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## The Netherlands-Indies; Rethinking post-colonial recognition from a multi-voiced perspective

Nicole L. Immler

*University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht*, n.immler@uvh.nl

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# The Netherlands-Indies

## Rethinking post-colonial recognition from a multi-voiced perspective

NICOLE L. IMMLER

### ABSTRACT

In the communication of pain, language matters. Telling someone to feel pain is not just a description of one's pain, it is – as philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein informs us – also asking for recognition of that pain. This requires a shared language which communicates it. Do we need a new language which can communicate and recognize the pain of the colonial past more effectively? Commencing with the recent apology for waging “a colonial war” in Indonesia by the Dutch prime minister, this article suggests an intervention in post-colonial recognition politics by exploring the idea of the multi-voicedness. *Multi-voicedness* (*Meerstemmigheid*) has become a catchword in current public and scholarly debates about the Dutch colonial past and its legacy, in which decades of recognition politics have tended to privilege clear-cut binary identities favouring certain voices above others. There is little conceptual clarity around what the term multi-voicedness entails and even less about its utility in post-colonial discourse. Although commonly associated with juxtaposing different perspectives, this article argues that introducing the lens of multi-voicedness – more specifically the idea of the *dialogical self* (Hubert J.M. Hermans 2004) – into the recognition discourse, contributes to a better understanding of transnational recognition politics. Capturing the diaspora's multi-voicedness permits wider scrutiny of what is otherwise a too simplified identity and generation question implicated in post-colonial recognition politics. It will be argued that recognition claims, although supposedly part of an emancipatory struggle, are silencing the multi-voicedness of entangled Indonesian-Dutch family history, the driver for the fight for justice in the first place.

### KEYWORDS

Reparations; recognition; transitional justice; generation; family memory; entangled history; dialogical self; multi-voicedness; identity politics; diaspora.

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The author can be reached at: [n.immler@uvh.nl](mailto:n.immler@uvh.nl); for her research, see: <http://www.dialogicsofjustice.org>. More information about the author can be found at the end of the article.

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## I INTRODUCTION: RECOGNITION – ABOUT APOLOGIES AND THE NEED TO STRIVE BEYOND<sup>1</sup>

It was unexpected when – on a trade delegation in Indonesia in March 2020 – the Dutch King, Willem Alexander, offered apologies for the “excessive violence” of the Dutch army in the years after the Indonesian *Proklamasi*. This was a special moment because it had been so long awaited. There had been earlier expressions of regret, but the king’s authority prevailed. Even though the apology was limited, as it was restricted to “excessive violence” (while we already knew it was “structural violence” over a much longer period), the king did acknowledge the ongoing pain still felt by affected families, when he stressed that the past must be recognized time and again by each new generation.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, in February 2022, this apology was substantially extended: a few hours after the report of the findings of a four-year research programme on *Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia 1945-1950*<sup>3</sup> was unveiled, the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, apologized on behalf of his government for waging “a colonial war” in which there was

[a] systematic and widespread use of extreme violence [...] which in most cases remained unpunished. This research has given rise to a renewed apology here and now: for the systematic and widespread extreme violence on the part of the Netherlands during those years (referring to 1945-1949) and the consistent turning a blind eye by previous cabinets, today, on behalf of the Dutch government, I offer a profound apology to the people of Indonesia.

In the next sentence extending his apology to the Dutch people, including the veterans, he went on:

Today we must also note that it is appropriate to apologize to everyone in our country who has had to live with the consequences of the colonial war in Indonesia, sometimes right up to the present. This encompasses all groups, including the veterans, those who did their duty as good soldiers at the time.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express gratitude to the Dutch Research Council (NWO) for its sponsorship of the research conducted for this article with the VICI-grant “Dialogics of Justice” (2020-2025). I also would like to thank colleagues and the Dialogics of Justice team who gave constructive feedback on earlier drafts. This article benefited very much also from the engaged feedback of the editor of this Special Issue, Fridus Steijlen, and of the scrutinizing feedback by a number of (anonymous) reviewers.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.royal-house.nl/documents/speeches/2020/03/10/statement-by-king-willem-alexander-at-the-beginning-of-the-state-visit-to-indonesia> (all links in this article accessed on: 18-6-2022).

<sup>3</sup> The Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD), the Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), and the Netherlands Institute for Military History (NIMH) received 4.1 million euro from the Dutch government to conduct a 4-year research programme; see: <https://www.ind45-50.org/en>. <https://ind45-50.nl/en/results>; debates can be found at: <http://ind45-50.org> and <http://historibersama.com>.

The responsibility for this “black page” in the country’s history does not lie with individual soldiers who were “sent on an impossible mission ill-prepared” but with

the Dutch government, parliament, the armed forces as an institution and the judicial authorities [...] the prevailing culture was one of turning a blind eye, shirking responsibility and a misplaced colonial sense of superiority [...] Even after so many years, this is a painful realization.<sup>4</sup>

The apology is the first recognition of its full responsibility for systematic large-scale violence between 1945 and 1949 by the Dutch state; also specifically mentioning the co-responsibility of the military, political, and judicial elite; “they turned a blind eye”. This also means that previously acceptable terms suggesting that the violence was incidental and exceptional (“police actions”) and that the Dutch “*armed forces as a body had behaved correctly in Indonesia*” were now inadmissible. This signalled that the official position of the government – embodied in the 1969 “Note on Excesses” serving as an excuse document to grant amnesties – has shifted.

Much could be said about the content of both apologies. Apologies can polarize, as some feel that the recognition of the one group is the misrecognition of the other.<sup>5</sup> In Rutte’s case one could ask whether an apology offered to all parties concerned qualifies as an apology at all.<sup>6</sup> However, my argument is not about the content, but the form. I argue that the apology is necessary to be able to enter a different stage in the debate, namely: to progress beyond thinking in terms of right and wrong and allow us to discuss the colonial past as a common, shared or entangled heritage<sup>7</sup> before we can face the aftermath still visible in manifold ways; for some much more tangible than for others.

The public and scholarly debate following the apology immediately focused on the terminology used and whether the nature of the violence this time had been adequately expressed. While the scholars and the prime minister have moved from using “excessive violence” to “systematic and widespread mass violence”, critical voices still miss the term “war crimes” and “human rights violations”. They speculate that this choice was intentional in an effort

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2022/02/17/eerste-reactie-van-minister-president-mark-rutte-onderzoeksprogramma-onafhankelijkheid-dekolonisatie-geweld-en-oorlog-in-indonesie-1945-1950> (all translations from Dutch to English by the author).

<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in the media we find the most extreme positions at both ends, repeating the black-white frames by, for example, ignoring those veterans who agree with the findings of the KITLV-NIMH-NIOD-report. Findings are confirmed also by an analysis of egodocuments of veterans; see Gert Oostindie 2015 and earlier Stef Scagliola 2002.

<sup>6</sup> When does an apology qualify as an apology? Key criteria are: “to (1) break away from or acknowledge past wrongdoings, (2) bridge past wrongdoings with future intentions, and (3) bond with the intended recipients of the apology” (See Juliette Schaafsma, Marieke Zoodma, and Thia Sagherian-Dickey 2021). This would require the “sorry” word, naming the facts of what happened, promise of action and of non-repetition.

<sup>7</sup> The notion “colonialism as shared legacy” is contested; seen as a move to gloss over the past in the which points of view of colonizers and colonized were far too different. We call it “entangled history”, see Immler and Scagliola 2020.

to avoid any legal consequences and a broader reparations debate; fielding “what step should be taken next as the key question in this debate?” framing it – in one or other way – as a “monetary” issue (“whose bills need to be paid”).

Another part of both apologies, just as relevant, came much less in the spotlight: the acknowledgment that the pain is still there. This was an important step to take in admitting that the experience of historical injustice still matters. But to whom? Acknowledging whose pain exactly? The pain of those Indonesians who lost their lives in hundreds of thousands in the independence war against the Dutch or the Indonesians who live in the Netherlands who feel voiceless or the Indo-Europeans who were persecuted as collaborators and had to flee to the Netherlands or the Dutch soldiers who were sent on an impossible and amoral mission or the Moluccans’ or Ambonese’ who fought on the Dutch side but who were disgracefully discharged from the army after the war or the deserters who were imprisoned for years for their disobedience? Who are still asking to be heard and to be acknowledged?

Even though the various diaspora communities and their respective suffering are mentioned in the government statement, they are still almost invisible in the broader public debate. They all share the feeling of having been voiceless for decades. It is a nation-centred perspective (Dutch vs. Indonesia) which takes centre stage and diaspora perspectives fade into the background.<sup>8</sup> Apologies in this sense (re)stage a kind of binary fiction allowing little space for complex (post)colonial realities.

