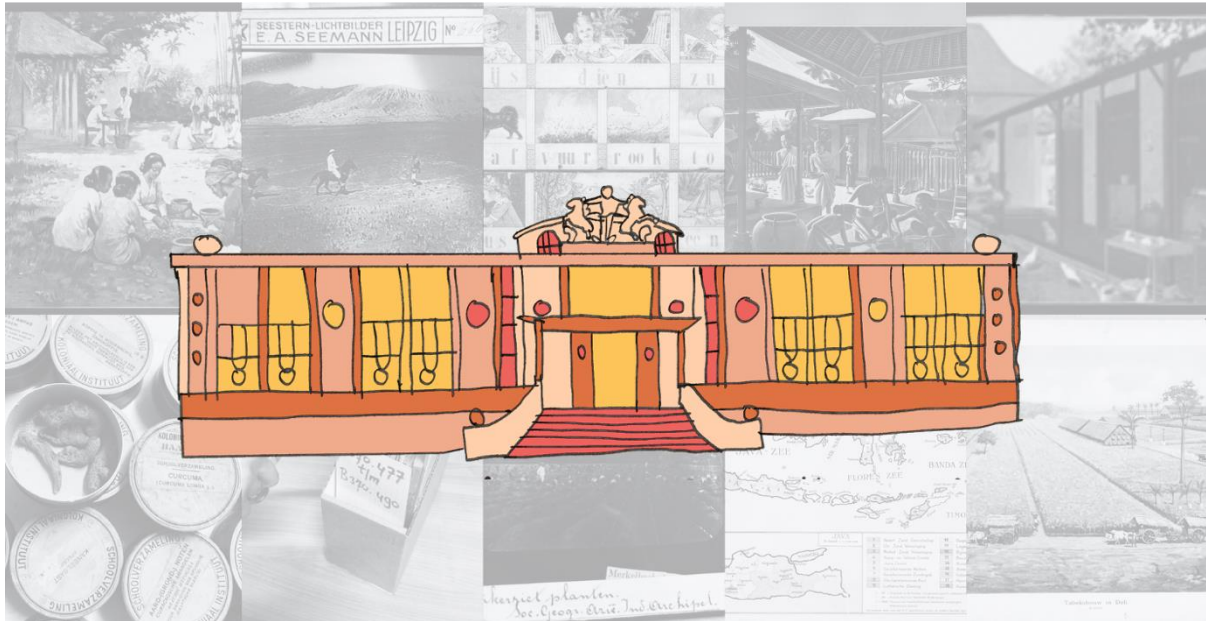




Unlearning the Lesson, Reading Otherwise: Indonesian Communities and the Dutch East Indies Education Collection in Nationaal Onderwijsmuseum Dordrecht

Research Report

Maria Angelita Dian Putri

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RWA Supervisor: Mirjam Shatanawi

NOM Supervisors: Hans van de Bunte & Janneke Pierhagen



Abstract

Nationaal Onderwijsmuseum (NOM) in Dordrecht is in the development to open an exhibition on *Imperialism and Representation: Indonesia in Dutch Classrooms, 1890–1930*, presenting their colonial education collection related to the Dutch East Indies. These objects were originally used to educate Dutch children about the Dutch East Indies during the colonial period, the question of this object narration become important. The exhibition making is in collaboration with Indonesian partners, a collaboration this research also explores through interviews. This research asks how Indonesian community participation can be mobilized to support decolonial efforts and introduce multivocality into the exhibition's development. Using triangulated qualitative methods, a survey of 35 Indonesian students in the Netherlands (8 museum objects) and three Emotion Networking sessions with 24 Indonesian teachers and university students (3 museum objects) were conducted before the exhibition's production stage, to examine how Indonesians today re-read a collection in which Indonesian themselves as subjects represented in this collection. Findings show that respondents do not read the collection as neutral but identify the implicit colonialism of its time through a decolonial lens, making visible the social hierarchy, exploitation, and romanticization imagery constructed by the Dutch. Respondents also demanded decolonial efforts, arguing that the objects misrepresent Indonesia, and called for local struggle, forced labor, and violence context during colonialism to be made explicit in object descriptions, alongside with public access to the objects to support knowledge production by Indonesian community. With most respondents affirming the importance of Indonesian involvement, the data suggests that multivocality must account for the power asymmetries behind various readings from communities, and that mutual understanding, inclusion of community voices, and decolonization must also extend to the collaboration with Indonesian institutions. The research recommends that NOM decides where community narration is included within the exhibition, treating community interpretation as a method and part of the exhibition-making process rather than an addition.

Keywords: Nationaal Onderwijsmuseum, Multivocality, Decoloniality, Community Participation, Colonial Education Collections

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object consultation with Indonesian communities today is needed to create richer meaning from a local perspective.

This is the shared interpretive authority a subject community is owed, a move away from a singular Dutch narrative. Multivocality offers a way to hold that tension: Hodder (2008) points to its capacity to challenge existing power structures, creating space for competing perceptions to coexist and for diverse perspectives to provoke thinking, learning, and emotional connection to heritage (Silberman, 2008; Barnabas, 2016). Practically, though, where should this voice sit, and whose narrative should lead? Further work is needed to make this voice present within the exhibition itself, not only added beside it.

