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Colonial Re-Collections

Memories, Objects, and Performances

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Colonial Re-Collections is a critical response to a range of theoretical and empirical problems that shape individuals' multifaceted engagements with colonial pasts. Among these engagements there is a remarkable fascination with the colonial, visibly present since at least the 1990s, both in formerly colonized and formerly colonizing societies. Scholars have defined this fascination as nostalgia that is 'colonial' (Werbner 1998; Bissell 2005), 'imperial' (Rosaldo 1989), or 'structural' (Herzfeld 2005). While these scholarly definitions differ, in a broad sense they all refer to a diverse range of material and immaterial phenomena—not only memories of times passed, but also an apparent desire, visible in the private and the public sphere, expressed by people of different generations or promoted by the consumer industry, for things, styles, and notions associated with the colonial era: from the recycling of colonial postcards to the wealth of movies addressing the colonial past; the rise of grand, colonial hotels to nostalgic colonial travel tours; the return of colonial-design advertisements to colonial furniture at home; and the laments about lost, colonial city quarters to memories of colonial quietness and peace.

Most of the scholarly literature on ‘colonial nostalgia’ has tended to focus on the fields of literary and film theory, and architecture (for instance, Peleggi 2005; De Mul 2011). Inspired by this scholarship, we were convinced that the phenomenon deserved more sustained empirical scrutiny from anthropological and historical perspectives. Focusing on historically and empirically informed specificities of postcolonial engagement with colonialism in both Indonesia and the Netherlands, this special issue aims to further problematize notions of nostalgia and colonial and postcolonial temporalities. Most of the articles in this special issue were originally presented at a workshop titled ‘Colonial Nostalgia: Memories, Objects and Performances’, held at the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde (KITLV, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies), in Leiden in October 2011.¹

Over the last decade, a number of large-scale projects concerned with the legacies of the colonial past in postcolonial Dutch society have been carried out by Dutch universities, research institutes, and cultural institutions,² with a focus on ‘postcolonial cultural heritage’ (Ter Keurs and Hardiati 2006; Oostindie 2008) and ‘postcolonial migrants’ (Van Leeuwen 2008; Bosma 2009; Oostindie 2009). More or less at the same time, with the fall of the New Order regime (1998), which used to control the study of Indonesia’s past, a new historical interest became visible in Indonesia, both in public and scholarly domains (Van Klinken 2001; Zurbuchen 2005). The primary focus of this burgeoning body of scholarship has been on the violence that took place between 1965 and 1968 (for instance, Farid 2005; Hadiz 2006; Hill and Dragojlovic 2010; Dragojlovic 2012; McGregor 2012). Scholarly work on engagements with ‘the colonial’ in Indonesia received less attention, with the exception of a book by Rudolf Mrázek (2010) that explores Jakarta’s intellectuals’ memories of the colonial,

1 We wish to thank Remco Raben, Michael Herzfeld, Patricia Spyer, Pamela Pattynama, Paul Bijl, Maurizio Pelleggi, Natalie Scholz, Bart Barendregt, and Matthew Cohen for their participation at the workshop, which sparked an engaging and inspiring discussion.

2 A large-scale project, titled ‘Bringing History Home: Postcolonial Identity Politics in the Netherlands’ (2006–2009) was the result of the collaboration between three large research institutions: KITLV, International Institute of Social History (IISH), and Meertens Instituut, generously funded by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO, Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research).

The exhibition *Indonesia: The Discovery of the Past*, held in De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam in the period from December 2005 until April 2006, was the result of the cooperation between the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde (RMV, National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden and the Museum Nasional (MNI, National Museum) in Jakarta on the project ‘Shared Cultural Heritage’.

and an article by Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler (2000) on memory work in Java. While Stoler and Strassler (2000:8) warned against presuming the existence of 'hidden scripts' of resistance in memories of subaltern subjects, Mrázek (2010) attempts to identify a lack of interest among his interlocutors to engage in discussions about the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism.

Most recently we have seen joint efforts between Indonesian, Dutch, and international scholars to explore a plurality of perspectives and approaches to Indonesian historiography. This scholarship endeavours to include the colonial past into Indonesian historiography rather than treating colonialism as something that is 'external' to Indonesian history (see Schulte Nordholt, Purwanto and Saptari 2013; Suwignyo 2014). Relevant in this context is also the project 'Sites, Bodies, Stories', a collaborative research programme (2008–2012) involving academic institutions and scholars in the Netherlands and Indonesia, which focused on the political dynamics of cultural heritage in colonial and postcolonial Netherlands and Indonesia. Quite unexpectedly, as one of the Indonesian coordinators remarked,³ this research revealed that a focus on heritage politics could be the way to include the colonial experience, as part and parcel of Indonesia's national history, in Indonesian history writing (Legêne, Purwanto and Schulte Nordholt forthcoming; Bloembergen and Eickhoff 2011 and forthcoming).

