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# Shifting the historical narrative of the Banda Islands

## From colonial violence to local resilience

JOËLLA VAN DONKERSGOED

### ABSTRACT

History is a representation of the past based on (written) knowledge which has been passed on from one generation to the next, with a preference given to written sources from a Eurocentric tradition. However, written sources about (former) colonial territories are a product of the colonial system in which they were produced. Acknowledging the biases in these archives, therefore, opens the way for acceptance of other forms of knowledge which were previously deemed “not objective” in Eurocentric historical disciplines. This paper presents several examples from the Banda Islands in Maluku province in Indonesia to attest that, by placing contemporary perceptions of the past and local reiterations of history on an equal pedestal as colonial documentation, we can work towards a more decolonial practice of writing histories. In the case of the Banda Islands, this means a shift from a colonial Eurocentric perspective of its history towards a narration of the past which honours the Bandanese heroes, religion, and resilience.

### KEYWORDS

Resilience, colonial history, oral history, *Hikayat Lonthoir*, Banda Islands.

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## HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF THE BANDA ISLANDS

Coveted for their production of the spices nutmeg and mace, the Banda Islands in the Indonesian province of Maluku had an important foothold in the global spice trade until the 1850s. In order to secure the highest profits for its stakeholders, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) aimed to gain complete control over the region and its trade. To attain this objective, the Company sent Jan Pieterszoon Coen to the archipelago; he perpetrated genocide<sup>1</sup> on its population, enslaved the few survivors, and brought in enslaved peoples to work on the nutmeg plantations. The year 1621, and the Banda Islands, therefore became synonymous with the violent colonial history of conquest.

However, this Eurocentric narrative is only a small part of how local history is perceived by the Bandanese residents and extended communities. Rather than revolving around the arrival and conquest by European merchants (including the Portuguese prior to the Dutch), their history is rooted in pre-colonial heroes, the arrival of Islam in the islands, and the resistance of local leaders to Dutch colonial dominance.<sup>2</sup> Their story therefore revolves around resistance and resilience rather than victimhood and oppression. In this article I claim that, by retaining the Eurocentric narration about these islands, academics (and others) are complicit in depriving the Bandanese peoples of pride in their history. Moreover, by depicting them as mere victims, they are complicit in upholding the colonial power dynamics which underpin the “objectified” representation of history. Instead, I argue for a “narrated” past like the approach used in oral history and folklore studies (W.F.H. Nicolaisen 1991). By focusing on the oral traditions which are present in the region, we can enable the inclusion of multiple perspectives and forms of how the past is passed on from generation to generation. This article will therefore look at both history (*what* is described about the past) and processes of memory (*how* the past is remembered).

Throughout the article I refer to the Bandanese peoples (plural) in order to encompass the various communities which consider themselves Bandanese. These include the current residents of the Banda Islands, those who left the islands in recent decades for political, economic, or religious reasons, as well as the various diasporas throughout Moluccas who settled there after fleeing Jan Pieterszoon Coen’s genocide in 1621. Among the latter group are the *Banda asli* (original Bandanese) who have settled in the Kei Islands and are still recognized as important knowledge bearers by contemporary Bandanese residents. Even though these groups all have their own goals, a common thread

<sup>1</sup> In this article I am using the word genocide instead of massacre based on the passionate and well-formulated speech given by Muhammad Farid during the virtual round table discussion(s) which took place on 10 March, 2021. He argues that genocide correctly describes the deliberate acts by the VOC (on the authority of the Dutch state) to eradicate the Bandanese community in an effort to restructure society. The recording of this speech can be accessed at: <https://bandaworkinggroup.wordpress.com/history/>.

<sup>2</sup> These narratives of resistance apply both to the leaders who resisted Dutch control in the seventeenth century and to the exile of nationalists Mohammad Hatta, Soetan Sjahrir, and Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo to the Banda Islands during the mid-twentieth century.

among them is a pride in the history of the islands. It is upon this commonality that I base my usage of “Bandanese peoples”.

