

# Clues of Provenance:

## Tracing Colonialism and Imperialism through Museum Objects

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How to research the history, origin and meaning of museum objects that were acquired in colonial times and contexts? In March 2022, the Netherlands-based NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD/ECR), facilitated by the National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW) and the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, published 50 detailed provenance reports about the history of 65 museum objects that were acquired in colonial Indonesia and Sri Lanka. In this Focus edition, we invited a few researchers, some of whom were affiliated with the project, to share their fascinating provenance reports and provide insight into the theoretical backgrounds and considerations in this burgeoning field.



Where do objects in old ethnographic collections, and other collections with a history in the colonial past, originate? Under what circumstances were they acquired at the time, and how did they arrive in museums and heritage institutions, far away from their places of creation and use? In what ways did these objects change meaning and significance over time and place, and to whom?

In recent years, the responsibility to know and research the provenance of colonial collections has been emphatically felt. This is part of a critical reevaluation of the history of old (ethnographic) museums and a call to 'decolonize' them. This renewed interest stimulates – and is being stimulated

by – active efforts of formerly colonized countries (e.g., Nigeria, Senegal, Republic of Benin, and Sri Lanka) to repatriate lost heritage. Well known is the Nigerian effort to retrieve a large collection of 3000 objects looted from the Kingdom of Benin in 1897 by British troops, better known as the "Benin Bronzes." For Indonesia, an important milestone was the return in 2020 of a ceremonial dagger, a kris, of the renowned Prince Diponegoro. It was promised by the Dutch government in the 1970s but never effectuated until the kris was recently identified through provenance research.

In the Netherlands, the uneasy presence of large collections with an acquisition history in the colonial era led to the

installation of two advisory bodies: one committee chaired by Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You, which consulted about new Dutch restitution policies and claim procedures in 2021. Among other things, it advised the unconditional return of cultural objects that were acquired against the owner's will, should the source country request restitution. The other initiative was a research pilot that focused on the practical aspects and theoretical considerations concerning provenance research: the Pilot project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPROCE).

Fig. 1 (above): One of the studied objects in PPROCE: An Acehnese drawing of a mythical bird. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.no. RV-1429-134a.

Fig. 2 (left): Cover of the final report of PPROCE, available online at <https://www.niod.nl/en/publications/clues-PPROCE>.

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Fig. 3: One of the studied objects in PPROCE: A conquered flag from the Sulu Sultanate, southern Philippines. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Inv.no. NG-MC-1889-84-4).



Fig. 4: One of the studied objects in PPROCE: A golden *Kastane* or *sabre* from the Kandyan Kingdom, Sri Lanka. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Inv.no. NG-NM-560).

This pilot – launched in 2019 as a government-sponsored initiative of the NIOD/ECR, the NMVW, and the Rijksmuseum – focused on the development of a methodology for provenance research into colonial collections. Publishing the report *Clues: Research into provenance history and significance of cultural objects and collections acquired in colonial situations*,<sup>1</sup> it also made recommendations regarding the organization and professionalization of structured provenance research.

The emphasis in this project was on objects from Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and research took place in close consultation with partners in these countries. The results of this project were published in March 2022, and they are publicly available on the webpage of NIOD/ECR and the partaking museums. Dr. Gunay Uslu, State Secretary for Culture and Media in the Netherlands, expressed her admiration for the research in this project and is committed to strengthening the collaboration to redress injustice, for example through restitution. She announced that she will set up an independent expert committee for this purpose.

A number of the contributions in this Focus section of The Newsletter are based on the results of this research project (the articles of Mirjam Shatanawi, Marieke Bloembergen, and Alicia Schrikker), or are written by colleagues from Switzerland and Indonesia working on similar provenance topics (Adrian Linder and Sri Margana, respectively).

An important theoretical starting assumption of the project was that provenance research, given the nature of the material and the historical context of colonialism, could – and should – be more encompassing than strictly focusing on the ‘origin’ of an object and lineages of previous ownership. Important are the socio-political lives and changing significance of the objects, and the different power relations within which the objects were ‘exchanged’ in local, colonial, transnational, and international contexts.

