Decolonisation in Dutch Archives

Defining and Debating

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On 23 and 24 November 2017 the symposium 'Rethinking the voc? Old genres, new trends in research and analysis' took place at the National Archives in The Hague, organised by the archive in cooperation with the Leiden University Institute for History on the occasion of the 'The world of the Dutch East India Company' [De Wereld van de voc] exhibition at the National Archives. This symposium ended with a round table about the state of the decolonisation of Dutch archives. As a participant in this debate, I focused on the question what exactly was meant by the terms decolonisation and archives, as well as the Dutch-centred approach. In this article I look at the usage of these terms and different actions, such as digitisation and re-evaluating archives, that are typically discussed in debates about the practice of decolonising archives.

Op 23 en 24 november 2017 vond bij het Nationaal Archief in Den Haag het symposium 'Rethinking the voc? Old genres, new trends in research and analysis' plaats. Dit symposium was georganiseerd door het Nationaal Archief in samenwerking met het Instituut voor Geschiedenis van de Universiteit Leiden, ter gelegenheid van de voc-tentoonstelling in het Nationaal Archief. Het symposium werd afgesloten met een rondetafeldiscussie over de stand van zaken van de dekolonisatie van archieven in Nederland. Tijdens deze discussie concentreerde ik me op de precieze betekenis van de termen 'dekolonisatie', 'archieven' en een 'Nederlandse benadering'. In dit artikel ga ik dieper in op het gebruik van deze begrippen en de bijbehorende acties, zoals de digitalisering en het opnieuw evalueren van archieven, die in de verschillende discussies over het dekoloniseren van archieven aan de orde komen.

Archives, especially state-owned archives, sit at the centre of a debate on inequality in contemporary society. As evidential records of a colonialist state, the idea of 'decolonising archives' has reached the point where it can even be debated in the symposium 'Rethinking the VOC' held at the National Archives of the Netherlands.[1]

When tasked with introducing the question for the final roundtable of this symposium, namely 'What is the current state of decolonisation of archive management and historical research in the Netherlands', I was initially struck by three words: decolonisation, archive, and the Netherlands. All three of these terms lead directly into three basic questions. What do we mean by 'decolonisation'? What is the 'archive'? And furthermore, can this process emanate from the Netherlands? We can further ask what can be done from the Netherlands to facilitate the de/restructuring of colonial recordkeeping systems without reinforcing colonial recordkeeping structures? I would ask where are we on this never-ending journey? Have we been moving in the right direction, and where can we go from here?

While I support actions that can be labelled as 'decolonising the archive', such as highlighting marginalised stories and widening the scope of our definition of the word archive, I still believe the usage of the term needs further evaluation.[2] I feel the term 'decolonise' is too heavy and powerful for the archival institution of the land of the colonisers to wave around in this conversation. Maybe we should view decolonisation, for lack of a better word, not as a fixed physical end result, but as an ongoing attitude that must be held by those dedicated to altering the colonial structures within, in this particular case, archives.

There will be no day where an archival institution can say, 'we have successfully decolonised'. Or, at least, I would be sceptical of any such declaration. Decolonisation is – to appropriate the phrase that Australian archivist Sue McKemmish used to describe records themselves – 'always in a process of becoming'.[3] It is ongoing and cannot be described in the past tense. Archival institutions can always do more. I view this term, decolonisation,

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1   For this paper 'National Archives' with no other qualifiers will refer to the National Archives of the Netherlands.

2   See, for instance, Ana Fota, 'What's Wrong With This Diorama? You Can Read All About It', *New York Times*, 20 March 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/arts/design/natural-history-museum-diorama.html. The positive step of re-calibrating and re-evaluating the historical diorama presenting the Lenape Native Americans meeting with Peter Stuyvesant came from protests by the group 'Decolonize This Place'.

But the question remains: is the diorama now decolonised? Will it ever not be, and will it ever not be depicting something entirely colonial?

