

Silences and Memories of the Indonesian Revolution and Dutch Colonialism

KATHARINE MCGREGOR

This essay considers silences as well as memories of the Indonesian Revolution and Dutch colonialism more broadly. It takes as a starting point a Dutch-Indonesian volume based on an oral history approach produced as part of the large research project 'Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950.' This work is discussed alongside broader issues of remembrance and forgetting in relation to the Revolution and colonialism in both countries and the politics of memory. The author also introduces her own work in relation to memories of colonialism and a decolonial approach to memory work.

In dit essay staan de stiltes en de herinneringen aan de Indonesische Revolutie en het Nederlandse kolonialisme centraal. Het vertrekpunt hiervoor is een Nederlands-Indonesische bundel die handelt over mondelinge geschiedenis en deel uitmaakt van het grootschalige onderzoeksproject 'Onafhankelijkheid, Dekolonisatie, Geweld en Oorlog in Indonesië, 1945-1950'. Dit werk wordt besproken vanuit het perspectief van bredere debatten over het herinneren en het vergeten van de Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog en van het kolonialisme in beide landen, alsook van de herinneringspolitiek op dit terrein. De auteur introduceert ook haar eigen werk over herinneringen aan het kolonialisme en over een dekoloniale benadering van herinneringscultuur.

One reason that memories of the Indonesian Revolution have been hotly contested between Indonesia and the Netherlands in recent decades is the growing global recognition of the historical injustices related to colonialism

and colonial violence and new demands from affected communities for redress for such injustices, or at the very least recognition.¹ In both Indonesia and the Netherlands we have witnessed a process of people, representing different interests, critically reckoning with long-silenced memories of the Revolution and the longer period of Dutch colonialism. These forms of remembrance include decolonial approaches to memory which critically challenge how colonial and national ways of knowing may replicate the dynamics of colonial power and further silence other experiences as well as efforts to shut down new critical attention to colonialism. In both countries we have also witnessed highly nationalist reactions to versions of history that are seen to challenge the nation in any way.

Complexifying understandings of the Indonesian Revolution

The Dutch academic research project 'Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950' (ODGOI) needs to be understood in this larger context because of its aim to complexify understandings of the Revolution. One subproject focused on collecting records and witnesses and included an open invitation for people to share their memories, diaries, letters and photographs with researchers in the series. In this sense it particularly aimed to forefront individual experiences of the Revolution. A range of these sources were drawn together in the publication *Meniti Arti/Sporen vol betekenis. Bertukar Makna Bersama 'Saksi & Rekan Sezaman' tentang Perang Kemerdekaan Indonesia/In gesprek met 'getuigen & tijdgenoten' over de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog* (Follow the Meaning: In Conversation with Witnesses and Contemporaries of the Time about the Indonesian War of Independence) co-written by Eveline Buchheim, Satrio (Ody) Dwicahyo, Fridus Steijlen and Stephanie Welvaart.²

One limitation in research on the Revolution to date has been that many books have been published in either Dutch or Indonesian for local audiences which has inhibited understandings of how people in each country reflect on this period of history. In contrast, *Meniti Arti/Sporen vol betekenis* is a bilingual volume with Indonesian alongside Dutch text on the same page. This is an important attempt to speak to two audiences at once.

The book aims to 'open a space for people who are not represented in many official archives to share their stories and to invite others to listen

1 Research for this paper was completed as part of the Australian Research Council funded project 'Submerged Histories: Memory Activism in Indonesia and the Netherlands', DP210102445.

2 Eveline Buchheim, Satrio (Ody) Dwicahyo, Fridus Steijlen and Stephanie Welvaart, *Meniti*

Arti/Sporen vol betekenis. Bertukar Makna Bersama 'Saksi & Rekan Sezaman' tentang Perang Kemerdekaan Indonesia/In gesprek met 'getuigen & tijdgenoten' over de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog (Yayasan Buku Obor 2022).

to experiences they have never heard of' (p. 16-17). The authors wanted to make more of these stories accessible to researchers and broader society. The key question asked was how the 1945-1949 period affected people's lives. The research team practiced reflective oral history, continually revisiting the assumptions they made and the questions they asked as the project evolved. The authors emphasize above all the great variety of experiences of Dutch and Indonesian people.