For this article, I draw from the encounters I had with Bandanese residents during my fieldwork carried out primarily on the island Banda Neira between 2014 and 2019.<sup>3</sup> By returning to the islands annually, I was able to gain trust and built close friendships with people, enabling me to move past the stock answers they tend to give tourists.<sup>4</sup> However, I acknowledge that the views I represent are primarily those of Banda Neira, which is the island which hosts the majority of tourists, and that therefore the people who live here are more aware of their position in a (global) context. Although the pandemic prevented travel to the islands, together with the Banda Working Group we have been able to establish an international conversation together with various scholars and Bandanese peoples.<sup>5</sup> As well as these recent encounters, I base my reflections on the content of a recently digitized manuscript from the Banda Islands.<sup>6</sup> I refer to it as the *Hikayat Lonthoir*, written in 1922 by M.S. Neirabatij, a Bandanese village leader (Neirabatij 1922). This document is currently in the possession of the National Maritime Museum (Het Scheepvaartmuseum) in Amsterdam.

In this article, I argue that history should be approached in a more holistic manner, including unorthodox sources to present the past in a way which is more inclusive and representative. In this I am following a more general trend within the historical discipline which aims to shift perspectives to empower marginalized voices, whether they were excluded based on religious, gender, racial or other societal constructs. I echo Ramirez’s words from *Femina; A new history of the Middle Ages through the women written out of it*, by stating that

<sup>3</sup> This fieldwork was conducted as part of my PhD research at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. One impetus for this research was a request by Tanya Des Alwi for the expertise of the Cultural Heritage and Preservation Studies programme to support the UNESCO World Heritage nomination of the Banda Islands. Funded by Rutgers’ international office, Rutgers Global, I was able to accompany two US Ambassadors during their visit to the islands and assist in the Tentative List nomination of the islands as a cultural landscape. My fieldwork comprised seven visits to the Banda Islands, a total of 128 days in the Banda Archipelago consisting of both participant observation and targeted interviews, which were conducted with an exemption by the Rutgers’ Institutional Review Board on the premise that the information gathered during my fieldwork would be published anonymously.

<sup>4</sup> Depending on the question and the person asking the question, I have heard residents answer questions about the colonial past in both positive and negative terms. This ambiguity in their attitude towards the colonial past seems to be based on two disparate stances: 1. their dislike of Jan Pieterszoon Coen and acknowledgement of the colonial violence which occurred in the past, 2. their pride that their islands were once at the centre of global envy.

<sup>5</sup> Please visit <https://bandaseries2021.wordpress.com/> to view the recordings of the four sessions.

<sup>6</sup> At the end of 2020, this manuscript surfaced in the collection during preparations for the instalment of the photography exhibition “I love Banda” by Isabelle Boon. After some negotiations, the museum agreed to sponsor my research to transcribe the manuscript, making it more accessible and raising awareness of its existence. It was exhibited in a small dedicated exhibition for several months in 2021, which was accompanied by a publicly available video on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRtmOjOr1oo&t=186s>) and a podcast series *Banda & Beyond* by *Beyond Walls* (freely accessible on Spotify and Acast).

writing about the past with an increased diversity of voices and perspectives is not an exercise in “rewriting history” (J. Ramirez 2022: xiii). Rather these new histories are “shifting the focus” to those who have been silenced, underappreciated, and subjected to a dominant (colonial) narrative in which they are portrayed as victims, or have faced obstacles created by the pursuit of capitalist gains which needed to be overcome.

#### COLONIAL POWER DYNAMIC

Regretfully, an attitude persists that prioritises historical sources from colonial production over traditional forms of knowledge preservation. In the case of Indonesia, this power imbalance is described in the work by Regis Stella on the representation of people from Papua New Guinea as follows:

But while there are competing representations, and each culture has its own representational modes, it is the representations produced by members of politically powerful, dominant groups that become accepted as ‘true’ (Stella 2007: 2).

The underlying notion is that written accounts are more “true” (read: objective) than those which are created and maintained by traditional methods and authorities. This is particularly dangerous in the context of colonial sources, as they are perceived as containing objective information rather than as a product of a colonial machine aimed at promoting the colonial oppressor. As Ann Laura Stoler wrote: “Dutch colonial archival documents serve less as stories for a colonial history than as active, generative substances with histories, as documents with itineraries of their own” (Stoler 2009: 1). In other words, colonial documents were created with a particular aim and for a specific reader, and are therefore subjective and fraught with the biases of the colonial creator.

