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Introduction

Icons of Memory and Forgetting

In the Dutch East Indies – the group of islands that is now part of the Republic of Indonesia – a number of photographs of colonial atrocities were taken in 1904. This study investigates the subsequent appearances of these photographs in Dutch cultural memory, i.e. the way in which groups of people remember the past through all kinds of representations.[1] The photographs, which depict the results of massacres in villages in the Gajo and Alas lands on the island of Sumatra, were taken by the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL) during a military expedition as part of the Atjeh War, which lasted from 1873 to 1908.[2] This study follows these photographs over the course of the last century as they were framed by texts, other images, and discourses within Dutch cultural memory by a variety of mnemonic communities: groups that produce cultural memories and are themselves shaped by these.[3] The most important of these communities in this book is the nation of the Netherlands as an imagined community, while important other communities include the Dutch military (chapters 1 and 2) and the *Indische* Dutch – those Dutch adults and children who had lived in the Dutch East Indies (chapter 3). All in all, these photographs reappeared more than seventy times in a wide variety of contexts.[4]

The two photographs that stand at the heart of this study were taken on 14 June 1904 by a Dutch medical officer named H. M. Neeb of the Dutch colonial army. They were taken after the massacre of 561 adults and children of the village of Koetö Réh in the Alas land, south of the area called Atjeh (now: Aceh) on the island of Sumatra (Figures 0.1 and 0.2, henceforth

1 For the most complete overview of the field of cultural memory studies, see Erll 2011. In this study, I follow Frederick Cooper in defining a colonial empire as a "political unit that is large, expansionist" and which subjects people to "coercive incorporation into an expansionist state and invidious distinction". What distinguishes *colonial* empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from other types of empires, Cooper writes, was the fact that "[s]ubordination was no longer a fate to which anyone might be subject, but a status assigned to specific people, whose marking therefore became an issue" (2005, pp. 27-8). Dutch policies and operations are called "imperial" when I focus on the expansionist aspects of the Dutch colonial empire (especially the many local wars between 1870 and 1914, which from an international perspective can be characterized as the period of "modern imperialism"), and "colonial" in all other cases.

2 On the Atjeh War, see Van 't Veer 1969; Reid 1969, 1979; Groen 1983; Siegel 2000.

3 For the concept of mnemonic community, see Zerubavel 2003.

4 See "List of where the 1904 photographs have appeared" at the back of this book.

Figure 0.1. H. M. Neeb. KR2. Koetö Réh, 14 June 1904. Photograph, 12.1 x 17.1 cm. Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, inv. no. 60011258.

Figure 0.2. H. M. Neeb. KR3. Koetö Réh, 14 June 1904. Photograph, 11.6 x 17 cm. Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, inv. no. 60009090.

referred to as KR2 and KR3). During a military expedition that was part of efforts around 1900 by the Dutch to subjugate all the islands of what is now the Republic of Indonesia, a number of villages in the Alas and neighboring Gajo lands were stormed by the army, which kept on shooting until all resistance had stopped.

KR2 shows the walled village in which the bodies of murdered villagers form a diagonal line that runs like a river from the lower right corner all the way to the left side of the image and then upwards to a group of soldiers who are preparing the burial of the dead. In KR3, soldiers of the colonial army and their commander (lieutenant-colonel G. C. E. van Daalen, standing all the way to the left) stand on the palisade of Koetö Réh, while killed Alas lie scattered on the village ground. In the center of the image, next to the soldier standing on the village ground and sitting in a cage-like construction of poles, a surviving child can be seen. In chapter 1, these two images will be more elaborately analyzed and contextualized.

By investigating these specific images, this study seeks to change thinking on the nature of cultural memory and forgetting in general and Dutch colonial memory in particular.[5] In the Netherlands, commentators have claimed over and over again that the colonial past – especially its violence – has been "forgotten" in the sense that it has vanished without a trace. Uncovering "lost" photographs has thereby become a regularly returning theme aimed at unmasking a hidden truth. There was, moreover, always someone to blame for the supposed amnesia, from politicians and historians to the press and the military.

In my view, there are two problems with this analysis: on the one hand it supposes a binary opposition between memory and forgetting, while on the other hand it starts from the assumption that cultural memory is a phenomenon brought about or thwarted by the intentions and actions of specific human actors. Against this either/or, intentionalist perspective on cultural memory, which is also the dominant approach within the broader field of memory studies, this book argues that memories can also have a more ambiguous – and in this case, haunting – presence in society and that it is not always possible to pinpoint specific actors who are to blame (or praise) for cultural memory being the way it is. Building on the work of Ann Laura Stoler, Michel Foucault, and Paul Ricoeur, in particular, I will show that rather than being absent, the 1904 photographs have consistently been present in the Dutch public sphere, but that they have sometimes

5 "Colonial memory" means "memory of colonialism", and I use it as an umbrella term for all cultural memories of colonialism in both the colonial and postcolonial periods.

appeared as absent because they were not meaningful within established frameworks. The problem with these photographs, therefore, is not one of being lost or found but one of semanticization, i.e. the production of meaning. One concept that will be crucial throughout this book is Ann Laura Stoler's "cultural aphasia" (2009a, 2011), which can be described as the inability of a mnemonic community to find appropriate words to name events in the world.