Moving beyond black and white and nationalist understandings of a contested period of history requires paying attention to different historical experiences and to more marginalized perspectives. In this light, *Follow the Meaning* succeeds in its aim of opening up new perspectives on the Revolution. The stories here come from people not usually included in elitist, masculinist and nation-centred historiographies of the Revolution and they help complicate the multitude of positions different Dutch, Indo-Dutch and Indonesian people (including minority communities) took in relation to the Revolution. Some examples of this are accounts from participants in the Dutch resistance often connected with the Dutch Communist Party who used the strategy of defection to avoid joining or fighting for the Dutch army, or of Dutch women who participated in the armed forces and the gendered regulations and scrutiny that they faced.

The book also attempts to use oral history accounts to challenge colonial and national stereotypes in relation to gender and ethnicity. The story of Ibu Djoewariyah, for example, who as a member of the Student Army (*Tentara Pelajar*) engaged in espionage during the Revolution, tries to move beyond the idea of women in the Revolution either operating only in the domestic sphere as '*babu*' (household assistants or bed partners for the Dutch soldiers), which is a common Dutch stereotype, or as workers in the Red Cross or public kitchens, which is a common Indonesian stereotype. The book importantly explores the experiences of persons of Dutch-Indonesian background by narrating the story of Ardie from Malang, East Java, whose mother was Indonesian and whose father was Dutch.³ So fearful were her family of her fate that they placed her in an orphanage for a period and then moved her to the Netherlands. Ardie explained the ongoing sense of living between two worlds stating 'that's why I felt until now that I was not part of Hindia [the Dutch East Indies] nor Indonesia nor the Netherlands' (p. 161).

My observations about the valuable insights presented in this subproject on personal experiences are mirrored in the comments of Grace Leksana in this forum, who feels these personal stories or the 'human dimension' deserved a larger place in the overall project and were underrepresented in the 'intermezzo' section of the summary volume

3 For a history of the Indo community in Malang see Tedy Harnawan, *Dalam Bayang-Bayang*

Modernitas: Orang-orang Indo di Kota Magelang pada Akhir Masa Kolonial (Penerbit Terang 2021).

Silenced perspectives on the Indonesian Revolution

Although several books produced as outputs of the project have opened up new perspectives, there are some silences in terms of memories of the Revolution that could have been discussed more critically. Again returning to the work *Meniti Arti/Sporen vol betekenis*, the authors could have asked why some of the perspectives featured in the book have been given so little attention to date. Reflecting on the case of Dutch communist defectors, a key reason for the silencing of this history – which is a trend shared in Indonesia – is the general silencing of histories of the political left which constituted one of the strongest sources of opposition to colonialism. In the chapter related to Ibu Djoewariyah, it is suggested it is not known when the silencing of active women and the emphasis on domesticated women in Indonesia began. Yet, scholars such as Julia Suryakasuma and Saskia Wieringa have clearly articulated that the domestication of women was something heavily promoted from the New Order (1966-1998) onwards, and I myself have also indicated how the militarization of history flowed through to an emphasis on women in support roles.⁵ Further to this, the stories of Indonesian women on the political left who often led resistance against both the Japanese and the Dutch have been silenced until recently in Indonesia due to the violent attack on the political left in the 1965 genocide, which led to an erasure of their stories from history.⁶

Another significant silence in the volume is the perspective of ethnic Chinese people living in Indonesia during the Revolution. The account from independence fighter Pak Idi of his experience of the Bandung Sea of Fire episode includes the mentioning of burning buildings that could have been

4 See Grace Leksana, 'Reconsidering Revolutionary "Heroes" and Histories of Violence in Indonesia'. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.19565>.

