

Reinterpretations at Fort Nassau in the Banda Islands, Indonesia

Joëlla van Donkersgoed



View from the reconstructed bastion of Fort Nassau on Banda Neira. In this image the material used for the reconstruction of the bastion is clearly visible, as well as the fact that the residence is located in the trajectory of the next phase of reconstruction. Photo by Joëlla van Donkersgoed.

In my research on the current interpretations of the cultural landscape of the Banda Islands in Indonesia, I explore the interpretations of the historic site of Fort Nassau on the island of Banda Neira by diverse interest groups, including local, national and international agents. Through my work, I examine the challenge of gathering insights into the different influences that define this particular site as a heritage site. Considering various heritage interpretations, which include both colonial narratives as well as the oral history of the Bandanese people, I suggest that fixating on a specific historical heritage deters the ongoing (re)interpretation of sites to suit the needs of contemporary society.

Banda Islands and Fort Nassau: nutmeg and mace

Until the mid-1800's, the Banda Islands in Indonesia were the primary source location for the sought-after spices nutmeg and mace. As these goods were popular around the world, traders from Asia and the Arabian Peninsula travelled great distances to the region in order to obtain them. The first European traders that engaged with people on the Banda Islands were the Portuguese in 1512, followed by the Dutch in 1599, and the English in 1601. The Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) was established in 1602 with the prime objective of maximizing profits by establishing monopolies on certain trade goods—the remoteness of the Banda Islands and their profitable resources made this location an obvious target for the establishment of a monopoly on nutmeg and mace. However, the Bandanese were not receptive to trading exclusively with the Dutch, which would mean breaking other long-established trade relations. The VOC sent Jan Pieterszoon Coen to seize control of the island, which he did through violent measures. In particular, in 1621, a bloody confrontation known as the 'Bandanese Massacre' involved not only the execution of 44 Bandanese noblemen but also the persecution, deportation and starvation of an estimated 90% of the local population. After this violent conquest, Jan Pieterszoon Coen divided the islands into

perken, plots of land that were to be governed by ex-VOC employees, called *perkeniers*, and labored by slaves.

Fort Nassau in Banda Neira is the first permanent construction the Dutch built on the archipelago, leading to fierce resistance from the Bandanese noblemen. It is the location where 44 noblemen, *orang kaya*, were publicly quartered and decapitated during the Dutch conquest. The fort itself has since known several uses, including its function as a prison and a storage facility. However, it lost its military defensive function after it was severely damaged by bombing during its capture by the English in 1810. The inner court was then turned into a tennis court for the enjoyment of the *perkeniers* families. In the 20th century, this open area was re-used as the location for a radio station and antenna. These, in turn, became a target for Japanese bombs during the attacks on the Banda Islands in World War II, which damaged the fort further. In ruins, the fort failed to regain a new function and vegetation took over the site. Bandanese who live near and at the site reported that the structure became haunted, with sounds of the massacred men and the rattling of their chains heard at night.

From site of tragedy to site of tourism

Fort Nassau had seen multiple phases of destruction and reinterpretation prior to the start of my research. When I first visited the site, the Banda Islands at large had been attracting interest from within and outside Indonesia by organizations and individuals interested in the development of heritage industries, due to its multi-cultural history and unique natural marine environment. Notably, through the patronage of a prominent local family Des Alwi, foreign experts have been involved in the preparatory work for the nomination of the Banda Islands on the Tentative List for the World Heritage List of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).¹ As a result of this general interest, the regional conservation office in Ternate, *Balai Pelestarian Cagar Budaya* (BPCB), initiated a reconstruction

Heritage sites are in a constant process of re-interpretation by a wide variety of actors and stakeholders. The act of attaching meaning to a site does not occur in a vacuum but is influenced by power dynamics within its broader social context. For example, emphasis on certain features of a site, at the expense of other features, can vary with each interpretation and each interpreter. Moreover, the meaning ascribed to a site by contemporary communities may be widely different from the intended meaning given by the society that constructed it. Because of this, heritage sites should be studied from a variety of angles that together shape the interpretation of the landscape in which the site exists.

project for Fort Nassau in 2014, which included the removal of vegetation and the rebuilding of the collapsed and absent bastion walls. This government initiative can be seen as shaped by a specific vision of tourism consumption: a completed fort that aligns with the aesthetic of the VOC. In order to accomplish this, the different life-phases of the fort, including its partial destruction and other historically significant events, were disregarded.

