

# Pressing Matter: Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums

## “THE DUTCH EXCEPTION”- MILITARY COLLECTING AND COLONIAL POLICY 1795- 1950

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Why is it important to speak on Dutch Colonialism in a discussion examining colonial collections and how they entered museums? Why is it important to understand the policies and visions that were had for establishing and maintaining an empire? Why is a historical overview of dutch colonialism important to a discourse on collections and the question of ownership? If there is a “Dutch” way to colonialism that differs from other European entities then the question is should the objects be viewed differently? Can we examine all colonial collections and colonial histories as the same? Was there something “dutch” about the colonial histories of the Dutch East Indies? The question of ownership, objects acquired through military conflicts are examined in this research as strategic and tactical efforts of the military to destabilise societies. The questions are then raised of the counter insurgency and the role objects



played in what is often represented as gifts; where such objects “Pusakas” act as negotiating colonial constructs as ‘objects of persuasion’. Similarly the question is being asked of military takings of objects from the elite groups, were these actions, efforts of the military at ‘governmenting mentality’. This research then seeks to present the question for consideration in the return and repatriation debate of objects:- on the basis of the value placed on particular objects in colonial administration, should they be included?

The research project, *Doing Justice in the Shadow of Law* (working title), explores questions of ownership and legality with regards to cultural objects collected in former colonies. By looking at objects that were collected in different colonial contexts - military interventions, trade alliances, missionary and scientific expeditions for example - and situating them in their (historical) legal context, the project aims to contribute to a better understanding of the legal conditions under which thee objects have been acquired, as well as curated, stored and displayed. Moreover, by opening a dialogue between objects and the legal framework for the protection and restitution of cultural property, the project problematises the juridical status and legal personhood of formerly colonised people and objects taken from them. Particularly, by taking into consideration that different entanglements with objects possible challenge the values and principles linked to the current (dominant) understanding of cultural property - as governed by international treaties. In that vein, the project also examines the extent to which the law can be part of a solution in our dealings with cultural objects collected in former colonies, and how the law can be rethought to include those who have been legally excluded in the past and present due to colonialism.



## DOING JUSTICE IN THE SHADOW OF LAW

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## FROM CULTURAL GENOCIDE TO CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION: THE LEGACY OF THE DEMOLITION OF BANTEN ROYAL PALACE BY DAENDELS IN 1808

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Since its first introduction in the draft of the Genocide Convention in 1948, the concept of ‘cultural genocide’ has raised considerable debate. Yet, in discussions and circumstances where material culture is at stake, it is not uncommonly invoked. Engaging with