Illustrative of this binary fiction – accentuating a Dutch and an Indonesian side to the debate while the identities at both ends are much more complicated – are also the civil court cases heard in the Hague in which the terms of recognition for Indonesian victims have been negotiated since 2009: “Indonesian victims against the Dutch state”,<sup>9</sup> typical of the media headlines about the first civil lawsuit brought by the “widows from Rawagede” against the Dutch state to acknowledge the murder of their husbands in mass executions carried out by the Dutch military during the war of independence (1945-1949) in 1947. They won their claim in a landmark decision in 2011, for the very first-time mass violence perpetrated by Dutch troops in Indonesia legally condemned. It was also a breakthrough in making the *Indonesian voice* – of the victims as of the Indonesian diaspora – heard in the Netherlands.

A key protagonist in this transnational litigation process is Jeffry Pondaag, who self-identifies as an Indonesian living in the Netherlands, founder of the Committee Dutch Debts of Honour or KUKB which is committed to helping Indonesian victims – who has been working with human rights lawyer Liesbeth Zegveld in the last decade to bring multiple cases before the court. These court cases can be considered to have been the most successful intervention

<sup>8</sup> Another element that via the state focus faded into the background is the responsibility of large multinationals (private firms), which profited most from European colonialism and still do; such as bank houses, railway entrepreneurs et cetera see the ongoing research by Cátia Antunes.

<sup>9</sup> *Volkskrant*, 8 September 2008.

in a hegemonic discourse, described by historian Gloria Wekker as “white innocence” (2016), the persistent belief in the Netherlands that Dutch society was innocent of any wrongdoing in its colonial past, resulting in a persistent ignoring of its legacies. The court rulings set a precedent and created a new sense of legal and historical reality, redefining the Dutch as “perpetrators” (Immler and Scagliola 2020). Those court cases have also added fuel to the debates on the various lasting legacies of the Dutch colonial past – such as status hierarchies, privileges, (institutional) racism and othering – which still haunt Dutch society and still harm diaspora communities.

While the term *diaspora* is not frequently used to describe the scattering of Indo-Europeans and Indonesians after the Second World War, choosing to use the term underlines the emotional and social linkages between past and present. It shows that these claims for justice go far beyond the acknowledgment of historical injustice in Indonesia; they also address hidden continuities of a colonial legacy (mindset) in Europe; they simultaneously claim and act out equal citizenship. However, it will be argued that, as part of an emancipatory struggle (performed as identity-struggles),<sup>10</sup> these claims also force the diaspora to silence parts of their entangled Indonesian-Dutch family history, ignoring parts of their post-colonial identity which drove them to fight for justice in the first place.

Decades of recognition politics have advantaged clear-cut binary identities which privilege certain voices over others. To acknowledge complicated entangled (post)colonial realities, we might need a language other than the current “recognition language”. Therefore, this article contributes to this field of post-colonial recognition politics by exploring the idea of *multi-voicedness* to scrutinize the oversimplified identity question asked by memory and justice activism. *Multi-voicedness* has become a catchword in current public and scholarly debates about the Dutch colonial past and its legacy but, hitherto, there has been little conceptual clarity about what the term entails and its utility in a post-colonial discourse. While multi-voicedness is generally associated with displaying multiple perspectives alongside each other,<sup>11</sup> this article argues that the lens of multi-voicedness – as defined by the psychologist Hubert Hermans (2004) as the *dialogical self* of individuals themselves – will contribute to a better understanding of the role of post-colonial diasporas in recognition politics and the challenges of such transnational strategic litigation.

I begin by describing to what extent identity-formation after 1945 – and the recognition politics embedded in this – fails to address certain imperial legacies. I then introduce the theoretical lens of “*multi-voicedness*” before analysing the role of the diaspora as an actor in post-colonial recognition politics. I conclude by showing how this multi-voicedness approach reveals

<sup>10</sup> Larissa Schulte Nordholt and Remco Raben, “Het postkoloniale debat is vooral politiek. Principes? Niet overzee”, *Groene Amsterdammer*, 6 February 2019; <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/principes-niet-overzee>.

<sup>11</sup> As multi-perspective teaching has become a key instrument in history classes; recently discussed as an instrument of relativizing.

the ways in which recognition needs to be rethought to do more justice to post-colonial recognition struggles.

## II THE PROBLEM OF FRAMING AND OF LANGUAGE IN MEMORY POLITICS AFTER 1945

Although the last decades have supplied a toolbox of recognition instruments, many affected individuals and communities still do not feel heard and acknowledged. This has not just the outcome of numerous shortcomings in the field of recognition politics and policies over the last decades (providing “better” recognition to some war-victim groups than others), but there is also a discursive problem to do with framing and with the language itself.

### *Problem of framing*

Historians have suggested that this misrecognition in the post-colonial context might have arisen from the frameworks so far available for discussing the past up. Among the Dutch public and their historiography, a national framing has dominated the debates on the politics of the past since 1945. In the Netherlands, the Second World War in Europe was the focus of attention for decades, while the war in the Pacific as well as the history of (de-)colonization was side-lined. The Indo-Europeans and other (re)migrants struggled to inscribe themselves in Dutch society and memory culture. Indo-Europeans who were soldiers in the Netherlands East Indies felt unwelcome on their arrival in the Netherlands. They also felt that their presence reminded the Dutch of their political, military and moral defeat; a lasting trauma for both. Dutch soldiers had to combat with the stigma of a lost war and a lost pride; the Indo-Europeans fought against the horrific memories of the violence perpetrated by Indonesians against them in the first few months following independence, a period known in the Netherlands as *Bersiap* (1945/46). The Moluccans, like other Indo-Europeans, had to fight for decades for the payment and pensions of their (grand)fathers - government employees, civil servants, or soldiers - for their services during the war - the so-called “backpay” or *Indische kwestie* (Meijer 2005; Steijlen 2010; Bussemaker 2014).

When historical studies in the 1990s showed that the reception of these groups after 1945 had been cold and bureaucratic, it had resulted in various compensation measures by the government to the Jewish, Indo-European, and Roma communities in 2001.<sup>12</sup> However, some groups, among them the victims in Indonesia, remained unseen.<sup>13</sup> This neglect has forced their

<sup>12</sup> For an overview on this history see the work of Fridus Steijlen (2010), Hans Meijer (2005), Herman Th. Bussemaker (2014), Martin Bossenbroek (2001), and others.

<sup>13</sup> All oral history collections available in the Netherlands up to that point documented the migration and exile experience, but the Indonesian voices have received little attention until recently. See: <http://getuigenverhalen.nl/home>.

The *Stichting Onderzoek Terugkeer en Opvang* (SOTO)-project (1998-2003) includes interviews about immigration and return experiences (SOTO collection, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam). The collection *Stichting Mondelinge Geschiedenis Indonesië* (1997-2001) documented the end of Dutch colonial rule in Asia; it contains 1,190 interviews about the period 1940-1962 in the Netherlands Indies, then Indonesia and Netherlands New

representatives to adopt legal procedures as a last instrument to gain justice (Immler 2018; Immler and Scagliola 2020). Since 2009, in the civil court in the Hague we have seen multiple claims against the Dutch state for mass killings, torture, and rape by Dutch troops, but also for compensation for war damage suffered under the Japanese occupation. Until very recently (February 2022), the Dutch government has denied its failures even more comprehensively and hence these groups were forced to go to court again and again, experiencing historical injustice as a continuing injustice.<sup>14</sup>

In these post-war recognition struggles, the post-colonial communities have often been accused of identarian groupthink and competitive victimization, thereby hindering some sort of broader social reconciliation. This behaviour can also be considered a reaction to the restrictive recognition policies of the Dutch government, such as the extensive but selective “war welfare policy”, ranging from the trauma-treatments since the 1970s to the symbolic gestures (excuses and commemorations) and the material restitution since the late 1990s (Jolande Withuis 2002). Recognition produces hierarchies between those recognized and those who are not. It creates a dependency and subordination in a certain sense; the one who asks for recognition from the one who does (or does not) provide it. While commemoration and justice procedures can provide the recognition of past suffering, if not granted (or not granted on their terms) it can also oppress people by continuing to imprison them in war-identities in which they are stuck rather than freeing them from these roles. Here research shows that, while apologies are mainly considered as the end of a process in political debates, victim groups see these gestures as the beginning of a social process (Immler 2018; Immler and Scagliola 2020; Schaafsma, Zoodsma, and Sagherian-Dickey 2021). This process includes turning away from a state-centred idea of recognition (repeating minority-majority relationships) towards a more direct addressing of “the social”, bringing the idea of society more into the conversation.