5 Julia Suryakasuma, *State Ibuism: The Social Construction of Womanhood in New Order Indonesia* (Komunitas Bambu 2011); Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (Institute of Social Studies 2002). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403919922>; Katharine E. McGregor, *History in Uniform: Military Ideology and the Construction of Indonesia's Past* (NUS Press 2007).

6 For some newer works that begin to open up these histories see Katharine McGregor and Ruth

Indiah Rahayu, 'Umi Sardjono and the Quest to Build a New Society for Indonesian Women', in: Francisca de Haan (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists from Around the World* (Palgrave Macmillan 2023) 377-397. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13127-1_15; and Katharine McGregor, 'The Cold War Indonesian Women and the Global Anti-Imperialist Movement 1946-1965', in: Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney and Fabio Lanza (eds.), *De-Centring Cold War History: Local and Global Change* (Routledge 2012) 31-51.

used by the Dutch. He narrates that ‘it was around 1:00 AM at night. We were burning everything. And we could smell salty fish that had burned when a Chinese shop was burned’ (p. 107). Despite this mention, the authors do not critically reflect on the then ongoing broader campaign against the ethnic Chinese. New scholarship by Chinese-Indonesian scholar Ravando Lie and memory-related activism by Chinese Indonesian artist FX Harsono has begun to open up long-repressed histories of violence against the Chinese during the Revolution.⁷ As noted by Farabi Fakhri in his contribution to the forum, other publications of the ODOI project, such as Esther Captain and Onno Sinke’s *Resonance of Violence (Het Geluid van geweld)* examine violence against a range of communities perpetrated by Indonesian paramilitary groups and *pemuda* or youths.⁸ Yet, the reasons for ongoing glossing over or normalizing of such violence in Indonesian narratives also deserve greater attention.

One important challenge in centring memories of the Revolution is what topics oral history respondents consider ‘speakeable’ and the choices that they may make to remain silent about others. In relation to this, a significant silence that the authors in *Meniti Arti/Sporen vol betekenis* acknowledge is that they could not find any women to speak on record who were formerly ‘*babu*’ or household assistants. The writers note ‘their voices are very rarely heard, talked about or given attention. The research team was confused because they could not find women who worked for the Dutch troops’ (p. 152). The reason for this silence relates to how deep colonial stereotypes about these women in Indonesia and the Netherlands run, and to the shame attached to anyone who worked for the Dutch and to women who may have had sexual relationships with Dutch men.⁹ Sexual violence during the Revolution is another striking silence that is only hinted at in passing in the witness accounts such as the comment from interviewee Penuh Boru Sembiring that ‘every time they entered a village young girls would be the first target’ (p. 161).¹⁰

7 Ravando Lie, ‘FX. Harsono: Kritik dan Kegelisahan Seniman Tionghoa’, *Tirto*, 5 February 2019. <https://tirto.id/fx-harsono-kritik-dan-kegelisahan-seniman-tionghoa-ddvx>; Idem, *A New Newspaper: Sin Po and the Voices of Progressive Chinese Nationalists in Indonesia, 1910-1949* (PhD Thesis; University of Melbourne 2024).

8 Farabi Fakhri, ‘Decolonial Dialogue and the Intricacies of Revolutionary Violence’. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgm-lchr.19568>.

9 On this topic of silences see Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial: Memory Work in “New Order” Java’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42:1 (2000) 4-48. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/>

[001417500002589](https://doi.org/10.1017/001417500002589) and Katharine McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic, ‘“They Call Me Babu”: The Politics of Visibility and Gendered Memories of Dutch Colonialism in Indonesia’, *Women’s History Review* 31:6 (2022) 933-952. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2090709>.

10 For further consideration of the topic of speakability in relation to this history see Ana Dragojlovic, ‘Practising Affect for Haunted Speakability: Triggering Trauma through an Interactive Art Project’, *History & Anthropology* 32:4 (2021) 426-441. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2021.1901287> and Katharine McGregor, *Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia* (University of Wisconsin Press 2023).

