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Objects, Nostalgia and the Dutch Colonial Elite in Times of Transition, ca. 1900–1970

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Abstract

This article analyses the role of the changing meanings of material objects in processes of identification, inclusion, and exclusion of people in the (former) colony and the Netherlands between 1900 and 1970. It reveals how and why people and nation-states relate to history, and to the Dutch colonial past in particular. I will argue that objects collected by the European colonial elite and the nostalgic feelings they evoked could be powerful instruments for people's social well-being and for the social standing of this particular social group in both the (former) colony and the Netherlands.

Keywords

objects – colonial elites – Dutch East Indies – nostalgia – decolonization

Introduction

'These objects were the staffage of my life', declared Trude Ament-Resink (1914–2002) recalling growing up in Yogyakarta in a colonial house full of artefacts collected by her mother Anna Resink-Wilkens (1880–1945) between 1910 and 1940.¹ She was surrounded by batik cloths, Hindu-Javanese statuettes and utensils, Dutch-Indies seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture, European paintings by fashionable painters like Andreas Schelfhout, and Javanese wayang puppets.

1 Interview of Mrs. Trude Ament-Resink by Mrs. Rens Heringa, 14-4-1990.

The Resink-Wilkens family was not the only European colonial family who owned such a collection. Numerous people from the European elite in colonial Indonesia surrounded themselves with (mostly ethnographic) objects from the places in the colony where they had spent a part of their life and with artefacts from their motherland. Many of these families eventually donated their colonial objects to museums in the Netherlands or colonial Indonesia. Due to the financial and cultural 'capital' required to build up such collections, most collectors belonged to the European (in the juridical² sense) colonial upper-class. In addition, collecting was a means of social climbing. In the colony, class was determined less by people's skin colour than by their economic, social, and cultural capital (of which the most important was speaking Dutch and having visited Europe) (Drieënhuizen 2012). As a result of the donations by these upper-class families, the collections of colonial objects in many Dutch and Indonesian museums can be seen, for the most part, as the material residue of the colonial and postcolonial experiences of this privileged social group.

In recent years the histories of these sorts of ethnographic collections and the biographies of their collectors have been examined in notably anthropological, social, and cultural studies.³ Although this 'material turn' stressed the importance and complexity of social meaning that such objects hold, many scholars consider the collecting of colonial objects solely as a scholarly practice, isolated from wider social dynamics in both the colony and its motherland. Here I will demonstrate that artefacts are closely connected to such transnational dynamics: objects and the memories they evoked, especially the nostalgic ones, could be very powerful instruments for the social well-being and social standing of people in transition.

I want to make this point by focusing on the European colonial elite travelling between the colony and its motherland in the first decennia of the twentieth century. Remarkably, many people of this group donated meaningful objects to Dutch museums and museums in colonial Indonesia (Drieënhuizen 2012). Often these artefacts evoked personal, even nostalgic, memories for their keepers and beholders, as one can notice from the way people wrote about, spoke about, and handled their objects. I will illustrate the anthropologist Thomas's (1991) propagated nexus between an object's meanings and its social dynamics by looking at the lives of some representatives of this group as

2 The society of colonial Indonesia was juridically divided into distinct groups. From 1920 there were three groups: Europeans, 'inlanders' (Indonesians), and 'foreign Orientals'.

3 Appadurai 1986; Clifford 1988; Thomas 1991; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Pearce 1994; Elsnor and Cardinal 1994; Schefold and Vermeulen 2002; Ter Keurs 2007.

they appear from a large database of donors to Dutch museums.⁴ In an analysis of the relationship between collectors and the meanings of objects in wider society, one can discern certain generations. Each generation was formed by their unique colonial experience and developed a distinctive, shared social consciousness (Mannheim 1928/1929). The lives of each generation's representative here and the meanings of their objects can be traced through people's personal letters, interviews, diaries, autobiographies, and the objects' social environments at home and in museums.

Objects are more than just material remnants of the past: artefacts can trigger memories and thereby make direct connections to events, places, and people from the past (Wilson 2005:48). For Trude Ament-Resink, for instance, such objects evoked a sense of intimacy with her Indies youth, while for her parents, who had collected these artefacts, they confirmed their status of European and Asian art connoisseurs and made their relation with Europe and European society visible. Susan Stewart, who wrote on objects in relation to language and narratives, considered collections of objects as permanent systems of defence against the destructiveness of time (Stewart 1984). Not only souvenirs, but also objects that had not been collected with such an intention in mind could 'fight time'; they could also become mnemonic devices that transmit memories, including to other people and other generations. Literary scholars and historians Hirsch and Spitzer call these carriers of memories 'testimonial objects' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006:353).

These mnemonic and social-cultural meanings of objects can play an important role in the conscious (and unconscious) fashioning and refashioning of the identity of the keeper, as we have seen in the case of Trude Ament-Resink (Bann 1994:37; Erll 2010:6). With the word 'keeper' I refer to the original collector, or to the people to whom the object has been passed on. Nobody collects everything: every person selects, intentional or unintentional, their choice of collectable objects from the past. When made public, this selection of objects and the meanings attributed to them influence the collective memories, social-cultural practices, attitudes, and beliefs of a community.

These meanings attached to artefacts are not fixed. In different times and places, under the influence of diverse historical developments, people ascribe varying meanings to the same objects and demonstrate to others their social situation by using material objects as 'iconic representations' of that situation, bringing new and different memories and identities into being (Pearce 1994:5; Alexander 2004:532).

4 I set up a database of colonial collectors and the collections in Dutch museums during my PhD research.

I consider identity as something personal, as something a person thinks distinguishes him/her in socially relevant ways from others, and which is not fixed. This image, identity, is determined in relation to others by attitudes and beliefs, group membership rules, and (supposed) characteristic attributes such as memories, cultural capital, and certain perceptions of the past (Iyer and Jetten 2011:95; Cooper 2005:71–2). Therefore, meanings given to artefacts reflect a person's identity in relation to larger historical and social-cultural contexts and social relations. If we accept this notion, material objects and their roles in people's lives give us insight into processes of identification and of inclusion and exclusion in both the society of the (former) colony and in the Netherlands. I will demonstrate here how a particular kind of memory (that is, nostalgia) could be triggered by objects and how this nostalgia turned out to be helpful in the way people were able to handle changing social and political circumstances.