There is a good example of where the overarching colonial structure is addressed alongside the post-colonial discursive space we still inhabit: in current discussions in Afro-Caribbean and Surinamese communities about what the reparation of the Dutch slavery would entail, an apology from the Dutch state is considered crucial, before “a more effective moral order” can be established.<sup>15</sup> Here the reparation claims are not just about a specific

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Guinea (only a few of them with Indo-Europeans who remained in Indonesia). The oral history platform *Getuigen Verhalen* includes seven interview collections detailing different experiences in the Netherlands Indies: soldier children, the so-called “comfort girls” in Japanese camps, Papuans and Moluccans in the diaspora, et cetera. The only collection which also contains Indonesian voices – interviews on the prehistory of independence – is that of Robert Cribb (1991) in the National Archives in Amsterdam.

<sup>14</sup> Instead of continuing to deny mistakes, the state should adopt a responsive and participative attitude towards those to whom it has caused suffering. In the words of the Japanese Honorary Debt Foundation which sued the Dutch state in February 2022: “Sit down with us at the table to discuss a decent decision”; <https://www.japanese-ereschulden.nl/2020/12/persbericht-09-12-2020/>.

<sup>15</sup> As Hilary Beckles, chair of the CARICOM Reparations Commission, put it in his *Keti Koti*



product (such as an apology, a national commemoration day and so forth) but also about a social process of repair, a form of relation-building addressing structural injustices. Aiming for “social repair” requires a joint struggle for a more fair and equal society (Immler 2021).

As critical historians like Susan Legêne point out, both the dynamics of nation-building and national historiography have made it difficult to see and understand the human suffering caused by the (de)colonial history of violence and the subsequent migration processes. Because of the different citizenship claims before and after colonization the imperial history of the Netherlands is not experienced as a common past. The memory of imperialism has become part of both an Indonesian or/and a Dutch history, with little knowledge, representation and understanding of what the one might have of the other from their particular perspective: “After decolonization, imperial narratives on colonialism were ‘nationalized’ [...] Common histories of imperialism became distinct histories of state formation and nation-building [...] this is what] has created new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, which silence human suffering in the process of state formation” (Legêne 2014: 100 and further, 2017). Consequently the imperial history of the Netherlands is not experienced as a common past because of the different citizenship experiences before and after colonization.<sup>16</sup> This national framing has been re-accentuated by the legal framing of the last decade; the on-going court cases at the civil court in the Hague concerning mass executions by the Dutch military in the Indonesian war of Independence: Indonesians vs the Dutch state, so-called victims versus perpetrators in the courtroom (Immler and Scagliola 2020).<sup>17</sup>

In the current public debate, some wish for a more judicial framing of the violence which was perpetrated by Dutch troops in the Netherlands-Indies/Indonesia and want to use the terms “human rights violations” or “crime against humanity” or “war crime” to give weight to the findings, not least with a weather-eye on a future reparation debate. In their report, the leaders of the KITLV-NIMH-NIOD research programme rejected the legal term “war crime” dismissing it as “too narrow” to address the broader nature of the violence. Instead, the cultural element of the structural violence was foregrounded: the historical analysis has shown that the war – as part of a colonial tradition of violent oppression, racism, exploitation, and administrative superiority –

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lecture on Reparations at the National Institute for the History and Heritage of Dutch Slavery (NiNsee), it first requires awareness and recognition that there is a problem before instruments which are reparatory can be offered. Beckles asked the Dutch government to take the lead in reparations for slavery on account of its historical role as the first to develop the slave trade as a corporate enterprise. See: [https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWFe4t3FPZU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWFe4t3FPZU); accessed on: 30-6-2021.

<sup>16</sup> Historians therefore made a plea to reach beyond methodological nationalism (Legêne 2017) and to write from an “European perspective” (Legêne 2017), to write a “transcolonial history” (Raben 2017) or an “entangled history” (Immler and Scagliola 2020), in order to do more justice to the complex intertwining of historical experiences.

<sup>17</sup> This legal frame – and the visibility in the media – overshadowed earlier initiatives which addressed the injustice in a more dialogical and entangled way, showing how former veterans engaged to repair civilian harm (Immler and Scagliola 2020).

was shaped by a colonial mind-set. This “colonial dissociation”, as Remco Raben and Peter Romijn have called it, implies a sort of mental distancing in which norms which apply in the Netherlands are not considered applicable to Indonesia. It was the linguistic, culturalist, and racialized ideas about Asians associated with notions normalizing violence which create a line of thought which makes violence possible on such a large scale,<sup>18</sup> ignoring the idea of “white innocence” (Wekker 2016) for so long.

Language lies at the centre of whether violence and injustice are revealed or veiled, and whether history is looked upon from a Dutch or an Indonesian perspective. Just think about the euphemistic term “police actions” which blinded generations for decades (Scagliola 2012; Remy Limpach 2017). This was used by the Dutch government to imply that the whole affair was an internal domestic matter, whereas the Republic of Indonesia had existed since 17 August 1945; thus a strategy to avoid making it subject to international law. The new term “extreme violence” is now currently far more widely used. From a post-colonial perspective, the concept of “extreme violence” (used by the lawyer in the court cases) is seen as a tool to legitimize the “normal violence” of the colonizer.<sup>19</sup> Critics also consider the term abstract thereby masking the nature of the violence, arguing instead for the use of the term “war crimes” which, according to Van Dale’s dictionary, is clearly defined as: “An act in time of war that violates the law of war or the custom of war or human rights”. The term clarifies a perpetrator and a victim position, by its use allowing a form of recognition which also classifies the crimes talked about: mass murders, rapes and torture.<sup>20</sup> Also recall the term “independence” which was added only in hindsight to the title of the research programme title “decolonization, violence and war”, so as to integrate the Indonesian perspective. These discursive interventions are important to disclosing just how much language informs our perception of reality.

### *Problem of language*

The language use of expressions such as “excesses” or “mass violence”, of “regret” or “apology”, of “compensation” or “reparations” has produced terms all of which apparently do not lead to mutual understanding but serve to perpetuate a simplified debate on right and wrong, guilt and innocence,

<sup>18</sup> Presentation KITLV-NIMH-NIOD-report; <https://www.niod.nl/nl/activiteiten/resultaten-onafhankelijkheid-dekolonisatie-geweld-en-oorlog-indonesie-1945-1950>; publications awaited.

<sup>19</sup> The terminology also became a divisive issue in the Dutch-Indonesian court cases. Here, according to Sandew Hira, we see the tension between a court case within the existing legal frameworks distinguished from a court case which is part of a strategy to pursue a social struggle. See: Sandew Hira, open letter on: [https://iisr.nl/nieuwsbrief/2021/2021\\_09/juristen-en-sociale-strijd](https://iisr.nl/nieuwsbrief/2021/2021_09/juristen-en-sociale-strijd).

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Swirc 2022; see also interview with author: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/06/10/wanneer-erkent-nederland-de-eigen-oorlogsmisdaden-in-indonesie-a4133108>. For more information, see also: Boyd van Dijk, “Nederland en het oorlogsrecht. De normen van toen”, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 6 April 2022, available at: <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/de-normen-van-toen>.

pride and shame. Which language might be most suited to reflect that, in the context of a colonial society, victimization and perpetration are very close bedfellows? How should the entangled experiences of violence and injustices, the implication of bystanders as subjects, the painful legacy of colonial stereotypes, hierarchies, and loyalties still experienced be described? How should the dividing lines which still run straight through Indonesian and Dutch families, communities, and Europeans as well as Global South societies be explained?

Indicative of this thorny issue is the debate about the term *Bersiap* and how the term was reconceptualized. For Indo-Europeans in the Netherlands the term *Bersiap* has great emotional value, representing their cruel experiences of a wave of ethnically motivated anti-colonial violence against people of Dutch or European ethnicity. Indonesians, however, do not use the term as this period is part of a much longer phase of violence during the “Revolusi”. From their perspective, the term does not capture the multifaceted nature of the violence perpetrated by Indonesians also against non-European groups, such as Chinese, Japanese or native Indonesians such as Moluccans and others considered collaborators of the Dutch colonial regime (representing feudal authority) and therefore opponents of the Republic of Indonesia.<sup>21</sup> As Indonesian historians such as Bambang Purwanto are keen to stress: discussing “violence” as being restricted to between the former colonizer/colonized follows old colonial thinking patterns.<sup>22</sup> Stressing the violence experienced on multiple sides does not mean that all violence is equal and that violence (in any form) is to be condoned. The violence on the Indonesian side was largely a reaction to the preceding Dutch violence, a violent re-occupation, after a systematic suppression and exploitation over a long period of time including mass murder, but also including massive violence by Indonesian parties against their own people. It is unhelpful to see all violence just as violence – hence equal – as there are more hidden manifestations of violence which are not as obvious and are therefore silenced.

