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Marginalizing colonial violence at the beginning of the 21st century

The representation of colonial military expedition to Banten of 1808 in the National Museum of Indonesia

ADIEYATNA FAJRI

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the narrative of colonial violence attached to the objects displayed in the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta. Taking the colonial military expedition to Banten in 1808 as a case study, this paper analyses the exhibition to show the interplay between museum as a product of colonialism and its focus on regionalism, its role in post-colonial nation-state-formation promoting national identity building, and the complexities of addressing violence. It argues that, as the museum engages with the discourse of coloniality and concurrently emphasizes national identity building, it inadvertently marginalizes the narrative of colonial violence. The findings show that, despite the abundant references to events and processes of direct and structural violence, the phenomenon of violence as an instrumental practice of colonialism has never been discussed or made the object of explicit analysis in the museum. Instead, the museum promotes a belief in a benign and benevolent Dutch imperialism.

KEYWORDS

Colonial violence, Banten, coloniality, museum, narrative of violence.

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INTRODUCTION¹

The colonial military expedition to Banten in 1808 was a huge calamity in the history of a once powerful kingdom in Java. The colonial government destroyed the royal palace, the seat of the sultan, and abolished the sultanate which had existed for almost 300 years. The memory of this distant past has been a contentious topic in Bantenese, and a larger Indonesian, contemporary society. It shapes public and private narratives about the war against the Dutch colonial regime and produces different social meanings for the newly established autonomous province of Banten. As this troubled past has never been materialized in any public commemoration, the process of recalling these difficult memories is challenging, and this is also visible in current museum spaces.

Since the 1990s, a large body of research has underscored the political role of museums as sites of non-neutral representation (E. Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Tony Bennett 1995; Kathleen McLean 1999; C. Gray 2015). Museums work as institutions whose aim is to shape a specific discourse in society (N. Sullivan and C. Middleton 2019). As a consequence, museum practice is always embedded in discursive formations. A huge plate attached to the wall of the National Museum of Indonesia is a good example. It carries the vision statement: "Creating an integrated cultural heritage museum management in order to strengthen cultural identity and resilience and to improve people's welfare and the role of Indonesian culture in the global world".² It clearly conveys the message that, since the post-Indonesian independence, the National Museum of Indonesia has been established to serve the purpose of national identity building. As a result, in the museum displays, the Indonesian government's political rhetoric, which stresses magnificent and glorious Indonesian heroism, dominates the memories of the Indonesian past.

Although colonial conflict also has a place in Indonesian historiography, it is generally downplayed in favour of the prominent role of local kingdoms in the early-modern global trading networks and national heroes' successive attempts to repel the European colonizers. The near absence of a comprehensive analysis of the late-colonial state as a set of repressive institutions and its post-colonial legacies, has been highlighted by Henk Schulte Nordholt (2004: 9) as follows.

Although attention was paid to protest movements and rebellions against colonial rule, the nature of the object of rebellion, the oppressive state, remained by and large unexplored. This omission has a lot to do with the fact that most historians operate from within the state by consuming its archives and looking through its glasses, while they are usually paid and sponsored by the state. Like fish that

¹ The author extends gratitude for the valuable suggestion to Ruly Handayani, Yustin Stefanie, Martijn Eickhoff, Daan Raemaekers, Mahirta, Klaas Stutje, Elsbeth Dekker, Harm Stevens, and Yadi Ahyadi.

² *Mewujudkan pengelolaan cagar budaya museum yang terpadu untuk memperkuat identitas dan ketahanan budaya serta meningkatkan kesejahteraan masyarakat dan pengaruh budaya Indonesia di tengah peradaban dunia.*

do not speak about the water in which they swim, many historians still seem to ignore the dominant structuring role of the state.

Pertinently, Indonesian national historiography is also heavily characterized by a state-centred narrative which focuses on Indonesia itself as the main subject of past events, aiming to bolster the construction of Indonesian national identity and unity (Agus Suwignyo 2014). Like other historiographies which have developed in post-colonial society, the nationalists' Indonesia-centrism produces a top-down history which is almost entirely devoted to legitimizing the existence of the state or state institutions (Rommel Curaming 2003: 1). Therefore, in the context of Indonesian nationalist historiography, the National Museum, while dealing with the collections assembled during the colonial rule, barely has the space to represent the difficult memory of the humiliating oppression by the colonial regime.

This article uses Banten as a case study in order to address how colonial history of violence and loss are represented in the National Museum of Indonesia at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It discusses the following questions: How does the museum represent colonial violence? What narratives does the museum communicate? How is the representation of violence shaped by the interaction of textual and visual media, objects, and environmental design in the museum exhibitions? Furthermore, it also discusses the question of how the museum engages with the discourse of coloniality when presenting the narrative of violence.

The first section of the paper develops a theoretical framework for analysing museum discourse in the National Museum of Indonesia. In the second section, I provide a historical reconstruction of the colonial military expedition to Banten in 1808. In the last two sections, while analysing the events in Banten, I explore the interplay between museum as a product of colonialism and its focus on regionalism, its role in post-colonial nation-state formation promoting national identity building, and the complexities of addressing violence.

Banten is a fitting case study because of its resonance on many levels. On the local level, the public narratives about the colonial military expedition to Banten, although quite distant in time, still resonate in present-day social spheres in general and in Banten local politics in particular. By and large, the rewriting of colonial narratives in Banten has focused on creating a positive self-image of the former colonized. Colonialism has been seen as the determining factor which fueled the spirit of local resistance, particularly in the nineteenth century. In this sense, local history writing acts as a form of resistance to replace the colonial discourse about the colonized. While referring to a broad range of historical sources, a recent work on the history of Banten by a group of local Banten historians, entitled *Sejarah Banten: membangun tradisi dan peradaban* (Nina H. Lubis et al. 2014), stresses the importance of the Dutch colonial government and its oppressive policy in provoking community resistance, thereby strengthening Banten spirit and identity.

Consequently, this spirit of resistance relates strongly to the way the

Bantenese reconcile with their colonial history. M. Bloembergen and M. Eickhoff (2015a), while calling the Banten the sultanate which never really surrendered, identify present-day Banten as a site of memory (*Lieu de Mémoire*) where colonial violence (including the destruction of the royal palace) is marginalized, and the glorious commercial past is emphasized. Yadi Ahyadi, a local Bantenese cultural historian, compares the mentality of Bantenese when they encountered the Dutch colonizer to flies, which despite their small size, are difficult to kill. The sultanate, he continues, had never been defeated by the Dutch but dissolved itself to avoid imminent bloodshed.³ These views are shared by many Bantenese,⁴ and reflect how the present-day collective memory of the Bantenese engages in a constant, selective process of forgetting and remembering (M. Halbwachs 1992), in order to develop sense of identity, and continuity with the past.

By discussing the representation of Banten on a national level, this article aims to contribute to the study of how the National Museum engages with difficult, painful, violent, and local histories. By focusing on the representation of the colonial military expedition in the National Museum of Indonesia, this paper develops a better understanding of the narrative of violence. It examines how this narrative has been deployed in the context of a burgeoning post-colonial nation, when national identities were contested and representations of colonial violence were sensitive. By analysing the museum practice through a decolonial line of thought, this article proposes that the colonial gaze still continuously exerts a substantial influence on the contemporary landscape of Indonesian culture.