Although there is an overall consensus among the Bandanese that the restoration is a positive action for the fort, the project has not been received with merely positive responses. Firstly, plans to reconstruct the moat around the fort were encountered with resistance by the local population who have inhabited that land for several decades and used the area of the moat for the cultivation of crops. Proposed preservation and rehabilitation plans to reconstruct the entire structure would therefore involve the displacement of several families. Secondly, there have been conflicting reactions to the reconstruction of the walls of the fort on two separate counts. On the one hand, the materials used in the reconstructed bastions differ from the material in the original stonework. Discontentment was voiced by several Bandanese in relation to this distinction, who argued that the reconstructed parts of the fort did not seem 'original' or as it is more frequently described in the field of heritage studies, that it is *inauthentic*. On the other hand, the Bandanese have also voiced regrets that the construction work is conducted by non-local workers, fueling the perception that the regional office does not trust the craftsmanship of Bandanese construction workers. Overall, the Bandanese feel that through this process of outsourcing the work, they have lost their ability to determine how the reconstruction of their site is being conducted.

Interestingly, while many post-colonial heritage debates question the contemporary validity of preserving colonial structures in territories that were once occupied, the development of a heritage industry in the Banda Islands suggests that heritage resources from the Dutch colonial era are not regarded negatively by the Bandanese nor the other Indonesian stakeholders involved in these interpretations. Instead, these resources are valued as an opportunity to monetize a heritage through tourism and foster a sense of pride in buildings that reflect the financial successes made through the trade of nutmeg historically.

Processes of reinterpretation

Fort Nassau on Banda Neira is an example of a Dutch colonial site that is being reinterpreted for contemporary uses. These efforts are propelled by Indonesian president Jokowi's wish to stimulate tourism as an avenue to increase the GDP of Indonesia.² Efforts and resources towards the reconstruction of this fort fit within this goal in order to attract more tourists to the Moluccan province. The Bandanese seem to welcome an increase in the number of tourists that visit

their islands, and the reconstruction of Fort Nassau is regarded as a positive investment towards this goal. The concern of the local population, however, is the way in which this is conducted. There is an overall sense of exclusion amongst the local communities during the process of reconstruction and there is a fear that the reconstructed site will be an inauthentic replica. The fear is based on previous reconstructions that did not meet the expectations of the Bandanese; for example, a recent renovation of a colonial building by non-local investors opted for a new roof made of blue durable material rather than a traditional roof. Some Bandanese described the modern appearance of this material as degrading the historical feeling of the building and the area. The use of material that differentiates visually from the historical fabric is in this case a factor that decreases the heritage value in the eyes of the Bandanese.

The ongoing efforts in heritage management, including the addition of this site as a cultural landscape to the Tentative List of UNESCO, as well as the restoration initiatives at Fort Nassau, suggest that there is increasing interest in the heritage resources of the Banda Islands at multiple local and international levels. This has attracted outside experts, who are invited to 'do something' with the heritage for the promotion and benefit of the Bandanese people. These efforts are welcomed by the local community as they recognize that tourism is a profitable source for seasonal work, and they are also proud to share the history and resources of the islands with visitors. However, developments surrounding the restoration efforts at Fort Nassau revealed that the local community does not feel directly empowered through the current style of heritage management. There are various ways in which their involvement could be formalized in these initiatives; for example, Bandanese construction workers could be employed rather than outsourcing the work to a company from Ambon; and the process of consulting the community could include devising a plan to incorporate the reconstructed site into their daily social lives, giving the fort a function beyond tourism as a stage to hold cultural performances, a marketplace, an area for drying nutmeg, etc. This would stimulate the site to accrue new social value and contribute to the larger cultural landscape that defines the Banda Islands as a potential World Heritage List property.

Joëlla van Donkersgoed
PhD Candidate, Rutgers University
j.van.donkersgoed@rutgers.edu

Notes

- ¹ 'The Historic and Marine Landscape of the Banda Islands', *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, 9 Feb 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/bandaaislands>
- ² 'Tourism Ministry Aims to Woo 13.5 Million Foreign Visitors next Year', *The Jakarta Post*, 14 June 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/woovisitors>