Conclusion

This research explored how Indonesian community participation can be mobilized in exhibition development to support NOM's decolonial effort and introduce multivocality into its narration. Drawing on a survey of 35 Indonesian students in the Netherlands, three Emotion Networking and Focus Group sessions with history teachers and students in Indonesia, and interviews with NOM and SINTAS, this research traced how Indonesian communities read, contest, and re-narrate a collection made about them. What emerges is that this re-reading already exists, carried through memory, curriculum, lived experience, and willingness to speak. What remains is the museum's task: building a structure capable of holding that participation through sustained engagement and collaboration.

Read together, the three discussions trace a single arc. Indonesian communities already read these objects through a decolonial lens, decoding exploitation, hierarchy, and romanticization as constructions of colonial reality rather than neutral fact. When asked what these objects need, they call for relational context: named wages, named violence, named omissions. And while willingness exists on both sides, community and museum, the institutional form capable of sustaining decolonial practice, participation, and multivocality still needs further work, not only in reading and presenting the collection, but in its accessibility beyond the exhibition opening period.

In what ways does Indonesian community engagement in reading and meaning-making with the collection generate decolonial efforts, and what implications do these have for the museum's broader exhibition-making practices?

Indonesian community engagement generates decolonial effort by surfacing a reading that already exists. Across familiarity, emotional response, ranking, and representation coding, respondents consistently delinked from the interpretive frame the objects themselves offer, refusing to read them as neutral, and relinked instead to knowledge already held through Indonesian curriculum and inherited memory of colonialism. This is not a decolonial narrative the museum must manufacture from nothing. It is the meaning that community already brings with it: the act of re-reading and meaning making is itself a decolonial effort, an emerging practice of reading otherwise. The implication for exhibition-making is that presenting these objects without engaging this reading, and this willingness to participate, would reproduce the same singular, Dutch-centered narrative the exhibition is trying to move beyond, especially when the Indonesian community has already shown itself ready to be included. This also carries effects for acknowledging colonial injustice directly: through their reading, the community has already validated the colonial mindset embedded in these objects, inequality, exploitation, the

colonizer's gaze, so the museum's task now is to acknowledge these facts and decide how to present them within the exhibition.

To what extent, and in what forms and contexts, can multivocal perspectives from Indonesian communities be incorporated into the object meaning-making and exhibition-making process?

The extent is high in willingness and substantial in practice. Respondents affirmed that Indonesian involvement matters greatly, and many were ready to contribute their own words to the exhibition. The Emotion Networking sessions already produced concrete curatorial input, grounding the exhibition more firmly in local context and conditions. An audio guide alone, however, is not enough: this context cannot simply live in an optional alternative track, but needs to appear explicitly, in the labels and the main narration themselves, not beside them. Given the relatively short timeline of both the museum and this research, Indonesian community involvement remains possible because it can still enter at the planning stage, before exhibition production begins, where it can shape content rather than simply react to it. Multivocal perspectives can therefore be incorporated at the level of content: teachers, students, and the Indonesian collaborator team have already supplied that content through this research. There is no single formula for this, since different contexts call for different approaches. What is missing is not willingness but form: a structure that distributes curatorial ownership more evenly since the willingness to contribute clearly already exists, beyond experts and curators alone, to include the wider Indonesian community. Future research could explore other groups within that community, government officials, indigenous communities, and others.

How can Indonesian community participation be mobilized in the development of the exhibition *Imperialism and Representation: Indonesia in Dutch Classrooms, 1890–1930* at the National Museum of Education to support the decolonial effort of the museum and introduce multivocality into the narration?

Taken together, these answers resolve the main question this research asked. Object consultation, focus group discussion, and Emotion Networking can mobilize Indonesian community participation, with Emotion Networking in particular surfacing how objects evoke feeling. Communities are already mobilizing this participation themselves, bringing a critical reading shaped by their own education and memory, and a willingness, on both sides, to engage in shared meaning-making. NOM and SINTAS are also mobilizing institutional collaboration, as both have expressed a shared demand for decolonial values in how the narrative is presented. This research shows that mobilization itself is not an obstacle. The unresolved question is institutional: whether the museum is prepared to accommodate and share curatorial authority, rather than simply inviting commentary into a narrative, and continues to create singular narrative. How that authority gets practiced in the actual presentation of the narration remains an open question and a task for further research, since this research gathered the reading, meaning-making interpretations, and recommendations that can inform that authority, but did not test their implementation, such as how a finished label is written or how an object is physically displayed. The task ahead of the museum is to keep doing this work: to build a lasting framework for engaging and involving the subject communities these objects depict, particularly Indonesian communities, and to carry this effort forward as an ongoing decolonial practice. This means building and accommodating a realization of curatorial form that makes the practice become real, in principle the actual process of exhibition-making, exhibition display and after exhibition.

Recommendations

Building on the findings above, this section offers recommendations for the NOM.