THE MUSEUM: COLONIALITY, DECOLONIALITY, AND COLONIAL VIOLENCE

Since their creation, museums have been instrumental in the reproduction and dissemination of power and ideology. In his groundbreaking book, *The birth of the museum*, Tony Bennett (1995) examines the relationship between exhibition and state power by exploring the development of museum. Using Foucauldian frames, he argues that museums aspire to be a site of legal innovation and cultural creativity, of pride in community and nation, situated between social consumption, entertainment, and politics. In the context of European imperialism, museums as social institutions also represent troubling encounters with the colonized people. In fact, museums were used as a colonial device to disseminate the hierarchy of races, domination, superiority, and conquest over their colonies. Through the history of conquest, trade, and the politics of colonialism, western museums are arguably a colonial device which sought to incorporate the people within the process of state (Bennett 1995).

In post-colonized nations, recent studies have argued that the museum is effectively used as a pedagogical institution to bolster national identity. Desi Dwi Prianti and I Made Suyadnya (2022), in the case of museum culture in post-

³ Interview with Yadi Ahyadi, 30-1-2023.

⁴ Focus group discussion, Majelis Bantenologi, UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Serang, Banten, 3-2-2023.

colonial Java, argue that, while the Dutch colonizer used museums to construct the meta-structure between the west and the rest, the de-colonized societies used them to reconstruct their national identity. Once part of a colonial nation, public museums in Java are utilized to inscribe a sense of belonging to the newly independent nation. Claire Sutherland (2005), discussing the narrative of resistance to the colonial rule in Vietnamese state-controlled museums, explicates that contemporary Vietnamese national identity is constructed in support of national unity, and colonialism is ascribed a minor role. The museums' emphasis tends to be on a self-affirming discourse of heroic resistance, with minimal representation of the colonial adversaries and their humiliating oppression.

In his influential book, *Imagined communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991) assesses that the museum played a prominent role in shaping the coming into being of the imagined communities of nations. This national imagination, Anderson argues, allows individuals to feel connected by the knowledge, self-perception, rules, and values they hold in common and by the memory of a shared past. Discussing the function of national museums in European nation-building in the nineteenth century, the collections of articles compiled by Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius take similar constructivist approach to national museums. Aronsson and Elgenius state that "National museums have thus developed into significant institutions turning empirical evidence into consolidating perceptions of membership, ultimately related to nationhood and citizenship" (2015: 2). As the place in which "the national identity" is constructed, renegotiated, and maintained through museum discourse, national museums offer an insight into fragmented discourses on nation-building and national identity.

According to the decolonial perspective suggested by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018: 5-6), the way museums address the construction of national identity reveals a persistent influence of colonial power, which has long shaped the museums' practices in the context of a global structure grounded in the narrative of modernity. Through their exhibitions, museums offer a glimpse into the darker aspect of modernity: coloniality. By actively homogenizing the concept of nationhood, and uncritically embracing nationalist ideologies without considering the inherent colonial legacies and power structures, societies might unintentionally perpetuate coloniality and hinder progress towards genuine decolonization and recognition of diverse perspectives and histories (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 24). In doing so, they not only overlook the diversity and complexities of various cultures and histories, but also inadvertently sustain the legacy of colonial domination.

As the central pillar of the "colonial institution", the museum, following Rolando Vazquez (2017), endorses the narrative of modernity which establishes itself as the "self" of world-historical reality through significant processes of separation and detachment from alterity. These modes of separation manifest in three distinct yet interconnected axes: Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, and contemporaneity. The first two axes emphasize how

museums impose the idea of a western monoculture and establish the notion of human superiority over the Earth. The last axis, contemporaneity, raises concerns about temporality. According to Vazquez, the “now” is defined through temporal discrimination in which modern/colonial ideas anchor their narratives of novelty, present-ness, and progress, while viewing other cultures as backward and traditional. This approach perpetuates a biased view of history, favouring western perspectives while marginalizing and devaluing the contributions of non-western civilizations.

Through the lens of Gloria Wekker’s analysis (2016), the modern/colonial function of museums, both in their actions and affirmations, constitutes a “cultural archive” which plays a role in shaping normative subject formation. The way collections, narratives, and audiences are curated and presented in museums is closely tied to the creation of normative cultural archives, worldviews, and individual identities. To address this, a decolonial approach, aiming to disentangle museums from western/colonial epistemology, as discussed by the concept of the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP) (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Mignolo 2013), is necessary. The CMP is a theoretical framework which helps decipher the intricate system of dominance and control which originated during colonial times and still impacts on our world today. By disentangling themselves from the colonial matrix, museums can foster a decolonial perspective, enabling engagement and imagination in the process of becoming decolonial subjects, which is essential to moving towards a more inclusive and equitable representation of history and heritage.

While decoloniality offers new insights, it differs from other theoretical formulations as it is not a single or fixed concept. Instead, it represents a diverse and ever-evolving field, characterized by an ongoing and meandering exploration of alternative ways of existence, thinking, knowledge, perception, and lifestyle. Decoloniality does not seek to impose a specific set of ideological or epistemological practices. Adopting such an essentialist approach, as Mignolo and Walsh (2018: 81-95) caution, could lead to “decolonial dangers” in which decoloniality is wrongly assumed to be the exclusive domain of indigenous people. This oversimplification and essentialization disregards the internal power dynamics in indigenous communities themselves in which heteropatriarchal structures and violence against women and minority groups are still prevalent. Another peril of such essentialization lies in the commodification of decoloniality, viewing it as the property of particular groups or individuals.

In this essay, although using decoloniality as an analytical approach, the emphasis shifts to the representation of historical categories, namely: colonial violence as portrayed in the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta. Although colonial violence might have entailed both the processes and conditions which attended the practice of colonialism and violated the physical, social, and/or psychological integrity of the colonized (Edward Said 1997; Frantz Fanon 1963), the article focuses on physical violence, namely: the colonial military expedition. Narrowing the scope to the military context, the

article delves into the direct use of force, coercion, and brutality employed by colonial powers to establish and maintain control over colonized territories. This specific focus allows a deeper examination of the immediate and visible manifestation of violence inflicted on colonized populations, shedding light on the impact and the legacy of colonial violence.

Focusing on the issue of colonial violence when discussing decoloniality is crucial, because violence has been a central and pervasive aspect of colonialism. During an interview with American diplomat Christian Filostrat, Josie Fanon, the wife of Frantz Fanon, explored the relationship between colonialism and violence, stating, "There is no colonialism without violence. There is no colonization without native deformations" (Filostrat 2019: 74). These phrases emphasize the inherent nature of violence as an integral component of colonial practices and its role in perpetuating oppressive systems of domination. In today's world, in which the narrative of modernity/coloniality remains oblivious to violence, thereby normalizing its presence, it is crucial to question how museums grapple with the ethical dilemma of violence and its representation. Have museums actively addressed these questions, or have they been indifferent to and complicit in perpetuating a global (Eurocentric) narrative? Recognizing the political nuances involved in crafting these narratives is important. In this paper, I demonstrate how this process has unfolded in the National Museum in Jakarta. The colonial military expedition to Banten was an event which, as an act of extreme violence, had all the characteristics which exemplify this. However, it will also show how certain elements of coloniality/modernity remain unidentified and are reproduced.

To find out how this museum deals with the issue of colonial violence, I use the colonial military expedition to Banten in 1808 as a case study. To do so, I have mainly employed a discursive analysis using a visual research method. Utilizing a visual research method, I have examined various museum elements, such as spatial arrangements, storylines, texts, labels, brochures, and exhibition materials related to colonial violence, to deconstruct the content conveyed. I have also conducted interviews with museum curators to gain invaluable insights into their curation process and the underlying intention behind the exhibited content.