This book introduces the concept of "emerging memory" to characterize the type of memory that is produced in a situation of cultural aphasia. Emerging memories are those representations of the past that are periodically rediscovered while retaining their shady presence. They keep on irritating a culture's self-conception because they prove hard to integrate into the existing narratives that a mnemonic community tells about itself and its past. That they nevertheless regularly re-emerge proves their durable relevance for the community in question.

Icons of Memory and Forgetting

A number of recent publications accompanied by photographs of Dutch colonial violence illustrate the current understanding of these images. One is a 2010 book by István Bejczy on the history of the Netherlands from prehistory to 2009. Bejczy writes that because of his book's scope and the limited number of pages, he offers only "elementary knowledge": of all phases in Dutch history, only the basics are given (5). The two short sections on the Dutch East Indies survey the most important events from that period[6] and include two images: one of the signing of the transfer of sovereignty in 1949 (233)[7] and KR2, taken after what Bejczy calls the destruction of Koetö Réh by the Dutch colonial army during the Atjeh War (209). In the book, the latter image works on different levels, but one of these is that it sums up the whole of the history of the Dutch in the Indies in one photograph of colonial atrocity.

In another overview of Dutch history by Geert Mak et al. entitled *Past of the Netherlands*, KR3 is called an icon of the Dutch colonial past (2008: 376). Robert Hariman and John Lucaites describe photographic icons as

6 The Dutch East Indies fell into Dutch hands again in 1816, after a British interregnum from 1811. From the perspective of the Dutch state, the Dutch East Indies came to an end in 1949. Indonesia declared itself independent in 1945.

7 This well-known film still shows Queen Juliana sitting between Indonesian Prime Minister Mohammad Hatta and Dutch Prime Minister Willem Drees.

> [those] photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics. (2007: 27)

The authors of *Past of the Netherlands* compare the 1904 photograph to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Nick Ut's photograph *Napalm Girl* (1972) from the Vietnam War. In the same way that those images represent not only the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica and a girl running down the road after a napalm attack but also the Spanish and Vietnam Wars respectively, the 1904 photograph, these historians claim, represents in the Netherlands the Atjeh War, colonial warfare, or even the Dutch colonial past.[8] As a widespread representation of a historically significant event, the photograph of Koetö Réh is produced here as an icon of memory.

In contrast to these two history books, there is a publication that appeared in 2010 in a one-off magazine published on the occasion of Memorial Day and Liberation Day on 4 and 5 May respectively (Figure 0.3).[9] Since the purpose of the organizing committee of these holidays was "to place the memory of and discussion on the Second World War and discussion about it in a broad context" (back matter), the magazine includes, among others, articles on the Srebrenica massacres, iconic war photographs, contemporary wars in Africa, war in video games, and – importantly for the present discussion – Dutch colonial warfare. This last article is entitled "The (Not to Be) Forgotten War in Atjeh", and in it, author Lucia Hogervorst offers an account of how the Atjeh War was represented in Dutch high school history books from the 1950s onwards. Although the war was discussed in these books, she argues that in public memory the war is largely forgotten and that "[i]t is quite possible that the Atjeh War will be removed from the list of subjects [taught in high school], which is overcrowded anyhow" (56). She illustrates

8 See Peirce 1955 on iconic signs.

9 C. van der Heijden 2010. The magazine was freely distributed "at manifestations on the occasion of the commemoration of the [Second World] war at Dutch public libraries, service clubs, museums, and educational institutes" (back cover). Copies could be found in the so-called "liberation train" which housed an exhibition, and which was part of a larger program which included lectures, film screenings, and debates. The motto for the commemoration and celebration as a whole was "*Stilstaan bij vrijheid*", which means both "Dwelling upon Freedom" and "Not Taking Freedom for Granted". See: www.stilstaanbijvrijheid.nl. Retrieved on 17 June 2010. The 4th and 5th of May commemorate the deaths in the Second World War and the liberation of the Netherlands (and the Dutch East Indies) respectively.

De (niet te) vergeten oorlog in Atjeh

Figure 0.3. Lucia Hogervorst. “De (niet te) vergeten oorlog in Atjeh.” Detail. From *Voorbij maar niet verdwenen: Oorlog: 65 jaar na de Tweede Wereldoorlog*. Ed. Chris van der Heijden. N.p.: n.p., 2010. 54-55. NIOD Library.

her article with two photographs, one of which is from 1898 from the Pedir expedition, which was also part of the Atjeh War (Figure 0.4, henceforth referred to as PD). It shows Dutch colonial soldiers standing around and on top of killed Atjehnese opponents as if they were hunting trophies. Within the context of the article, the photograph emerges as a revelation: the reader is told s/he is observing something that is important but that has nevertheless been forgotten. In the context of the magazine, the photograph becomes something of an indictment, for the Atjeh War is the only subject presented as no longer being where it properly belongs: in Dutch cultural memory. Whereas in the two history books discussed above, a photograph of colonial violence was an icon of memory, here it is an icon of forgetting.

The paradox produced by these publications is that although these photographs are, in the words of Hariman and Lucaites, historically significant, emotionally charged, and widely reproduced, they are nevertheless considered to be hidden. What I argue in this book is that this is the case not because these images have actually been unavailable or are part of a cover-up but because they have failed to become meaningful within a national framework for most observers, while for others they cannot be viewed in any other manner.