In the communication of this pain (on all sides), language matters. As we can learn from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, telling someone to feel pain is not just a description of one’s pain, it is also asking for the recognition of that pain. However, the ability to express pain verbally, and subsequently to make a claim for recognition, requires a common ground such as a shared language which makes it possible to communicate that pain in the first place. After all, someone has to be able to understand what you mean when you say that you are in pain (Veena Das 2006). Following this reasoning, anthropologist Tine Molendijk has shown that the black-white categories

<sup>21</sup> The term *Bersiap* (the battle cry of Indonesian revolutionaries) originated in a colonial context and is used from a Dutch or Indo-Dutch perspective. As Raben explains: “It is an ethnocentric term, which in a colonial context indicates a hierarchy and this hierarchy we call racism”, see: Remco Raben, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/01/19/indonesische-blik-op-de-geschiedenis-wordt-als-irrelevant-weggezet-a4081083?t=1648575486>.

<sup>22</sup> See: interview with Anne-Lot Hoek, “Een onderzoek naar schuld en boete (An investigation on guilt and penance)”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 22 November 2016.

of villain or heroes, fighters, or victims are often not helpful in addressing the ambivalent war experiences many Dutch veterans have: "Categories of perpetrator, hero, and victim all aim to clarify something that is muddled. They turn complex questions about good, evil, agency, and responsibility into a black and white story" (Molendijk 2018: 93).<sup>23</sup> Although public debates are dominated by such white-black frames, in more private settings veterans might allow more ambivalent experiences.

This issue – over-simplified categories – has recently been brought to the fore by the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. In *Rethinking identity* (2018), he shows that in the recognition debate, identity is the central but misleading variable: identity is "a lie that binds". Appiah is convinced that the issue of recognition would become more complex and less central were the "lie" about identity to be dismantled and identity is seen less as an essence and more as "in flux". As identities also shift over time, Appiah calls for telling more complex stories to counter the oversimplification of the debate and the hardening of relationships. Numerous scholars have been worried about the problems of identity politics, showing in which way the commemoration of the past or doing justice (often) reproduces certain problematic categories thereby stigmatizing such essentialisations instead of overcoming them (John Torpey 2006).

### *New approaches*

To reach beyond such simplified categories,<sup>24</sup> specifically the perpetrator/victim divide, literary scholar Michael Rothberg introduced the concept "implicated subject". Implicated subjects "contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control those regimes" (Rothberg 2019: 1).

Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. **An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles.** [...] implicated subjects do not fit the mold of the "passive" bystander, either. Although indirect or belated, their actions and inactions help produce and reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators. In other words, implicated subjects help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present; apparently direct forms of violence turn out to rely on indirection. Modes of implication – entanglement in historical and present-day injustices – are complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory, but are nonetheless essential to confront in the pursuit of justice. (Rothberg 2019: 1-2; emphasis by author).

<sup>23</sup> In the context of veteran studies, the term moral injury is seen as a term which captures the complexities of the injuries more adequately. See Molendijk 2018.

<sup>24</sup> A counter-movement is a trend towards micro-histories, for example, in Holocaust Studies (Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman 2016).

The crucial point is how the subject is incriminated in positions of power/powerlessness past and present; the entanglement of privileges, social position and power, displaying how people profited or suffered from (a)symmetrical power relations.<sup>25</sup> The implicated subject position breaks through a simple binary reading of the colonial past, without orchestrating the colonial project and it allows space for a third position, that of those who benefited from this colonial past. The importance of this theoretical framework is to stress the interconnectedness between structure and subjectivity and to state that colonial structures within which incriminated subjects operate preceded them.

Building on critical notions of “identity as a lie” and “implicatedness as a given”, the question explored in this article is what the concept of *multi-voicedness* – complexifying identity positions – can or cannot offer the hope of reaching beyond the perpetrator/victim divide and blame/guilt categories to see the colonial past and its legacy as a shared (not dividing) experience and hence rethink recognition politics.

### III MULTI-VOICEDNESS AS THEORETICAL LENS

*Multi-voicedness* (*Meerstemmigheid*) is a key term in current discussions about how to represent Dutch colonial history and its complicated heritage. It is visible in historical scholarship, as in the context of the KITLV-NIMH-NIOD research programme on *Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia 1945-1950*, and in the museum field, as in recent exhibitions displayed in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam on the “*Revolusi! Indonesia independent*” (2022) and on “*Slavery*” (2021).<sup>26</sup> However, hitherto there is however little conceptual clarity about what the term multi-voicedness means. Broadly speaking, the term polyphony is associated with juxtaposing different perspectives, displaying, such as in the exhibition *Revolusi*, “a very wide range of diverse, chaotic and contradictory voices”.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the Dutch history of slavery was told through various characters. By displaying polyphony in both exhibitions Taco Dibbits, director of the Rijksmuseum, aimed to achieve a deeper understanding, mutual understanding. This follows the idea: the more information supplied, the more nuanced one’s view and judgement on the past. However, as Valika Smeulders put it, when taking up position as head of the Rijksmuseum’s history department: It is more than “How to tell the story of the Netherlands in more than one voice?” It is the one single voice which

<sup>25</sup> The question of implicateness is crucial to “who needs to take the responsibility”? The question of power is key to “who determines what price to pay?”

<sup>26</sup> For both exhibitions, see: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/past/revolusi>; and <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/past/slavery>. In both, the polyphony of the colonial past is represented through the narration of multiple personal life accounts.

<sup>27</sup> Historian Remco Raben, consultant to the museum’s curators, stressed how important it was to find a “polyphony” of perspectives for the exhibition, elaborated on in his article for the catalogue. See interview with him and Taco Dibbits: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/arts/design/rijksmuseum-revolusi-indonesia-independent.html>.

is already so complex: “My ancestors were migrants; they were plantation owners as well as enslaved”.<sup>28</sup> In her eyes, passing on multifaceted knowledge beyond the “shame and guilt” frame is a first step towards a conversation.

The historians in the research programme on *Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia 1945-1950* specified their definition as following:

Multiplicity and multivocality – multiple perspectives and multiple voices – go hand in hand. [...] If multi-perspectivity is mainly about gaining a better understanding of historical events, multivocality is primarily about the way in which we tell or structure the historical narrative; in other words, the representation of the past. Or, to put it in other words, multivocality is about the question of how the different perspectives are given a human voice. [...] The fact that we want multiple voices to be represented [...] is a logical consequence of the inclusion of multiple perspectives [...] Telling history in this way does not mean that the historical events are relativised; on the contrary, they are in fact anchored even more firmly in the different stories. In addition, multivocality also gives the historian an opportunity to reveal their own presence in the historical story, and thus to engage in the necessary reflection on their role as an interpreter.<sup>29</sup>

This requires a constant reminder of the meaning of certain terms and how they are being used, connecting them to particular perspectives which reveal how different meanings, be they historical or contemporary, legal or scholarly and whether or not they are coloured by positionality, are interconnected. It is important to be transparent when displaying multiple perspectives, but it seems that the process of making choices – deciding which frame (the legal, cultural, and so forth) might be the most helpful – requires much more careful attention.

Unlike the historian’s idea of “multi-voicedness”, a form of multiplying perspectives, I am concerned with – following up on the remark by Valika Smeulders – how different voices come together in one person; complexifying questions of subjectivity and positionality.

This complex notion of identity inherited by (post)imperial subjects has been ignored for decades. While multi-voicedness is generally associated with displaying multiple perspectives next to each other,<sup>30</sup> this article argues it is the multi-voicedness of individuals themselves – the so-called *dialogical self* – which has the potential to reveal ambivalences and false promises in

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Valika Smeulders, “How do we tell the story of the Netherlands in more than one voice?” (Hoe vertellen we het verhaal van Nederland meerstemmig); <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/nieuws/2020/09/hoe-vertellen-we-het-verhaal-van-nederland-meerstemmig>. A similar approach is followed by the Museum Sophiahof in the Hague, displaying the cultural and historical heritage of the Netherlands East Indies; telling the story “from within” the people. See: <https://www.museumsophiahof.nl/>.

<sup>29</sup> See for their use of the term multi-perspectivity: <https://www.ind45-50.org/veelstemmigheid-en-multiperspectiviteit>. The term is also associated with diversity in the research team as well as using more structurally oral history sources; see also their “Witnesses and Contemporaries” project.

<sup>30</sup> As multi-perspective teaching has become a key instrument in history classes; recently discussed as an instrument of relativizing.

the recognition discourse. The concept of *dialogical self* (Hermans 2004) allows us to hear the often contradictory voices hidden behind an claimed position, helping to go beyond simplistic binary identity constructions.