In my analysis, I have adopted two distinct yet interconnected analytical methods: thematic analysis and discourse analysis. Using thematic analysis, I have carefully examined the textual and visual content, spatial arrangement, and overall storyline of the museum displays. This approach enabled me to identify recurring themes and patterns in the representation of colonialism and colonial violence, shedding light on the prevalent narratives and perspectives conveyed. I have conducted a concurrent discourse analysis, using the Colonial Matrix of Power approach, to show how the museum engaged with the colonial matrix of power when discussing colonial violence. In my analysis of the CMP, I have adopted Mignolo's framework of "enunciated" and "enunciation". According to Mignolo (2011), the *enunciated* refers to the content or subject matter of the conversation, while the *enunciation* pertains to

the terms and context in which the conversation takes place. In this essay, the focal point is the issue of colonial violence, which serves as the “enunciated”. Meanwhile, within the colonial matrix of power, the museum (as an actor) plays a crucial role as “locus enunciation”, as it is the platform through which colonial powers disseminate their ideologies, norms, and values, shaping the understanding and perception of the enunciated content. Utilizing Mignolo’s analytical framework, this essay aims to unravel the power dynamics at play in the museum context, critically examining how enunciation influences the interpretation and dissemination of narratives surrounding colonial violence.

THE COLONIAL MILITARY EXPEDITION TO BANTEN IN 1808

The early-nineteenth century was a period of radical change in the history of the Netherlands East Indies. The outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War in 1780 and the demise of the Dutch Republic in 1795 led to the bankruptcy and the dissolution of VOC. Furthermore, since 1795 the communication between the Netherlands and Batavia had been strained by the war in Europe, English hegemony at sea, and mutual distrust. In The Hague, it was generally believed that the colony was governed by a lot of elderly, self-seeking, conservative, Orangist, Anglophile men of the *ancien régime*, incapable of and unwilling to reform (G.J. Schutte 1978: 154). By formally defining colonies as unalienable “possessions” of a centralized sovereign state, the Batavian revolutionaries bequeathed a state-led colonial empire. To achieve this, they had to eradicate those politics deemed outdated remnants of the *ancien régime*. A debate arose about who was capable of being appointed Governor-General. High priority was given to a military official and experienced administrator with the capacity both to master the military situation and undertake the political and administrative reorganization of Java singlehanded (Schutte 1978: 155). In 1807, the king, Louis Napoleon, assigned the task of reforming and defending the East Indies to a regime change veteran, Marshall Herman William Daendels (1762-1818).

Although Daendels radically reorganized the political structure of the colonial government (Onghokham 1991; Peter Carey 2013), he refrained from attempting to improve the welfare of the Javanese people. In fact, under his regime the local inhabitants were more heavily burdened. They had to supply troops for the military and to continue to produce crops for the benefit of the colonial government. Aware of the rising price of coffee on the international market, Daendels forced the local inhabitants to cultivate coffee on their land, without proper regard for the local circumstances (Carey 1979: 60). These moves, Carey argues, led to widespread depopulation in certain districts and growing agrarian discontent. The districts along the north coast, along which the *grote postweg* was being built, experienced extreme depopulation as people fled to escape conscripted labour. Daendels arranged this through the alliance with the local *bupatis* (local official in charge of governing the territory of a regency). This alliance proved to be short-lived and unsuccessful, largely because Daendels’ penchant for military-style executions of those who

thwarted his plans. Fierce opposition to these compulsory labour and military obligations soon led to uprisings in many places in Java (Ota Atsushi 2006: 154).

Daendels' political approach to the local rulers, which was fed by his revolutionary ideals and modern bureaucratic vision, soon proved a miserable flop. He clearly showed a lack of political empathy and subtlety. Daendels intervened deeply local court politics (Carey 2008: 185). This interference stemmed from his resentment of feudalism and his suspicion that the aristocrats involved might turn out to be formidable opponents. Since the beginning of his administration, Daendels had striven to put the relationship between the colonial government and local rulers on a new footing (Ongkhokham 1991). The political power of the independent local Javanese rulers was undermined, as he appointed colonial officials to be the implementers of his general policy. These moves proved to be counterproductive and caused a smoldering resentment and bitterness among the local rulers whose authority was shackled (Carey 2008).

The relationship between the colonial government and the local rulers in Banten was already on a shaky footing after a series of succession wars. However, the situation worsened during Daendels' administration, when he treated Sultan Mutakin of Banten (r. 1802-1808) with disdain. Daendels' foremost task was a military one, to hold Java as a base against the encroaching English Navy. This implied that the local ruler had to provide supplies for the construction of military bases. At the time, Java had no principal sea harbour in which to establish naval power in the region. Following the suggestion of Admiral Adriaan Buijskes (1771-1838), Merak Bay, an uninhabited place covered in centuries-old rainforest, was deemed the most strategic location for the construction of military base (J.K.J. de Jonge 1862: 95). Construction began immediately, under the supervision of Captain Cowell using conscripted labourers from Banten. Toiling in extremely unhealthy conditions, they had to clear the forest and drain the swamp. One thousand five hundred workers allegedly died at the site (De Jonge 1862: 96). This elicited fierce complaints from the local elite in Banten who began to refuse to recruit more workers (Atsushi 2006: 143).

The failure to complete the Merak Bay project disappointed Governor-General Daendels and he blamed the Sultan for being incompetent and unwilling to cooperate and assist him (Dinar Boontharm 2003: 56). Affronted, Daendels felt he had to do something to undermine the status of the Sultan. On 14 November 1808, ordered Commander Philip Pieter Du Puy, to present the Sultan with an Daendels ultimatum which included the demand that he moves his seat from the *kraton* to Anyer (J. Hageman 1856: 198). The Sultan, however, adamantly refuse to leave, insisting that he remains in the palace his ancestors had built three hundred years ago. Above all, he was reluctant to abandon his ancestors' graves (Hageman 1856: 199). This refusal soon flared into a heated situation, not helped by the arrogant behaviour of Du Puy, who raised his voice. Aware of the escalated situation, Du Puy ran and hid in one of the *kraton* rooms before the mob could find him because of the ticking of

his pocket watch, which immediately led to them slaying him with a dagger (Hageman 1856: 200). His corpse was dragged before the Sultan, and later thrown into the nearest river.⁵ The courtiers also murdered three so-called *inlander* soldiers who had accompanied Du Puy. Lieutenant Kohl was kept in captivity, before also being murdered the next day.⁶

News of the murder reached Batavia on the same day, 14 November 1808, in a letter sent to Governor-General Daendels by Commander Leeser.⁷ This bloody incident brewed strong resentment and led to the Governor-General taking aggressive reaction. The document *Order van de dag*, dated 21 November, 1808, records that Daendels instructed a punitive expedition (*straf-expeditie*) to the Sultanate of Banten be mounted.⁸ On November 16, Daendels set out with his military unit comprising 1,000 men. The *Order van den dag* lists some of the supplies accompanying the military expedition, including 200 grenades, one company of horse artillery, twelve cannon plus two heavy howitzers (weapon for firing shells), 700 infantry, and 60 cavalrymen. After a 25-hour march from Batavia, the troops arrived in Banten. Daendels led the mission personally. It was important for Daendels to display his military might to the Bantenese. The advance of the troops was so sudden it sowed shock and havoc in the royal palace (De Jonge 1862: 99). The Dutch military units proved too powerful for them. The Dutch troops began to encircle the *kraton* and bombard the old buildings with cannon fire. After three days of siege and bombardments, defended by 3,000 Bantenese, the *kraton* was finally destroyed, and the Sultan surrendered (Daendels 1814). The Sultan, his family, and courtiers were later escorted to Fort Speelwijk, the Dutch garrison, which was located 2 kilometres from the *kraton*.⁹ The regalias of the sultanate were then confiscated as war booty (De Jonge 1862: 99).

