

Writing on colonialism as a history of knowledge^{*}

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It cannot be just a coincidence. It is of a high symbolic meaning that this event is taking place on November 10, Indonesia's Heroes' Day. November 10 seventy years ago marked the peak of the battle of Surabaya. For Indonesia, it was a heroic moment. It was the first battle to defend Indonesia's independence that had just been proclaimed three months before.

My early impression about November 10 is a simplified drama of three scenes. Scene #1: Hotel Oranje with Dutch flag fluttering on its tower's pole. Red white blue. Then, heroic republican youngmen climbed up and tore out the blue part and so it became red and white, the flag of Indonesia. Scene #2: The Dutch 'hid behind' the British troop that landed in the harbour. They marched in to the town. There were open fires and one Indonesian youth shot dead Brigadir General Mallaby, again, in a heroic action. Scene #3: as a retaliation, the British launched a massive attack on Surabaya, with bombardments, artilleries, advanced weapons on the British side. The Indonesians had only a few guns taken from the Japanese and sharpened bamboos. A kind of battle between David and Goliath. Meanwhile, our hero Bung Tomo, through his radio rethoric, inflamed the youths to fight the sacred battle to defend our motherland. His rhetoric and his image is vivid and still being copied: his eyes glared, his hand clenched and he exclaimed: Allahu Akbar!

It cannot be just a coincidence that we are having our event here in the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam) in the evening of November 10, in the year Indonesia celebrates its 70th anniversary of independence.[†] If it is just a coincidence, we are to give this synchronicity a meaning. And the meaning we are attributing to it will nonetheless contain irony and dilemma, just like this one: The commemoration of the Indonesia's Day of the Heroes always implies the stereotyping of the Dutch as an archenemy.

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There will always be a dilemma in every presentation of a story or history, outside or inside a museum. This evening we are presenting to ourselves and to the world a beautiful book on the Rijksmuseum's collections that relate to or originated from the archipelago that is now Indonesia. The collections, of course, come with a colonial context. We can also call this context as 'shared history'.

Looking back into the colonial time, the Rijksmuseum is not older than Rumphius' wonder chamber far faraway in Ambon. Rumphius was a botanist and his wonder chamber of floral specimens is believed to be the first museum ever built in the East Indies (1662). Unfortunately, nothing of it remains today. If we are not pretty sure about its factuality, we can talk about other museums as well. The Rijksmuseum was developed in the century that also see the establishment of prominent museums and libraries in the Indies, among others: the Batavia Society of Arts and Science's museum and library, and the Bogor Museum of Zoology. I was born in Bogor and spent my childhood there, so I keep in my heart a special nostalgia about the museum, the herbarium, and the botanical garden. Now, it is even more amazing for me to realize that *my* modest Bogor zoology museum came from the same era as did this majestic building of the Rijksmuseum. This splendid

^{*} Speech text for the presentation of *Bitter Spice: Indonesia and The Netherlands From 1600* (Harm Stevens, Rijksmuseum-Vantilt), Rijksmuseum 10 November 2015.

[†] To add another coincidence, in the same day, the People's Tribunal against the Indonesian government regarding the 1965-66 atrocities began in The Hague.

construction, design by Pierre Cuypers, was opened for the first time in 1885. The Bogor Museum of Zoology was set up just nine years after, in 1894. They came from the same spirit of the time: the spirit of the Age of Reason. When I say the Age of Reason I don't mean a strict philosophy periodization if any. I think of a broader definition which covers both a period as well as a strain of thought and praxis that is characterized by its optimism and glorification of reason. As a strain of thought it covers rationalism to modernism. As a time-frame it spans from the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Curiously or not, it coincides with the Dutch colonization of the East Indies archipelago. In fact, colonialism is one of the manifestations of the spirit The Age Reason.