A clear example of a Eurocentric focus and erasure is the summary which was published by Van Ronkel in 1945 about the manuscript we now call *Hikayat Lonthoir*. Until the manuscript was retrieved as an uncatalogued object in the collection of the Scheepvaartmuseum, Van Ronkel’s summary was the only known source to describe the content of this manuscript. After summarizing the narration about the origins of the islands and the birth of the legendary siblings, Van Ronkel wrote:

It continues with the internal history of the little kingdoms of the islands, which is not that interesting to us but which is of course very important to the inhabitants of those lands. [...] While reading, we feel the need for variation, something new, despite how important those uniformly described events might have been for the community concerned. Well, the new is about to happen: the arrival of the Portuguese! (emphasis added; Ph.S. van Ronkel 1945: 128).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Original text: *Dan volgt de inwendige geschiedenis der rijkjes op de eilanden, voor ons niet zoo interessant maar voor de bewoners dier landen natuurlijk zeer belangwekkend [...] Al lezende gevoelen we behoefte aan variatie, aan iets nieuws, hoe belangrijk voor de betrokkende bevolking de eenvormig beschreven gebeurtenissen ook mogen geweest zijn. Welnu het nieuwe gaat gebeuren: de komst der Portugezen!*

Not only does Van Ronkel juxtapose himself and his (white) reader audience with the Bandanese peoples by using words like “us” and “we”; he also assumes that his audience will have the same attitude towards the local history of the islands: that it is negligible and should be dismissed as mere myth and legends. On top of this, he points out (with an enthusiastic exclamation mark) when the manuscript becomes interesting for him (and his supposed audience): with the arrival of the first Europeans. A close reading of this passage therefore shows the sentiments which drove Van Ronkel to his subjective and limited summary of the manuscript, and this attitude can be found throughout the text. At the end of the article, he reflects on the manuscript and describes it in a derogatory way as an “Indonesian notion of *history*” (Van Ronkel 1945: 130, original emphasis).<sup>8</sup>

This passage from Van Ronkel offers an example of how scholars have written about the past and colonial territories from their own subjective point of view. A myriad of other examples could have been used to illustrate this, as writings about colonial territories have invariably been written with a specific agenda and audience in mind. These documents should therefore not be taken at face value, and other sources which provide insights into the past should be actively sought to alleviate the biases in the (colonial) archive.

These biases have been ignored throughout Europe: the European (in this case Dutch) self has been either blatantly ignorant of the colonial past and its violence or has centralized global history around itself (G. Wekker 2017). In other words, global history is portrayed from the perspective of how the rest of the world influenced the west, or how the west influenced other countries. Using this mechanism, Europe (or the west) retains its seat of power, its claimed superiority, and asserts its myopic view of the world. As Wekker describes, even the traditions of the Dutch historical discipline are divided into national history and imperial history (Wekker 2017: 41-42), treating these as separate topics rather than acknowledging that they are linked, that one does not exist without the other.

Rather, we should acknowledge and reinforce that occupied territories influenced the Netherlands as well: colonization was a process which occurred between colonizer and colonized. It is what Michael Rothberg describes as *multidirectional* memory, which implies a dynamic process of polyvocal intercultural negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing (Rothberg 2009: 3). As such, we should use the “narrated” past alongside the “objectified” past to attempt to “re-narrate the *received* history” (Rothberg 2009: 22). The received history is that which has been created from a Eurocentric gaze, and the re-narrating can occur by placing the so-called “Other” in the main role. Re-narrating is therefore part of a historical practice which embraces the concept of multi-directional memory as it makes use of unexpected texts and unconventional contexts.

Going back to the *Hikayat Lonthoir*, it presents an interesting opportunity to decentre the European colonial narrative, as it describes the history of the

<sup>8</sup> The original text states *Indonesische opvatting van “geschiedenis”*, original emphasis.

Banda Islands from the perspective of the village of Lonthoir on Banda Besar.<sup>9</sup> The story begins with the flood of Noah, and it continues up to a fairly recent clash between two brothers that led to the creation of the most recent *adat* village called *Fiat* or *Baru*. Central to the narration is the role of the Islamic religion as a leading motive for the behaviour and relationships between the various characters. Deep Islamic roots remain an important feature in cultural, social, and religious life on the islands, and religion is very much intertwined with historical reflections.