The Concept of Nostalgia in a Colonial Context

As with other ways of remembering, nostalgia is just a means to relate to the past, but in the case of nostalgia this is always a self-interpreted and mostly romanticized past (Lukács 1983:23–4). As Bal pointed out, nostalgia is a certain mood and a specific colouring of memory (Bal 1999:xi).

Nostalgia and the colony have always been closely related. This is mostly stimulated by the geographical distance between people and the object of their recall (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 1999:vii) or, for instance after a colony's independence, by the loss of that particular object. After all, this romanticized past regularly condemns the present and entails a yearning for a different time, a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Svetlana Boym discerns two kind of nostalgia: one that is a reflective feeling of loss, imperfection, and irrecoverableness of the past, and one that is restorative and 'attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home' (Boym 2001:xviii).

In recent decades scholars have tried to understand nostalgic feelings relating to the colony, in particular the role that the forgetting of unpleasant or shameful situations plays in these feelings, especially as colonial hierarchies and the position of indigenous people in the colony are ignored or erased from memory.⁵ Renato Rosaldo, who coined the term 'imperialist nostalgia',

5 Salman Rushdi, 'The Raj revival', *The Observer*, 1-4-1984:29; Bijl 2012.

pointed out that the nostalgic vision of the past transforms every European in the colony into an innocent passer-by (Rosaldo 1989:108).

I argue that this act of forgetting and this worldview served a purpose for the people who cultivated this kind of nostalgic view. As some social psychologists point out, nostalgic feelings have an important social function for people in times of transition: positive feelings with regards to their own past can increase 'people's psychological well-being and their capacity to cope with challenges in the present' (Sedikides, Wildschut and Baden 2004). Thus nostalgia can be empowering and productive; it furthermore can bring people comfort (Bal 1999:xi).

Artefacts can help give this comfort. By using psychoanalyst Winnicott's concept of 'transitional objects', environmental psychologist Turan has shown how artefacts as 'objects of legacy', along with narratives, can help displaced persons ease their migration, stimulating a sense of continuity and maintaining and constructing an identity (Winnicott 2005; Turan 2010). Therefore, such artefacts offer insight into the way people in their present relate to the past in order to build their future, and into their reasons for doing so.

Although (colonial) nostalgia has already been analysed from various angles, for instance from an anthropological (Rosaldo 1989), literary (Stewart 1984; Pattynama 2005; De Mul 2010; Bijl 2013), and cultural-sociological (Gilroy 2004; Tannock 1995) point of view, colonial artefacts (that is, objects that are collected and/or used in a colonial context) and the meanings attributed to them have been little studied as a means to gain insight into diverse colonial legacies such as nostalgia and transition processes. This is unfortunate because we have seen that objects have meaning for both individuals and, when made public, also for social groups and whole nations, fulfilling a useful function in social processes. By tracing the different meanings of artefacts across a turbulent political period we can gain insight into a different facet of the role nostalgia can play in people's lives.

In this article the diverse manifestations of nostalgia that can be found between 1900 and the end of the 1960s are scrutinized, and their functions, in relation to the identities of the Dutch colonial elite, are explored. It was in this period that important changes in regime took place in Indonesia.

Nostalgia and Interstitial Identities in the Dutch Imperial Space

Many Europeans who travelled between the colonies and their metropolises in the first decennia of the twentieth century were susceptible to nostalgic feelings. The Dutch colonial elite never spent their whole life in the colony: one

of the characteristics of this group was that they were transmigrants (Bosma 2007). They used to travel to and from the colony, for instance because their children were educated in the Netherlands. In the colony, too, for reasons of career advancement, they were forced to move every four years or so. These people led interstitial lives (Bhabha 1994:269) and were always in some kind of transition. As a consequence they had to leave many people behind and had a hard time generating a clear sense of belonging. As one former civil servant remarked in a letter to a colleague: 'When living here, one wishes to go *'kembali'* [meaning colonial Indonesia]; staying there one wishes to go back to *'negeri cold'* [meaning the Netherlands].'⁶ Colonialism as a form of globalization and the resulting fragmented world encouraged the need for local attachments and the illusion of continuity. In this period colonial nostalgia could be either a yearning for the motherland (when residing in colonial Indonesia) or a longing for the easy life in the colonial society of the Indies (when residing in the Netherlands). In this respect I agree with Paul Bijl, who has recently claimed that colonial nostalgia already existed 'when the colony was still in place' (Bijl 2013:131–2).

To those people whose lives were in transition, 'testimonial transitional objects' were the only consistent links to places and people of the past: they were foci of memory, points of interaction between past and present, memories and post-memories, personal and cultural recollection (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006:353). These travelling, 'uprooted' people collected material objects in one place, took these with them when they moved on, and sometimes donated them to, or received them from, friends, relatives, or institutions in other places in both the Netherlands and the colony. In these emotionally charged artefacts past and present came together in the narratives they evoked. The objects sustained and strengthened people's attachments to family and the motherland, and enabled people to construct their life narrative by the mostly romanticized memories the artefact evoked.

Civil servants like Henri Damsté (1874–1955), who was stationed in various places on Sumatra, Bali, and Celebes (now Sulawesi), bought all kinds of *'fraais'* (fine things) on those islands for his family at home to remind them of him while he was away. However, he also had a personal cultural interest in collecting. He obtained bamboo cases inlaid with mother-of-pearl, Japanese statuettes, kris hilts, wayang puppets, slippers with gold stitching, and textiles from Sumatra.

6 'Eenmaal hier ziende [sic; read: 'zijnde'], weer kombali [sic] willende, daar vertoevende; weer naar negeri koud terug'. Letter from unknown civil servant to Max B. van der Jagt, 1-5-1956 no 33, Nationaal Archief, the Hague (NA), Collection 421 M.B. van der Jagt 2.21.205.26.