This destruction of the Banten court was the beginning of the end of the sultanate. On 26 November 1808, Sultan Mutakin was exiled to Ambon, and the sultanate was abolished in 1813 and made a Regency. Daendels made further inroads into the sultanate's sovereignty and legitimacy by appointing a *Regent* as the head of administration.¹⁰ The Sultan no longer had any political authority because all regulations concerning his subjects had to be approved by the *Regent*. The crown prince, Sultan Muzaffir Mohammed Aliuddin (Sultan Aliuddin II) appointed as the successor in 1808, retained his title and received an annual allowance and gifts.¹¹ As a result, he was still able to create political turmoil. After fomenting mass rebellions, in February 1832 he was sent to

⁵ *Extract uit het Register der besluiten van Zijne Excellentie den Maarschalk en Gouverneur Generaal, 22-11-1808.*

⁶ *Inlijving van het rijk Bantam, 22-11-1808.*

⁷ *Order van den dag Campement te Ceram twee uren boven Bantam den 24-11-1808.*

⁸ *Order van den dag Campement te Ceram twee uren boven Bantam den 24-11-1808.*

⁹ *Extract uit het Register der besluiten van Zijne Excellentie den Maarschalk en Gouverneur Generaal, 22-11-1808.*

¹⁰ *Extract uit het Register der besluiten van Zijne Excellentie den Maarschalk en Gouverneur Generaal, 22-11-1808.*

¹¹ *Staat der Nederlandsche Oostindische bezittingen, Bijlagen II, Bantam, No. 1, 22-11-1808.*

Surabaya as a prisoner (Atsushi 2006: 146). This exile to Surabaya marked the end of the political history of this long-respected Islamic polity in Java. The sultanate regalia, royal *pusaka* (sacred objects, heirlooms), and its collection of Arabic-*pegon* manuscripts were finally transferred to the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences (now Museum Nasional, Jakarta).

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF INDONESIA: COLONIAL, REGIONAL, AND NATIONAL DISCOURSES

The National Museum of Indonesia was founded 1778 as the *Bataviaasch Genootschap voor Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (Batavian Society for the Arts and Sciences), and it is the inheritor of the collections brought together by the Dutch in the colonial period. It houses one of the world's greatest and oldest ethnographical and archaeological collections acquired, often by violent means, from regions in the Archipelago. The Batavian Society collecting practices were inspired by the establishment of the *Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen* (Dutch Society for the Sciences), founded at Haarlem in 1752 (Hans Groot 2009: 72). The Batavian Society was established as a distant, indirect offshoot of this organization by a group of colonial officials who advocated the founding of an independent scientific organization in Batavia (now Jakarta), rather than just being a branch of the Haarlem society. The Society was initially established with the intention of advancing research in the arts and sciences, encompassing biology, physics, archaeology, literature, ethnology, and history.

As time passed, the focus of the Society gradually shifted, becoming increasingly dedicated to understanding the cultures of and social conditions in the colony. This change in direction led the Society to play a more active role in advising the colonial government on policies relevant to the colony. With a newfound emphasis on studying the cultures and societies of the colony, the Society actively engaged in the practice of collecting material culture and conducting archaeological research. In 1950, after the recognition of Indonesian independence by the Dutch government, the Batavian Society was refounded into *Lembaga Kebudayaan Indonesia* (the Indonesian Culture Council). In 1962, the Indonesian government took over the museum and renamed it *Museum Pusat* (Central Museum). Since 1979 the museum has been known as *Museum Nasional Indonesia* (The National Museum of Indonesia) (K. McGregor 2004).

After Indonesian independence in 1945, a major change took place in the National Museum, a stirring which can be seen as the embryo of a "decolonization project" (Bloembergen and Eickhoff 2015b: 154-155). Before that time, the museum had been associated with colonialism in many ways, and, in fact, was used as a colonial device, as a propaganda tool to suit the imperial narrative, providing the recommendations necessary for the colonial government to legitimize and formulate its policy in the colony to keep control over the population. Six years after the Dutch left Indonesia, a catalogue published in 1955 provided a changing paradigm to the nationalization of

heritage which made the removal of the European (including Dutch) objects in the museum display possible (Bloembergen and Eickhoff 2015b: 154).

The term “decolonization” specifically indicates a conscious attempt by the Indonesians to deconstruct the unequal relationships of power which characterized the colonial period (Paul Michael Taylor 1995: 106). Since 1955, the National Museum of Indonesia has indeed undergone a process of decolonization. However, decolonization in this context pertains to structural and institutional transformation, or what Mignolo and Walsh (2018: 123) refer to the first wave of decolonization, not in the sense of epistemic decolonization or the construction of new social condition of knowledge (the second wave of decolonization). As a matter of fact, Katherine McGregor’s observations on the museum display in 2004 show that the colonial gaze was still embedded and reflected in the practice of its narratives about “primitive culture” and ethnicity (K. McGregor 2004). A much more recent investigation by Bloembergen and Eickhoff (2015b) complicates the notion of “primitivity” as understood by the museum and how it connected to the concept of the “local genius preposition” reformulated by post-colonial Indonesian archaeologists. Primitivity, the museum stated, did not necessarily mean backwardness but rather the “base” of indigenous culture. Employing this narrative, the museum aimed to emphasize the creative independence of Indonesian culture, overriding the dominant thesis of foreign influences.

In 2007, a new building (called B Building) was added to provide a huge amount of floor space to house some 142,000 objects. Currently, the new building is divided into two wings: north and south. In the south wing, the narrative is arranged according to the seven elements of culture (religion, social organization systems, knowledge systems, languages, arts, economic (subsistence) system, and technology) espoused by the prominent Indonesian anthropologist Koentjaraningrat in 1989. It is important to note that Koentjaraningrat himself and his ideas about the seven elements of culture (*tujuh unsur kebudayaan*), which entails an essentialist categorization of culture, were a key feature in the Indonesian cultural policy under the New Order regime and continue to resonate even today (Mulyawan Karim et al. 2023). The narrative about the seven elements of culture was not necessarily formulated for the museum, but it was very prominent and widely circulated in Indonesian intellectual circles. Based on this narrative, the collections of the museum were divided into a material organization as follows: ethnography, bronzes, prehistory, ceramics, textiles, historical relics, stone sculptures, and treasures.

Meanwhile, the north wing consists of four exhibition spaces, highlighting the narratives of progress. Here the theme stresses the technological and social development of Indonesian society, from the earliest evidence of human existence to the end of the colonial period. Albeit a new development, this categorization shows how the element of colonialism still pervades the practice of the museum in which the objects were often reduced to static identities and essentialist categories. From a decoloniality perspective, the idea of

progress and development is essential as it serves as the rhetoric of modernity, promising future happiness but silencing the darker side of modernity, coloniality. The notion of progress and development was constructed in opposition to stagnation and underdevelopment, forming a chronology of denials which legitimized the colonial epistemic praxis of exploiting and destroying human and nature (Mignolo and Walsh 2018).