3   McKemmish is not referring to colonial archives in this case, but states that records in general are always being re-evaluated, re-used, and re-created; records are never only in the past, but part of an ongoing process. Sue McKemmish, 'Are Records Ever Actual?' in: Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott (eds.), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (Clayton 1994) 200.

as a journey without end, a goal that we will always strive for. Along the way there are checkpoints, actions, and events that can move us forward. I will discuss these issues below. These actions include not only the most obvious, such as the repatriation of displaced archives, but also the potentials that come from the digitisation of the archive such as the VOC's, the impact of reading the archive for previously marginalised stories, and the work of artists and activists that call into question our old narratives for understanding the past. These actions are vital to the telling of histories that have previously been overlooked. They represent progress in the long quest of slightly undoing the heavy burden of the colonial past. These are not ends, however. If we are going to use such a powerful term, then there should not be a satisfaction with the state of the decolonisation of the archive. It can always be moved forward.

The archive as institution and as metaphor

The papers that were presented at the 'Rethinking the VOC' symposium highlighted how colonisation is still relevant today, and the roundtable discussed the many artists, archivists, activists, and researchers who show us the remnants and impact of colonisation and its role in our contemporary society. Given the work and research background of the roundtable participants, we each came with our own definitions of 'decolonisation' and 'archives'. The larger 'cultural archive' – as defined by Gloria Wekker as being 'located in many things, in the way we think, do things, and look at the world, in what we find (sexually) attractive, in how our affective and rational economies are organized and intertwined. Most important, it is between our ears and in our hearts and souls' – was discussed, and the roundtable tackled 'the archive' in the rather broad, conceptual sense where everything can be an archive.[4] Despite this rather general approach, the focus of the symposium and this forum was the specific archive of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (the Dutch East India Company, VOC) in particular. I will be conscious of this fact and will try not to stray too far from the VOC archive in particular, as audience comments after the roundtable revealed a tendency to hear 'decolonising the archive' as 'decolonising the VOC archive'. Even when not discussing the VOC archive specifically, I will focus on archives defined as the records created by an organisation in the process of their business, and the institutions where such records are held. A more encompassing conversation on our larger cultural archive deserves to be held, but given the theme of the conference, the other papers in this forum, and my own area of research, I will stick to a discussion about the decolonisation of an archive such as the VOC archive.

4   Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham 2016) 20.

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Letters and papers sent from the Dutch East Indies to the Gentlemen XVII (the seventeen member board of the Dutch East India Company) and the Chamber of Amsterdam 1614-1794. Second book, sequence 1634, © National Archives, The Hague, The Dutch East India Company (VOC), access number 1.04.02, inventory number 1110. http://proxy.handle.net/10648/ba9a9ebe-89e6-6501-f1d6-0a8b5f283a7a.

To explain quickly the VOC archives, pieces are held in the United Kingdom (primarily records gained when the British conquered Dutch-controlled lands), Sri Lanka (from the Dutch Ceylon era), India (from VOC settlements in southern India), South Africa, Malaysia (what I term VOC-adjacent records created by the Dutch Reformed Church in Malacca), Indonesia (records created by the VOC there as well as those from other settlements and sent to the VOC Asian headquarters) and the Netherlands (those records created or received by the Dutch offices of the company), which was the focus of this symposium.[5] The international scope of the VOC thus further makes any talk of 'decolonising' more complicated, as it is not a simple act that can be performed in one place at one time. To add even further to this, the predecessor to the National Archives of Indonesia was the Dutch-founded *Landsarchief*, and the National Archives of Malaysia which hold the aforementioned church records was founded after independence under the auspices of UNESCO with former *Landsarchief* director Frans Verhoeven as the de facto director.[6]

The focus of the roundtable on archives management was important to me. So far the debate in Dutch cultural institutions regarding their decolonisation has focused on museums, such as the 'Words Matter' publication from the Research Center for Material Culture and the Van Abbemuseum's 'Deviant Practice' and 'Queering the Collection' programmes.[7] In these discussions the theoretical concept of 'the archive' is ever-present, often without discussion of archival institutions or the input of archivists. Though in the past it may have been the case that archives and archivists were lagging behind in the conversation, this is changing. As archivist Michelle Caswell put it, '"the archive" is not an archives'.[8] By this she means that the theoretical concept of 'the archive' is not equal to an archives, and if a conversation on archives will take place, archivists and their unique expertise on recorded information must play a role. It is therefore worthy to note that this roundtable both took place at an archives, included archivists on the panel, and resulted in an article in the Dutch Archivists Association newsletter *Archievenblad*.