Damsté placed the objects he considered most valuable in the semi-private spaces of his house in colonial Indonesia. These artefacts could be seen by visitors: an antique Hindu statuette of a dog, Chinese roll screens, some indigenous weapons, a plaquette of a Dutch windmill, and a cuckoo clock. He sent photographs of these to the Netherlands. The objects on display for visitors not only reflected Damsté's refined taste and cultural knowledge, but the windmill and cuckoo clock also offered links to his European background. Those were aspects of overriding importance in social standing in colonial Indonesia. People's connection with, and belonging to, Europe became clearer when they related to these objects with a certain yearning, a longing for places, a culture, and a family left behind (Drieënhuizen 2012).

At Christmas Damsté's wife, Bella, when decorating their house in Sekayu, near Palembang in Sumatra, wrote in a letter to her mother:

I will be glad when all your portraits and memories are put in their proper place. You know that my blue teacups are the same as those of Lien. With my old-fashioned dinner tray (which is also the same as Lien's) and crystal tea-caddy those objects are a loving memory of the house at the Hooglandsche Kerkgracht. They give me such a domestic happiness! It all looks so 'cosy'. Under the teapot I put the cloth you made for us on our departure from Holland. And in this way all pieces represent a memory.⁷

Every European who visited the house in colonial Indonesia admired the cuckoo clock of the Damsté family. The clock reminded people of 'home'; it gave one visiting Assistant Resident feelings of hope. In the colony he felt 'stranded in the present' (Fritzsche 2004); the clock ticked away the minutes until he could return home to the Netherlands.⁸ In this sense, his longing for home was an awareness of the linearity of time and a side effect of the 'teleology of progress' (Boym 2001:10).

This restorative nostalgia and the continuity of cultural identity the objects provided functioned as a social strategy to ease the transition between home country and colony and to underscore people's cultural relatedness. Damsté's objects, evoking romanticized pasts of the Netherlands and reflecting his knowledge of colonized people, affected his identity and social standing in both

7 Letter from Bella Damsté-Muller to her mother, 25-12-1906 no 72, Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Leiden (KITLV), Archive of Henri Titus Damsté H 1084.

8 Letter from Bella Damsté-Muller to her father-in-law, 6-6-1907 no 72, KITLV, Archive of Henri Titus Damsté H 1084.

the colony and the Netherlands. Damsté and others created 'facilitating environments': their houses were decorated with an interesting mix of Indonesian and European objects that referred to their background, their cultural belonging and, thus, their life history. They demonstrated Damsté's endeavours in Empire-building, his relation to Europe, and his expertise. These environments provided him with a cultural and social continuity and fashioned his identity.

Further, the artefacts displayed contributed to Damsté's scholarly status as a non-academic: colonial and ethnographic knowledge in Europe was still very much in demand and obtaining such was a way to distinguish oneself. Due to his collection Damsté came into contact with notable academics like Arabist C. Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936) and archaeologist N.J. Krom (1883–1945). Furthermore, people with similar backgrounds were able to identify with his collections and engage in similar feelings of nostalgia when visiting his house. For instance, a Dutch newspaper wrote about the museum of the Dutch military academy, which had a similar function: '[I]n every corner of the building everyone who has visited the Dutch East Indies will find something that brings back memories, whether it is a kris or klewang, [...] from what is for most people the best time of their life.'⁹ In short, ethnographic and archaeological objects did not only, and perhaps not in the first place, reflect an interest in indigenous people, but were especially a means to maintain relations with family and other Europeans in the colony by evoking (nostalgic) memories of a shared past and by displaying knowledge. This resulted in bonding and the establishment of group feelings by evoking recognizable shared pasts, events, and longings. What is more, these social relations, memories, and forms of knowledge influenced the fashioning of a collector's status and identity.

Damsté's colonial nostalgia throughout his long colonial career was no exception. Former colonial civil servant Max B. van der Jagt (1873–1960) was posted in diverse places on Java but the very height of his career was his appointment as Resident of Kedu and his subsequent appointment as governor of Solo. When he retired to the Netherlands, in 1930, he created an eclectic atmosphere in his house in The Hague. Guests encountered paintings of the places in colonial Indonesia where he had lived. A gift of the association of the Dutch East Indies civil servants, a black bronze European statue, was placed on the mantelpiece. Next to the bronze statue were two Chinese candlesticks and a box for incense sticks. In this room there was also a Qur'an standard that Van der Jagt had bought in Sumatra in 1926. A large, stuffed turtle hung on the wall, alongside cloths from the Batak in Sumatra. Japanese temple lamps

9 'Het Etnografisch Museum van de K.M.A.', *Het Vaderland*, 26-11-1938.

functioned as lighting and an Indian carpet covered the floor.¹⁰ Van der Jagt, when writing of these artefacts that bore so much meaning and so many memories for him, mentioned hardly any of the original keepers of the object: he only writes about the famous Sundanese sculptor named Iko, living in Bandung around 1910 (Van Meurs 1941:101–6). Iko had made a small Prajnaparamita statue. Although they were Indonesian artefacts, made by people like Iko, the importance of the objects lay in their relation with Van der Jagt's past (career) and the associations they evoked.

In the case of Van der Jagt, even more than Damsté, his objects did not function as art works, but primarily as carriers of remembrance that, when displayed, provided the continuity of colonial memories and thus identity. The objects referred to Van der Jagt's successful political career in colonial Indonesia (with an emphasis on the very height of his career in Magelang and Solo), his globetrotting, and his knowledge of the colony and its people. They evoked feelings of power and manliness, as well as memories of great efforts, a certain social order, and Van der Jagt's social status. These memories were of a past very positively lived, and were a yearning for a better time (Davis 1979). His collection reflected and influenced Van der Jagt's identity.

At the same time there was a certain rejection of the present, or at least a certain amount of discontent with the present, that made him nostalgic and very conservative (Lasch 1991:82–3). After his retirement in 1930, Van der Jagt dwelt on his nostalgic memories and his successful acts in the colony. By publishing his colonial 'memoires' and receiving other former colonial civil servants and military men in his house he created a recognizable and nostalgic context for other conservative colonials like himself. The meaning of the objects surrounding him helped him construct his identity as a conservative colonial civil servant.

