

# *The sabre of Negara: a tale of many countries. Contextualising provenance research*

On 11 January 2021, the Director General of Culture of the Indonesian Ministry of Culture and Education, Dr. Hilmar Farid, announced the establishment of a »repatriation committee« that would coordinate research into Indonesian heritage in the Netherlands and advise the Indonesian government on restitution requests. Farid emphasized the importance of collaboration on an equal footing between Indonesian and Dutch researchers: »The return of historical objects is not only important for the history and culture of the Indonesian people, but also offers the opportunity to research historical injustice that occurred during hundreds of years of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia.«<sup>1</sup> Two weeks later, on 29 January 2021, the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science Ingrid van Engelshoven announced that the Dutch government was prepared to unconditionally return state-owned cultural objects to the countries of origin, if it could be demonstrated »with a reasonable degree of certainty« that they were lost involuntarily under Dutch colonial rule. She also departed from a desire to redress historic injustice: »I am of the opinion [...] that injustice was inflicted on the indigenous population of colonized areas by taking possession of cultural goods against their will.«<sup>2</sup>

Today's political interest in both countries in the large numbers of Indonesian objects in Dutch museums is not entirely new, and has frequently been part of the two

countries' post-colonial bilateral relations, leading to the restitution of some prominent objects to Indonesia such as the famous Nagarakrtagama manuscript in 1970, the equipment of the National Hero Diponegoro in 1977 and the Prajnaparamita statue in 1978. However, between the 1980s and 2010s, the subject of restitution disappeared from the political agendas of both countries, with the exception of a number of non-state claims by Indonesian private actors and direct negotiations between Dutch and Indonesian museums in the new millennium.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, the discussion about the future of colonial collections in museums and the necessity of a more structural cultural dialogue between former colonizing and colonized countries reemerged. In the Netherlands, this discussion was triggered by the closure in 2013 of Museum Nusantara in Delft, which held a collection of more than 18,000 Indonesian objects, and by the publication of a set of guidelines for return requests by the largest consortium of ethnographic museums in the Netherlands, the National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW).<sup>4</sup> It led to the installation of an advisory committee directed by Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You, to the committee's report »Colonial Collections and a Recognition of Injustice«, and finally to the above-mentioned announcement of Minister Van Engelshoven.<sup>5</sup>

In both Farid's announcement and Van Engelshoven's policy directives, provenance

research on individual museum objects is regarded as a prerequisite in the process of returning objects.<sup>6</sup> On the Dutch side, the reemerging interest among politicians and academics in provenance research led to the establishment of the Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPOCE) in November 2019, in which the authors participate. It is a collaboration of the NMVW, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (RMA) and the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education. Its aim is to map out the specific steps needed to conduct provenance research into colonial collections on a practical and methodological level. To gain experience and set examples, a few dozen objects from the collections of the NMVW and the RMA are researched, originating from Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Part of the selection was made by partners in Indonesia and, wherever possible, expertise in the countries of origin is sought. The research mainly addresses the circumstances under which objects came into Dutch possession. Along the way, research methods and archival resources are explored, leading to research recommendations for objects acquired within a colonial context.

PPOCE – and structural provenance research in general – fits in the mutual interest of Dutch and Indonesian politicians to forge new bilateral cultural relations. At the same time, the provenance histories of concrete Indonesian objects in Dutch museum collections tell a much more complex story about European imperialism in the larger region of Southeast Asia and about the flow of objects from Asia to Europe.

In spatial imagination, the history of colonialism has for a long time been conceptualized as a centrifugal story, centered around the motivations and activities of Western agents in the imperial center or its colonies. In histories of material culture and collection practices, this translated into a plethora of – in itself va-

luable – studies into the organizational and intellectual history of collectors in the West (intellectuals in service of cabinets of curiosities, museums and universities), into the activities of Western collectors in the colonized world (scholars, soldiers, missionaries sending objects home), and – as a post-colonial anti-thesis – into the material culture of local civilizations prior to, or in spite of Western intrusion.

In recent decades historians have moderated the strong traditional historical dichotomy between the metropolis and the periphery, and »the West« and »the non-West«. Alan Lester and Tony Ballantyne, for instance, argued that the Empire was essentially one historical space, in which multiple social networks operated and interacted. Colonial functionaries, soldiers, missionary groups, artists and scholars, but also »colonised« groups such as Buginese traders, Javanese students, Chinese indentured labourers, Islamic pilgrims and many others travelled through and beyond the Empire.<sup>7</sup> This emphasis on the multidirectional flow of people, ideas and objects was not made with the aim to trivialise the influence of colonial spatial and political restrictions, but to see that the Empire as a historical space overlapped and interacted with alternative spaces. Examples are Chinese diasporic and Indian Ocean trade networks, religious networks of pilgrimage to the Hijaz, and emerging political anticolonial networks. Each of these networks reshaped the flow of raw materials, commodities and cultural objects.