It was an exciting period in *human* history, marked by curiosities, discoveries, inventions, explorations—if we are to use positive words. Nowadays, with the advance of critical thinking, we can also describe the same spirit of the time with negative words such as objectification, occupation, expropriation, exploitation. These example of words may even be taken as pairs: your curiosity is fulfilled by objectifying others; your discovery is an occupation of the other's land, your invention leads to an expropriation of other's property, your exploration is at the same time a beginning of an exploitation. Those critical words will turn us off from the excitement of the Age of Reason. But, let us forget about political correctness and critical thinking for a while. Let us imagine the excitement of the Age of Reason:

Explorations and discoveries of the new world! The expansion of the horizon of the knowledge of men! (eventhough at that time it meant European men) The social prestige and intellectual satisfaction upon obtaining new wonders, artifacts or specimens! On top of gold, glory, and probably gospel, it is the excitement of knowledge, the joy of arts and science—like the name of this society: The Batavia Society of Arts and Science. It is this joy of arts and science that drove the acquisition of most of the ethnographic or anthropological collections in the Rijksmuseum, Tropenmuseum, or many other world museums.

It is the joy on the side of the explorer. Not necessarily equal on the side of those being explored. Meanwhile we are talking about a shared history. If this is a shared history, how then it is felt by the other side?

The writer of this beautiful book, Harm Steven, can give us a good alternative illustration to start. When, early this year, he was involved in the return of Diponegoro's staff to Indonesia (it could be said that he was in fact the man behind the return), he was surprised by a stark difference of attitude toward the concerned staff between the Dutch and the Indonesian counterparts in general. Dutch curators, scholars, or general audience will generally take an artifact as an object, valued for its artistic or historical quality. On the other side, the Indonesian minister himself called Diponegoro's staff a nation's '*pusaka*', or a nation's heirloom with spiritual value. The word '*pusaka*' always implies a spiritual value.

During the exhibiton of the staff in Galeri Nasional, Jakarta, there was a paranormal debate regarding the authenticity of the staff. One paranormal said that the staff didn't radiate energy, so it must not be authentic. This kind of discussion is unlikely to happen openly in the Netherlands or Europe. Some of the collection would have been regarded as relics or *pusaka*. They would be respected and entitled for cleansing rituals performed by special men on special days. The whole idea of a ritual can be beautiful and exotic, but don't be affected too easy. Some museum connected to the royal families in Java were known for the disappearance of their collection, not by supernatural power, but for being secretly sold to other parties. The end buyer could be people who also regard the relics for their spiritual power. For a modern point of view this is rather confusing. However, when spirituality has value, it will have value in the pragmatic level too.

Moreover, Indonesia is not only comprises only the traditional communities that suppose to be close to mystique. Let us think about the rational Indonesians. How will this European joy of arts and science that have brought in the collections from Dutch East Indies to the Rijksmuseum be perceived by a modern Indonesian, say, for example like me? I was born into a Javanese family but we don't belong to a community that keeps a *pusaka*, let alone performe rituals to the spirits that dwell in the relics or in nature eventhough we don't deny their possible existence. My mother converted from the Javanese belief to Catholicism when she was teenager, not long after the proclamation of independence. It is at that time a kind of independent conversion to modernization. Since then she expanded her horizon beyond traditional boundaries, became a teacher and kept the job for the first decade of her marriage, though at the end of the day she resumed the role of a traditional housewife and a mother of five. The family had moved from Yogyakarta to Bogor and I was born there.

Unlike Yogyakarta which is special because it is in the heart of Java, Bogor is the opposite. Just 60 km to the south of Jakarta, it is basically built by the Dutch. It doesn't have a *keraton* or a palace for the *sultans* or *rajas*. Instead, it has a European style white mansion that is now regarded as a state palace, located in the middle of a beautiful vast garden where spotted deers graze peacefully. Moreover, it has the botanical garden Hortus Botanicus Bogoriense, the Herbarium Bogoriense and the Museum Zoologicum Bogoriense. It also host the agriculture schools. It's a colonial heritage, but not only some colonial heritage, it is a town that bore the spirit of the Age of Reason. It was the ideal place for the natural scientists, the botanists or the plant collectors. The town developed in the late 18th and during the course of 19th century and that particular period should reconnect us to the establishment of the Rijksmuseum, which is around the same time.