Collecting (as a practice) and the associations and nostalgic memories objects had the power to evoke functioned as 'tools' for people like Van der Jagt, Damsté, and many others. When made semi-public, artefacts and collecting not only stressed individuality and uniqueness, but also a relation to cultures, places, and certain social groups: nostalgic feelings aroused by objects could elicit a sense of cultural and social continuity. This fostered social bonds and influenced social prestige and identity. It positively affected people's well-being in culturally different places (that is, the Netherlands and colonial Indonesia).

10 Inventory and (draft) last will of Max B. van der Jagt, ca. 1942–1956 no 35, NA, Collection 421 M.B. van der Jagt 2.21.205.26.

This kind of restorative nostalgia (or, rather, longing for a romanticized life in the past either in the colony or in the motherland), as Boym stated, was a ‘transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home’ (Boym 2001:xviii). With this reconstruction people were able to adjust to their new situation, and create and maintain their (multiform) identity both in the Netherlands and in the colony. Nostalgia was thus a strategy, and for this reason we should not consider it necessarily as ‘false’ or ‘inauthentic’, but rather as a means to structure the relations between the past and the present (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 1999:xi) with a view to one’s future. Nostalgia was thus political because people deployed it for their own good, trying to make something of their situation. How political colonial nostalgia could become in all respects became clear when the Dutch presence in Indonesia came under great pressure.

Changes in the 1940s: Nostalgia as Political Strategy Par Excellence in the Netherlands

The 1940s were turbulent times for the Dutch, both in the Netherlands and in Indonesia. The occupation by Germany and Japan respectively, the Indonesian Revolution, and the violence against Dutchmen during the so-called *bersiap* period caused anxiety and anger amongst Dutch people. The assumed certainty of colonial domination and the illusion of European supremacy were disappearing. The Dutch standing as a European colonial superpower disintegrated and uncertainties about the future dominated. Faced with these uncertainties and feelings of loss of power, nostalgia, a yearning for a comprehensive, orderly world, was experienced more powerfully (Iyer and Jetten 2011:95).

In the 1940s colonial nostalgia in the Netherlands became more prevalent and went hand in hand with Dutch nationalist feelings. Objects, when placed in public spaces like museums in certain narrative contexts, turned out to be powerful instruments in inciting Dutch collective nationalist feelings, creating a sense of historical and cultural continuity and a claim to identity in uncertain times. For instance, in August 1940, three months after Germany occupied the Netherlands, the Koloniaal Instituut (hereafter: Colonial Institute) in Amsterdam organized an exhibition to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary. The exhibition focused solely on the period of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, United East-India Company) in Indonesia: a VOC ship with flying colours adorned the exhibition poster. This was a period of which many Dutch felt proud—the defeat of their oppressor, the Spanish Empire, hegemony on the seas, a vast overseas ‘Empire’. It was a historical interpretation that inspired the Dutch people, again living under a foreign power.

One of the people who had a major share in the public cultivation of this kind of imperialistic, nationalistic, and individual nostalgia was Mrs Diana van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys (1854–1946), the Indies-born wife of Wybe van Gybland Oosterhoff, a Dutch army medical officer. Around 1885, living in Batavia, she started to collect Dutch-Indies furniture from the seventeenth and eighteenth century (called VOC or ‘Company’ furniture). According to an acquaintance, Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys was charmed by the beauty of the wood-carving and the quality of this exceptional furniture (Van de Wall 1939:32). In addition, collecting furniture distracted Diana van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys from the pain of losing one of her children. At that time she and another European woman, Mrs Beets-Van de Poll, were the only ones who had ever collected this particular sort of ‘forgotten’ furniture: chairs, cupboards, and beds could only be found in the houses of the Javanese in Batavia. Because it was not appropriate for a European woman to visit the local kampongs, she let the people wishing to sell their antique furniture come to her house. She bought furniture from local salesmen as well. At Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys’s request, Chinese craftsmen subsequently restored the battered furniture. In three years she had amassed an imposing collection, which she took with her on her return to the Netherlands around 1890 (Oosterhoff 1898; Van de Wall 1939:32).

In the Netherlands Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys, her son Horace, and her daughter Louise became ardent champions of the *Verbond van Nationaal Herstel* (Alliance of National Reconstruction). This political party, in which Horace van Gybland Oosterhoff played an important role, was founded in 1933. It was anti-communist, very nationalistic and royalist, and moderately fascist; it emphasized the importance of the Dutch nation-state and loyalty to the Dutch royal family, and (just like the Colonial Institute) tried to consolidate strong ties with the various overseas territories. Van Gybland Oosterhoff and the ‘*Verbond*’ propagated the idea of ‘*Rijkseenheid*’, a political and cultural union of the Netherlands and its overseas territories under Dutch guidance. The family also supported the ‘*Groot-Nederlandse Beweging*’, a movement inspired by a feeling of kinship between the Netherlands, Flanders, and South Africa where the Dutch, primarily because of a common language, had found their kinsmen in the descendants of the Boers (Van Rinsum 2006). In the end the ‘*Verbond*’ became overshadowed by the more successful national-socialist NSB.

The Van Gybland Oosterhoff family’s world view had already become manifest in the meaning they attributed to their furniture. The period from which this furniture originated had been very important for the married couple Van Gybland Oosterhoff: it was the era of people like the first Governor General, Pieter Both (1568–1615), and Governor General J.P. Coen (1587–1629), who founded Batavia and laid down the foundations of the Dutch Empire. When

Diana van Gybland Oosterhoff loaned certain pieces of her furniture to the Koloniaal Museum (Colonial Museum) and the Museum van Kunstnijverheid (Museum for Applied Arts) in Haarlem she stressed their 'national importance'¹¹ to both the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies as furniture and 'heritage' (*erfstukken*) from 'our pilgrim-fathers' (Oosterhoff 1898:336). Van Gybland Oosterhoff used the term in reference to the English founders of the United States and to indicate the importance of Dutch Empire-builders like Coen and Both, who were representative of the Dutch heyday of expansion and world power in Asia, South Africa, and Europe. This furniture embodied the lives and successful actions of these pilgrim fathers, from which people in the twentieth century still received the benefits, according to Van Gybland Oosterhoff (Oosterhoff 1898:319). It was a period to which people like Van Gybland Oosterhoff wished to return, and that they wished to 'reconstruct' (hence the name of the political party). Furthermore, the furniture pieces integrated the most important overseas territories: they were made based on Dutch examples by local Asian craftsmen, decorated with Hindu and Dutch motives, and sold to Europeans in Dutch enclaves in Indonesia and South Africa (Van de Geijn-Verhoeven, Eliëns and Regeer 2002). National papers and (art) historians soon adopted this rhetoric and celebrated the exotic furniture's 'national Empire' significance: the cupboards, chairs, and beds became 'nationalized' (Bloembergen and Eickhoff 2012; Beers 1892:9).