Conversely, religion plays only a marginal role in the Eurocentric representation of Bandanese history. Rather, religion is mentioned among the attitudes and behaviour of the Bandanese which designate them as “Other”, erratic, and unreliable. These accounts and stereotypes were used to justify colonial violence and dominance. For example, in 1511 the Portuguese historian De Barros described that the Bandanese are “[...] of the worst repute in these parts. [...] They have neither king nor lord, and all their government depends on the advice of their elders: and as these are often at variance, they quarrel among themselves” (John Crawfurd 1856: 34-35). It is likely that the Portuguese merchants had encountered the two-party system in Banda, under which the *Orlima* and the *Orsia* would gather at the neutral village Ortatta to discuss nutmeg prices together.<sup>10</sup> This form of public debate, one could say democratic decision making, must have been foreign to the Portuguese who came from a hierarchical monarchy where authority was to be obeyed.

Moreover, the statement completely dismisses the legendary past of the islands which had resulted in this partition: the legends of the seven siblings described in the *Hikayat Lonthoir*, who became the first kings on the islands. Even beyond this (written-down) oral history, the continuation of traditions such as the *Cakalele* or the songs (*kabata*) performed during the *kora-kora* races indicates a deeply rooted hierarchy and cultural structure which encompasses both culture and nature (Van Donkersgoed and Farid 2022). The knowledge which is retained and managed by the *adat* community can therefore be seen as a piece of living history, a contemporary iteration and interpretation of that which has been passed down from the past.

However, this manuscript was produced in a land under colonial rule and it can be conjectured that was written down for a European reader. One indication of this intended readership is the self-censorship about the colonial violence which occurred on the islands and is only rarely mentioned and in little detail. Yet the very act of writing down local history indicates the desire of Neirabatij to have his voice and the perspective from his village heard. And the way to be heard was to imitate the oppressors’ way of legitimizing history: by writing their oral history down.

<sup>9</sup> Also known as Lontor, Londor, et cetera. The island is also known as Groot Banda and is often synonymous with the village Lonthoir. For this article I chose the spelling Lonthoir which is used in the *Hikayat Lonthoir*.

<sup>10</sup> The *adat* villages in the Banda Islands are divided into two groups: the *Orlima* (people of five) and the *Orsia* or *Orsiwa* (people of nine). To read more about the origins of the *Orlima* and *Orsia* division on the Banda Islands, see J. van Donkersgoed and M. Farid 2022: 46-47.

The colonial system therefore influenced the form in which these histories in the *Hikayat Lonthoir* were preserved, although the aim of the manuscript was to influence the way that the history of the Banda Islands had hitherto been presented by the colonial regime. It was written to assert that the Bandanese are a proud people with a long history dating back to Noah, that their land is sacred and religion is a cornerstone of their society. Therefore, it can be considered an early attempt to shift the Eurocentric historical narrative about the Banda Islands. It can be placed in line with Florida's research about Javanese writers, who were aware that their act of writing history takes place in the past, since they will be read by future audiences and therefore their histories have the potential to impact the future (Nancy K. Florida 1995: 396-399).

Therefore, if positivistic historians were to reject the *Hikayat Lonthoir* as mere myth, the potential (and aim) of this piece of writing to shift the narrative would be neutralized by the same mechanism which upholds the Eurocentric version of history. By categorizing colonial sources as "objective" insights into the past, other sources of historical knowledge are overpowered and slighted for their proclaimed subjectivity. The legitimacy offered to written forms of knowledge continues to plague the historical discourse in Indonesia, a trope I encountered during my fieldwork when oral history was dismissed as an invalid historical source. In short, a stance has been adopted which legitimizes accepted forms of authority (written publications by accredited scholars) over knowledge within society which has been transferred from generation to generation through (oral) traditions.

The preference adopted for colonial sources over local knowledge can be placed within what Ann Stoler calls the "toxic corrosions and violent accruals of colonial aftermaths, the durable forms in which they bear on the material environment and on people's minds" (Stoler 2013: 2). She calls for a "labor to revise what constitutes the archives of imperial pursuit" (Stoler 2013: 4), a call which I aim to answer by shifting the perspective in which the history of the Banda Islands is portrayed by focusing on local voices and decentralizing the Eurocentric perspective.