Since 2013, every five years the museum has transformed its permanent exhibition. Based on its 2017 museum masterplan,¹² in 2019 it officially opened its new exhibition storyline. I conducted fieldwork research in January 2023 to evaluate the current exhibition instalment dating from 2019 in A Building, the old, original premises of the Society, and the exhibition in the B Building in which the collections from Banten taken during the colonial military expedition in 1808 were stored.¹³

In A Building, although the narrative of cultural evolution does remain dominant, the latest exhibition presents a new look in which the discourse of nationalism, rather than regionalism, is emphasized. Interestingly the recent narrative projects the prominent role of the objects and the embodied cultural practices in the formation of the Indonesian nation-state. Here, although the spatial arrangement of the gallery still follows the regionalism approach, the emphasis is on common cultural traits, such as spirituality, agriculture, and maritime heritage, to create a narrative aligned with the Indonesian nationalist vision of *Menjadi Indonesia* (Becoming Indonesia).

While the discourse of neoliberal globalism has seen increased discussions around multivocality and marginalized voices, particularly in European museums, in the last few decades, the National Museum of Indonesia has taken a different approach by engaging with the homogenization of culture through a rather right-wing nationalist lens. As it tries to create a cohesive national identity, the museum seems to be promoting a homogenized version of Indonesian culture, portraying it as monotheistic, agricultural, and/or seafarer-based, thereby imposing a narrative of a dominant monoculture. Although this portrayal might be part of a nationalist project, Mignolo (2017) warns that it could perpetuate and reinforce coloniality, where nation-state prioritizes nationals over human beings. Disguised as a “de-linking” which is intended to raise up a non-western way of thinking, a monolithic nationalist propaganda of culture paradoxically removes other voices which do not slot neatly into the unified national narrative (Alexandra Lewis and Marie Lall 2023).

However, remnants of the ethnographic and regionalism approach can still be found. Passing through the main gallery of the museum in A Building, for example, it is impossible to ignore the huge image of the map of Indonesia showing various ethnic groups hanging on the wall next to the entrance. This

¹² *Pengembangan Museum Nasional Indonesia* (Museum Nasional Indonesia: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, Jakarta, 2017).

¹³ Now the museum is preparing to launch a new installment of the permanent display in October 2023.

image is a copy of the original painting created by Mas Pirngadie (1875-1936), a Javanese artist who worked as an assistant to Johan Ernst Jasper (1874-1945), a colonial administrator of mixed Dutch-Indonesian descent.¹⁴ Enchanted by the batik motives he created in his sketchbook, Jasper assigned Pirngadie to make a drawing of Indonesian craft traditions and ethnic groups. Obviously, besides the importance attached to crafts at that time as a source of income for the population (Sandra Niessen 2013), colonial painting of the physical features of certain ethnic groups was driven by what Aníbal Quijano (2000) refers to as the “coloniality of power”, which structures society based on the racial or anthropological classification. The museum curators responsible for setting up this exhibition and with whom I spoke emphasized that the image is part of a larger Indonesian heritage as it exemplifies “*karya seniman asli Indonesia*” (the works of native Indonesian artists).¹⁵ Here, the preservation of the so-called “colonial” collection, but permitting the intervention of indigenous people, might be a way for post-colonial societies to assert their autonomy and reclaim their history.



Figure 1. Display room in A Building, the National Museum of Indonesia (photograph by Adieyatna Fajri, 2023).

While much has changed since the latest instalment of the new display room in A Building in 2019, the general scheme of the exhibition is still heavily

¹⁴ About this painting see also Bloembergen (2006) and Sadiah Boonstra (2023).

¹⁵ Interview with Rully Handiani and Yustin Stefanie, curators of the ethnographic collections, 27-1-2023.

inclined towards a cultural evolutionist approach, showcasing the history of Indonesian culture according to a narrative of progress (modernity/coloniality). The Darwinian natural evolutionary approach has been applied to cultural matters so that the artefacts are presented as “evidence” of progress in a natural stage of human history. Walking through the galleries (Figure 1), the visitor is offered a chronology of sorts which intercuts with thematic groupings. Large displays are set up along the main gallery: massive display cases filled with an array of materials give the gallery the distinct appearance of a cabinet of curiosities. The first chamber in the main gallery in particular displays a great variety of objects which operate symbolically in religious registers or were once used for religious purposes. The sequence is arranged according to the grand narratives of so-called “religious development” in Indonesia, from the ancestor worship of prehistoric times to present-day monotheism.

Besides the abundance of “classical” Hindu and Buddhist artefacts, “Islamic” objects have been the most prominent feature, particularly in the next room, in which a great variety of artworks are displayed under the banner *Peradaban Islam* (Islamic civilization). While denoting *puncak kebudayaan Indonesia* (the peak of Indonesian culture), the designation of Islamic civilization is apparently a recent curatorial intervention. In the previous storyline, designed to emphasize the diversity of culture in Indonesia, the National Museum had no section dedicated to Islam. Y. Kamada observed that objects, even those featuring Islamic elements, were not displayed as “Islamic art” and there was no “Islamic art gallery” in the museum. Nor did the museum catalogues and publications contain a section on “Islamic art” (Kamada 2015). It is interesting, that *debus*, a martial art from Banten using *alat penusuk* (the stabbing weapon), is categorized as “Islamic culture” in this section. The accompanying text describing these objects states that *debus* is considered a form of Islamic art and was historically used as a means to disseminate Islam peacefully.

While Islam has been taking up an increasingly important position in the museum space, Christianity, the second largest religion in Indonesia, is scarcely represented in the exhibitions. When I asked about the representation of the Christianity, the curators immediately pointed out a seventeenth-century Portuguese bell as the only “Catholic” object displayed in the museum. The minimal representation of Christianity might be the outcome of the close association between European colonial regimes and Christianity. Mignolo (2009), discussing relationship between racial formations under colonialism and imperialism, situates them in the context of concurrent transformations in Christianity and the rise of the capitalist world economy. In Indonesia, colonialism and Christian missionary objectives became so intertwined they could barely be distinguished from one another.

Moreover, the removal of European objects fuelled by the anti-colonial sentiment rife in 1955, prevented the museum from showcasing a plurality view of the intricate relationship between Christianity and colonialism. Above all, the colonial period tends to be portrayed as a negligible blip in the ancient and glorious past of Indonesia. This concurs with the discourse of colonialism

in standard Indonesian historiography in which it has merely been seen as a determinant factor (H. Purwanta 2017). By being viewed as a “determinant factor”, the discourse surrounding colonialism often dismisses it as just one of many influencing factors in the country’s development. Therefore, although colonialism is acknowledged as a part of Indonesia’s past, it is not given any significant weight or attention as a defining period in shaping the nation’s history.

THE NARRATIVE OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE

The National Museum shows a rather ambiguous attitude towards the colonial period. Since 1868, the museum has been housed in a colonial building constructed in a neo-classical style displaying the grandeur and power of colonial times. The exhibits in B Building also depict the colonial experience in a reconstruction of a *tempo-doeloe* room furnished with a variety of teakwood furniture (Figure 2) to show visitors how the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Dutch and Indisch people lived in the colony. This corner reflects the recalling process of personal and colonial nostalgic memories of the past intertwined with social and historical contexts and dynamics in a (post)colonial context (Caroline Drieënhuizen 2014). Other exhibits document the colonial technological advancements in weaponry, railway transportation, and writing traditions which contributed heavily to the modernization of Indonesia during the colonial period. In contrast to the standard Indonesian historiography, however, there is very limited reference to the most ubiquitous theme of the colonial state monopoly on spice commodities.