Various contributions in this forum raise questions about the politics of history writing in Indonesia and the Netherlands. An interesting section of *Meniti Arti/Sporen vol betekenis* deals with how two topics that are highly charged in each country are alternatively addressed in the other. The authors explain that there is a general dichotomy of emphasis on *bersiap* (get ready!) in the Netherlands and *merdeka* (freedom) in Indonesia, with almost complete silence or highly negative connotations of each term in the other country respectively.¹¹

Yet, there are exceptions to these highly charged understandings of history. In the East Javanese town of Ambarawa, the authors found a teacher who runs a guided tour of a former Japanese internment camp that is now the Kanisius Agricultural and Development Vocational School. What struck the researchers was that the guide used the term '*zaman bersiap*' (the Bersiap-period) to refer to the suffering of the internees. What is more, the guide stated 'these internees were not only harmed by the Japanese. When things were quiet, grenades were often thrown inside the camps by Indonesians' (p. 180). By opening up the history of this site, the guide moved beyond nationalist histories that generally only focus on Indonesian suffering at the hands of the Dutch. Instead the guide emphasized the suffering of Dutch and Indo people inside the camps, especially women, which is a theme commonly narrated in Dutch memory. In the case of the Netherlands, the researchers pointed to the example of the contested Van Heutz monument in Amsterdam, which celebrates a general who was known as a brutal commander during the war to conquer Aceh (1873-1904). They point to many protests over time, including a 1962 action during which someone wrote the word *merdeka* on the monument. The authors note that *merdeka* is a potent and sensitive word in the Netherlands that means more than just freedom because it 'represents the opposing side in a war that the Dutch were not able to win' (p. 183).

Remembrance of the Revolution in the Netherlands in recent years has been shaped by increasingly intense debates about colonial history. One of the most striking and troubling examples of recent developments here is the 2020 action of a group of anonymous people calling themselves Aliansi Merah Putih (The Red and White Alliance), a nationalist reference to the colours of

11 For a discussion of this term and its use in the Netherlands see William H. Frederick, 'Shadows of an Unseen Hand: Some Patterns of Violence in the Indonesian Revolution, 1945-1949', in: Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad (eds.), *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective* (Brill 2002) 145. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004489561_009. For an Indonesian perspective on why the term is associated with an effort to 'erase all the wrongful actions of the Dutch in Indonesia', see Bambang Purwanto, 'Bersiap, Kutukan Kemerderkaan Indonesia yang Menghantui Belanda', *Media Indonesia*, 23 August 2022.

the Indonesian flag, whose members vandalized the Indisch monument in The Hague by writing on the monument with red paint ‘freedom or death,’ ‘we have not yet forgotten’ and ‘dog’ (p. 254). In his commentary on this incident the author Satrio (Ody) Dwicahyo explains that, as an Indonesian, he did not know how to feel about this case. He was disturbed by the vandalism but also aware of the selectivity of Dutch memory and associated amnesia about, for example, the use of former Nazi concentration camps to house Moluccans who moved to the Netherlands after the war, alongside the positioning of Dutch people only as victims in the Indisch monument (p. 254-255). His ruminations on what position to take regarding this action are very reflective, but this also seems like a missed opportunity to discuss ongoing histories of racism and exclusion in the Netherlands that have contributed to a demand for recognition of the suffering and experiences especially of Indo people.¹²

Meniti Arti/Sporen vol betekenis covers many different topics because the authors deliberately tried to avoid presenting a singular history of the Revolution. Yet, this means that the volume as a whole is not that cohesive. It is pitched at a more general reader which makes the work accessible, but it would have been very useful to provide for each chapter a list of further critical reading so those newer to this history could gain a better understanding of the broader context of the viewpoints of individuals, and of where scholarly reflection on each topic sits. Other publication outcomes from the overarching research project are more scholarly in focus, but they are largely empirical histories with far less attention to contemporary debates about memories of this period, which are also of critical importance as a reflection of the legacies of this history.