Provenance research, in this approach, builds on the historiographical tradition of microhistory. According to founding scholar Carlo Ginzburg, microhistory involves the researcher, in the manner of a detective or psychoanalyst, studying surviving traces, minute details, unique clues that provide a deeper insight into the past. It is particularly concerned with groups that are underrepresented in the archives and have barely been given a voice. Focusing on small units of research – such as an event, a community, an individual,

or in our case a museum object – helps to “ask large questions in small places.”<sup>2</sup>

In the following contributions of this Focus section, each author discusses the provenance and micro-histories of one or more objects. The contributions not only discuss objects of various natures – from an Acehese figurative drawing (Mirjam Shatanawi) to a Sri Lankan cannon (Alicia Schrikker) – but also address different historical processes of heritage formation: from a history of absence and disappearance (Sri Margana), to a history of forgetting (Adrian Linder), and a history of transformation and alienation (Marieke Bloembergen).

### The papers

In the first paper, Sri Margana reconstructs the history of *Keris Kyai Hanggrek*, a Javanese ceremonial dagger that was donated around 1819 to the Dutch King William I by Pakubuwana IV, the Susuhunan of Surakarta, Central Java. Sri Margana highlights that in Javanese cultural perception, the *kris* was not just a diplomatic gift but an animated protector of those who carried it. The fact that the *kris* cannot be located today is therefore a serious matter.

In her paper, Mirjam Shatanawi writes about the collecting practices of army officer G.C.E. van Daalen, focusing on an Acehese sword *sikin panjang* and two pencil drawings depicting the mythical creature *Buraq* from his collection. Her provenance research provides insight into how high-ranking officers acquired objects, against the backdrop of varying degrees of pressure and violence, and how this military way of collecting is still visible in museum collections from Aceh today.

The third article, by Marieke Bloembergen, takes us to the eighth-century Buddhist shrine Borobudur in Central Java. Bloembergen discusses the fate of 19th- and 20th-century tokens from this temple – heads, statues, and reliefs – that were carried away in colonial times and are being kept in museums worldwide. Focusing on 14 Buddha heads in the collection of NMVW that “probably” originate from Borobudur, Bloembergen shows the richness of stories held by these heads, and how lush their lives can be. These are stories that transcend the interests of institutes, nations, and states; as Bloembergen argues, research into these objects cannot be restricted to national or bilateral forms of collaboration, but rather requires international coordination.

The research by Adrian Linder into the history of a human skull leads us from the

Baroque Palace of Friedenstein in Gotha, Germany, to the lives of Anang and Andreas in Banjarmasin, Indonesia. Following the lives of these individuals, we learn about the collection of human remains in general, about repression and extreme violence in a colonial context, and about processes of forgetting and remembering.

The final paper is by Alicia Schrikker, who reflects on the socio-political biographies of six Sri Lankan objects in the Rijksmuseum. Schrikker argues that provenance research of objects with a colonial history must not solely revolve around the question of when and why an object ended up in a Dutch collection, but should also recognize the layered histories and meanings of objects through time and space.

Together, these contributions demonstrate the richness and multifaceted character of this burgeoning field. Hopefully, in the coming years, many more objects will be researched in a similar manner so that knowledge about the colonial era will increase and diligent restitution can become common practice.

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**Notes**

- 1 [https://pure.knaw.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/496442096/RAP\\_PPROCE\\_FinalReport\\_ENG\\_v10\\_202203.pdf](https://pure.knaw.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/496442096/RAP_PPROCE_FinalReport_ENG_v10_202203.pdf)
- 2 Charles W. Joyner, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1.



Fig. 5 (above left): One of the studied objects in PPROCE: A Korwar or ancestral statue from West Papua. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.no. RV-2432-3.

Fig. 6 (above right): One of the studied objects in PPROCE: A kris from Sultan Hamengkubuwono IV of Yogyakarta. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.no. RV-360-1481a.

Fig. 7 (below right): One of the studied objects in PPROCE: A Letter of the Sultan of Madura presented to the Dutch King William I. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.no. RV-360-8080-1.