By considering these furniture pieces as objects of legacy, Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff sustained and strengthened her attachment to these 'pilgrim fathers' and situated herself as keeper of these artefacts within the rhetoric of Dutch world power and nationalism, and thereby strengthened that particular narrative. These nationalistic feelings and her longing for a period in which the Dutch ruled the world intensified at the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent German occupation of the Netherlands in 1940. After forty years Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys, by then a widow, donated again pieces of her furniture: in the winter of 1939 she gave early-modern furniture from colonial Indonesia and the Cape to the Dutch queen, Wilhelmina.¹² In that year and the following year she also donated more of this kind of furniture to the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam. In 1940 the Gemeentemuseum (Municipal Museum) in The Hague also received furniture from Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys, as did the pre-eminent national museum, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

11 *Opregte Haarlemsche Courant*, 22-4-1898.

12 'Indische barokmeubelen voor H.M. de Koningin', *De Sumatra Post*, 15-2-1939; 'Indische Barokmeubelen aan H.H. de Koningin geschonken', *De Indische Courant*, 15-2-1939.

By donating this furniture to both the queen and different museums, Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys thought her family name would live forever: she insisted the room that would house her furniture at the Colonial Institute should bear her husband's family name. This was important to her since her only surviving and beloved son Horace died at an early age in 1937 and the family name would otherwise die out. The Colonial Institute was the perfect place for her to enshrine her husband's name and to link her family's name to the institution's message: this institute was conceived by its founders and the Dutch government as a Dutch nationalistic-imperialistic institution that promoted 'Groot-Nederland' (the 'greater Netherlands') (Bossenbroek 1996:264).

More important, by donating this kind of furniture Diana van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys tried to lift the spirits of the queen and the Dutch people in turbulent times. After all, by referring to the Dutch seventeenth century she reminded fellow Dutchmen of their strength when defeating the Spanish. Consequently, she asked for a consolidation of the Dutch Empire and the idea of a liberated, independent Greater Netherlands. In short, by means of nostalgic feelings she tried to re-establish social cohesion and to infuse hope, courage, and strength in the Dutch people to restore the pre-war balance of power and an 'imagined' historical national past (Boym 2001:14). She tried to give continuity to the identity of both the nation and herself; even then this was superseded by a nostalgic idea of a world that has never existed, except as a narrative that was part of her and her family's identity. In the institute her pieces of furniture, in conjunction with her family's narrated meaning through the display, became the 'interlocutors' between her and her family's individual identity and nostalgia and a collective identity (Turan 2010:53). Thus here nostalgia was a social practice and some kind of political 'manipulation' in the context of a contemporary collective struggle (Burlein 1999:311–24; Bissell 2005:218). This manifestation and function of colonial nostalgia, however, would be overtaken by political developments in the (former) colony and the Netherlands.

Colonial Nostalgia and Coping with the Unsettled Times of Indonesia's Fight for Independence

Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff's furniture in the Colonial Institute remained in place until early 1947. In August 1945 Sukarno and Hatta proclaimed Indonesia's independence. Less than six months later Mrs Van Gybland Oosterhoff died. In the former colony a war broke out between Indonesian nationalists and the Dutch military trying to restore Dutch rule. The balance of power between Indonesia and the Netherlands was definitively shifting. Early 1947, even before

the official Dutch military interventions in Java and Sumatra took place, the institute made changes in the collection of the Van Gybland Oosterhoff chamber (as it was called) and moved it upstairs. Instead of VOC-furniture, Buddha statues now filled the room downstairs.

This change can be interpreted as the institute's acknowledgement of the definitive change in the political situation in the colony—a logical consequence of the institute's change of name in October 1945 (Kraaibeek and Van Leysen 1995:20). From that moment onwards, the Colonial Institute was called the the Indisch Instituut (hereafter: Indies Institute). The change of name and the move of the chamber from the first to the second floor filled Diana van Gybland Oosterhoff-Neys's daughter, Louise, with anger. In an embittered letter she accused the institute of throwing themselves at Sukarno's feet; in her opinion, the Buddha statues that had replaced her mother's chamber were an admission of weakness, an act of political correctness. According to her, her family's heritage was now hidden somewhere in the institute where nobody could take offence at it;¹³ she felt betrayed. An article on the matter was published in a Dutch newspaper, written by one of the family's sympathizers. This article called the removal of the chamber from the first floor a complete surrender to the 'extremists' (meaning the Indonesian revolutionaries). This 'surrender' was experienced by the writer as being extremely painful: 'The best 350 years of our nation's history are being voluntarily erased', the article in the *Haags Dagblad* read.¹⁴ Louise van Gybland Oosterhoff called the chamber with much contempt the 'Linggadjati phantom chamber', referring to the political accord between the Netherlands and the young Indonesian republic in which the Netherlands agreed to recognize the new republic if they would join the newly created Netherlands-Indonesian Union.¹⁵

Of course Louise van Gybland Oosterhoff felt betrayed by the act. Her family's view of the colonial and national past had fitted with those of the prevalent political factions in Dutch society. The family's identity was defined and reflected by the meaning of their objects—objects that represented a past in an institute that had reflected the family's ideals. This had all changed now. The institute rejected its former ideals of the Netherlands as a colonial power: as early as 1947 it anticipated the inevitable and constructed a slightly altered

13 Letters from Mrs Louise van Gybland Oosterhoff to the Colonial Institute, 16-4-1947 and 28-4-1947 no 2214, Archives of the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, Amsterdam (KIT), Papers concerning inheritances and donations of diverse objects, 1919–1952.

