

Giving Space for Grandma: Towards Digital Restitutionary Work of Indonesia's Cultural Heritage from Colonial Context

Made Naraya Laksmayuda Sumaniaka

Arts and Heritage: Policy, Management and Education, Maastricht University, the Netherlands

E-mail: naraya.sumaniaka@student.maastrichtuniversity.nl

ABSTRACT

The Dutch–Indonesia policy on colonial objects reveals persistent structural limitations, particularly in marginalizing the interests of source communities (Tythacott & Ardiansyah, 2021; Smith, Ristiawan & Sudarmadi, 2022; Drieënhuizen, 2024). Building on argument that the historical injustice of colonial collections is not just in the way that collections were collected, but also in the way that collections were documented, classified, and recorded within a particular Eurocentric worldview, I consider the object's record as an object itself – containing traces of colonial legacy. These records often carry persistent inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and biases inherited from earlier cataloguing practices during colonial times and further perpetuated through digitization (Turner, 2022).

To support the restitution policy, the Dutch government established *Colonial Collections Datahub*, a digital platform designed to be the “central access point” for researchers and stakeholders about information on colonial collections in The Netherlands (See Figure 1). The Datahub aggregates and publishes records about colonial objects held across Dutch institutions, offering a new digital interface for online users through which object's records may be explored and potentially, contested. The exclusionary nature of current material restitutions models towards source communities and limited studies on digital spaces of colonial collections prompts this research to consider how Colonial Collections Datahub and social media as digital space offer possibilities to source communities to reclaim interpretive authority over their heritage. This research questioned the ways of source communities perceive and respond to the digital space of colonial collections.

Derived decoloniality, third space and indigenous data sovereignty as theoretical framework, this research adopts qualitative method by conducting focus group discussions with communities in Aceh, Bali, and Surabaya towards the Colonial Collections Datahub interface. Complementing this, an experimental digital ethnography was conducted through three TikTok video series on Indonesian colonial objects, with case studies on Prince Diponegoro's *sabel* and an Acehese *Barus* flag. The communities and objects were chosen acknowledging the Indonesian geographical balances and historical significances.

Findings show that digital platforms can act as knowledge entry points, transforming community members from passive recipients into active agents of intervention. For example, in the Colonial Collections Datahub, Acehese community rehumanized a skull previously categorized as trophy and offer narratives as it belongs to the guerilla leader of Teuku Panglima Nya' Makam (see figure 2). Balinese community reclaimed a Balinese colonial photograph of Puputan Badung knowing that it was his grandma that was inaccurately attributed (see Figure 3). They also reconnected with a Balinese sacred statue of *pratima* previously recorded as a doll which open the way to a physical reunification through *pasupati* ritual at Wereldmuseum Amsterdam (see Figure 4 and 5). While the Colonial Collections Datahub works as a slow, careful way to correct and update historical records, TikTok operates as fast-paced, emotional vehicle for collective memory-making. People use it to share reactions, stories, and opinions about colonial objects in real-time. The comments are often spontaneous with multifaceted emotions which highlight different sides of history while also relating to contemporary society (See Figure 6).

Such actions often serve as forms of epistemic and historical rectification, disrupting inherited colonial narratives which sparks heritage activism. However, participation is mediated by structural asymmetries embedded in digital infrastructures through platform governance and curatorial control.

Despite these constraints, the study documents how communities engage in restitution discourse through ephemeral, creative, and subversive means, opening spaces for alternative historiographies.

This paper proposes the concept of digital restitutionary work borrowing the emerging term of restitutionary work (Rassool and Gibbon, 2024) to describe practices that combine technological engagement with acts of decolonial intervention in colonial collections. This framework could bridge the interchangeable terms of repatriation and restitution within the Indonesia-Dutch repatriation policy. Digital restitutionary work encapsulates acts of community-led intervention, reinterpretation, and re-contextualization in online heritage platforms, where physical return may be delayed, contested, or impossible. Within the thematic relevance, this concept underscores the need for cross-border collaborations that dismantle both the material and digital perpetuation of colonial legacies.