5   More specifics of archival holdings can be found at: http://www.tanap.net/content/archives/introduction.cfm.

6   Michael Karabinos, 'The Djogdja Documenten: The Dutch-Indonesian Relationship Following Independence through an Archival Lens', *Information & Culture* 50:3 (2015) 372-391. https://doi.org/10.7560/IC50304.

7   See: https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/sites/default/files/2018-06/WordsMatter_Nederlands.PDF, https://www.materialculture.nl/en/events/words-matter, https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/research-programme-deviant-practice/, https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/collection/queering/about/.

8   Michelle Caswell, '"The Archive" Is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies', *Reconstruction* 16:1 (2016) https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk.

Decolonising the VOC archives: acts and processes

What is becoming clearer, and more of a consensus, is that decolonisation is a process. It did not end at the transfer of sovereignty or the closure of a VOC *factorij*. It is ongoing. This is true of colonial archives as well. Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, former director of the Namibia Library and Archives Service, points out in her work on the archives of Namibia that 'a colonial situation (…) extends beyond the formal independence of a country, because the colonial archival heritage remains and its character is not automatically changed by the country's new legal status'.[9] Long after nominal decolonisation, these archives remained colonial through both their content and the colonial structure of the recordkeeping systems.

To move in any positive direction in the decolonisation process we must have a strong working knowledge of the colonial system, especially of the colonial recordkeeping and information creation systems. To know the system is to know whether your work is deconstructing it or reinforcing it. Engaging in research in a decolonial mindset is assisted by understanding how colonial administrations structured and created knowledge. In that sense I agree with Jos Gommans, who states in this forum that more research on the VOC is needed in order to decolonise. We must understand the colonial to make it decolonial. In this case, it involves an understanding of the recordkeeping system as developed by the VOC. The organisation of information is integral to power structures. Tearing them down means knowing how each piece fits in with the next. But what does this look like? And is it in this context necessary that the research be purely academic in nature?

Does the 'de' in 'decolonisation' denote undoing? If that is the case, there is nothing we can do in the archive that will completely undo the acts of the colonial past, but we can impact the present and future. If the word decolonise is to be used, the colonial that we are attempting to 'de' must first be completely recognised. This is a line of thinking that I tried to develop in a 2017 project at the Van Abbemuseum which sought to lay out the colonial foundations of the museum through the cigar and tobacco business deals of benefactor Henri van Abbe.[10] In using the museum's archive, and other archives in the Netherlands and Indonesia, I traced the supply chain of the tobacco that would eventually lead to the museum's founding from the fields of Sumatra through the auction houses of Amsterdam to the factories around

9   Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, *Recordkeeping and Missing "Native Estate" Records in Namibia: An Investigation of Colonial Gaps in a Post-colonial National Archive* (PhD dissertation, University of Tampere 2015) 21-22.

10   Michael Karabinos, 'Here or There: Locating the Karel I Archive', in: Nick Aikens (ed.), *Deviant Practice* (Van Abbemuseum 2018) See: https://vanabbemuseum.nl/fileadmin/files/Onderzoek/Deviant_Practice/4788VAM_Deviant_Practice_def_HR_spreads_2.pdf.

Eindhoven. That this contemporary art museum was also a colonial museum was necessary for me to show so that any discussion on decolonising the museum could reflect on the pervasiveness of the colonial. A museum, archive, or any cultural institution has to acknowledge its colonial past in order to make its rhetoric on decolonisation carry weight.

Similarly, in previous research I noted the strong visual appeal of records seized by the Dutch military intelligence forces from various Indonesian independence groups, including the Republican government, during the Indonesian Revolution of 1945-1949.[11] While this archive dates from a few centuries after the height of the VOC, it helps reveal just how full the National Archives of the Netherlands is with material from Indonesia. To expand its use and usership, perhaps an artist residency programme of young Indonesian artists could be instituted at the archives, or a website highlighting the museum-quality images at their disposal.[12] Such actions would certainly re-create and re-contextualise the Indonesian archives at the National Archives in The Hague, and would provide an initial step towards dismantling or at least acknowledging existent power structures in this archive.