14 *Haags Dagblad*, 2-3-1947.

15 Letter from Mrs Louise van Gybland Oosterhoff to the Colonial Institute, 28-4-1947 no 2214, KIT, Papers concerning inheritances and donations of diverse objects, 1919–1952.

historical discourse using displays that reinforced a new understanding of current politics, like the relationship with Indonesia as part of a development aid programme.¹⁶ The museum subscribed to, and inscribed, a different collective and individual Dutch national (in contrast to imperial) memory and, therefore, identity (River-Orraca 2009:32). These new developments were reinforced in 1949, when the Netherlands officially recognized the independent Indonesian Republic.

The Van Gybland Oosterhoff family was not the only one longing for a return to the 'good old days'; in his memoirs Van der Jagt severely criticized and deplored the way the Dutch government had dealt with the Indonesian republic. Van der Jagt called the Dutch recognition of Indonesian sovereignty a 'disastrous' (*catastrophale*) and 'incomprehensible undignified' act (Van der Jagt 1955:329–30). According to him, 'red' (socialist) and Catholic ministers and chairmen had succeeded in forcing this through. As a result, the Netherlands lost their 'most precious possession' in 1949.

The family Van Gybland Oosterhoff's restorative nostalgia in the reconstruction of a lost home was forced to change into Boym's conception of a reflective nostalgia of loss, imperfection, and the irrecoverableness of the past. This was a nostalgia that thrived on longing and lingered in pain. The meaning of the family's furniture and the nostalgia it evoked did not fit the particular postcolonial reality of that time, and the expression of national identity was no longer as it had been conceived by the Van Gybland Oosterhoff family. The postcolonial reality forced people like the Van Gybland Oosterhoffs to revert to another manifestation of nostalgia with another function: nostalgia that highlighted the distance between subject and desired object and which was more oriented towards individual narratives instead of a national memory based on a single (in this case, Empire) identity (Boym 2001:xviii).

In 1947 the Van Gybland Oosterhoff family insisted that the furniture be returned to the family, where it could serve their own private memories and could function as a 'facilitating environment', which the museum was no longer willing to provide. In this environment the family could continue to sustain their attachment to the group of people supporting 'Groot-Nederland', and thereby express their identity. However, the museum refused to grant the request.¹⁷

16 For the important role of museums in historical national discourses and identities, see Anderson 1991 and Hobsbawm 1983.

17 Letter from the Colonial Institute to Mrs Louise Gybland van Oosterhoff, 11-6-1947 no 2214, KIT, Papers concerning inheritances and donations of diverse objects, 1919–1952.

'A Paradise Forever Lost': Colonial Nostalgia and the Creation of a Decolonized National Past

After 1949, when the Netherlands finally officially recognized Indonesia's independence, many people turned to a less politically engaged form of colonial nostalgia. They realized that a return to colonial times was impossible. In 1955 one colonial civil servant, when looking back on his life in the colony, considered his life there 'a living reality in a time that has gone for good'.¹⁸ This turn to another manifestation and function of nostalgia was again strategic: a certain, less politicized colonial nostalgia for the past still provided former colonialists with an identity and made their 'homecoming' in the Netherlands possible. In this period a timeless longing, for what is called *tempo doeloe* (former times), free from national political associations, came into being (Van Leeuwen 2008:18).

In this period *tempo doeloe* was the imagined, nostalgic past of the colony in which, as historian Frances Gouda once asserted, racial mastery and economic inequality in the colony were conceived as natural and harmless, and in which relations between Indonesians and Europeans were characterized by mutual warm-heartedness and respect (Gouda 1995:237–42). The social hierarchies were portrayed as 'the normal and natural state of affairs' (De Mul 2010:423). Colonial rule was seen overall as 'decorous and orderly' and, in retrospect by some, 'even beneficial' (Rosaldo 1989:107). A mythical colonial society that had never existed was created. As we have seen this construction, built on the memories and the narratives of the travelling colonial elite, had existed since the nineteenth century (Bijl 2013), but now flourished as never before.

This imagined past also served the present: the production of a new nostalgic past was a way in which the former ruling elite could come to terms with themselves in a period of decolonization and in which colonialism was criticized sharply. By being nostalgic, people maintained a sense of continuity of identity, despite a rupture between past and present. People were unwillingly cut off from the land they longed for and which had played such an important role in their histories. They were eagerly creating 'facilitating environments' in which objects reminded them of their 'paradise lost'. These 'environments' were helpful in the creation of a sort of continuity of experience and in the claims people made about their own life narrative and identity.

18 Letter from J.W. Meyer Ranneft to Max van der Jagt, 21-11-1955 no 33, NA, Collection 421 M.B. van der Jagt 2.21.205.26.

A family's material artefacts, as 'objects of legacy', could be handed on to future generations and mediate narratives about the past to those generations and thus sustain attachments to the family, its members, and their histories. However, when there were no children who were able or willing to engage in this transfer of objects and narratives, people sought other 'sheltering and nurturing environments', as did the Van Gybland Oosterhoff family (Winnicott 2005, cited by Turan 2010:46). Initially the colonial elite considered the former Colonial Institute to be a 'facilitating environment'. Actually, unlike Van Gybland Oosterhoff many people from the colony still considered the Tropenmuseum (former Colonial / Indies Institute) in Amsterdam as such a public facilitating environment for their colonial (often nostalgic) experiences in the 1950s and early 1960s. For instance, the unmarried Max van der Jagt, the former Assistant Resident of Kedu and governor of Solo, donated his personal archives and meaningful artefacts, along with a considerable sum of money, to the institute in 1960.¹⁹

By transmitting selected objects from semi-private to public spaces, the donors of material objects gifted to a museum transformed individual experiences of colonial nostalgia into manifestations of a cultural memory in the Netherlands, as we already have seen in the case of the Van Gybland Oosterhoff family. This memory was the outcome of the process of the selection of objects by both the collector and the museum, and thus the mediation of a certain kind of memories and meanings (Black 2011:419). Over the years the changing meanings, ascribed to objects by curators, collectors, and visitors, reflected this.