Figure 2. A reconstruction of the *tempo-doeloe* room in the National Museum of Indonesia (photograph by Adieyatna Fajri, 2023).

The treatment of the colonial period by the museum is intriguing. These instances portray the colonial era as a benign, benevolent time, overlooking the harsh realities and negative impacts of colonialism. Museums appear to romanticize and sanitize the history of colonial rule, emphasizing the positive aspects like infrastructure or technological advancements, while downplaying or ignoring the exploitation, oppression, and cultural destruction experienced by colonized populations. While promoting the belief in the benevolence of the Dutch colonial regime, these portrayals disregard the experiences and struggles of Indonesian communities, erasing their agency and resilience in the face of colonization.

The narrative of resistance to Dutch colonialism is only to be found on the fourth floor of the north wing of the B Building, called “ruang emas dan keramik” (gold and ceramics room), which displays some of the most magnificent Indonesian gold *pusaka* collected during the colonial military expeditions in Indonesia in the nineteenth century. The Banten objects, in total seven, of our study are also featured in this room.

The objects from Banten did not make their way to the museum directly. The destruction of the *Surosowan* Palace did not sound the immediate death knell of the sultanate. In its aftermath, the colonial government deposed the former sultan and appointed his crown prince as the new king who continued to rule for a few years, although deprived of any significant power. On 27 November 1808, Daendels declared that the Dutch government would appoint a local Bantenese official (*rijksbestierder*) to implement general policy and it was he who would issue orders on the instructions of the Dutch Resident. He also decided that other members of the elite could retain their rank and that the Sultan could not make any change or create new positions without the permission of the Governor-General. In the same declaration, most of the Sultan’s property was confiscated, and the Sultan himself was exiled to Ambon.

Hans Groot’s valuable contribution to the history of the Batavian Society, *Van Batavia naar Weltevreden* (2009), provides a general overview on the fate of the objects after the destruction of the royal palace. The Sultan’s precious regalia, including jewels, weapons, garments, and manuscripts, were transferred directly to ‘s *Lands Civiele Pakhuizen* (National Civilian Warehouse) in Batavia in which they were kept until 1833 (Groot 2009: 273). During this period (1808-1833), it is likely that other Bantenese regalias were also acquired by the colonial government. On 9 October 1833, the first government decree on the property was issued.¹⁶ The collections were divided between several places: the manuscripts assigned to the Home Affairs Department of the Resident of Banten. The same decree¹⁷ also ordered the Resident of Batavia to destroy a number of royal objects, including the royal parasol, embroidered mules, flags, a wooden eagle, priestly robes, and nine royal chairs, while other objects were to be sold in the market.¹⁸ The Batavian Society received some of

¹⁶ *Gouvernementsbesluit 9-10-1833*.

¹⁷ *Gouvernementsbesluit 9-10-1833*.

¹⁸ According to local Bantenese stories, the Dutch were afraid of the perceived aura and

the most valuable items, such as a pair of betel boxes made from coconut shells embossed with gold (*poh jenggi*), a set of complete gamelan instruments, and three kris in precious metal scabbards. Other objects sent to the Society were a breast-cloth bearing an Arabic inscription and a matching green shirt. There were also a *djamoer/paddestoel*, (a mushroom),¹⁹ two native (*inheemse*) weapons (*kogang pemgarad*), and two short swords (*golok*). On 11 December 1833, it took forty-seven compulsory labourers to transport the gamelan Sukarame, from the warehouse to the building in Rijswijkstraat (Groot 2009: 273).

However, the story does not end there. In 1834 the society was instructed to make a choice from what was left of the Sultan's property.²⁰ James Tromp and Adriaan Bik were the board members tasked with the selection. In March 1835, E.A. Frizte and C. Visscher, officials of the Political Administration, who had been appointed to initiate the process, reported to the board that they were unsure about which objects should be selected. This hesitancy, according to Groot (2009: 273), seemed to stem primarily from their awareness of ancestral memories (*voor den inlander voorouderlijke herinneringen hechtten*) with which these objects were imbued. Eventually, the committee selected two gold crowns, two kris, one with a gilded scabbard, a kris grip, and five spears. Meanwhile, the committee also recommended that the books and manuscripts could be better investigated on the premises of the Batavian Society (*genootschaplokaal*).

Groot does not provide us with a more detailed explanation of specific hesitations or indeed if these were common in the early-nineteenth-century Dutch colonial collecting practices. Instead, Groot assumes that such an attitude shows a form of empathy (*enig inlevingsvermogen*) (Groot 2009: 273). To my view, this uncertainty was perhaps related to objects like the kris and the crown of the Sultan of Banten, which, despite being made of gold and of significant monetary value, were imbued with invaluable spiritual and magical (*kesaktian*) meanings. Notably, since the seventeenth century, the Sultanate of Banten had played a prominent role in defining the meaning and use of the kris in its territory, as evident in the *Undhang-undhang Banten*, a legal compilation of the Qadi Court of Banten dated back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, now preserved in the Leiden University Libraries. From the chapter *Masalah wong nyothé ing alun-alun* (matter of men wearing kris in the city), we know that a kris was the preserve of high-ranking court officials.²¹ John Splinter Stavorinus, a Dutch official who joined a delegation to Banten to take a cargo of pepper on board and remained there from 10-30 May, 1769, had a chance to see some pieces of the royal regalia, including

spiritual power of these *pusaka*, recognizing their potential to incite local uprisings. Therefore, they ordered that some of the objects should be burned. Also, mention here which decree and where it can be found.

¹⁹ No further information is available to specify the object. Mushroom here could also mean dried mushrooms and should be discussed in the broader context of Dutch colonial botanical collections.

²⁰ *Gouvernementsbesluit 21-11-1834*.

²¹ Cod LOr 5598 section 2: 1.

the Sultan's kris, during an official audience granted Mr Van Tets, the VOC senior merchant, by the Sultan. He testifies to the significance of the kris in the procession.

Behind his (the sultan's) chair stood one of his female lifeguards, who was relieved from time to time, armed with a large gold kris, in a sheath of massy gold, which she continually kept raised on high; and which the king, when he stood up to conduct us out, took from her, and put under his arm (Stavorinus 1798 I: 81-82).

Although there were at least twenty objects transported to the museum, my investigation of the museum inventory list provided by the museum curators reveals that only eight objects (a set of complete gamelan instruments, the sultan's crown, a pair of betel-box, a kris grip, and five krisses) are still in the museum's possession. It is unclear where the other objects mentioned in the report are now located. Before the installation of the new gallery in 2019, the gamelan Sukarame, was in the display room of the ethnographic collections labelled "Sundanese musical instrument". Even though an object was collected by the exertion of violence, the way the national museums display such object is by resorting to what has been called the "sanitization of museum objects" (James Scott 2015; Andrew Whitmarsh 2001). In this approach, the objects are removed from their violent histories, and presented merely as examples of technology. Since 2019, the gamelan has been removed from the display room, and placed in the museum depot. From the perspective of the current curatorial works based on the 2017 museum masterplan, the gamelan no longer fits the present narratives which reflect a concern to present a more comprehensive view of Indonesian culture which is moving beyond the regional grouping perspective.