As a child I experienced my first joy of science through the zoological museum which opened for public and the herbarium where my aunt worked as a librarian. The joy of knowledge came with wonder. Supposed, a child's first encounter with natural science would come with wonders, which the Hollywood reenacted perfectly in *Night at The Museum*. In the Museum Zoology I stood under the giant skeleton of a whale, I saw beautiful birds, strange animals and beasts—some with alien names even for me: *rangkong*, *cendrawasih*, *banteng* and *babirusa*, *kancil* and tiger. Their glass eyes glittered.

One day, my aunt who worked at the library of Herbarium Bogoriense planned to take me to see her colleague who was a taxidermist. A what? Of course she didn't use the scholarly word 'taxidermist' to me. She said in Indonesian, her friend was an '*ahli mengeringkan hewan*', which literally will sound, a master of drying up animals. Now, that title sound scary. I had pets at home, cats and dogs. I loved them and I didn't want them to be dried up and dead. For the first time in my life, I came to sense a hidden horrible thing behind the presentation of wonderful collections of a museum. My aunt continued: Yes, of course we have to kill the bird. It has to be killed in a good condition. How? By twisting it. I remember I had the imagination that this master of drying up animals would twist the feet of the bird to kill it. I probably rejected the image of him twisting the neck of the bird because I would find it too cruel.

That was my first lesson in life about the other side of a presentation. It was a turning point in my life. A realization that came to ruin the wonder I had previously had when looking at a museum's collection. A childhood bitter awakening about the ethical problem that lays beneath the joy of our knowledge. Behind every wonder chamber there is a dark shadow of ethical dilemma.

We can talk at length about the ethical problems of many colonial collections. An extreme example would be a museum that displayed not only stuffed and mounted animals like in zoology

museum, but also a stuffed and mounted human. Not here in the Netherlands, luckily. It was in Spain. The museum used to exhibit a black man known as El Negro de Banyolas. He was not killed by the way, and thank God it is not part of our Dutch-Indonesia shared history. His body was stolen from his tomb in Botswana and went into a 'taxidermic process'. He was on display from almost the whole course of the 20th century. In 2000, El Negro was finally taken back to his village and reburied properly. Compare to this stuffed and mounted El Negro de Banyolas, the human masks of men from Nias—collection of the Rijksmuseum we can see on display—carry a very mild ethical burden. Well, we can talk lengthily about the ethical problems of this and other exhibitions, but we won't have enough time. And I think we are all agree to certain degree about certain ethical issues.

My proposal here is that our joy of knowledge will always contain dilemma, with or without colonial context, with or without racism. Any choice that comes out from that dilemma will bring residue. The question is: how do we 'decompose' the residue? It is both a question of ecology as well as mentality (if not a question of spirituality).

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Look at this stately Rijksmuseum. The highlight of the treasury would be Rembrandt's *Night Watch* that majestically rests on the furthest wall of the main hall, facing everybody who is entering the building. To pay a visit to it we will have to walk through the long corridor that cuts the middle of the Gallery of Honors where we will see the Dutch Golden Age paintings of Vermeer, Hals, and other Dutch Old Masters. The splendor of this hall overshadows the other galleries, let alone the rooms that display the collections from other continents. Of course this arrangement is just acceptable for a national museum that aims at showcasing the greatest artistic achievement of the nation.

But those who have interest in a shared history can immediately follow a side story of the Dutch Golden Age paintings. A side story unmentioned in the Gallery of Honor or the Gallery of Night Watch. Begin by paying attention to the period, the years, of the Golden Age itself. It is a period roughly encompasses the 17th century. This time-frame will direct us straightly to the period of the establishment and the rapid progress of the VOC. The VOC made most of its profit from spices and other commodities from the archipelago that is now Indonesia; commodities that it acquired, many times if not most of the times, in wicked ways. The VOC contributed a huge portion to the Dutch tremendous prosperity during the Golden Age. Every time we talk about the Dutch Golden Age, we talk about Rembrandt, Vermeer, the Old Masters. Frankly, it is impossible to think about the Dutch Golden Age without mentioning the VOC. It is impossible to talk about the VOC without mentioning the archipelago that is now Indonesia.