For instance, N.P. van den Berg donated a rather badly painted portrait of the famous agriculturalist and publicist Karel F. Holle (1829–1896) to the Tropenmuseum in 1956. The painting had been produced by Holle's nephew and was handed over to Van den Berg because he was the son of Holle's godchild. Although Van den Berg saw the portrait mostly as a bad painting of a paternalistic figure, the memory of this ancestor meant that the family could not easily part with it. The portrait had probably reminded the Van den Berg family not only of this remarkable distant relative, but also of carefree childhood days at tea plantations in the Preanger and of other close relatives who had lived in colonial Indonesia. A certain kind of nostalgic longing for colonial times and resentment of the present was discernible when Van den Berg lamented in his letter: '[W]hat was left of Holle's reputation in modern

19 Bequest of Max B. van der Jagt, 16-3-1960 no 4421, KIT, Papers concerning the expansion of the collection by means of donations, 1927–1969.

day Indonesia?'.²⁰ In 1956 he donated the portrait that he characterized as an 'exile in the attic', to the Tropenmuseum, which he considered a place where his paternal forefather felt at home, even when the 'surroundings would treat him coldly',²¹ a comment probably referring to the Dutch problems in coping with their colonial past. However, when the painting was on display people were reminded in a positive fashion of one of the most innovative and engaged agriculturalists who started tea plantations in the Preanger in the middle of the nineteenth century. In this manner this history became part of the collective memory of the Dutch people.

Another example of a painting that was gifted to the Tropenmuseum was the portrait of Pangeran (Prince) Ngabehi Mangkubumi, donated by B.E.R.N.D. Engelbert van Bevervoorde in the autumn of 1964. Around 1903 Mangkubumi had given it to the latter's father, Willem F. Engelbert van Bevervoorde (1857–1910), then Assistant Resident of Yogyakarta, as a token of their friendship. When Van Bevervoorde Sr. died in 1910, his son stowed the portrait away because he 'had no personal memories of the donor', but probably held onto it because of its (nostalgic) connections to his family's past.²² At the end of his life he chose to donate the painting to the Tropenmuseum, since there was no family member left who had any memories of the *pangeran* or of Engelbert van Bevervoorde senior, and their colonial family history was forced to come to an end.

By donating these portraits to the facilitating environment of the museum the family remembrance continued and the family's 'colonial' identity was sustained, even after decolonization. The donation of these once cherished objects to an institute associated with the former colony meant that donors felt that their individual memories of the colonial past became connected to a wider collective history: an imperial past in a Dutch colonial historical narrative construed by the museum displays. By donating, people also added to their own identity formation: they presented themselves as empire-builders and as benefactors to the nation and to the colonized people.

20 Letter from Norbert van den Berg to the Tropenmuseum, 21-7-1956, no 4421, KIT, Papers concerning the expansion of the collection by means of donations, 1927–1969.

21 Letter from Norbert van den Berg to the Tropenmuseum, 21-7-1956, no 4421, KIT, Papers concerning the expansion of the collection by means of donations, 1927–1969.

22 Letter from B.E.R.N.D. Engelbert van Bevervoorde to the Tropenmuseum, 22-10-1964 no 4421, KIT, Papers concerning the expansion of the collection by means of donations, 1927–1969. The Engelbert van Bevervoorde family had been working and living alternately in the Netherlands and in the Dutch colonies Ceylon and the East Indies since the 1750s.

After decolonization the 'new' Dutch nation-state had to reposition itself and create a new national narrative and identity focused on the nation, but this was a slow and gradual process. For instance, the Colonial Institute's/Tropenmuseum's permanent display of the (former) colony opened in 1926 and was changed drastically only in 1960; before then the display was only adjusted a couple of times, the last time in 1943 (as the history of the Van Gybland Oost-erhoff chamber shows).²³ For a long time the museum offered its visitors a comprehensive, orderly, slightly nostalgic image of the (former) colony, which was mainly a Dutch story of 'civilizing', governing, and developing the Indonesian people. Dutch transnational history thus became incorporated in new, national, historical discourses, in which for quite some time *tempo doeloe* nostalgia was considered 'the' national colonial past. Museum displays reflected this process and were instrumental in these nation-building processes and in influencing Dutch collective memory. As such, an object's meanings had functioned as identity markers for society as a whole and its construction of its (romanticized) nationalized version of the colonial past.

The *pangeran* portrait's history shows us this function as an identity marker. In the museum the portrait was considered a 'very dear' part of the 'Old Indies collection'—even after the institute's reorganized policy. The painting was considered to have a 'not unimportant historical value'. The painting symbolized a specific colonial history as seen by many, especially colonial, Dutchmen in this age: a romantic, peaceful, orderly, and timeless period.²⁴ This seemingly harmless, peaceful image of the colony dominated Dutch public opinion and became the nation's version of the colonial past and lost home. It was a version of the past that was to predominate until the early 1960s.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Tropenmuseum (like other ethnographic museums) finally adjusted many of its separate 'Indonesian' exhibitions into one major Indonesia exhibition telling the story of Indonesian social-economic life. It is possible that the painting of the *pangeran* was on display, but it is also very likely the painting never left the depot, even though it had been considered valuable by the museum. Perhaps it already reflected the Dutch colonial system too much by that point. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, nation-states have to forget many painful or embarrassing events to be able to cherish a past that serves the future (Anderson 1991:163–85). Museums, with their selection processes in terms of the choice of donors, objects, and narratives, can play a central role in this act of 'forgetting'.

23 <http://collectie.tropenmuseum.nl/Default.aspx>, Java-exhibition (accessed 29-3-2013).

24 Letter from C. Nagtegaal to Engelbert van Bevervoorde, 28-10-1964 no 4421, KIT, Papers concerning the expansion of the collection by means of donations, 1927–1969.

Appropriation and Rejection of Colonial Nostalgia as a Social Strategy in the Long Aftermath of Decolonization

The 1960s were a period of social and political changes in the Western world. Protests against the 'imperialistic' Vietnam War reached a peak after the My Lai massacre in March 1969. In the Netherlands all kinds of authority became suspect, including the authority of the Dutch political rulers. Cautiously people began to criticize the violence committed by Dutch soldiers during the so-called police actions after Sukarno's declaration of independence in 1945. The year 1969 saw the publication of what was known as the 'Excessennota', which investigated the violence of the Dutch military in Indonesia between 1945 and 1949.