Unlike the gamelan, the other Banten objects acquired during the colonial military expedition in 1808 are now the stars of the Gold and Ceramics Room on the fourth floor of the new building. The Gold and Ceramics Room is the most highly secured room in the National Museum because it houses all the magnificent Indonesian gold artefacts and high-quality porcelain. Only in this room are visitors not allowed to take photographs. While the museum claims to be protecting the gold and porcelain from theft and illicit trade, this policy actually shows that it values these objects more for their monetary value rather than for their cultural significance and symbolism. This unequal treatment is evident as other objects in the museum do not receive the same level of protection or respect as those in the gold gallery.

Ruang khasanah emas (the Gold Treasury) features many gold and silver ornaments once worn by sultans or local rulers in the Archipelago. It covers the period from the early-sixth-century Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms to the late-nineteenth-century Islamic kingdoms. The room is divided into two sections corresponding to the period in which the objects are made. The first section displays an excavated gold collection from the Hindu-Buddhist period, including the most marvellous archaeological find of the "Wonoboyo Hoard" which was discovered in the village of Wonoboyo located in Klaten, Central

Java. These artefacts originate from the ancient Mataram kingdom, probably from the reign of King Balitung (r. AD 899-911).

The next section exhibits the gold collections seized by the colonial government during brutal military expeditions. A panel describes how these objects were collected during the most violent episode of colonial history in nineteenth century. It is remarkable that the panel places heavy emphasis on the Banjarmasin, Bali, and Lombok Collections as objects collected during colonial military expeditions, excluding the Banten War in 1808. Although it is excluded from the description of what was counted as a military expedition, it is impossible to miss the Banten objects (the krisses, betel-box, and the crown of the Sultan) displayed in a small glass cabinet right in the middle of the display room near the entrance door. The other collections from Banjarmasin, Lombok, and Bali are displayed in huge plate glass cases, accompanied by a long description of how the colonial military expeditions were conducted. This room also contains collections belonging to the national hero, Prince Diponegoro, consisting of a kris, a walking stick, and a saddle, which are not made from gold but occupy a very significant position in Indonesian national history.

The placement of the artefacts belonging to Prince Diponegoro, along with other gold collections, might appear somewhat intriguing from the perspective of European art historical tradition. This underscores the discrepancy in how western perspectives and Indonesian societies approach the value of objects. Soedarmadji Damais highlights this gap as follows:

In traditional Indonesian societies, the importance of an object, natural or cultural, was not generally understood in terms of intrinsic or aesthetic value, nor even in term of antiquity. This is perhaps a more European idea. Traditionally, the Indonesian criterion of an object's value was the assumed degree of its *kesaktian* (spiritual power). A *kris* or a lance of no obvious beauty could be considered priceless if associated with a knight or ruler of kingdom past. (Damais 1992: 208).

The introductory panel also explores how power and authority were perceived and manifested in the institution of local Indonesian kingship, with some aspects of this dynamic still relevant to certain present-day local communities in Indonesia. The objects can be seen as visually and aurally projecting the power of the ruler who possesses them, and that the possession of objects themselves bolsters the perceived power and legitimacy of a ruler. The perceived supernatural power associated with the sultan resonates in any object considered to be his possession, including crowns, weapons, clothes, jewellery, or manuscripts. By addressing this topic, the museum appears to suggest that the primary motivation behind the sacking and looting of rulers' palaces was because the inherent significance of these objects.

The museum room, filled with "war trophies", houses a presentation which is quite simplistic and straightforward. Indeed, the curators of the museum have opted to avoid the presentation of the excessive violence. Instead, the museum employs the aestheticization of the objects and the display of the objects by taking a "celebratory approach" (Scott 2015) which eliminates the violent

and belligerent context in which the objects were collected. This was achieved through special effects like splendour lighting and the placing of objects behind glass in a neat, symmetrical display, creating a sense of an orderly sequence. By paying more attention to the aesthetics of the objects and removing their violent histories, the museum is engaging in a process which helps to foster a sense of pride, identity, historical milestones, and cultural continuity among present-day Indonesian audiences.

The Banten objects, now in total seven, are placed in a small glass display case raised on a pedestal facing a massive wall bearing the image of the Banten crown. The Banten crown is indeed the pinnacle of the museum collection. Its image is not confined to the gold chamber, in the Islamic civilization room, the museum has also installed a big introductory panel presenting the image Banten crown as a magnificent example of Islamic art. Beyond the museum space, the image of the crown has also regularly resurfaced in many of the museum publications, book-covers, posters, and pamphlets. A recent Islamic Eid celebration (April 2023) postcard posted on the museum's official Instagram account also features the image of Banten crown. The image of the crown has appeared twice (in 1997 and 2010) on the front cover of two different series of the museum catalogues. The crown, made of high-quality gold, beautifully crafted with intricate motifs and set with gemstones, offers the visitor aesthetic delight and beauty.

Through the circulation of images outside the museum exhibit, we have discovered an association between the aesthetic and religious value of the object, rather than focusing on the narrative surrounding the object itself. When the image of the crown is detached from its acquisition, this choice could fail to convey the full impact and consequences of the violence it represents, including the loss of mystical, religious, dignified, and other forms of power which were stripped away when the objects were looted. The spectacle created by the representation of the image also often lacks the emotional, psychological, and physical ramifications of the colonial violence. As a result, this trivializes a serious matter and distorts and reduces the understanding of the violent past.

On the glass case in which the Banten objects are placed is a very small caption which bears a description as follows:

Sejak abad 16-19 kesultanan Banten, memiliki peranan yang penting dalam penyebaran Islam di Nusantara. Banten yang memiliki posisi dekat Selat Sunda yang merupakan pintu gerbang untuk ke Jawa dan Sumatera. Ketika bangsa Belanda tiba, kesultanan Banten menjadi salah satu istana yang ditaklukan oleh pemerintah Belanda dalam proses kolonialisasi. Pada tahun 1683 Sultan Abdulfatah Ageng dipaksa menyerah oleh Belanda dengan syarat, tetapi pada tahun 1832 istana dimusnahkan. Kemungkinan pada waktu itu regalia dari istana Banten menjadi koleksi Bataviaasch Genootshap (Museum Nasional sekarang).

'From the 16th-19th century, the sultanate of Banten played an important role in the dissemination of Islam in the Archipelago. Banten, located near the Sunda Strait, was the gateway to Java and Sumatra. When the Dutch arrived, the sultanate of Banten was one of the palaces conquered by the Dutch (VOC)

government in the process of colonialization. In 1683, under certain conditions Sultan Abdulfatah Ageng was forced to surrender by the Dutch, but in 1832 the palace was destroyed. Probably, from that time the regalia of the Banten palace was kept in the collection of the Bataviaasch Genootschap (Now the National Museum).'

It is remarkable that at the end of the description, the museum is not entirely sure (*kemungkinan*) about when the objects were brought to the museum. Moreover, despite a historical inaccuracy that the destruction of the palace took place in 1832, this caption reveals some important issues. Firstly, the colonial military expedition (or the punitive expedition as it is referred to in the archives) to Banten is seen as a *penaklukan* (a conquest). The term *penaklukan* is often used in Indonesian historiography specifically to denote a war between two empires driven by political or religious conflicts, or economic rivalries.²² This is clear from the beginning of the text in which the museum refers to the role of Banten in the spread of Islam in the Archipelago and its strategic position as a trading-post. From the museum description, one might conclude that the reason for the conquest was a combination of religious and economic motives. As mentioned, the expedition sent to Banten was in fact to punish the sultan for a treacherous massacre of Daendels' official mission.