There is infact a direct line that connects the Dutch Old Masters to the archipelago that is now Indonesia. We can draw this line. We should suggest an alternative route to read the collections of this museum. We can still start from the masterpiece of the Dutch Golden Age paintings. They are the icons of Dutch arts. The artistic aspect will lead us to the understanding of the local context in which the artists lived and worked, as well as about the art patrons who were the new rich of that ime. From these patrons we can go to the social economic structure of that era, and that will lead us to the story of VOC and the beginning of Dutch-Indonesia's 'shared history'. From the gallery of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and other Old Masters, there has to be a direct narrative route to bring us to the rooms of the Indonesian collections.

That would work as a little effort to help decomposing the residue of a dilemmatic knowlege construction. We don't have to change the construction, we just need to make a connection or new connections.

But, what about Indonesian themselves?

Well, to be frank, Indonesian patriotism won't let Indonesian be very happy with the presentation and explanation of their history in an unheroic narrative that we will find in this museum. Even a person who is relatively critical about heroism like me find it awkward to read an explanation about Sukarno, in the museum's website, that is written like this: '...in 1930, Sukarno found himself in prison.' Well, you can blame it on my English, but I think it sound like a typical Indonesian passive voice euphemism, a trick to hide the perpetrator. Do you think Sukarno would have walked asleep and then found himself in prison?

Now, my critics to my own country: on the other side, Indonesia is, I'm afraid, trapped in its own heroism. I'm a novelist, and part of my job is to discover the psyche of my society. I think Indonesia is trapped in its own heroism by constructing its history as a single line story of liberation from the colonial power. There are problems in this particular construction of history. First, subconsciously you know that without the colonial power, your existence won't be the same. Deep in you heart you know that you have an existential dependency on your enemy. Second, you are trapped in an antagonistic habit and black-and-white attitude. This habit and attitude won't help you settle difficult problems in certain levels. For example, to confront you own autrocities.

Indonesia can only escape the trap by opening up itself to other versions of history aside from the linear heroic one. I'm very sad that these days we hear more pressure and intimidation from the Indonesian government against debates and discussions and efforts that advocate alternative versions of the 1965-66 history.

To begin wrapping up this talk, let us highlight the problems that may interfere with our journey to honestly read our shared history. In the formal and mainstream discourses, there are denials in the side of the Dutch and there is a trap of heroisme in the side of Indonesia. However, there have always been individuals and communities that are independent from the formal policy or from the popular sentiment. I asume all of us who are now in this room are people of independent and critical mind. But, it is also worth to remember, our critical thinking may turn off the excitement of discovery and exploration. Our postmodern and postcolonial awareness may extinguish the joy of the Age of Reason.

I will end my talk with proposals:

1) Eventhough we are bound to our shared history (or the history of colonialism), we can transcend it.

2) One way to transcend it is by looking at colonialism as an inherent part of The Age of Reason and a repetition of the structure of knowledge itself. We know we cannot live without knowledge. Knowledge gives us excitement as well as dilemma. A very beautiful and rich metaphor about it is written in an ancient book The Book of Genesis.

If we can accept this, we don't need to be blaming everything to the past-time colonialists all the time, we don't need to be blaming patriarchy all the time, we don't need to be depend on victim narratives all the time. And as the perpetrator of colonialism and other autrocities, we can confess our wrong deeds because, like a child, we are driven by the joy of discovery and exploration, by the excitment of knowledge, by the lust for truth, and we make errors.

3) to transcend we don't need to destroy anything anymore. We only need to make connections. To overcome a mental block we need to make new synapses, like making a direct link from the Dutch Old Masters to Indonesia's colonial history.

The book we are presenting today is an effort of that kind. The title is beautiful as well as metaphorical: *Bitter Spice*. In Indonesian language it will be Rempah Pahit, and that will instantly link

us to Majapahit, the ancient kingdom that 'unite' the archipelago in a no less dilemmatic meaning. Maja is a kind of fruit. Pahit is bitter. Bitter is an inherent aftertaste of a desired spice or of the fruit of knowledge.

Let us continue to write and rewrite our history, not as a history of political powers, but as a history of knowledge.