For colonial archives the colonial is in both the content and context of the records. The VOC archive is inherently a colonial archive with a structure that mirrors the organisation that created it. Remco Raben's call in this forum to reactivate the VOC archive and use it to tell Asian histories is, without a doubt, a necessity, and one which can lead to disrupting the power structure of the archive. However, failure to recognise the colonial structure and connections between records risks, in my opinion, solidifying and further engraining the colonial power in these records. Focusing on the content – even while reading it against or even beyond the grain – must not come at the expense of overlooking the grain itself. That context exists no matter how we read the content. We must understand the VOC as a recordkeeping culture, and determine why and how they recorded, and what led them to consider certain things worth recording (what Dutch archivist Eric Ketelaar termed archivalisation). Lose sight of it and the colonial structure will exist unimpeded, still guiding us to certain records, still guiding the structure of what and how we read the records. We must recognise the colonial context of these archives if the goal is to disengage the colonial power structures.

In the specific case of the VOC, it was a massive organisation, unprecedented in scale or scope. Its archive, in turn, reflects this image of the company – or, at least, a sliver of it, as South African archivist Verne Harris

11 Michael Karabinos, 'Indonesian National Revolution Records in the National Archives of the Netherlands', in: James Lowry (ed.), *Displaced Archives* (London 2017) 60-73. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315577609-5.

12 See, for instance, the Queensland State Archives 'Creative in Residence' programme.

reminds us.[13] It is a highly organised archive, with interconnected records and a structure appropriate for a company of such a size. It also reflects the VOC in other ways as well. As with any archive, it is biased towards those writing and organising it. It is biased towards the power of the creator. It amplifies certain voices while squelching others. It is not neutral, it is not objective, it is not an unbiased account of 'what happened'. It is only what was recorded, and what was kept. It was recorded, and kept, by people. These people had an agenda when creating the records. An archive performs for its creator, and this is the archive we are left with.

American scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang make a point against the use of 'decolonisation' as a metaphor. They remind us that decolonisation is an extremely physically violent and politically shifting act. The decolonisation of Indonesia resulted in four years of war, hundreds of thousands of casualties and deaths, displaced persons and generations torn from their birthplace, lingering violence in West Papua, Aceh, and the Maluku Islands, and other political instability. To think we can equally decolonise the archive through a conference or a few projects overlooks this past and turns the use of the term decolonisation in this discussion into a metaphor. As Tuck and Yang state:

> When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym.[14]

To 'our societies and schools' we can add 'our archives'. Though the addition of 'our' does lead to us question: whose archives are the VOC archives anyway? Can the Netherlands speak of decolonising 'our' archive when it belongs to so many that UNESCO has labeled it 'memory of the world'? That is why, in addition to 'decolonisation' and 'archive', 'the Netherlands' was the third aspect of the initial question that stood out to me. It was not about decolonising (Dutch-created and organised) archives in Indonesia, Suriname, or elsewhere, but those here, in the Netherlands, including those of the VOC. When a state institution wants to talk about decolonising the archive, as a metaphor, it overshadows the suffering and violence of the past, former and recent.

Decolonisation stemming from a state institution also risks actions being implemented through a colonial lens. This was recently behind the name change of a long-term research programme led by multiple Dutch research institutions. Originally titled 'Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950' the word 'Independence' was added in an attempt to

13 Verne Harris, 'The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa', *Archival Science* 2 (2002) 63-86. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435631.

14 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1:1 (2012) 3.

remove the critique that the research was too heavily focused on the Dutch perspective.[15]

The impossibility of decolonising a globally scattered archive

Decolonisation sounds like a valiant goal, and there are hopefully few in our profession who would want to be seen as colonisers rather than decolonisers. But that is one of my reasons against using the term in relation to archives. There is the potential for very little to be done, only to have it publicised as 'decolonising an archive' when it does not amount to much. Who should determine when/if an archive is decolonised? What should decolonising an archive look like? Are we meant to discuss the possibility of shipping the VOC archive in the Netherlands to Indonesia? Would we split up the archive to send records related to, among others, South Africa, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, to their respective countries? Destroying the integrity of the archive does not seem like decolonising, nor something that anyone at the National Archives would consider. So is digitisation always the answer? What has been done and what more can be done?