Building on these studies and on the questions they raise, *Colonial Re-Collections* aims to go beyond existing conceptualizations of nostalgia, and to provide new insights into modalities of engagements with the colonial past in both Indonesia and in the Netherlands. Who engages with what is seen as colonial, and for what reasons? What kind of colonial pasts are re-enacted, desired, achieved, or repudiated? What is being marked out as colonial, why, and from whose perspective? What kinds of personal, political, and collective claims for the future are envisaged in multifaceted forms of colonial re-collections? How are past-present relationships constructed, contested, negotiated, and transformed throughout processes of colonial re-collections? How can these phenomena of colonial re-collecting be understood in the context of geopolitical changes?

The articles in this special issue open up perspectives for further discussion about the discourses and practices of *tempo doeloë*—a longing for the 'good old days' of the Dutch East Indies. They explore this phenomenon from the

3 Bambang Purwanto, during one of the discussions at the conference 'Sites, Bodies, Stories. Heritage Formation in (post-)colonial India and Indonesia', held at Universitas Gadjah Mada, 13–15 January 2011.

perspective of four diverse groups with quite different relationships to the colonial past in Indonesia and the Netherlands: Indonesia's urban youth in today's Jakarta (Sastramidjaja); Indisch (Dutch-Indonesian) migrants and their descendants across the world (Dragojlovic); Dutch colonial elites returning to the Netherlands (Drieënhuizen); and old Javanese coolies at a former Dutch colonial tea plantation in Sumatra (Lamb).

Yatun Sastramidjaja focuses on the remarkable engagements of Indonesia's urban youth with the colonial past, which take the form of heritage trails, historical re-enactments, and costume balls in Jakarta's old colonial quarter of Kota Tua. While, at first sight, these interactive colonial heritage performances seem ephemeral, intended to revoke the atmosphere of the good old colonial times, or *tempo doeloe*, Sastramidjaja shows that something more complex is at stake. Against the background of the recent decline of authoritative history, these performances, she argues, serve as a means for the participants to investigate broader, more inclusive interpretations of the urban past—interpretations that also draw on suppressed memories, including those of local communities and ethnic minorities, as a basis for critical awareness and social engagement in the present.

Ana Dragojlovic, building on her research on the intergenerational transmission of memory and senses of loss, explores the apparent nostalgic engagements of the Indisch (Indonesian-Dutch) migrants and their descendants across the world, and gauges the meanings of their travels. She argues that these apparently nostalgic travels and the affective experiences in the places from which they emanate serve as vehicles through which descendants can attain temporal proximity to embodied collective memories. As in Sastramidjaja's article, apparently ephemeral nostalgic performances—in this case, travels to geographies of absence and loss—are a means to engage with the sensibilities of a group's contemporary relations to the past.

Carolien Drieënhuizen follows the travels of the private collections, assembled by the colonial elites of the Dutch East-Indies, in space (from the colony to the Netherlands) and in time (from a colonial presence through to decolonization). Exploring when and how such objects, and the attachment to objects, changed and when and why objects moved from private collections to Dutch national museums, she shows how objects, as bearers of nostalgic meanings, were powerful and strategic instruments with which these privileged groups emphasized their status and bonded with peer groups; reconnected with colonial memory and identity; and to accommodate to the abrupt and violent decolonization.

Nicole Lamb explores how and why former coolies of the Sumatran Kayu Aro tea plantation, all Javanese migrants, tend to remember the colonial times

in positive terms: as an era of *cukupan* (enough), relative prosperity, and security. Like the previous authors, Lamb clarifies how such apparently nostalgic narratives of colonial times speak to a problematic presence—in this case, one that is dominated by (social and economic) insecurity and poverty. The articles by Sastramidjaja, Dragojlovic, and Drieënhuizen focus on more privileged groups, whose colonial re-collections act as strategic vehicles for change, or to accommodate change, and thus to re-engage with possible new futures (albeit sometimes in conservative ways). Lamb's article, by contrast, shows that colonial re-collections serve not so much as a weapon, but rather as compensation for or an escape from present-day hardship.

Together the articles reveal how engagements that we termed colonial re-collections, triggered by heritage performances, travels, the circulation of objects, and oral history, are mostly a vehicle to cope with complicated past relationships, and, especially so in the last case, with present-day, difficult socio-political circumstances. Colonial re-collections, in that sense, as Remco Raben already remarked at the workshop in 2011, are not only referring to a sense of loss of an idealized bygone past, but are also posing questions about the future of remembering the past. To what extent engagements with the colonial can also be a means to engage with potential future memories of the present, remains open for discussion. The question, then, is not only 'whose colonial re-collections?' but also 'whose future?'

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