While dialogue is generally seen as a practice between clearly defined parties, psychologist Hubert Hermans (2004, more elaborated in Hubert Hermans and Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka 2010) has shown that the self is in itself dialogical, *the dialogical self*; hinting at the different voices people carry within them, being in dialogue but also in conflict with each other. In this sense, the self is conceived of as a multiplicity of dynamic, interacting voices: the voice of the self (referred to as *I-positions*), the voices of others (referred to as *inner-others*) and interacting voices (referred to the dialogue between *I-positions* and *inner-others*). While the *I-positions* arise from the different roles people move between, the *Inner-Others* are internalized voices of persons or ideas, often present in direct and indirect quotes (Emma-Louise Aveling, Alex Gillespie, and Flora Cornish 2015). The *dialogical self* is described as “a spatial and temporal process of positioning”. This is different to the Cartesian view in which the “*I*” is not seen as “an immaterial essence”, but as “a dynamic multiplicity of ‘*I-positions*’”, which position and reposition themselves over time and space. In a globalizing and digitalizing age, dialogue becomes increasingly mediated and this affects external and internal dialogical relationships.

The dialogical self can be conceived of as a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous *I* positions in the landscape of the mind, intertwined as this mind is with the minds of other people [...] In this conception, the *I* functions as a process of positioning and repositioning (i.e., the *I* has the possibility of moving from one spatial position to another in accordance with changes in situation and time) [...] The *I* has, moreover, the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story involved in processes of question and answer, agreement and disagreement, and negotiation and cooperation. Each of them has a story to tell about its own experience from its own stance. As different voices, these characters exchange information about their respective *me*'s, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self. As participating in the collective voices of the society and culture at large, some voices have more social power than others, with the result that some voices are neglected, suppressed, or just not heard. (Hermans 2004: 303).

While the term *Implicated subject* puts emphasis on context and on how structures generate various forms of implicatedness, the term *dialogical self* draws attention to how these structures are internalized via people's inner voices and how different subjects interact. Although Hermann's concept pays little attention to the hierarchies involved between the different *I-positions*, Rothberg's concept addresses the power hierarchies and privileges in a (post) colonial setting; between the more and the less powerful, the more and the less heard. Bringing both concepts together allows more insight into power structures (revealing how the internal dialogue is determined by external

dialogue) and into agency (in the process of position taking). In Herman's theoretical framework, being in dialogue with oneself is seen as a precondition for being in dialogue with others. However, a contextually implicated perspective shows that being in dialogue with others is also a key variable for being in dialogue with oneself.<sup>31</sup> Both processes are intrinsically linked.

This article – interested in the question what form such a societal dialogue about the colonial past would take – the empirical section which follows explores the *dialogical self* of the key actor who brought the “Rawagede case” to court, integrating the persons he represents, struggles with or struggles against as internalized I-positions (inner others) in the analysis. Displaying multi-voicedness which challenges the binary and exclusive frames of recognition politics just discussed will allow to engage in with larger questions: for instance, can members of diasporas who themselves still operate in a political context of recognition struggles actually allow their own (transnational and transcultural) dialogical self to be voiced? How would society have to be constituted to allow this to happen? How can institutions take responsibility and accept accountability in a way which recognizes polyphony?

#### IV SEEKING JUSTICE: A DIASPORA PERSPECTIVE

These on-going recognition debates, as described above, provide little space for discussing the multi-voicedness of the colonial past and its claims on people's life, well-being, motivations, and aspirations. The history of the court case and the role in it of lead activist Jeffry Pondaag, head of the Committee Dutch Debts of Honour (KUKB), has been described in different places (Immler 2018; Immler and Scagliola 2020).<sup>32</sup>

While this success can be considered the achievement of an individual (a “fighter” mentality), the protagonist is giving a voice to a larger group, the *Indonesian voice*, in Dutch society. Below I explore Jeffry Pondaag's reflections on his life-story – available online<sup>33</sup> – as an example for the multi-voicedness in the Indonesian diaspora; showing how polyphony drives his actions and simultaneously also recognizes the struggle silences this dialogical self. I discuss the way in which recognition activism hones particular biographies into a clear-cut identity, profiling successful activism, but also revealing the challenges a post-colonial debate can – or cannot – move forward.

Many conversations with Jeffry Pondaag commence with the question: “*Who is my father? Who is he?*” Also, in public debates on the Netherlands-Indies

<sup>31</sup> This extends the idea of recognition as an instrument of dialogue as put forward elsewhere (Immler 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Hitherto alongside the assertions of activists, the multiple narratives of the claimants, their family and members of the village community have been explored (Immler 2018), as the entanglement of Dutch and Indonesian efforts (by veterans and civilians alike), to bring the injustice out into the public gaze, long before the court case (Immler and Scagliola 2020: 19 and further).

<sup>33</sup> For privacy reasons, to avoid feelings of misinterpretation or to be objectified, in this article I refer only to information shared by Jeffry Pondaag in opinion articles or interviews available online.



he often interjects this question indicative of his personal quest.<sup>34</sup> But instead of elaborating his family history, he moves on directly to his political agenda; drawing attention to the Dutch colonial past, its illegitimate and violent nature and the lack of responsibility the Dutch government has taken so far. In the following I focus on his family story, reconstructed from public sources; an insightful glimpse into the extent to which the personal is political.

When I arrived in the Netherlands [...] my family on my mother's side repeatedly said to me that we Indonesians were extremists, terrorists, trouble-makers and that [President] Sukarno was a collaborator. This is how most Dutch people think. I have had to fight this distortion of history for years.<sup>35</sup>

While sharing this personal motivation in a letter to the court, on other platforms he has revealed how this has resonated in daily life:

What are you doing here? When are you going back? They asked me in Heemskerk. My answer is "If you hadn't been there, I wouldn't be here!"<sup>36</sup>

Jeffry Pondaag, born in Jakarta in 1953 as the son of an Indonesian father and a mother with Dutch roots, emigrated to the Netherlands in 1969 at the age of sixteen with his mother, who returned to her family after a divorce. Over the years, he felt increasingly uncomfortable with the way decades later the Dutch still dealt with their past: keeping quiet or sometimes glorifying the past (such as reference to golden coach used by the Dutch royal family). The various forms of indifference evinced by Dutch politicians, the resurfacing stereotypes in public discourse and the obliviousness to history struck him. In the 1990s, the growing publicity about Dutch war crimes perpetrated during the independence struggle still did not dent the government's position one iota. However, he viewed the lawsuits not themselves a means to an end but as a tool to enforce change:

I set no store by these lawsuits. Let the Netherlands apologize in general for all the suffering inflicted on the Indonesians and acknowledge that Indonesia became independent on 17 August, 1945.<sup>37</sup>

Adopting the course of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, these court cases can be seen as complaints rooted also in a particular life-story, as grievances which have not been assuaged and made in still hostile environments: "The term *complaint biography* helps us to think of the life of a complaint in relation

<sup>34</sup> Jeffry Pondaag, "Kolonialisme en slavernij zijn bouwstenen van de Nederlandse samenleving", *Transparant*, October 2016; <https://www.doorbraak.eu/kolonialisme-en-slavernij-bouwstenen-nederlandse-samenleving/>.

<sup>35</sup> Jeffry Pondaag, "Open letter to the attorneys of the Dutch State", 24 December, 2019; <https://historibersama.com/jeffry-pondaags-letter-to-the-dutch-court-in-the-hague/?lang=nl>.

<sup>36</sup> Niek Opten, "Indonesische vechtjas", *Haarlems Dagblad*, 24 januari 2015; see also: <https://javapost.nl/2015/02/03/indonesische-vechtjas/>.

<sup>37</sup> Opten, "Indonesische vechtjas".

to the life of a person or a group of people" (Ahmed 2021: 20). In this scenario, complaint becomes a form of social and collective action. Analysing complaints as testimony (2021: 13), Ahmed shows how we can learn about power from those who choose to fight against the powerful, stressing the courage needed to complain. In her work, Ahmed has shown how those who want to address inequality run into invisible walls; walls of which others do not or do not want, to take note, because these walls have a function in defending the status quo (Ahmed 2017: 137-160). Therefore, it is in the nature of complaints not to be heard or as she writes "how we are not heard when we are heard as complaining" (Ahmed 2021: 3).