Though the focus of Tuck and Yang is on North American settler colonialism and decolonisation, their article does draw attention to the differences between decolonisation and social justice, as well as how the metaphor hides the 'unsettling' reality of decolonisation that has yet to take place in Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere.[16] Does making 'decolonising the archive' a metaphor in the Dutch context hide the reality that decolonisation as the transfer of sovereignty of Indonesia required bloodshed and a four year-long war, and further violence in the 1960s and 1990s as the impact of colonialism and decolonisation as a process continued to rear its head? Or is the European context different enough from settler colonies to allow us the ability to speak of 'decolonising the archive' as a metaphor without considering those of stolen lands in North America and Oceania? To fully 'decolonise' in North America is to return the land to indigenous groups. Anything else that is called 'decolonisation' is making strides in social justice. Noble and necessary, but not truly the decolonisation of the land. The history of the Netherlands is not that of a settler colony, so 'decolonisation' looks different. However, I believe that despite the difference between settler colonial history and the colonial history of Indonesia and the Netherlands the problems of the metaphor persist. While it is not directly about giving back land rights, decolonisation is still all-encompassing. Can

15   'Programme Name Amendment', *Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950* https://www.ind45-50.org/en/programme-name-amendment. Accessed 17 March 2019.

16   Tuck and Yang, 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor', 20.

we decolonise archives alone, divorced from all other institutions or forms of decolonise that can take place?

Given all the ways of viewing decolonisation, it seems unlikely anyone, let alone an archival institution, can 'decolonise' in a way that will satisfy the definitions of everyone. And that is another danger of the metaphor. Seven people on a panel discussing the decolonisation of archives will have seven definitions and seven frames of mind to bring to the conversation. Agreements can turn into disagreements based on word choice, and where we would all seemingly agree – that we should decolonise – might see each person disagreeing on what that means and what should be done. Perhaps it is a matter of semantics, or perhaps I am taking decolonisation too literally, and should instead be focusing on how the conversation is moving forward in relation to decolonising archival research.

Digitisation: a move forward?

In her research on the archives of the United States Virgin Islands, archivist and scholar Jeannette Bastian found that the case 'suggests that the records created within a community – even those created by a colonial regime – are central to that community's ability to fully understand its past and construct a strong collective memory'.[17] Access to the records, rather than custody, becomes paramount. Given that the 'Rethinking the voc' symposium was held in recognition of the digitisation of the voc archive held by the National Archives, it seems appropriate to discuss access in relation to digitisation.

A completely digitised collection has, without question, increased access to the archive. It is not free of its own problems, however. There are still paleographic, linguistic, and economic barriers to complete access to the archives, as they are difficult to read, in a language not spoken by people in the societies they record, and require internet access to view. Furthermore, Dutch archivist Charles Jeurgens reminds us that the context provided by historical recordkeeping systems is vulnerable to being lost in mass digitisation and the focus on individual pages over interconnected records. He warns that by having to interact with records through an interface that there are 'consequences not only for the accessibility and reproducibility of the information, but also for matters such as how information is ordered and the sustainability of the documents'.[18] None of this should be taken to mean that archives should not be digitised, but rather that digitisation does not resolve

17   Jeannette Bastian, 'Taking Custody, Giving Access: A Postcustodial Role for a New Century', *Archivaria* 53 (2004) 80.

18   Charles Jeurgens, 'The Scent of the Digital Archive: Dilemmas with Archive Digitisation', BMGN – *Low Countries Historical Review* 128:4 (2013) 33. http://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.9348.

all of our concerns, or solve all of our problems. Digitisation is a step, if done correctly, but digitisation alone is not 'decolonising the archive'.

With digitisation projects we are also faced with a new iteration of the power of archives in the form of funding. Who pays for mass digitisation and who decides what papers are scanned, and which are scanned and made accessible first? Given that the VOC archive is not constrained by modern national borders in both scale and physical custody, what role does money from the Dutch government or Dutch NGOs play in 'decolonising' this archive? In Namibia, Namhila notes that 'the digitization of registers of the Dutch Reformed Church in Namibia (NGK) by the international church-based organization FamilySearch is under way', while also pointing out that the NGK was historically whites-only.[19] The Surinamese *slavenregisters* are physically in Suriname but their digital access is being assisted by the National Archives of the Netherlands. This cooperation is another great step. In Indonesia, the VOC archives held by the National Archives of Indonesia have been digitised by the Netherlands-based Corts Foundation. In such cases it must be asked: who owns the digital copies? Who determines access? Is the content of the archive becoming decolonised, while the context stays colonised? Is there a difference, and does it even matter as long as there is access? And what about those without highspeed internet access? I ask these questions to remind us that any discussion on 'decolonising the archive' leaves lingering questions.

