



# Rethinking the voc: Between Archival Management and Research Practice

## Introduction

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This forum has its origins in the international symposium ‘Rethinking the voc’ organised by the National Archives of the Netherlands in November 2017. The larger part of the voc (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, Dutch East India Company) archives is kept in the National Archives in The Hague, but archival institutions in Jakarta, Cape Town, Colombo, Chennai, Kolkata and London also keep considerable quantities of the administrative papers of the former multinational and colonial power.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand the conference focused on the presentation of new research, based on the analyses of the voc archives, on the other hand on discussing how colonial archives in a time of postcoloniality have to be managed, preserved and presented. The different papers thus dealt with a great variety of themes, from climate history in Cape Town to family law in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka, from Japanese court culture to Dutch bureaucratic cultures of secrecy.<sup>2</sup>

The immediate background of the symposium was twofold. First, the voc archives kept in the Dutch National Archives were being digitised. By then a large part of the voc collection could be consulted online and the archivists aimed to set up dialogues with professional historians to see whether and how digitisation practices had changed research practices and had unlocked new research themes worldwide. Second, the National Archives had launched an exhibition in early 2017 that was praised, but also aroused criticism.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition showcased the most spectacular holdings in the

voc archives, but narrated mainly about governors and poor Dutchmen and other Europeans who were recruited to sail to the East. The East itself was represented through exoticised images of sultans and spices. Visitors, historians and activist expressed their shock and dismay. They argued that very little was explained about the colonial power relations that developed in due course, and that the histories of Asian men and women in and around the Company such as slaves, scribes, sailors or soldiers remained invisible. At present the legacy of colonialism in Dutch culture, museums and archives is fiercely debated in the Netherlands<sup>4</sup> which gave both the exhibition and the conference momentum at a societal, academic and policy level.

The voc archives are diverse and complex. Most readers may think of ship logs, personnel administration and cargo lists, but the voc archives also contain diplomatic correspondence with local rulers, ethnographic and political reflections, and extremely diverse urban and occasionally rural administrations of all the factories and towns that the voc controlled. Sovereignty and jurisdiction claimed by the voc in various regions resulted in the production of tax registers and extensive criminal and civil cases, notarial records and so on. For some regions in Asia the voc archives form a major historical source, besides oral histories or court chronicles.<sup>5</sup>

The symposium presented a sampling of historical research that is currently being done across the globe and in which the voc records, rather than the history of the voc as such, play a central role. The postcolonial archival turn, which raises questions about the relation between power,

1 For a good overview of these archival collections see [www.TANAP.net](http://www.TANAP.net).

2 To name only a few papers presented at the conference 'Rethinking the voc': Nadeera Rupesinghe, 'Exploring the Micro through Dutch Legal Sources'; Stefan Grab, 'Weather Reports from the Cape'; Frederik Cryns and Cynthia Viallé, 'The voc Archives as a Valuable Source for Early Modern Japanese History'; Djoeke van Netten, 'Secret Instructions, Secret Resolutions, Secret Committees and Other not so Secret Secrecy in the voc-Archive'. There were twenty presentations in total, next to a roundtable.

3 Caroline Drieënhuizen was one of the most vocal critics of the exhibition <https://carolinedrieenhuizen.wordpress.com/2017/04/29/de-negentiende-eeuwse-wereld-van-de-voc-tentoonstelling-de-wereld-van-de-voc-in-het-nationaal-archief-in-den-haag-nog-tm-7-januari-2018/>.

4 Public and academic discussion was sparked off by the publication of Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (London 2016); Matthijs Kuipers, 'De strijd om het koloniale verleden. Trauma, herinnering en de "Imperial History Wars" in Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 131:4 (2018) 657-676. <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2018.4.009.KUIP>. See also the four contributions to the forum 'Decolonisation and Colonial Collections: An Unresolved Conflict', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 133:2 (2018) <https://www.bmgn-lchr.nl/595/volume/133/issue/2/>.