Pondaag's family story – as those of so many other Dutch-Indonesian families<sup>38</sup> – reveals complex and entangled family relationships. I have learned from these told (hi)stories that the legacy of the colonial past within families can be incredibly complex, resulting in multiple identity and loyalty conflicts. Pondaag had to struggle to define his position stuck between the "racial hierarchies"<sup>39</sup> in Indonesia and in the Netherlands and the loyalty conflicts within his own Indonesian-Dutch family. These tensions were already palpable in Jakarta ("*Let's face it, we ourselves lived above average in Indonesia; say double the average*"),<sup>40</sup> but became more apparent and irritating in the Dutch context. When memories surfaced, they revealed how the family names already carried the colonial load, for instance, when a Javanese teacher pointed the finger at him, calling him "an intellectual", as the Javanese referred to the Dutch. His mother's family name alone revealed her Dutch roots, which made him an "Indo-European".<sup>41</sup>

In the war of independence his family members fought on both sides: some on the Indonesian side for independence; others remained loyal to the colonial power, seeing the Dutch royal house as a "benefactor" instead of a "colonial brutalizer". This has had consequences: "*I have therefore distanced myself from my Indo-European family*".<sup>42</sup> He consciously positions himself as "an Indonesian" who wants to show "the Dutch" what they have done. This mission took on a life of its own in 1995 when he was confronted with the tragic history of Rawagede, turning him into a memory activist, "speaking on behalf of Indonesian victims". To pursue this aim, he set up the Committee Dutch Debts of Honour in 2005 (KUKB)<sup>43</sup> to bring the truth into the public domain

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Gert Onno, former editor of *Moesson* ([www.moesson.com](http://www.moesson.com)), a monthly magazine of the Indo community. 3 May, 2016, Amersfoort. See footnote 1.

<sup>39</sup> The colonial hierarchy in the Netherlands East Indies consisted of three categories: first "Europeans" (Dutch and Indo-Europeans), second the so-called "Foreign Orientals" (Chinese and Arab minorities) and third "Inlanders" (natives, meaning Indonesians) (Esther Captain 2014: 55).

<sup>40</sup> Jurgen Tiekstra, "Het goede leven van Jeffry Pondaag", *Sneinspetiele*, 26 July 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Alwin Kuiken, "Eenling tegen de tijdgeest", *Trouw*, 1 oktober 2011, <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/eenling-tegen-de-tijdgeest~b2bb2457/>.

<sup>42</sup> Fitria Jelyta, "Laat het maar gaan, het ligt achter ons. 'Dát is Indisch zwijgen'", <https://dekanterkening.nl/samenleving/laat-het-maar-gaan-het-ligt-achter-ons-dat-is-indisch-zwijgen/>.

<sup>43</sup> See <http://www.kukb.nl>.

in a team-effort. This action seems to have ended, at least symbolically, the long struggle between the conflicting voices in Pondaag's life.

While some inner-voices supported voicing it, others did plea for the past to be silenced. The voice of his Indonesian family ("What's done is done; *Sudah*") is in favour of silencing. This is – Pondaag says – the Javanese way to settle emergent conflicts amicably: "As a child, I was not so direct. You have made me what I am", he says referring to the Dutch.<sup>44</sup> Other voices support his outspokenness: his wife is the daughter of an Indies veteran and grew with her own family silences ("My wife's father was also there for three years as a soldier. And, when I asked him about it, you know what he did? [...] He said: 'dirty politics', and walked away").<sup>45</sup> His wife supports his struggle by granting him the space to pursue his activities ("It eats him up day and night. He can't stand injustice").<sup>46</sup> Their daughters show their solidarity by keeping their Indonesian passports. As not least do all those individuals who, although invisible in the public sphere, stand with him in his organization KUKB.

### *Internalized others and "otherness"*

The various voices of those who have shown their solidarity with his struggle have been internalized by Pondaag as "inner others". For instance, the voices of the deserters, who felt betrayed by their own government ("I also stand up for the Dutch people who refused to go to Indonesia as conscripts. They had to go to prison for years. Some went into hiding for a long time after 1945").<sup>47</sup> They were often soldiers who had shown their solidarity with the Indonesian victims. He also stands up for Dutch civil servants who were in camps for years at the time and did not receive their salaries. All of them have had no voice in public debates characterized by clear-cut identities.<sup>48</sup>

So-called inner-others are also absent voices, those whom Pondaag conceives are siding with his struggle. Although at the beginning of his conversation with the Indo-European community, Pondaag claimed that it be seen as the responsibility of the Indo-Europeans to help the widows of Rawagede, the Indo-European community representatives framed their struggle as an opposing one. While Pondaag hints at the historical entanglement of perpetrator-ship, collaboration and victimhood, the Indo-European community presents itself first and foremost as victims of the

<sup>44</sup> Opten, "Indonesische vechtjas".

<sup>45</sup> Tiekstra, "Het goede leven van Jeffry Pondaag".

<sup>46</sup> Opten, "Indonesische vechtjas".

<sup>47</sup> Opten, "Indonesische vechtjas".

<sup>48</sup> While in public debates only the victim or the perpetrator role is available to Dutch KNIL soldiers, there are more ambivalent positions. Some of these support the legal struggle, like those who drew attention to the massacre of Rawagede right from the beginning. I-positions also shift over time: the soldiers, who were each other's enemy in the 1940s, later approached each other with respect as "brothers in arms"; suspending the national frame. Moreover, the man we call the "Indonesian freedom fighter" did not always have the grand struggle in mind, but rather his small village in Java which he was prepared to defend against anyone. See: Immler and Scagliola 2020.

Bersiap, when the Dutch and others fell victim to Indian revolutionaries.<sup>49</sup> Pertinently, focusing on their own victimhood is also a way of ignoring their responsibility as part of the colonial regime in the Netherlands-Indies. This silences the military past of those families, which also incurred great suffering, undiscussed and unprocessed for decades. A show of solidarity from the Indo-European community would have meant discussing these different forms of violence in relation to one another instead of the one side trying to silence the other. Consequently, although partly Dutch himself, Pondaag has felt and expressed anger about “the Dutch”, thereby excluding some fellow campaigners from the Indo-European community who have believed more in seeking a dialogue with the Dutch government than fanning conflict with it.<sup>50</sup> It has also alienated Diaspora Indonesians who joined the struggle in the first place to “support Indonesian victims” not to struggle against the Dutch state.<sup>51</sup>

What has become evident is that the legal cases cause friction as the strategic entrenched essentialism reduces the space in which alternative identity positions can manoeuvre. A clear-cut victim-perpetrator perspective automatically excludes other, more complicated perspectives of implicated subjects, as victims (of the Bersiap) and victimizers (as part of the ruling class). At one and the same moment profiting from the system, but on another level losing everything (home, status, health, and self-confidence). There is not yet much space in the community for such a pluralistic quest for recognition.<sup>52</sup>

### *Mapping multi-voicedness*

These complicated (family) relationships – mapped out above – beg the question “*Who is my father?*” a key to understanding Pondaag’s activism better. This is the burning question which reveals his quest and his doubts. As an activist Pondaag adopts a clear Indonesian identity in the public discourse; his life-story narratives show multi-voicedness. The protagonist’s “I” encompasses multiple identities; the “I-position” as Indonesian and as Indo-European; as a deprived member of a minority in the Netherlands and as a privileged person in Indonesia; as a succourer of victims in need<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Jelyta, “Laat het maar gaan, het ligt achter ons. ‘Dát is Indisch zwijgen’”.

<sup>50</sup> Interview in Tilburg with James Salam (\*1958, aged 58), 11-2-2016. This interview is part of a larger interview-set “Narrated Justice”, including 28 interviews with victim-families in West Java and Sulawesi and 6 expert interviews with *inter alia* KUKB members (including Pondaag), examining the afterlife of the court cases. The data set is deposited with the data archive of the KNAW (DANS) with restricted access. See: Immler (2017), “Narrated (In)justice”, Casus 1: De koloniale schadeclaims; <https://doi.org/10.17026/dansze8-yg84>. Or maybe better: <https://easy.dans.knaw.nl/ui/datasets/id/easy-dataset:99990>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview in Parepare with Yvonne Rieger Rompas who was doing the fieldwork in Indonesia for KUKB (\* 1956, aged 59), 15-10-2015 (in above DANS data set “Narrated Injustice”); and follow-up talks.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Gert Onno.

<sup>53</sup> Up close the stories of these widows are more complex. The women were widowed because of the execution of their husbands by Dutch soldiers; therefore, they are victims, representatives of a weak and dependent position. At the same time, their men, although they were farmers and not militia, were also seen as heroes who died in the struggle for independence, were buried in

and as a victim of discrimination himself; as an ordinary worker and as an educator and fighter for justice; as an angry, lone warrior, and as a successful memory activist; as a connector approached by various groups seeking advice in their recognition struggles and as polarizer; as a neglected *persona non-grata* and a public voice, whose criticism of the misrepresentation of Dutch colonial history has now become a more mainstream position.

In contrast, recognition-activism supposes “one voice”. As an activist he claims: “There is just one perspective”. This is what Spivak called “strategic essentialism” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1988), a form of essentialism needed to attack institutional neglect, the assumption of a clear-cut position of oneself in relation to an enemy; precisely the opposite of a dialogical self.