If digitisation does not lead to increased access – and by this I mean beyond just physically offering digitised scans – nothing changes. Colonial archives would simply become digitised colonial archives. Archival descriptions and inventories can be written in various languages, with complemental descriptions being written by impacted communities. While projects have been started, increased cooperation between the various archives with VOC material would also benefit everyone, as it is not the National Archives alone who can declare any sort of 'decolonisation'.

A recent project at the Danish National Archives has made the archive of the Danish West Indies (now United States Virgin Islands) available online to the public.[20] Funding came from both the Danish Ministry of Culture, as well as a major Danish cultural foundation. While a massive undertaking of five million pages, the project's website notes that records related to the islands would have also been created in other government departments and are thus scattered across the Danish National Archives. Given the size of the archive, the full scale and location of these other records are unknown, and they are not part of the digitisation project. Furthermore, due to the sale of the islands to the United States in 1917, the United States National Archives and Records Administration holds relevant Danish-era records in

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19 Namhila, *Recordkeeping and Missing "Native Estate" Records in Namibia*, 226.

20 See for the archive of the Danish West Indies: https://www.virgin-islands-history.org/en/about/therecords/.

Washington DC. These records, too, are outside of the digitisation project. The double colonisation of these islands further muddles our idea of decolonising the archive. Could Denmark 'decolonise' this archive while the United States continues to hold political power over the islands and their archive? As Manjusha Kuruppath points out in this forum, the global histories of empires are interconnected, and perhaps we need to reflect more on how their decolonisation is similarly connected.

Any chance at 'decolonisation' must be precipitated by non-colonial actions, especially if it is to originate from the Netherlands, as in the case of the VOC archive. To be decolonial, a digitisation programme must be non-colonial. Cross-national workshops and research projects must be non-colonial. In being non-colonial, various actors can make decisions that take us in the right direction. For historians, sources beyond the Dutch/VOC archives can be consulted; the colonial structure of the VOC archive and the relationship between records can be better understood in order to dismantle the colonial. Historians, artists, activists, and other researchers can use the colonial archives in non-colonial ways, re-activating the archive and allowing the silenced voices to speak. Displaced and seized archives can be returned; new non- and post-custodial models of custody can be implemented for archives of joint heritage.[21]

With the VOC archives spanning three continents, does ownership or custody still need to be relevant today? Should we instead only try to imagine it as its conceptual whole – but even this is something that never existed in one location in the first place? With more of it being digitised in the Netherlands and in Indonesia, can we begin experimenting with its digital structure? How was it organised colonially, and can that structure be both preserved for history, while being picked apart to reveal other histories?

A further part of my unease with the term decolonise in the context of 'decolonising the archive' is the definitiveness of it all. It is an end. If an archive claims it has been decolonised, it runs the risk of the institution 'moving on' to the next project, feeling satisfied and neglecting underlying issues. Archives must evolve, as should our experiences with them, and the process must be ongoing. So 'the state of the decolonisation of archive management in the Netherlands' is in no way a positive one. It is also nowhere near anything resembling an end. We can never undo the colonial that is so deeply rooted in something like a colonial archive, and the term decolonise presents an end that will never fully remove the pains of the past. 'Decolonising an archive' sounds like a project with a time frame. Archives must always keep working, always be pushing forward.

21   Karabinos, 'Indonesian National Revolution
      Records', 60-73.

There are questions that any institution – such as an archive – that chooses to invoke the word 'decolonise' must ask itself. Why does it want to frame its work as decolonisation? What does it mean by the term? How far is it willing to go to achieve this goal? How often is it willing to listen, and who will it listen to? Does decolonisation have budgetary constraints?

Conclusion

Given the National Archives' role as a state archive, it holds immense power, including in this debate over 'decolonising the archive'. The National Archives of the Netherlands must work – with researchers, with other archives, with marginalised communities, with people whose 'memory' was never deposited in their collections – and truly listen. It must view decolonisation not as something to budget for and address this year or next, but to alter its mindset and have make fundamental shifts. It must see everything that it has done, and is doing, to be merely a small step, and always aiming for more. Digitisation is a step, now access should be even further increased by linking related records or from user-generated content. Convening the symposium that lead to the articles in this forum was a step, now let's continue with it. What new ideas have emerged in the past year and a half, where can the work go from here? We know decolonisation, in any form, is a process, and that process with the archives is still in its early stages.

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