms with the return. The news that the manuscript had not been placed in a public national institute accessible to the Indonesian people but was held by an individual and was treated not as a work of art but as a relic may have made Pott feel he had been deceived.

Aside from the claims concerning objects, both countries used the return of the *Nāgarakṛtāgama* in 1970 and the *Prajñāpāramitā* in 1978 to negotiate their respective national identities. In 1970 Queen Juliana of the Netherlands handed over the *Nāgarakṛtāgama* to President Suharto on the occasion of his visit to the Netherlands. Only in 1978, however, was the *Prajñāpāramitā* presented to the National Museum in Jakarta at its bicentennial anniversary.⁵² By having important national figures present these objects at ceremonial events (the first visits of the Indonesian and Dutch heads of state to their respective countries following the Indonesian independence), the Dutch and Indonesian governments practised identity politics, highlighting their own role in the processes. Indonesia invoked the return of its national cultural heritage from its coloniser as proof of recent and past greatness and perseverance. The Netherlands emphasised benevolence by returning the heritage, hoping to engender goodwill to preserve some of the tangible Dutch heritage (e.g. the VOC archives in the former Dutch colony).⁵³

In conclusion

As noted by Van Beurden and Couttenier in this forum, researching the provenance of objects and the restitution of cultural patrimony is an

51 NA, 2.27.19. Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, inv.nr. 4193. Restitution of cultural objects to Indonesia, 1963-1975. Memorandum 2/4 MMA cons. Javanese manuscript.

52 Van Beurden, *Treasures*, 144-149.

53 *Leeuwarder Courant*, 12 October 1963.

important aspect of decolonisation, as a long-term, ongoing, multifaceted process that entails changing relations both within and between present and former colonised and colonising states and societies, reformulating identities and unlearning colonial attitudes and world views. As I and also Ajeng Arainikasih and Hafnidar state, however, such research and restitution is only one aspect. Redressing historical injustices, relating as equals to the former colonisers and constituting and legitimising the 'de-colonial', history and identification in the new nation state were furthered not only by the restitution of objects but also by the claims placed on them.

By requesting restitution of the Nāgarakrtāgama, the Prajñāpāramitā and the Dubois collection of fossils, Indonesia reminded the people in both Indonesia and the Netherlands repeatedly of the changing balance of political power and its consequences, including the right to control the national patrimony and the related recognition of the country as an autonomous nation state. As a result, the question remained on the Dutch political agenda and led Dutch government and museum institutions to come to terms to a certain degree with decolonisation and to realise that their superior, moralist and paternalist identities as guardians of heritage were no longer taken for granted.

These developments, covered in the newspapers, magazines and the political arena in both countries, influenced public self-awareness and led people in limited measure to shape and rethink their views on a national past and their national identification. In short, Indonesian claims to certain objects, the meanings ascribed to them and the fear of losing these objects enabled both Indonesia and the Netherlands (and especially the new Indonesian state) to assert their own agendas and reposition and identify politically and culturally as the former coloniser and colonised.⁵⁴ Even without being returned, as Couttenier also mentions in this forum, objects had a sort of agency and instigated action and change in society and were conducive to decolonisation. They became ideological tools.

Cuno and Appiah criticised the largely nationalist politics that fuelled these restitution claims: Appiah urges us to adopt a transnational perspective on objects and reminds us that people may bond with cultural objects in more ways than national identification. As he notes, however, the connection with objects considered symbolic property remains powerful long after ownership ends. Not acknowledging this bond or the right of nations to encourage this sentiment (and to pursue certain policies) in responses reflects remaining trapped in colonial mindsets, superseded power relations and attitude structures.

When we discuss the future and 'decolonising' of colonial objects, it is not only a judicial matter or the question of who the rightful owner is based on provenance research (as advocated in this forum) or the rectification of historical injustices. The discussion also and perhaps mainly addresses

54 Wintle, 'Decolonising the Museum'.

the meaning of objects and the involving structures that resist, change and generate the related political, social and cultural domination. Undoing colonialism, the long and multi-layered process of decolonisation in which people and countries re-position politically, socially and culturally, continues to this day and is reflected in and encouraged by the meanings and restitution claims of contested cultural objects.

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