The struggle for recognition (Axel Honneth 1994) demands a clear juxtaposition of an “imagined us and them”. In this framework, the claimant is the embodiment of the colonized and the accused the colonizer. Positioning oneself as an Indonesian in the lawsuits against the Dutch state allows the activist to ignore all the other voices and assume a distinct binary identity. Here we see how the process of nation-building after 1945 (“us” and “them”) has been solidified, even by those whose complex family histories might have challenged this process. It seems that strategic essentialism silences the multiple entangled “inner other voices”, which are so characteristic of post-colonial diaspora families. The drama of a post-colonial hegemonic discursive space seems to be that to be heard means that a multi-voiced reality is silenced. Speaking with only one voice (“Indonesian” versus “the Dutch”) is, from Pondaag’s perspective, a choice to be heard, an act of emancipation, of voice empowerment, a legitimate means in a political struggle, a contestation which lends weight and meaning to the struggle. However, it also requires silencing parts of the self; the “inner others” as Hermans would call them; ironically neglecting that part of his post-colonial identity which made him fight in the first place. Moreover, not engaging with these inner others also has the consequence of creating a conflict with those who represent these voices in the public debate.

This polyphony in the Pondaag family and its multiple internalized inner others is exemplary of the complex plural constituencies of Dutch post-colonial society. As soon family stories are delved into, the simplified categories quickly dissolve. Nevertheless, public discourses and recognition struggles force members of minorities to essentialize, after all, it is this speaking for a clearly classified “other” which made the activist/his group visible in Dutch society in the first place. At the same time, this dominating I-position “Pondaag vs. Dutch state” resulted in silencing the voices of those the activist claims to

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the military cemetery (“I prefer him to be buried there with his friend, not here in the garden. Together. Instead of being here alone. He died a martyr”). The women see no contradiction in requesting both a victim compensation from the Dutch and a hero’s pension from the Indonesian state. From their perspective, they are both. This reveals the problem of zooming in on only the widow victim-position, which reveals marginalization and powerlessness; it also reproduces it. Also voicing their counter-positions is therefore an attempt to create multi-voicedness (Immler 2018).

represent, when he decided for the claimants which compensation gesture by the Dutch state to reject as “too little” or “inadequate”. This creates the paradox – the person representing the victims is bypassing their desires. This is the essence at which critical KUKB members see Pondaag’s emphasis on aversion towards the Dutch not solely as an interest in the Indonesian people, but as a feeling of being himself unseen, unheard, misunderstood, and disrespected.<sup>54</sup> This exemplifies the characteristic of what Sara Ahmed (2021) has called a *complaint biography*: the nature of complaints not being heard. This notion helps to stress that this description of cycles of silencing is not meant to blame a particular individual, but to show a phenomenon more common in post-colonial diaspora communities, in which certain life-stories are deeply rooted and in which there are situations perceived as being unreceptive to particular stories or/and voices.

This case study shows that so far, the court cases in the Hague have been discussed in too narrow a frame, centre-staging historical injustice in Indonesia, but excluding hurtful dividing colonial legacies still prevalent in Dutch society; namely: how *injured citizenship* under colonialism has resulted in experiences of *unequal citizenship* in Dutch society today. However, these transnational litigations are instruments of voicing and emancipation,<sup>55</sup> as this article demonstrates, and these recognition claims automatically must be expressed in a “guilt” language and mean silencing the dialogical self-rooted in a complex entangled Indonesian-Dutch family history, thereby neglecting that part of their post-colonial identity which made them fight in the first place. Seeing the victims’ and perpetrators’ dialogical selves spurs us on to search for better instruments to deal with past injustices: instruments which go beyond the clear-cut categories we rely upon in recognition debate. Both the logics of war and the recognition of its victims are dualistic and the ultimate aim of recognition might mean accepting each other’s multi-voicedness and conveying far more complex stories and entangled social realities.

#### V RETHINKING POST-COLONIAL RECOGNITION FROM A MULTI-VOICEDNESS APPROACH

Let us return to the “profound apologies” expressed to Indonesia by Minister President Mark Rutte and the various other parties as part of the painful decolonization process. Is Rutte’s apology a figurative endeavour to stimulate everyone to engage in a different kind of conversation reaching beyond the classic binaries; voicing the multi-voicedness of a post-colonial society or rather an exercise in relativism? While the public debate is focused on an

<sup>54</sup> When the Dutch Ambassador went to Makassar to apologize to the victims at the Dutch consulate, Pondaag told some of the widows in Sulawesi not to travel there as it would be more appropriate them to be visited by the Ambassador in the villages. While one of the widows wanted to travel to Makassar “to thank the Ambassador”, Pondaag rejected such a conciliatory gesture. Interview with Yvonne Rieger Rompas, see also footnote 51.

<sup>55</sup> Decades later and in geographically distant places members of the diaspora are often key in making recognition and reparation claims (Maria Koinova and Dzeneta Karabegovic 2016; Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2016); most visible in the Jewish, the Armenian or the slavery descendant communities.

adequate definition of the nature of the violence in Indonesia and the question of “what next?” in terms of reparations, King Willem Alexander’s notion that “the pain and the grief will be felt for generations to come” has faded into the background. We see performances of perpetrator-ship (the state apologizing) and of victimhood (Dutch veterans and Indo-European civil victims alike, both ignoring the Indonesian victims), reiterating exclusive group-identities. What is absent is the more complex notion of identity inherited by (post)imperial subjects and the entanglement of historical experiences.

This case study has shown how engaging with family history can complicate this history: entangled family relationships in the Indonesian and Indo-European diaspora militate against the clear delineations nationalized debates suggest. Colonial history is a history of entanglement and hierarchies. Whether these have been experiencing or exercising violence and injustice, having or denying privileges, both positions are often close to each other and consequently challenge simplified recognition models which do reveal just how complex the healing of social relations can be.

This case has also shown that the theory of multi-voicedness (Hermans 2004) can provide a starting point from which to rethink the dilemmas of nationalized recognition practices in post-colonial settings. The concept of multi-voicedness allows not only the possibility of referring to the different groups and positions in a debate around recognition, but also to listen to the often-contradictory voices. It also opens the way towards reaching beyond different rival groups and engaging with family history in a way in which the contradictory I-positions people voice are heard, conceptualizing the self as a multiplicity of dynamic, interacting voices: the voice of the self (I-positions), the voices of others (internalized others) and the inner others (the dialogue between I-positions and inner others). During recognition struggles people often become “imprisoned” by a dominant I-position, rooted in a specific personal or family narrative or the narrative of one’s “cultural archive”. This binary thinking (minority vs. majority, colonized vs. colonizer, victim vs. perpetrator) is often stimulated by polarizations in public debate which require people to overlook more complex I-positions. The dialogical self-theory encourages an examination which goes beyond such binary positions and shows how the different voices relate to each other. Connecting the “implicated subject” to the “dialogical self” generates a better understanding of how power structures and agency interact; describing how contexts and embeddedness in particular contexts puts pressure on individuals but also time allows room to manoeuvre, in which to listen to (or not to hear) and recognize multiple internal voices.

*“Who is my father?”* – exploring this question has revealed the fact that in post-colonial (and indeed many other) settings is there no simple answer to it. Displaying the multi-voicedness of a family has shown, for example, that the migrant/diaspora as well as the generation question is simultaneously one of identification/solidarity and distance/neglect. Bringing I-positions of identification and I-positions of distancing into dialogue with each other opens

the door to a more robust debate. To take the above example: integrating the inner voices of his family – whether standing for their “Dutchness” in terms of privileges (his mother’s name), collaborator-ship (his Indo family), or belonging (his wife and daughters’ home-feeling) – into the description of the struggle, which the activist spearheads as an “Indonesian” against the Dutch state, allows a more dialogical approach. Acknowledging this dialogical self would allow this general divide between various I-frames and we-frames to be bridged.

### *Entangled post-colonial I-positions*

Some of the I-positions seem to be in opposition to each other but nevertheless also deeply entangled. The activists’ display of Dutch directness (“I have a right to be angry”) in opposition to the stereotype of the acquiescent Javanese (*sudah*) could be read through a post-colonial lens as “a performance of whiteness”. Anger in this sense is a prominent emotion in the Indo-European community: being angry is considered an act of emancipation in a post-colonial context in which behaviour previously the preserve of the former colonizer is appropriated (Thomas Bouwmeester 2018).<sup>56</sup> This debate about a “double consciousness” (W.E.B. Dubois) – understanding oneself through the eyes of the oppressor – plays itself out in the Indo community, in which we can witness a constant struggle for recognition by the Dutch state as being an affirmation of this internalized condition.<sup>57</sup> However, at the same time, it is an over-identification with the Dutch. Expressing anger preserves moral integrity and fosters a sense of empowerment and emancipation, but also carries within it an idea of subordination. It is evident that this is not just a struggle *against* the Dutch government, it is also a strategy to unify a family or community and to become “more” Dutch. As these positions might appear to stand opposite each other in the public debate, enforcing opposing identities and thereby intruding distance and distrust. Therefore, with Hermans, we can identify both positions as echoing an (or multiple) “inner voice(s)”. The struggle for justice is a way of positioning oneself to mobilize for political action (I-position as Indonesian), but also to resist his family’s assimilation in the Netherlands (I-position as Dutch).