The workings of this multidirectional flow of objects is well demonstrated in the provenance histories of objects in the collections of Western museums, such as the NMVW and the RMA in the Netherlands. Even though in our project the end point of the object biographies is always the same, i.e. museums in the Netherlands, provenance research leads us to histories that are usually not covered by traditional studies of collecting. To illustrate the potential of provenance research, the re-

mainder of this paper is dedicated to a sabre and sheath from South-Kalimantan in the collection of NMVW (fig. 1), and a model of a Javanese marketplace in the collection of the Rijksmuseum (fig. 2).

The sabre with NMVW inventory number TM-H-1669 was donated by the colonial official Ferdinand Theodoor Pahud de Mortanges in 1888. This type of curved and double edged sabre, locally known as beladah belabang, is regarded as a traditional weapon of the town of Negara, north of the city of Banjarmasin in South Kalimantan. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the region was ruled by the Banjarmasin Sultanate, which was in close interaction with neighboring Buginese and Javanese states and Dayak groups. Dutch interference in the regional economy and internal politics of the Banjarmasin Sultanate intensified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the discovery of coal-fields and led to the Banjarmasin war between 1858 and 1863 and the military abolition of the Banjarmasin Sultanate in 1859. In the following decades the armed status quo under direct colonial rule was repeatedly interrupted by small-scale »rebellions« that were quickly repressed.

Apart from the coal and diamond mines exploited for the colonial economy, the Banjarase economy was dominated by agriculture and river trade, and small scale industries such as metallurgy and weapon production in the town of Negara.<sup>8</sup> According to reports of European travellers in the region, Negara numbered a few thousand inhabitants of whom 70 to 80 were active in the manufacturing of weapons of various kinds, including swords, pistols and rifles. The town produced decorated ceremonial weapons as well as weapons that were used in warfare.<sup>9</sup> An inventory card of the museum states that beladah belabang number TM-H-1669 also originated from this town. To date our research efforts have not yet led to certainty how the object ended up in the possession of

Pahud de Mortanges, who lived and worked on Java between 1858 and 1882 and collected a variety of items from many parts of the archipelago. Although it is not a particularly valuable piece, he may have received the weapon as a gift in the context of one of his many official and honorary public functions. Alternatively, Pahud de Mortanges or a different broker could have purchased the weapon in Negara. Finally, there are also examples of beladah belabang that were taken from the battle field in one of the military conflicts in South Kalimantan.<sup>10</sup>

Pahud de Mortanges donated the weapon to the Koloniaal Museum, one of the predecessors of NMVW's Tropenmuseum, as an example of a local Banjarase artisanal production. But this beladah belabang also embodies the many ways in which the Banjarase society was connected to other parts of the world, because of and in spite of the Dutch Empire. First of all, the shape and size of the weapon are iconic to the Banjarmasin area but at the same time they are regarded as a local derivative of similar Dutch navy cutlasses and Ottoman scimitar swords that ended up in South Kalimantan via trade networks in the Java sea. This foreign influence is especially significant with beladah belabang TM-H-1669, because its slightly deviating brass hilt suggests that it is was inspired by an old Dutch sabre.<sup>11</sup> Islamic influences can also be discerned from the many Arab inscriptions on the blade, evoking Quranic verses, the four caliphs, archangels and the first words of the Shahada.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, the raw materials used to manufacture the weapons were imported through colonial and pre-colonial trade networks as well, such as locally produced metal from Central Kalimantan, imported iron and steel from Sweden and England via Dutch routes, Pamor (nickelous iron) from South-Sulawesi and imported by Chinese and Buginese traders, and polishing stones (batu ulas) from Singapore.<sup>13</sup> Once the weapons were



Fig.1 *Beladah Belabang* from Negara, South Kalimantan (Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.nr. TM-H-1669)



Fig.2 the hilt and inscriptions on the *Beladah Belabang*. (Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.nr. TM-H-1669)

sold on the market, they were exported to various parts of the archipelago, where they were sometimes used in the fight against Dutch colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the Dutch interference in Banjarmasin affairs, culminating in the abolition of the sultanate and the imposition of direct colonial rule, also brought many non-Dutch European soldiers, missionaries, traders, and scholars to the region. Other than French and British imperial armies and civil services, the Dutch colonial apparatus made extensive use of German, Swiss and other European personnel. These non-Dutch actors also engaged in the collection and exportation of cultural artefacts. For the *beladah belabang* this is illustrated by the fact that Pahud de Mortanges was of Swiss descent. Three of the four most important European sources about the Negara weapon industry were produced by Germans.<sup>15</sup> In the initial stages of provenance research to Indonesian heritage in

Dutch museums, we saw evidence of historical agents from Italy, England, Germany and France which led us to present-day museum experts from Germany, Switzerland and Italy.