The *Hikayat Lonthoir* offers a great starting point for this approach, even though it was written under the yoke of a colonial regime. The majority of the manuscript discusses local heroes and kingdoms; just fourteen percent of the manuscript describes a time when Europeans were present on the islands. As G. van Engelenhoven wrote regarding postcolonial memory: "[...] silence sometimes speaks louder than words. Silence can indicate dignity, it can protect, disrupt, and reconfigure: silence can be deliberate, and it can be powerful". (Van Engelenhoven 2022: 10). The absence of discussing colonial violence, such as the Bandanese Genocide in 1621, can therefore be interpreted as a deliberate act of silence.

The history of the Banda Islands does not begin with the arrival of Europeans; the Bandanese peoples are proud of their long legendary past. Therefore, by retaining a focus on the European presence on the islands,



historians (and those who use history) mispresent the Bandanese and dispossess them of a proud past. This argument even extends into the colonial past: by portraying the Bandanese as “mere” victims, they are placed at a lower rank and deprived of their agency. The act of retaining the power dynamic of victor and victim diminishes the martyrdom of their ancestors and ignores their ongoing resilience: the Bandanese peoples are still on Banda and in the region, practising their traditions and passing on their histories despite the colonial incursions.

#### CONFLICTING TEMPORALITIES

The writer of the *Hikayat Lonthoir* not only imitated the written form in order to obtain legitimacy for their local history; they also forced themselves to place this history within the perceived temporality of the coloniser. The Eurocentric perception of time is characterized not only as a linear arrow of time towards progress, but also by its fixation with objectifying the past through dates and numbers. The insistence on this perception of time also limits the acceptance of other histories, which are perceived in a different temporality. As Arfaoui states:

In practice, colonization destroys, deforms, and suffocates history by enforcing a dominant temporality and organizing the whole world around it. Colonization denies collective constructions of history in favor of a fictitious imaginary. (Meryem-Bahia Arfaoui 2021: 27).

This fictitious imaginary is what I earlier described as the “objectified past”, one that is verifiable from documentation which is produced in the same system by the similar authors. However, it is fictitious as it denies other concepts of time and prevents a collective construction of time. Bhabha reasserts the need to acknowledge different time perceptions as valid when he writes:

To reconstitute the discourse of cultural difference demands not simply a change of cultural contents and symbols; a replacement within the same time-frame of representation is never adequate. It requires a radical revision of the social temporality in which emergent histories may be written. (Homi K. Bhabha 2004: 246).

A decolonial practice of history-writing therefore includes a revision of our temporal framework, one that embraces the “narrated” past as valid.

The *Hikayat Lonthoir* can act to counter the objectified past as a “narrated” past, as it is a written account of oral histories in a traditional cadence.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the document, the writer uses *maka*<sup>12</sup> (then) frequently to indicate the passage of time and a new (part of a) story (Figure 1). Similarly, when I

<sup>11</sup> Based on the insights of linguist Dr Aone van Engelenhoven, as stated in the exhibition video created for the *Hikayat Lonthoir* (Het Scheepvaartmuseum 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes *maka* is preceded by *alkisa(h)*. Both words are used to indicate the beginning of a story.

talked about the past with Bandanese residents, they only rarely used specific dates. Past events are placed in a relative order; they occurred in the time in which a specific person was alive or another specific event happened.

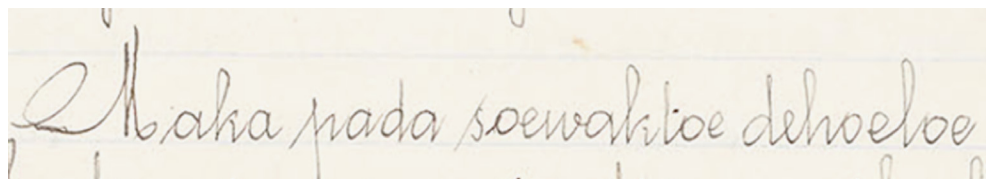


Figure 1. Beginning of a new story in the *Hikayat Lonthoir*. It states: "maka pada soewaktioe dehoeloe" (Indonesian: *maka pada sewaktu dulu*, English: then in the past) (Neirabatij 1922: 50).