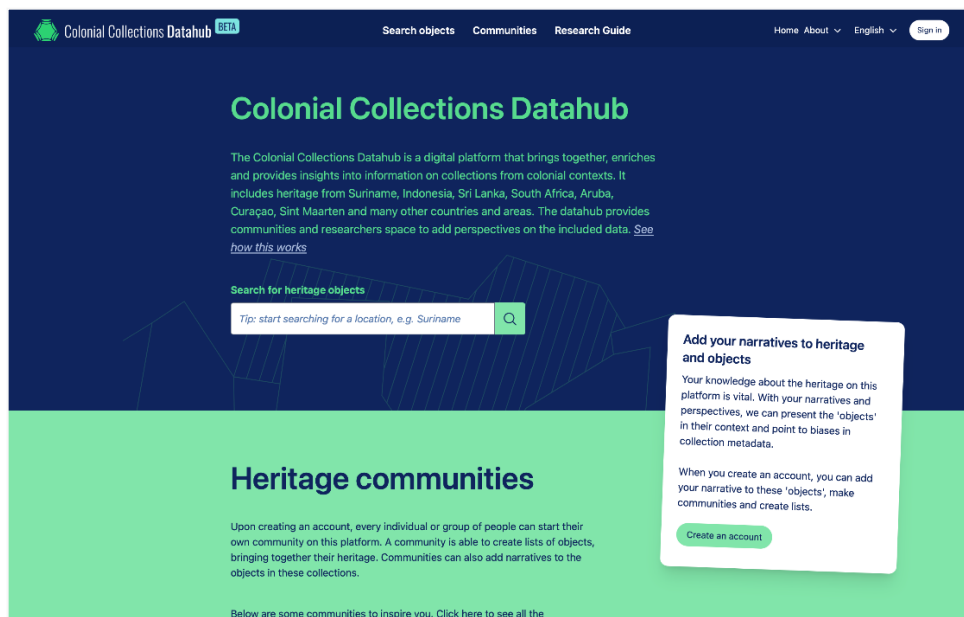


Figure 1. Landing page of Colonial Collections Datahub (<https://app.colonialcollections.nl>).

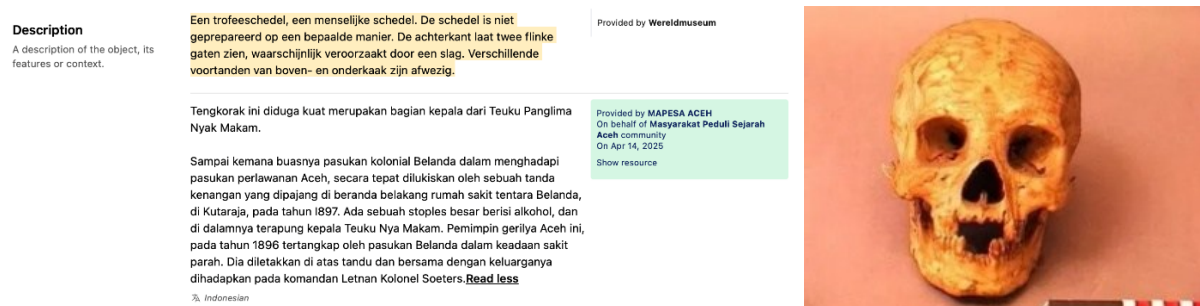


Figure 2. Added narrative of Acehnese ‘trophy’ skull.

Metadata

Title

A title or name given to the object by its current holder.

DE NICHT VAN DE LAATSTE RADJA VAN TABANAN DIE WEGENS DEELNAME AAN EEN OPSTAND VERBANNEN IS NAAR LOMBOK

Provided by Wereldmuseum

[Add your narrative to title](#)

Description

A description of the object, its features or context.

Bahwa perempuan yang duduk di kursi paling depan adalah Sagung Ayu Wah. Ia bukan adik sepupu, melainkan adik bungsu dari Raja Tabanan, I Gusti Ngurah Rai Perang. Sagung Ayu Wah merupakan pemimpin pemberontakan yang terlibat dalam pertempuran sengit melawan Belanda di Tuaklang pada peristiwa Puputan Badung tahun 1906, sebelum akhirnya diasingkan ke Lombok oleh pemerintah kolonial Belanda.[Read less](#)

🇮🇩 Indonesian

That woman seated in the front row is Sagung Ayu Wah. She is not a cousin, but the youngest sister of the King of Tabanan, I Gusti Ngurah Rai Perang. Sagung Ayu Wah was a prominent resistance leader who engaged in fierce combat against the Dutch in Tuaklang during the 1906 Puputan Badung, before eventually being exiled to Lombok by the colonial authorities.[Read less](#)

🇬🇧 English

Provided by FGD Bali
On behalf of Bali community
On May 26, 2025
[Show resource](#)





Figure 3. Added Narrative of Balinese Colonial Photograph.

Notices for this object

Belonging



The Belonging Notice is being used to indicate that only specific persons belonging to communities, Tribes, Clans, and societies have the right to access and handle these specific items or collections.

Local Contexts

This is a sacred belonging used to carry the pratimā. The winged lion is used in many Balinese designs, including as home décor. However, in this particular case, this lion vehicle carries the pratimā and thus sacred. (Ravinjay Kuckreja, in Focus Group Discussion with Balinese Community dated 1/05/2025)

🇬🇧 English

Provided by FGD Bali
On behalf of Bali community
On May 26, 2025
[Show resource](#)




Figure 4. Added narrative of Balinese Pratiṃā



Figure 5. Pasupati to the Pratiṃā at Wereldmuseum