While recognition theory in the western philosophical tradition of Charles Taylor and others contends that as recognition is essential to human beings and that, “a form of oppression”, misrecognition has the capacity to “harm” others (Charles Taylor 1994), post-colonial critical theorist Glen Coulthart (2007) argues that recognition often keeps the other in the imagination of the otherness of the other; it is not recognition as equal but recognition as different. This dilemma of recognition politics is not only being increasingly discussed in

<sup>56</sup> Anger is more than an emotion, it is also an instrument to legitimize voice. The “dichotomous thinking”, represented in the performance of anger, signifies family memory and struggles for justice also present in the Holocaust context. Being angry about “too little” recognition offered to (grand)parents is “a fundamental element in the constitution of family memory regarding the Holocaust” among the second generation (Immler 2012: 276).

<sup>57</sup> Therefore at least as important are community events which give the community recognition of itself; see Captain 2014.



the literature, it is also a lived reality in post-colonial communities. While the recognition of a specific harmful post-colonial-migrant identity is the dominant frame for the first and second generations (turning it into *an* identity question), the grandchildren generation often feel equal as Dutch citizens, moving more easily with their "harmless identities" between multiple identities and connecting with other minority groups (Captain 2014). While members of the first and second generations are often characterized by strong emotions arising from the past, such as nostalgia or aversion,<sup>58</sup> the third generation often feels connectedness but also seeks a more distanced view, trying to put family experiences into perspective. Instead of experiencing the past as a burden, third-generation Indo-Europeans take pride in their (post)colonial heritage, appropriating it in a cultural rather than a political way (Captain 2014: s 58).<sup>59</sup> To connect to family-life is an inheritance, but also a choice; an 'inscribing oneself in the world', as the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958: 184) has put it. One might consider these through Herman's lens as representing two I-positions. These generational shifts, multiplying I-positions, mean that we must now reconsider the current recognition language.

### *The family lens*

Hermans (2004) considers the dialogue with oneself, the dialogical self, a precondition for dialogue with others. Therefore, it follows that hearing one's own multi-voicedness is the precondition for hearing the multi-voicedness of others. This makes family history a crucial framework from which to re-approach the (post)colonial past.<sup>60</sup> Consequently re-engaging with the complexity of family history is the salient precondition for discussing the colonial legacy in a more dialogical way.

Family history shows how experiences are entangled and connected; revealing in which way the colonial past is an entangled past. The history of colonialism is not the voice of victims against perpetrators, minority against majority, diaspora against a government; personal experiences are much more complex, just as post-colonial communities themselves are hybrid, intertwined with Dutch society in many ways, in privilege as well as discrimination. Family history therefore also addresses the systemic dimension of privileges and injustices. Consequently, family history is not an apolitical historiography,

<sup>58</sup> Paradigmatic of the difficulties to live this polyphony is the Indo-European community division into two camps: those characterized by a nostalgic longing for the old *tempoe doeloe* and those embracing a critical view of the past; an opposition embodied by writers of the second generation such as Kester Freriks (2018) who cherishes nostalgia, while Alfred Birney's autobiography, *The interpreter from Java* (2016/2020), describing the life of his traumatized father, KNIL-soldier during the Bersiap, reveals the violent legacy casting its shadow over his and his family life. This opposition unequivocally shows that *tempo doeloe* sentiments are not innocent memories, but part of imperialist nostalgia.

<sup>59</sup> For more recent literature on the Dutch-Indo community from a generational perspective see the work by Julia Doornbos and Ana Dragojlovo (2022).

<sup>60</sup> In the slavery debate, we see a recent trend to narrate the slavery past as family history which creates new possibilities to complexify the history of slavery; reaching beyond its black/white dichotomy (see Immler 2020).

as often argued by historians, but highly political, such as the autobiography *The interpreter from Java* by Alfred Birney (2020/2016), has illustrated so aptly. Family members will experience privileges and disadvantages over time. Often the generation lens seems too deterministic to grasp how this legacy influences and shapes the following generations in multiple ways. In this instance, by allowing a more dynamic relationship between those I-positions, multi-voicedness makes the leeway for a generational perspective which formulates an alternative to the classical sociological approach to generations (community of shared experiences) and the classical psychological approach (as intergenerational transmission); the cohort-experience defined by the experience of rupture and the family-experience defined by continuity.

The dialogical self allows for scrutiny of an over-simplified identity question also implicated in recognition politics. The concept multi-voicedness can help to develop a new language (as it is itself already part of it) in which one can talk about the colonial past and its injuries in a such a way that the pain, privileges or/and injuries are heard not only by a particular minority group but also by the majority. Acknowledging polyphony asks society and its various institutions to develop different strategies to deal with the Dutch colonial past and its legacy (in terms of representation, commemoration, recognition, and so forth).

How can we encourage this listening to and representing of multi-voicedness on a personal and social level? Both the narrator and the listener are often imprisoned in essentialisms and oppositions which polarize public as well as academic debates. How can institutions take responsibility and accountability in a way which allows for dialogical selves? I argue that a dialogical perspective can help to clarify how the various frameworks (such as (post)colonial identities) in which we narrate our lives might limit the multi-voicedness of individuals and institutions.

### *Rethinking dialogue in recognition procedures*

If we consider recognition struggles as battles striving for a broader dialogue in society about the colonial past and its legacies, the concept of multi-voicedness suggests re-theorizing *dialogue* in this context: Instead of seeing dialogue as a process restricted to two parties, dialogue with the other also means becoming aware of one's own dialogical self and only after one has listened to the those multiple voices is there a possibility to conduct a broader dialogue with others (respecting their other voices). However, acknowledging one's own dialogical self is – as we have seen in the example above – one of the major challenges in recognition struggles which are generally based on much too rigid, unambiguous identities. Discussing complexity is therefore perceived as undermining a political struggle. This attitude is understandable as there is an impulse to choose a clear and simple story when it comes to identity. Moreover, admitting polyphony, which includes certain neglected parts in oneself, can be considered a threat in a situation which does not (yet) feel safe. So, the question remaining to be answered is, whether there is a conceivable

form of recognition in which the multi-voicedness of individuals, groups and institutions could be acknowledged but which will avoid simplification and the trap of seeking more simple binaries?

To allow a space for polyphony in which more complex stories in our family histories are encouraged could be a big step forward in this respect.<sup>61</sup> But this begins with the individual him (or her)self. As Adriaan van Dis stressed in his recent inaugural lecture: “Let us try to look flexibly at our ancestors’ past. It is precisely the complexity which is interesting”. It is about “understanding ourselves and trying to improve ourselves. It is about the art of changing direction”.<sup>62</sup> I hope this article can contribute to a change of direction, by inspiring this conversation with ourselves and with each other.

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<sup>61</sup> To give a practical example: to push for a memorial culture in which victimization of oneself but also of others is articulated, in which former adversaries are also invited to participate, will open new possibilities to link formerly conflicting parties.

<sup>62</sup> Adriaan van Dis, “It is precisely this distress we must seek” (*Wij moeten het ongemak juist opzoeken*). Van Dis wrote a letter to his three deceased half-sisters, read out when he was awarded his honorary doctorate at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, asking in a way for more polyphony and complexity: “Let us try to be flexible when examining our forebears’ past. It is precisely this complexity which is interesting”. See reprint in the *Volkskrant*, 12 May 2022; <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/de-cancelcultuur-brengt-ons-nergens-schrijft-adriaan-van-dis-we-moeten-het-ongemak-juist-opzoeken~b19a87b5/>.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NICOLE L. IMMLER is professor of Historical Memory and Transformative Justice at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht in the Netherlands. Since 2020, she has been leading the research team “Dialogics of Justice”, which examines the social impact of recognition and reparation practices of diverse forms of historical injustice in a global context. Her research encompasses the disciplines of Oral History, Memory Studies, History of the Holocaust and Colonialism, and Transitional Justice. Her previous publications include: “Seeking justice for the mass execution in Rawagede. Probing the concept ‘entangled history’ in a postcolonial setting”, *Rethinking History; The Journal of Theory and Practice* 24(1)(2020): 1-28, together with Stef Scagliola; “What is meant by ‘Repair’ when claiming reparations for colonial wrongs? Justice for the Dutch slavery past”, *Slaveries & Post-Slaveries* (2021); “Hoe koloniaal onrecht te erkennen? De Rawagede-zaak laat de kansen en grenzen van rechtsherstel zien”, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 133(4)(2018): 57-87. Nicole L. Immler can be contacted at: [n.immler@uvh.nl](mailto:n.immler@uvh.nl); for her research, see: <http://www.dialogicsofjustice.org>.