The only time-specific dates mentioned, both in the *Hikayat Lonthoir* and in conversation, is when an event which occurred during colonial rule is described. In the case of the *Hikayat Lonthoir*, these dates are dissonant to the flow of the rest of the text; they appear as foreign incursions in order to appeal to a foreign reader. The need to place history within the temporal perception of the colonial seems to reflect a need for legitimacy, although the effect is actually the opposite since the dates do not match the colonial documentation. The attempt to gain legitimacy for their history by using dates therefore backfires and instead provides a reason to dismiss the account as incorrect.

An example of a date mentioned in the *Hikayat Lonthoir* can be seen in Figure 2.

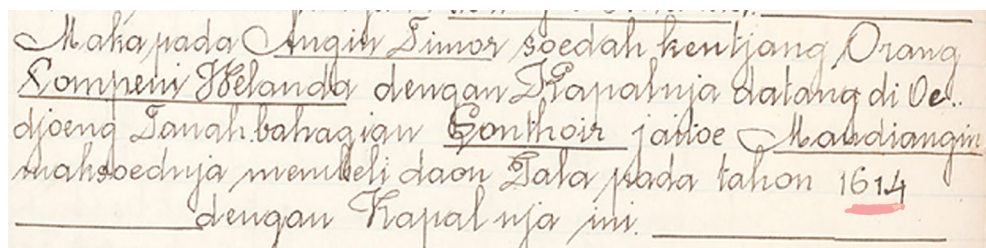


Figure 2. Description of the arrival of a VOC ship at the village of Lonthoir to buy nutmeg (leaves) in the year 1614. In modern Indonesian it states: *Maka pada angin timor sudah kenyang Orang Compeni Belanda dengan kapalnya datang di Oedjong Tanah bahagian Lonthoir yaitu Mandiangin maksudnya membeli daun pala pada tahun 1614 dengan kapalnya ini*. The text is followed by a drawing of a three-master (Neirabatij 1922: 69).

The red underlining of the date "1614" is original, but it is not clear whether it was made by the author, the copyist or a (Dutch) reader. Any of these people could have marked it as one of the few dates in the text, to signify its importance. However, the date does not correspond to the recorded arrivals of ships: the first Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, Pieter Both, arrived in 1611 and the second, Gerard Reynst, in 1615. The importance of this passage lies not in whether or not the date is "correct", but rather in the

felt necessity of the author to include this temporal marker to indicate the arrival of the Dutch VOC.

Even though Van Ronkel's analysis of the form of the *Hikayat Lonthoir* is generally derogatory, he did make an interesting observation regarding the style used by the Bandanese author to appeal to a foreign (Dutch) reader audience. Van Ronkel speculates that the original narration of the stories was in Arabic, and that this prose was modernized and translated into plain Malay in order to be understandable to Neirabatij's (colonial) superior. He calls this "an act of talking down to a white man" (original language; Van Ronkel 1945: 130). In short, this version of an original literary (prosaic) text was crafted to make it palatable (and understandable) to the colonial oppressor.

Rather than devaluating the *Hikayat Lonthoir* as "false" for its temporal discrepancies or its self-regulation in order to appeal to the colonial oppressor, this manuscript provides us with an insight into how the Bandanese author wanted his people's islands to be represented in history. It creates an opportunity to acknowledge both source types in their own right: the colonial documents as a witness to events intended to justify the colonial endeavour, and the *Hikayat Lonthoir* as an agent to reclaim a proud past centred on local resilience and heroes, albeit written in a manner which would appeal to the colonial power.

#### ON SHIFTING THE FOCUS TOWARDS THE BANDANESE

Regretfully, the content of the *Hikayat Lonthoir* was only recently publicized and therefore remains largely unknown, resulting in histories about the Banda Islands which continue to be written from a Eurocentric perspective and/or to appeal to a Dutch audience. I do not deny the importance of educating the (Dutch) public about the atrocities which happened in the Banda Islands under colonial rule; in fact, I endorse the increased efforts which have been made in the Netherlands in recent years to create more awareness.<sup>13</sup> However, it is a slippery slope between addressing colonial violence and asserting victimhood upon a group who does not want to be attributed this label. Here I am again referring to the colonial power dynamic, in which the colonizer retains a position of power in a narrative and subjugates the "Other" as a victim. As Homi Bhabha writes: "the victims of violence are themselves 'signified upon': they are the victims of projected fears, anxieties and dominations that do not originate within the oppressed" (Bhabha 2004: 23).