Another recurring factor of foreign involvement in provenance histories is the acquisition of objects by Dutch museums from the international art market. An example is the model of a 19th-century Javanese marketplace in the collection of the Rijksmuseum (inv. nr. NG-2009-134) which displays 154 miniature figures made of rice dough. The model, acquired in 2009 from a Dutch antiquarian, had previously been in possession of a French antique dealer. The marketplace is in itself an illustration of the above-mentioned mobility of people because it depicts, among others, Chinese and Malabar traders and Dutch functionaries. Such models, of which at least 21 exist in Europe, were made as souvenirs for Europeans, and similar ones were displayed in the Dutch pavilions of the Universal Exposition of



Fig. 3 A model of a Javanese marketplace (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Inv.nr. NG-2009-134)

1878 in Paris and the Colonial Exhibition of 1883 in Amsterdam. How this particular marketplace ended up in Europe is a subject of inquiry for which French, Scottish and Dutch archival sources are used.

For PPROCE, this awareness of alternative histories attached to the objects under investigation implies that we need a degree of flexibility, knowledge not only of the Dutch and Indonesian but several other languages, and expertise about more cultures than the Indonesian ones. Both the sabre and the Javanese marketplace from our pilot project show that research often leads to other regions in the ar-

chipelago and different countries in Europe via the people that were involved in both the creation and the distribution of objects. Notwithstanding the fact that the responsibility for both the provenance research and restitution lies with the Netherlands, sources may lie in various different parts of the world. Provenance research on objects from the colonial era would therefore benefit greatly from an international network of provenance researchers and experts from the countries of origin, as well as from other countries involved, similar to the already functioning network of provenance researchers on Nazi-looted art.

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# *Abstract*

## *Der Säbel von Negara. Eine Erzählung aus vielen Ländern. Kontextualisierung von Provenienzforschung*

In den Niederlanden entwickelte sich in den letzten Jahren eine weiterführende Diskussion über die Zukunft der kolonialen Sammlungen in den Museen des Landes und die Notwendigkeit eines strukturierteren kulturellen Dialogs zwischen den ehemals kolonisierenden und ehemals kolonisierten Ländern. Auslöser waren insbesondere die Schließung des Museum Nusantara in Delft 2013, das 18.000 indonesische Objekte bewahrt, sowie die Veröffentlichung von Richtlinien für Ansprüche auf Rückgabe durch das größte Konsortium ethnographischer Museen in den Niederlanden, das Nationalmuseum der Weltkulturen (NMVW). Die Autoren waren beteiligt am Pilotprojekt Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPROCE) im November 2019. Am Beispiel eines Schwerts, eines sogenannten beladah belabang, wird deutlich, wie die Gesellschaft in Banjarase sowohl durch als auch trotz des niederländischen Handelsimperiums mit anderen Teilen der Welt vernetzt war, sei es durch Material, Vermittler oder Gestaltungselemente. Am Beispiel eines Modells einer Marktszene wird ebenfalls die Notwendigkeit einer internationalen Dimension der Provenienzforschung in diesem Bereich deutlich.



1 English translation by the authors. Original quote: »Pengembalian benda-benda bersejarah tersebut bukan hanya penting untuk sejarah dan kebudayaan Bangsa Indonesia, melainkan pula memberikan peluang kepada kita untuk bisa menelaah lebih lanjut mengenai ketidakadilan historis«. See Indriani 2021.

2 English translation by the authors. Original quote: »met een redelijke mate van zekerheid«; »Ik ben van oordeel [...] dat door het tegen hun wil in bezit nemen van cultuurgoe-deren, de oorspronkelijke bevolking van de koloniale gebieden onrecht is aangedaan«. See Van Engelshoven 2021, p. 4.

3 Cf. Van Beurden 2016, pp. 117 – 121.

4 NMVW 2019.

5 Advisory Committee 2020.

6 Van Engelshoven 2021; Endang Nurdin, Callistasia Wijaya, 13 March 2020.

7 Cf. Lester 2001; Ballantyne 2002.

8 Alternatively spelled Nagara, today Sungai Mandala in kabupaten Hulu Sungai Selatan.

9 Cf. Hendriks 1842, p. 4; Grabowsky 1889, pp. 90 – 92.

10 See for instance Van Rees 1865, p. 285.

11 The author wishes to thank Albert van Zonneveld for his information.

12 The author wishes to thank Mirjam Shatanawi for translation and interpretation of the inscriptions.

13 Cf. Hendriks 1842, p. 8; Grabowsky 1889, p. 91.

14 Cf. Idem; Smits 1881, p. 16.

15 Cf. Müller 1837 – 1844; Grabowsky 1889; Schmeltz 1892.