However, such a punitive action should also be understood in a much wider history of colonial violence in nineteenth century and colonial-state formation. As we know, while it is not the first brutality that the colonial government had committed in Indonesia, the destruction of the royal palace of Banten marked the first "barbaric" Dutch-colonial action in the archipelago, to quote Erik Ringmar's words (2006), when describing the destruction of Yuangmingyuan royal palace in China by the combined Anglo-French army in 1860. Barbaric in this sense pertains to the total ignorance of the beauty and magnificence of other cultures. Although the expedition to Banten was claimed to be an act of retaliation, as in the case of the destruction of the Chinese summer palace, Ringmar put this atrocious mission in the wider context of European project to civilize other cultures. When he instructed the destruction of the palace of Banten, Daendels himself said that the mission was to set an example (*Om voor altoos een exempel van straffe te stellen*) for other local communities of the consequences should they resist and rise up against the colonial government.²³

Nowadays, the thinking of the decolonial movement has been profoundly poignant in its criticism of the Eurocentric civilizing mission, which, despite its obliviousness to violence and brutality, has continued to shape our present-day world, concealed under the guise of "modernity". Unlike the civilizing mission during the colonial era, in which the act of civilizing meant to visibly "erase, remove, dispossess, and exclude", the coloniality of our modern world operates in a more intangible manner, embedding itself as a world-historical reality which exercises control over our global representations (Vazquez 2017).

²² See, for instance, the use of the word *penaklukan* in the Indonesian standard history book *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia*, 6 vols, edited by Poesponegoro et al. (2008).

²³ *Instructie voor den Sultan van Bantam*, 27-11-1808.

When it comes to the local actors, the museum has indeed focused principally on national heroes while the local common people, who were the victims of colonization, have been under-represented. In the case of the Banten colonial military expedition, the pretext for the event in which around 1,500 local Bantenese labourers lost their lives in the construction of the Merak military base and 3,000 Bantenese who defended the *kraton* from the bombardment have been totally disregarded. This omission could be put down to the limited availability of the substantial amount of archival material required to present a comprehensive narrative, as well as to constraints in space and resources which influence curatorial decisions when presenting the narrative. In the broader context of the museum, in which the narratives of national identity and coloniality are constantly being negotiated, the historical marginalization of local common people reflects dynamic power imbalances which prioritize certain narratives, perpetuating existing power structures and official narratives. In this context, the narrative of loss and defeat can be seen as contradicting or undermining the desired image of national pride, progress, and historical victories.

In general, the fact that all the objects in the National Museum acquired by colonial military expeditions are placed in the gold chamber together with other collections from a totally different context and mode of acquisition raises the question of how should the discourse of colonial violence be located in the museum? In the context of museum displays, space does matter (H. Lidchi 2013). The gold chamber is located on the fourth floor, the topmost display room of the building, not only because of security issues, but also because this choice reflects how the Indonesian state maintains the concept of *puncak kebudayaan* (the acme of a culture), a formalistic and Darwinian approach to culture. Obviously, the way the museum displays colonial violence has been continuously shaped by the practice of what Achille Mbembé (2003) describes as “mummification, statuefication and fetishization”. As a result, the objects are dissociated from their historical context, as if they were just archaeological remains. If that were not the case, the museum would refrain from detaching the gamelan from other Banten objects, considering that both the gamelan itself and the other objects were also acquired under violent circumstances. Above all, no attempt has been made to expand and contextualize the story of so-called “punitive expeditions” to a wider history of colonial violence in the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, the museum has demonstrated a profound awareness of its inherent dilemma and shown a willingness to engage actively with decoloniality, particularly among the emerging generation of younger curators. In fact, since the post-independence era of Indonesia, the museum has persistently undertaken a process of decolonization in its practice. The young national museum curator, Yustin Stefanie, reflects²⁴

²⁴ Interview with junior curator at the National Museum, Yustin Stefanie, 27-1-2023.

dari sisi kami yang sebagai warisan BG pun juga tidak memungkiri. Ada beberapa kebingungan juga untuk menempatkan posisi kami dan keluar dari perspektif kolonial [...] kami tidak ingin narasi yang kami bentuk malah dilihat umum kaya mengglorifikasi dan berlebihan.

‘From our viewpoint, we cannot deny that we are the heirs of the BG (read: Bataviaasch Genootschap). There is some confusion about how we should position ourselves so as to transcend the colonial perspective [...] we don’t want the public to perceive our narratives as glorifying and exaggerating (of national identity) either’.

In its representation of colonial violence, the museum is also exposed to the challenges of making the narrative palatable to both internal and external audiences, especially the younger generation (in the curators’ words: the *millennial* generation). The 2022 visitor satisfaction report shows that over 50 percent of visitors to the National Museum are aged between fifteen and twenty-five years old.²⁵ The museum acknowledges that designing a narrative of violence suitable to younger audiences requires careful considerations about age-appropriate content. Instead of exposing the audience to potentially disturbing information, the current primary focus of the museum is providing accessible and engaging display, using age-appropriate language, visuals, and interactive elements to enhance the understanding and capture the attention of the young visitors.²⁶ The Banten objects, and other artefacts, have also been affected by these curatorial practices. The static display, which prioritizes aesthetic qualities over the troubling issue of colonial violence, was fundamentally designed to appeal to the targeted audiences.

CONCLUSION

By analysing this museum’s representation of colonial violence, this paper has addressed issues surrounding the objectives and means with which the violence episodes in the museum are visualized in the context of a post-colonial nation in which national identity is strongly articulated, rehearsed, and reproduced symbolically. The findings show that, despite the abundant references to events and processes of direct and structural violence, the phenomenon of violence as an instrumental practice of colonialism has never been discussed or made the object of explicit analysis. On the contrary, the exhibitions give us the impression that the museum treats violence as a natural trait of colonialism, an inevitable feature of historical processes which requires no explanation. Ironically, at the same time, by so doing the museum promotes a belief in a benign and benevolent Dutch imperialism.

This paper has also shown that the museum, although its anti-colonial and nationalist mission is clear, continues to engage in a discourse of coloniality. To be more precise: the complexity of addressing colonial violence in the

²⁵ *Laporan Hasil Penelitian Kepuasan Pengunjung Museum Nasional 2022* (Jakarta: The National Museum of Indonesia, 2022: 3).

²⁶ Interview with the museum curator, Ruly Handayani, 27-1-2023.

National Museum is caught in a vortex of coloniality and national identity building in post-colonial discourse. When the museum does attempt to communicate episodes of colonial violence, the focus lies on the aesthetic aspect of the object, downplaying any depiction of the colonizers and their humiliating subjugation. The fact that museum narratives must cater to a younger audience also explains why the narrative of violence has been marginalized; this approach aims to keep the content age-friendly and suitable for younger visitors.

Overall, the issue of coloniality/decoloniality in the National Museum of Indonesia poses significant challenges. As demonstrated in this essay, there is a gap between the local histories of Banten, which highlight resistance to the colonial government, and why the objects from Banten are represented in the museum merely for their aesthetic value, portraying them as part of Indonesia's magnificent culture. Through discussing the issue of colonial violence, this article aims to identify how the matrix of colonial power has continued to shape the practice of enunciation in the museum. To make progress towards epistemic decolonization, the museum should actively allow local histories to speak for themselves. However, achieving this goal would require a radical shift in the museum's vision, *de-linking* it not only from western Eurocentric perspectives but also from uncritically nationalist agendas.

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