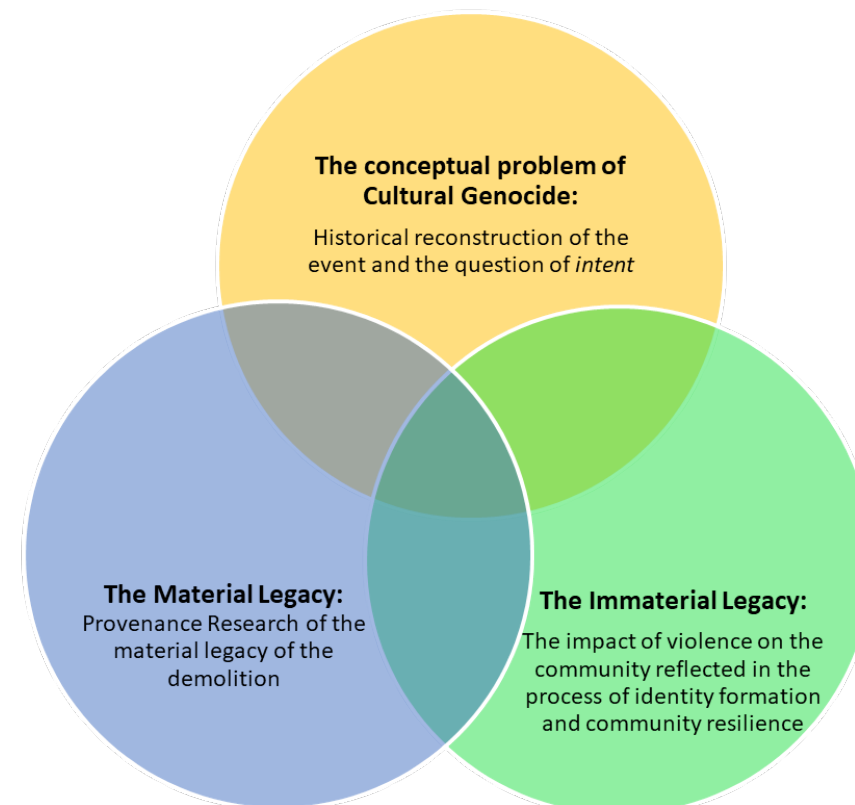
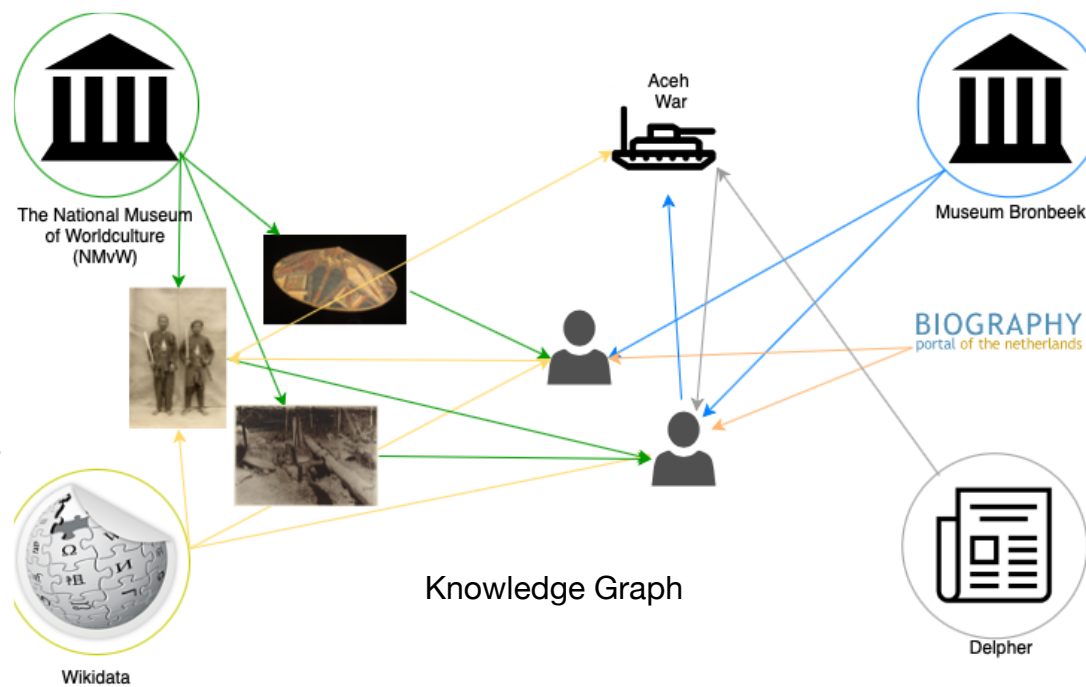


Figure 1. The research entanglement

reflections on potential forms of cultural genocide in connection with the demolition of the royal palace of Banten in 1808 by the Dutch colonial government, the present research discusses both the material and immaterial legacies of cultural genocide, including in museums as spaces with tangible remains and objects of cultural genocide, archaeological sites, and what this might mean for reconciliation and identity formation.

To what extent does Knowledge Graph constructed from heritage object's metadata and further enriched with collector's biography information has the potential to scale-up objects' provenance research for museum experts?

Heritage institutions hold rich information on cultural heritage objects involving contextual information about people, places, times, and events. This information is usually kept in institutional silos, where domain researchers often work with data across institutions. Linking entities among different institutions can enrich these data sources and, in turn, can aid domain research. The aggregated version of data can be further used to infer insightful knowledge that can excel in one of the time-consuming tasks of the domain, which is provenance research.



This research will first focus on entity linking across institutions to construct a Knowledge Graph representing both structured metadata of objects and the collector's biography. This work aims to use this newly formed Knowledge Graph to find interesting patterns to scale-up provenance research and analyse the effect of adding such information to the current data source. Experiments with the different modalities of data and pattern mining techniques will reveal to which extent this data enrichment places a role in finding useful knowledge for the domain researchers.

## KNOWLEDGE DISCOVERY IN DATABASE FOR PROVENANCE RESEARCH ON COLONIAL HERITAGE OBJECTS

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By close reading artistic productions from several contemporary artists, with the help of decolonial thinking, Black studies and image circulation theory, attention will be paid to how these artistic engagements imagine futures that escape historically anchored conceptual and structural institutional attempts to deny futures of the heritage in their storage. This leads to thinking about engagement with this heritage literally outside of the walls of the ethnographic museum itself and within the contemporary art context with all of its own complications and potentials. I'm coming to this research with a decolonial art practice background and as a Black Caribbean man from islands that, as Inez van der Scheer has coined, share continued Dutch occupation and colonization. This informs the urgency within this research to think about how other futures, other than those demanded by the continued colonial violence unleashed on communities that have formed me, can be imagined.



Wendimagegn Belete, *Your Gaze Makes Me* (2021), detail. Presented at Future Generation Art Prize, Pinchuk Art Centre, Kyiv Ukraine. Photo by Quinsy Gario.

## A REDISTRIBUTION OF HOPE. CONTEMPORARY ART, ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS AND REFUSAL

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