This lingering colonial mechanism of the Eurocentric gaze can be seen in many histories written about the Banda Islands. For example, a book title like *Het verloren volk - de Banda eilanden* (The lost people - the Banda Islands) (J. van den Berg 1995) focuses on colonial destruction and thereby diminishes the resilience of the Bandanese peoples: they are still there (albeit scattered) and

<sup>13</sup> Here I am referring to the protests at the statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen in Hoorn, the ongoing virtual exhibition "PALA - Nutmeg Tales of Banda" at the Westfries Museum, the international round-table series organized by the Banda Working Group, the myriad of publications in newspapers, magazines, and books, and discussions and references on TV.

they are proud of their ancestors. In short, the trap of centring the narrative on Dutch violence acts as a sensational trigger to gain an audience, but at the same time it strips the Bandanese peoples of their agency and hence reproduces the colonial power dynamic of silencing the formerly colonized.

Improving access to documents (and other forms of historical sources) like the *Hikayat Lonthoir* and listening to contemporary communities is therefore vital in working towards a more inclusive history of former colonized territories. Listening to the Bandanese peoples has taught me not to project my (academic) ideas upon their history and heritage, but rather to accept their narration as the foundation upon which I base my research.

For example, from an academic perspective, Fort Nassau, the site where the catalyst of the 1621 genocide took place when forty-four village leaders were slaughtered (Figure 3), seems the ideal candidate to describe as a site of trauma. However, the Bandanese residents perceive this site as a physical marker of the importance their islands had in global trade, a reminder that people from the other side of the world came for their nutmeg and that the Bandanese village leaders stood tall and strong in the face of these foreign traders. The information board which was placed at the site in 2010 echoes this perspective: the narrative is centred on the strength and resilience of the Bandanese peoples (the emphasis is not on the colonial oppressor, nor does it portray the Bandanese as victims).



Figure 3. Left: information board propped against a tree within the walls of Fort Nassau (photograph by J. van Donkersgoed, 2017). Right: the monument constructed around the well which commemorates the sacrifice the *orang kaya* made to defend the Banda Islands. This monument is known as *parigi rantai*, the 'chained well' (photograph by J. van Donkersgoed, 2017).

The information board explains that the local Bandanese opposed the construction and fought the Dutch guerrilla-style, but that the fort was completed nonetheless. It is referred to as *Benteng Air*, meaning 'water fort', because of its proximity to the waterfront and surrounding moat. Under the command of Pieter Both, it became the VOC's headquarters in the Banda Islands. The historical summary ends with the Bandanese massacre, as it states

that forty *orang kaya* (Bandanese rich and influential men) who resisted the Dutch demands were killed on this site. The history of Fort Nassau is therefore framed as a physical and unwelcome intrusion by the Dutch in the Banda Islands, and the Bandanese are presented as warriors who fought against colonial settlement. However, the violence committed by the Dutch is written in a detached objective manner, which indicates that this history is not meant to elicit anger against the Dutch. This is evidenced by the slogan heading the next section, which states: "Make peace with the past, build awareness".<sup>14</sup> As this slogan is written in Indonesian, it is a message meant for Indonesian visitors and Bandanese residents, urging them to make peace with the past while also raising their awareness about the heroes of their past.

A site which directly engages and commemorates these heroes is the monumentalized well near Fort Nassau, which lists the names of the *orang kaya* who were slaughtered in 1621 (Figure 3). This monument was created by Des Alwi, a prominent Bandanese diplomat, at the place where he believed the *orang kaya* spilled their blood to defend their land and Islam (Alwi 2006). There is no consensus among the Bandanese as to whether the well marks this location, or whether it was the water source at which the men were allowed to perform *wudhu*, an Islamic cleansing ritual, before they were murdered. This religious element is always mentioned, and it marks these men within oral history as heroes to be honoured. Moreover, wells are places connected to stories of resistance, as some informants told me that their ancestors poisoned the water in the wells of the Dutch colonists as an act of rebellion.

