This essay focuses on an impressive, almost 3 meter high, opulently carved teakwood room-screen with a human figure (probably Perseus) and two dragons, made by Chinese craftsmen in Java in the early eighteenth century, to furnish the Council Room of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Batavia (fig. 1). We will follow this object’s travels through time and space. The aim is to gain insight into the multiple layers of heritage formation in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Travelling far on “rather short legs”

ANALYSING THE ‘TRAVELS’ OF AN OBJECT is a method of historical research that can help to visualise the networks of empire and capture the dynamic relation between heritage formation and the use of political mechanisms of identification, inclusion and exclusion on the other hand. The screen selected for this essay is one of several travelling objects that were part of a research project on archaeological sites and the dynamics of heritage formation in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia.

In the book we are currently writing we aim to knit these processes of identification that occur within, but also beyond colonial and postcolonial histories, together. In order to understand parallel historical research that can help to visualise the networks of empire and capture the dynamic relation between heritage formation and the use of political mechanisms of identification, inclusion and exclusion on the other hand.

In 2009, the teakwood screen, once a part of the VOC regalia making and reappraisal of the category ‘Company-furniture’ (fig. 5). This did not go by unnoticed in the Netherlands.

In 2009, the teakwood screen, once a part of the VOC regalia made by Chinese craftsmen, often carved the objects. However, so he emphasised: “For the Netherlands and for the Netherlands-Indies this furniture is of national importance.”

In subsequent years we see how this furniture transformed into a Dutch artefact. This happened in the process of collecting, publishing catalogues and organising exhibitions. In 1897, in the Dutch East-Indies, the Museum of the Batavian Society opened the ‘Company Room’ and in 1919, in celebration of the founding of Batavia in 1619, it hosted the exhibition ‘Old-Batavian furniture.’ In the Netherlands, the city of The Hague organised the exhibition ‘Oud-Indische Meubelen’ (Old-Indies Furniture) in 1901, and in 1939 the Municipal Museum in Amsterdam exhibited this furniture in a comparable way. The ‘nationalisation’ of this furniture was completed in 1939 when Van der Wall published his elaborate Het Hollandsche Kônikse bôrmeubel (Dutch colonial baroque furniture).

When we compare the categories Oosterhof used in 1898, with those of Van der Wall in 1939, we see a clear development: ‘oud-Indisch’ (Old-Indies’) became ‘Hollandsche-kôniksia’ (Dutch-colonial). This nationalisation of an aspect of the VOC culture is not exceptional; the first edition of Van der Walls book (Dutch colonial baroque furniture).13 We see a similar process with regard to the archaeology of VOC-forts. In 1912 the Dutch art-historian and archival specialist J.C. Overvoorde wrote about his travels through America, Africa and Asia in 1910/11, in order to inventory what he called the ‘Monumenten van Nederlandsch Nieuw’ (Monuments of the Dutch ‘tribe’).14 Overvoorde concluded that the colonial government of the Dutch East-Indies had strongly neglected the ‘stone archive’ of the VOC-time, and that it had an obligation to rescue this archive. Since the Hindu-monuments were already the object of state supported restorations, the time had now arrived for the government to turn its attention to the monuments of the ‘Hollandsche stin’ (the Dutch tribe).15 To Overvoorde such a VOC-hierarchy policy was important, because, in his eyes, it could strengthen the ties between the people who for many generations had lived in the Dutch Indies, and those in the ‘motherland’. Van der Wall, who published his ‘De Nederlandse oudheden in de Molukken’ (Dutch antiquities on the Moluccas) in 1928, would, however, point to another political meaning of the VOC-past: the ‘uncivilized’ or unethical activities of the early colonial on the Moluccan islands. While he agreed that many people could see this as a sullied page of VOC history, he in the end emphasised that the company also formed the ‘foundation’ of our colonial authority.”

The Museum of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences in Batavia started to consider collecting the furniture of the Company’s era at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898, the then-director of the museum, D. Dosterhof published his essay ‘Over Oud-Indische Meubelen’ (Something about Old-Indies furniture) in the illustrated journal Elsevier. He described the style as a mixture of baroque, Dutch and Portuguese, with Hindu influences, whereas Chinese craftsmen often carved the objects. However, he emphasised: “For the Netherlands and for the Netherlands-Indies this furniture is of national importance.”

As stated above, the appropriation of the material culture of the early colonial past was problematic for such a long time in the Netherlands and the Dutch East-Indies, because of its hybridity. The character of this furniture, however, only became an object of discussion from the moment that curators of the Museum of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences in Batavia started to consider collecting the furniture of the Company’s era at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898, the then-director of the museum, D. Dosterhof published his essay ‘Over Oud-Indische Meubelen’ (Something about Old-Indies furniture) in the illustrated journal Elsevier. He described the style as a mixture of baroque, Dutch and Portuguese, with Hindu influences, whereas Chinese craftsmen often carved the objects. However, he emphasised: “For the Netherlands and for the Netherlands-Indies this furniture is of national importance.”

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shared or conflicting interests. In other words, ‘shared heritage’ glosses over the supra-local and transnational dimensions of heritage, or those processes of ‘reframing’ that go beyond the boundaries of states and empire.

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Notes
4 Bernard Hulsman, ‘Barok was de eerste globale stijl voor kunst. Tentoonstelling Victoria & Albert museum werpt nieuw licht op de barokke stijl’. Alk, 24-6-2009.
8 M. Serrurier-ten Kate, De Compagnie’s Kamer van het Museum van het Batavische Gouvernement op de barokke stijl’, Tentoonstelling Victoria & Albert museum werpt nieuw licht op de barokke stijl. Alk, 24-6-2009.
9 For the specialists and objects in London and Berlin, see: V.I. van de Wall, Het Hollandsche koloniale barokmeubel. Bijdrage tot de kennis van het ebbenhouten meubel omstreeks het midden van de XVIIe eeuw en het begin der XVIIIe eeuw (Antwerpen 1939) 42-62.
11  M. Serrurier-ten Kate, De Compagnie’s Kamer van het Museum van het Batavische Gouvernement van kunsten en Wetenschappen (Batavia 1907), L. van Voueren, Catalogus van de historische tentoonstelling, ter gelegenheid der herdenking van het driehonderdjarig bestaan (Wievrederen 1919).
13 J.W. Ijzerman, Catalogus van de tentoonstelling ter herdenking van het 200-jarig bestaan van Batavia, gefunde in het Oudheidkundig Museum in Amsterdam, juni-juli 1919 (Amsterdam 1919).
14 J.C. Overvoorde, ‘Verslag van het onderzoek naar de monumenten van Nederlandse aanwezigheid of onder Nederlandse invloed ontstaan in de meervoudige zittingen buiten Europa’ (Leiden 1912).
15 Vincent Kuitenbrouwer has recently argued that ‘stam’ should be regarded as the Dutch version of Britishness; it can best be translated as ‘tribe’, as it has a clear ethnic and cultural connotation. J.V. Kuitenbrouwer, A War of Words; Dutch pro-Boer Propaganda and the South African War (1899-1902) Dissertation University of Amsterdam (2010).
16 J.C. Overvoorde, ‘Verslag van het onderzoek naar de monumenten van Nederlandse aanwezigheid of onder Nederlandse invloed ontstaan in de meervoudige zittingen buiten Europa’ (Leiden 1912).