Recommendations to the NOM and Exhibition on *Imperialism and Representation: Indonesia in Dutch Classrooms, 1890–1930*

1. Find common ground before calling it collaboration.

Looking from the interview and desk research, collaboration requires an ongoing iterative process, since this process is itself an experiment, and a shared understanding of what "collaboration" means in practice with Indonesian counterparts. This includes agreement on curatorial values and lenses, particularly around decoloniality and narrative lens before going forward. Without that shared ground, participation risks becoming tokenism rather than achieving co-creation.

2. Treat collection accessibility as part of the decolonial effort.

The museum should give the subjected communities in these objects direct access to the collection, through an open public website, exhibition publications, and informal channels such as social media, not only formal ones. Co-producing research and content with local communities would extend this access further, helping local knowledge reach a wider audience and become visible within the institution itself. The museum should also investigate open licensing or public domain status for key objects: EN participants proposed releasing pieces such as the nutmeg wall chart under a Creative Commons license. I recommend the museum assess the legal and provenance requirements for this, since open access would push the decolonial effort beyond interpretation alone, into the question of who is permitted to hold, study, and circulate these materials.

3. Build community engagement into the exhibition-making process.

Variety of methods, such as surveys and Emotion Networking, help draw out community voices, and this research shows that Emotion Networking carries those voices effectively, provided translation is accounted for and a facilitator holds the conversation, so everyone has room to speak. This kind of engagement also surfaces how colonialism's effects persist today, connecting historical objects to Indonesia's present day and to how people actually live with that history. I recommend this approach for any future exhibition involving Indonesian communities or Dutch East Indies-related themes.

4. Decide deliberately where community voices sit within the exhibition narration.

Interviews with Indonesian collaborators make clear that a single placement is not enough and risks becoming tokenistic. These voices should appear across multiple forms: object labels, the main curatorial text, and additional formats such as audio guides or video testimony.

5. State labor, violence, and local people commission information explicitly in object descriptions. Respondents consistently asked for concrete information stated outright: wages, recruitment conditions, women workers, social inequality, the structure of forced labor, and the violence an object's surface conceal, such as the Banda genocide, absent from the nutmeg wall chart. I recommend the curatorial team treat this as a required component of label for this collection, both to ground the exhibition in fact and to raise visitor awareness of colonialism's effects.

6. Adopt a question-based curatorial voice without losing factual clarity.

The NOM director's preference for inviting visitors to form their own interpretations is valuable, but several EN participants argued that certain facts, exploitation, Orientalism, the colonial economic structure, must be stated clearly, not left open to interpretation. I recommend combining both approaches: state the historical facts first, then use open or reflective prompts to invite visitors to read and interpret them further.

7. Support further research into implementation.

This research gathered the readings, meaning making, and recommendations that can inform curatorial authority, but it did not test how these translate into a finished label, a final object placement, or visitor reception of the completed exhibition. I recommend the museum support a follow-up study once the exhibition opens, to evaluate whether the curatorial form adopted actually delivers shared authority, and to inform future Dutch museum collaboration with Indonesian communities.

8. Extend Indonesia-Netherlands collaboration.

Reflecting to this storytelling and narration development in exhibition making process points to the need for constant communication and early agreement on curatorial and, where relevant, decolonial values held within the narration, to avoid miscommunication or misrepresentation. Both parties need to find common ground and be transparent about what the exhibition aims to achieve, so it does not collapse into a single perspective that risks legitimizing colonialism and imperialist power. This means consulting and engaging beyond experts alone: with wider groups such as Indonesian students based in the Netherlands, who are geographically closer to Dutch museums. None of this is out of reach.

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Appendix

1. Artificial Intelligence Statement and Context of Use

In the course of this research, I used Claude AI (Anthropic) as a writing support tool. Specifically, it was used for English grammar correction, for refining the phrasing of research questions and survey items. Recurring prompts included instructions such as

- “Correct grammar while keeping my personal academic writing style and voice. Specific preferences: Correct grammar and improve clarity without changing my arguments or voice. Flag and note sentences that feel vague or disconnected from the overall research.”
- “Correct grammar for this survey question”
- “Correct grammar for intro of the object first impression section”

During the data collection phase for this thesis, interviews conducted in Indonesian were transcribed and translated into English with the assistance of AI tools. Google Translate and Claude (Anthropic) were used to produce initial draft transcriptions and translations, and Grammarly was used to support grammatical correction in the English-language write-up. These AI-generated drafts were treated as a starting point rather than a final product: given the cultural and linguistic specificity of the source material, I reviewed and substantially revised the translations myself, drawing on my own knowledge of Indonesian to correct mistranslations. The full transcripts, including these revisions, appear in the appendix; the analysis and interpretation presented in this thesis are my own. All conceptual decisions, including the research design, theoretical framing, interpretation of data, and final analysis, remain on my own. AI tools were not used to generate findings, analyze participant responses, or produce original arguments. I disclose this use in line with principles of transparency and honesty of this research.

2. Survey Questionnaire Design

Google Form Access: <https://forms.gle/5Bh61xBQ2qyJ6b277> / s.id/EducationMuseumCollection