Fort Nassau is therefore an example of a ruin which is part of the colonial archive, not as a written source but as a physical manifestation. It is currently in the final phases of restoration, following the decision by the national and regional governments to rebuild the bastions which were destroyed in the twentieth century. The reconstruction goes against the recommendation of the Dutch governmental agency for cultural heritage (Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed: RCE), which advised that the fort should remain a ruin (suggesting that it should be turned into a "garden of ruins") (P.C. Wieringa and Y. Attema 1997: 33). This advice aligns well with Stoler's statement about the European love of imperial debris:

Portrayed as enchanted, desolate spaces, large-scale monumental structures abandoned and grown over, ruins provide a favored image of a vanished past, what is beyond repair and in decay, thrown into aesthetic relief by nature's tangled growth (Stoler 2013: 9).

It is a romantic stance which allows European visitors to take a step back from the past, to put it away as something distant and nostalgic, rather than acknowledge its presence and impact in the present. The full reconstruction of the fort is seen as interrupting this distancing of time, as violating the preservation of the material (European) integrity of the site; there is no acknowledgement that

<sup>14</sup> Translated by J. van Donkersgoed. Original text: *Berdamai dengan masa lalu, membangun kesadaran.*

the role of the fort might have evolved and changed to serve the needs of the current peoples residing near and maintaining the site.

My research has therefore focused on finding ways to endorse the local community and identify how they want to manage their heritage site. The cultural landscape approach seems the most inclusive method to conduct bottom-up heritage management in an international framework which has its foundations in the Eurocentric Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD).<sup>15</sup> Perceiving heritage through the concept of cultural landscapes defies the nature-culture dichotomy inherent in the AHD, as it aims to value heritage (sites and landscapes) in a more holistic manner with a focus on the uses and values attached and maintained by contemporary communities which are local to these heritage places.

Similarly, the act of writing about the history of formerly colonized places and peoples could benefit from a more bottom-up and holistic approach which foregrounds the needs, wishes, and values of the contemporary communities it concerns. Shifting the focus away from the Eurocentric perspective in the case of the Banda Islands would therefore mean that the history of the islands does not begin with the arrival of the Europeans but rather with the rich multi-cultural pre-colonial history of the Bandanese peoples. Fort Nassau is presented as a site of resistance and resilience rather than a site of trauma and victimhood. Awareness of (colonial violence in) the past can still be generated, but through a narrative about the resilience and strength of the Bandanese peoples.

#### CONCLUSION: DECOLONIALITY AND THE CULTURAL ARCHIVE

In this article, I have aimed to show how we might shift the focus of history writing about Indonesia from a Eurocentric gaze based on colonial sources to a more bottom-up approach by accessing the cultural archive. By developing/ applying multi-directional memory, we acknowledge that knowledge is produced by a myriad of actors and based on different kinds of sources. These can assist in creating a more inclusive narrative and empower the perception of history as experienced by the (local) peoples involved.

In practice, this means that we (scholars) should accept the narrated past as an equally valid source alongside colonial documentation, and actively search for ways to find and incorporate these historical narrations and interpretations in our writing. Where we begin a story, which actors we give prime agency to in our writing: these are questions we need to be aware of in order to work towards a more decolonial history. Since we, both the former colonizer and the colonized, are trained in a system which is biased in favour of the Eurocentric perspective, this change cannot happen overnight. However, we can work actively to counterbalance the colonial narrative by foregrounding other sources of (historical) bottom-up knowledge.

<sup>15</sup> The Authorized Heritage Discourse was coined by Laurajane Smith (2006) and critical heritage studies have developed around deconstructing the Eurocentric mechanisms of global heritage practices, as well as developing methods towards a more inclusive and critical heritage practice. See also Rodney Harrison 2013: 111.

Manuscripts like the *Hikayat Lonthoir* offer one gateway towards a re-narration of received history. Ensuring the accessibility of these alternative sources, through digitization, open-access publication, and active communication with communities involved in the histories, is therefore key in establishing decolonial practice. Active communication implies a stance of listening rather than imposing preconceived notions or ideas, as illustrated in the case of Fort Nassau. Rather than presenting it as a site of trauma, the local narration is a (hi)story of resistance and resilience. Ethical practice is therefore one which supports the stance of local peoples towards their history, rather than subjugating them to an (academic) practice which serves our objectives (whether imposing a temporal framework to dismiss a source as invalid, or self-flagellation to make a statement about colonial violence). If we continue to reassert our objectives upon communities, we take away their agency and continue to subject them to a Eurocentric system of oppression.

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