5 For extensive information on the voc archives and an overview of inventories and indexes, see: [www.TANAP.net](http://www.TANAP.net). Leonard Andaya's work on Maluku is a fine example of research that combines oral history with the study of the voc archives. Leonard Andaya, *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period* (Honolulu 1993).

ONTDEK DE WERELD VAN DE 



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Op de afbeelding wordt niet afgebeeld: afgevoerd

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One of several posters used to advertise the exhibition 'The world of the Dutch East India Company' at the Dutch National Archives in The Hague, 24 February 2017 – 24 June 2018.

anxiety and knowledge production, seems to have played a less central role in the VOC related historiography thus far. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the VOC records had always been studied from a multinational and multi-topical perspective. Interestingly, Ann Stoler's influential critical approach to the nineteenth-century archives of the Dutch Ministry of Colonies has impacted the study of colonial society in the Dutch East Indies in the nineteenth and twentieth century at large. But this has – strangely enough – not been picked up fundamentally by historians of earlier colonialism under the VOC so far.<sup>6</sup> In general, there remains a strong disconnect between historians who use the VOC records and those who work on the subsequent colonial state. It goes without saying that from the perspective of the Indonesian archipelago, this disconnect makes no sense at all.

The current digitisation of the VOC archives has the great advantage that it increases global accessibility to the archives, but it potentially facilitates a situation where students study VOC scans in separation from their archival context. This new situation makes a critical understanding of the reasoning behind the organisation of the records and practices of reporting even more poignant. At the symposium, a cultural approach to the knowledge contained in the VOC archives was placed at the centre through topics and themes, as well as through discussions of reading strategies. The last session of the conference reconsidered the VOC archives from the perspective of archival management, and was devoted to the question what decolonisation of the VOC archives entails from an institutional point of view.

The contributors to this forum each participated in the symposium and were asked to join the forum because they not only presented their own research but also explicitly reflected on the new historiographic directions and the moral implications of researching, preserving and presenting the VOC archives in this digital age. Early modern historian Manjusha Kuruppath kicks off the forum with a discussion of the place of the VOC and its archives in global history. She shows how the VOC records always played an important role in the study of global interaction, in particular in the field of global economic history and the history of globalisation, but that it has often yielded company-centric histories that reproduced Eurocentric views of history. A global history approach, she argues, should stimulate historians to work with VOC archives, while at the same time questioning persistent Eurocentric visions in global history. Kuruppath sees great potential in the field of comparative history if comparisons include non-European empires or settings. She argues that there is also much to gain in the field of cultural connected history, for instance by

6 Ann Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', *Archival Science* 2:1 (2002) 87-109; Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (New Jersey 2010).

looking at the impact of Asia on Dutch culture, as she demonstrated with her own research on the use of Asian political events by Dutch playwrights, or by studying cultural connections across the Indian Ocean that were fostered through the network of the VOC. The VOC itself, or its specific corporate history, does not necessarily have to play a central role in these histories. Just as economic historians mine data from the VOC records to gain insight into global economic processes, cultural historians could use these archives to retrieve data on global cultural connections. This type of research requires strong linguistic skills, as it ideally involves a close reading of the documents in combination with other contemporary sources in different languages.

Remco Raben, a specialist in colonial and Indonesian history, equally holds a plea for a close reading of the VOC records. However, unlike Kuruppath, he prioritises the local over the global. He shows how reading from the margins, 'eccentric reading' as he calls it, of the VOC archives can actually bring us very close to the experiences of people who lived around Dutch power centers such as Batavia. Colonial visions expressed in the VOC archives, through for example the categorisation of ethnic groups, often blur historical understanding of local societies and actors. To illustrate this point Raben revisits court records and interrogations related to the Chinese massacre of 1740 that were produced by the criminal court of Batavia. According to Raben, when we read this type of material we should be wary not to overestimate the sense of control and regulation that these records breathe, but rather look beyond the purpose for which these documents were written. In the case of the Chinese massacre of 1740, Raben analyses what people were doing during and after the massacre, and what they conveyed about their family, business, and place of abode. Decolonising the archive in his view means recognising and taking distance from the colonial reasoning that produced the archive and to look beyond the discourse of the coloniser and explore what the archives equally convey about, for example, local daily life. 'Beyond the archival grain,' to use Raben's own words.