However, the memorandum's findings did not match the time-honoured Dutch self-image of moral leadership (De Mul 2010:51; Bijl 2012:449). As a consequence, although the 1960s (in contrast to the future-oriented 1950s, which was a time of economic reconstruction, the creation of the welfare state, and the promotion of a mentality of leaving the past behind) gave ample scope to retrospectives of the colonial past, people failed to speak about colonial violence and atrocities. In this way memories of these events never came into being (Bijl 2012:449); instead, 'forgetting' or a kind of aphasia occurred and the critical approach to colonial history was never really implemented.

The opposite occurred: instead of focusing on the victimhood of former colonial inhabitants, the Dutch retrospective of colonial history in this period, aside from the image of the 'paradise lost', became dominated by a renewed and intensified colonial nostalgia centred on European victimhood caused by the events of the 1940s in the former colony (Van Leeuwen 2008:101–38, 340). This can be explained partly by the large influx of Europeans coming from Indonesia to the Netherlands—people who were forced to leave Indonesia and had endured many hardships in the new nation-state between 1949 and 1964. Their colonial nostalgia served as a diversionary tactic: to lead the discourse away from colonial guilt and shame. It was a plea for an acknowledgement that those European migrants had histories in the colony as well. Their nostalgia and a sense of continuity in terms of identity generated a feeling of relatedness amongst them and ensured their inclusion in Dutch society (Pattynama 2008:59–60). These people's experiences and nostalgic feelings influenced the Dutch national discourse on the former colony.

De Mul rightly points out that nostalgia has many meanings and functions for different people (De Mul 2010:414). It seems that a considerable number of the colonial elite did not identify themselves completely with the kind of nostalgia mentioned above. Their past was dominated less by an image of

victimhood than by a history of the glory of the Dutch Empire and successful political and governmental careers, as we have seen above in the histories of the families Van der Jagt, Van Gybland Oosterhoff, Van den Berg, and Engelbert van Bevervoorde. For some of these people nostalgia for the former colony became potentially disruptive at the end of the 1960s: they could not identify with, nor feel connected to, a colonial nostalgia mainly centred on victimhood (Iyer and Jetten 2011:94).

As was pointed out earlier, a kind of 'decolonization light' had taken place in the display of the Dutch ethnographic museums between 1945 and 1960. Now the former Colonial Institute in Amsterdam, to which people had been donating their important personal colonial objects and memories until the early 1960s, changed its policy permanently and radically. Although there was still demand for such an approach, in all probability the directors of Dutch ethnographic museums had decided that displays on the 'good old days' of Dutch colonialism, which would give visitors 'feelings of pride or satisfaction', were no longer appropriate (*Verlagen* 1960:169). From the 1960s onwards these institutions began to exhibit the social-economic development of many so-called Third World cultures, like the Zulu people from the south of Africa or the Berbers from Morocco. Furthermore, the new displays were based on the self-image of the Netherlands as moral leader, including propagating aid to the 'developing world', to other countries; the Netherlands as 'Gidsland' was a role that had dominated the Dutch self-image since the implementation of the Dutch colonial civilizing mission (*ethische politiek*) around 1900 (Gouda 1995; De Mul 2010:417). Thus, although the narratives and their focus changed, there was some continuity in former colonial museums' exhibition policies in colonial and postcolonial times.

Not only did colonial nostalgia have little appeal for many members of the former colonial elite in the late 1960s, but they also began to realize that this kind of museum was no longer a facilitating environment for their collective and individual colonial identity: in that decade fewer and fewer people from this social group donated their meaningful objects of the colony to these museums.²⁵

As the meanings attributed to the objects show, nostalgic feelings for colonial Indonesia were just a part (albeit an important part) of these former colonial elite's identities. This group had an interstitial character: they had been a colonial elite continually transmigrating between the Netherlands and the

25 *Verlagen der Rijks verzamelingen van geschiedenis en kunst* 1957, 1960, 1962, and 1965 and *Jaarverslag Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen* 1958, 1960, 1963, 1964, and 1965.

colonies. As a result they had obtained cultural capital and social networks that intermingled with, and had been part of, the Dutch national elite. The former colonial elite was therefore able to derive their identity as an elite group from other aspects in the Netherlands, and moved away from their former facilitating environments and colonial nostalgia.

Conclusion

By understanding objects as bearers of (nostalgic) meanings, interwoven with social and historical contexts and dynamics, we gained insight into the function of nostalgia in a broad, (post)colonial context. We have seen how representatives of certain generations of the colonial elite were susceptible to diverse forms of 'colonial nostalgia', which sometimes overlapped and co-existed with the colonial nostalgia of other social groups.

For many people nostalgia was not so much about the past; above all, it was a social and political strategy with many different faces. Nostalgic feelings helped the colonial elite to perceive a sense of continuity in their identity over time and across different contexts. Testimonial, transitional objects placed in (semi-)public 'facilitating environments' helped this group to constitute and fashion their identity through the transference of memories. In so doing, they were able to cope with challenges in the present, to ease both spatial and political transitions, and to feel grounded in diverse social and cultural contexts (Iyer and Jetten 2011:95).

Colonial nostalgia was never innocent and was always a part of people's social strategies. As such it influenced not only personal, but also collective identities, as people donated their objects to national museums which defined and represented through display collective memories. As a result, dominant versions of colonial nostalgia determined Dutch perceptions of the national colonial history.

Just like every other social group the Dutch colonial elite adapted, recreated, and changed their own recollection of the (colonial) past to define their own identity. When their platforms to air their nostalgic image of the colony disappeared and another, conflicting perception of the colonial past became dominant, colonial nostalgia stopped being helpful and thus stopped being part of the elite's identity. Now their identity was integrated with that of the Dutch national elite, of which they were also a part. The colonial aspects of their identities merged into their 'national Dutch' identities. By disentangling the meanings of people's objects and collections, we gain insight in the role and function of (nostalgic) memories in different (post)colonial contexts.

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