Decolonial memory

Memories of the Revolution and of broader experiences of the Dutch colonization of Indonesia lay at the heart of the comparative research I have been conducting together with Ana Eclair for the project ‘Submerged Histories: Memory Activism in Indonesia and the Netherlands’ over the last three years. This independent project, funded by the Australian Research Council, developed out of our long-standing research into Indonesian and Dutch memories and in response to rising global activism in relation to memories of colonialism. In this project we analyze how Indonesian and Dutch people engage with memories of colonial history through artistic projects including texts, films and photographic productions as

12 See Esther Captain, ‘Harmless Identities: Representations of Racial Consciousness among Three Generations Indo-Europeans’, in:

Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving (eds.), *Dutch Racism* (Rodopi 2014) 53-69.

well as walking tours, museum interventions and protest movements.¹³ By expanding the forms of engagement with the past away from written histories and oral histories alone, we have observed new creative ways in which people are engaging with colonial history. For our project, we pay particular attention to decolonial memory activism which, unlike most forms of memory activism, is ‘not confined to challenging state narratives alone’ and instead ‘seeks to challenge the ongoing nature of colonialism and colonality and related structures of power.’¹⁴ To think comparatively about the challenges many societies face in dismantling colonialism we created a new research collective called the ‘History, Memory and Decolonial Futures Collective’, which brings together many scholars working on history and memory in diverse colonial contexts.¹⁵

Another key project I have been working on with co-editors Sadiyah Boonstra, Bronwyn Beech Jones, Ken Setiawan and Abdul Wahid is the edited book *Rethinking Histories of Indonesia: Experiencing, Resisting and Renegotiating Coloniality* to be published by ANU Press in 2025. This work, which was funded by small grants from the University of Melbourne, also centres a decolonial approach to memory. This book is connected to the ODGOI project because together with Ken Setiawan I was encouraged by members of the ODGOI team, including Eveline Buchheim, to conceptualise a book project that would respond to the ODGOI project based on the awareness of some team members of their project’s limits. Yet, as we formed a broader editorial team and collected together a range of scholars with very different disciplinary perspectives, we felt that responding to the ODGOI project was too restrictive as an aim. We wanted to do something more ambitious and to remain entirely independent in our focus. *Rethinking Histories of Indonesia* thus took its own direction. A key principle of this book was to take a highly collaborative approach to knowledge production with a series of intense online workshops. In response to the limited scope of the ODGOI project we brought together Indonesian and non-Indonesian scholars to critically reflect on diverse forms of the production, replication and resistance to colonality from the 1880s to the present.


In common with the work *Meniti Arti/Sporen vol betekenis* this research aims to open up new perspectives on colonial history, yet applies a much

13 For some examples of our work see Katharine McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic, ‘Decolonising Memory’, Special Issue of *Inside Indonesia* 155 (2024); Idem, ‘Songs from Another Land: Decolonizing Memories of Colonialism and the Nutmeg Trade’, *Memory Studies* 17:3 (2024) 599–612. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980241242388>; Idem, “‘They Call Me Babu’”.

14 Idem, ‘Songs from Another Land’, 603.

15 History, Memory and Decolonial Futures Collective, <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/school-of-culture-and-communication/our-research/groups-and-resource-centre/history-memory-and-decolonial-futures>.

broader temporal and thematic conceptualization of the scope of colonial history or colonial legacies. Indeed a key oversight of the 'Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950' project is its narrow focus on the independence struggle or Revolution. What is needed now is a far more expansive reconsideration of the deeper and more persistent legacies of colonialism.



Katharine McGregor is Professor in Southeast Asian History in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne and an expert on memory, violence and Indonesian history. She is the author of *Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence* (2023) which won the 2024 NSW Premier's History Prize and co-editor of *Rethinking Histories of Indonesia: Experiencing, Resisting and Renegotiating Coloniality* to be published by ANU Press in 2025. She is currently working on an ARC funded research project called 'Submerged Histories: Memory Activism in Indonesia and the Netherlands'. E-mail: k.mcgregor@unimelb.edu.au.