Can archives as institutions contribute to such rethinking? Archival theorist Michael Karabinos discusses the VOC archives from the perspective of archival management and focuses on the problem of decolonising a state archive in the postcolonial Netherlands. The roundtable on this topic at the conference in which Karabinos participated turned out to be a lively and somewhat confusing debate in which participants did not give clear definitions of archives, as they used interpretations of the archive as a physical archive and as cultural memory interchangeably. In his article, Karabinos highlights the importance of clarity in this debate, and sets out to discuss examples of potential acts of decolonisation in which digitisation and accessibility can play a crucial albeit limited role. Karabinos raises doubt about the feasibility of decolonisation of the archives by discussing the complexity and practical difficulties that the process entails. While Karabinos certainly sees the institution of the archive as the formal actor in this process, he

equally stresses that historical research plays an important role in both fully understanding the structure of information and in making the unseen visible. The unseen could refer to the stories of individuals, whose lives are bound up in the archives as a consequence of their interaction with the VOC, as Raben discusses in this forum, or to the processes of global cultural interaction that surface through a close reading of the sources, as Kuruppath argues.


Jos Gommans, South Asia specialist and global historian, takes a different stance. He has reworked his initial opening speech at the conference into the closing paper of this forum, highlighting the relevance of the VOC archives for the study of Asian history and reviewing the historical production on the region over the past decades. He is highly critical of the potential influence of present-day identity politics and activism on historical research in the VOC archives, which, he argues, can only result in a shallow understanding of history. Gommans emphasises that the VOC was not a monolith, but consisted of men of highly diverse backgrounds who acted and contributed to the shaping of the VOC in different places and times, and that we should keep this in mind while reading the archives. He therefore pleads for, what he calls, an empathic approach by which historians show awareness of the cultural and temporal distance between themselves and their subjects of research. Such cultural sensitivity will enable them to bring to light the diverse actors who together comprised the world of the VOC and look at cultural transfers in all directions and at individual agency in the making of this world.

So where does this forum leave us? The four contributors each take a different cue to the question of rethinking the VOC archives. In the view of Gommans, this requires empathy and a localised focus on individual actors. For Kuruppath, this means decentering the VOC in a global connected history, which urges historians to reflect on their own position as well as on the sources they work with and on a good understanding of what the archives contain, what they lack and why so. This is not an easy task, as the third contribution illustrates. Raben emphasises ‘eccentric reading’ to highlight and understand the lives of the millions of people who one way or the other encountered the VOC. Such histories do not surface automatically; ‘forcing the archives’ is how Nira Wickramasinghe aptly describes this laborious process.<sup>7</sup> ‘Rethinking the VOC’ is an ongoing process that involves archivists and historians across the globe. All the authors in this forum agree that decolonising the VOC is an important and ongoing process. However, there is less agreement on how decolonisation can or should be realised. Michael Karabinos argues that archival management should answer to the societal criticism and take the lead in decolonising the archives, while on the other end of the spectrum Gommans warns against the influence of identity politics

7 Marina Carter and Nira Wickramasinghe, ‘Forcing the Archive: Involuntary Migrants “of Ceylon” in the Indian Ocean World of the

18th-19th Centuries’, *South Asian History and Culture* 9:2 (2018) 194-206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2018.1446797>.

on historical research and archival management. This forum thus remains inconclusive about the exact direction the rethinking of the VOC archives should take, but rather contributes to an ongoing conversation between archivists, historians and activists.<sup>8</sup>



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8 Thomas Dresscher, 'Het dekoloniseren van archiefbeheer en historisch onderzoek in Nederland', *Archiefblad* 122:9 (2018) 14-19.