

Returning to the Metropole: The Indonesian National Archives and its changing role at the start of the New Order¹

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To see how archivists themselves can play a role in the history of their country, and how post-colonial nations can use colonially-produced records in asserting their national identity, this paper looks at the Arsip Nasional (National Archive) of Indonesia, itself a remnant of the Dutch colonial past. Through the detailed study of one letter written by the Indonesian National Archivist shortly after the regime change that brought Suharto to power it is possible to see the change in the archival relationship between former coloniser and colonised. By reversing the strong anti-Dutch policies of the previous government Indonesia was able to engage in a high level of archival cooperation with the Netherlands and successfully reverse the colonial power of archives.

Plenty has been written on the importance of archives in the creation and maintenance of colonial power.² The gathering of information is necessary whenever a state expands its territorial control. There is less, however, on what happens to these documents after independence. Do they exist in various archives around the world as remnants of colonialism, still wielding the power of the creator, or can their power be reversed and used by the former colony to solidify their own existence? In post-colonial archives, when the successor state must return to the metropole for copies of documents and assistance in maintaining international archival standards, it can appear that they are losing control of their own history. In this situation, however, it is possible that access to the nation's written history can be increased. All post-colonial states have the possibility of reading their histories as written by the colonial power. By engaging in active practices, archivists can reshape the archive and take control of their history – despite using colonial structures.

Archivists themselves can take on the role of reversing the colonial power of archives and become driving forces in affecting their national history. Through a short study of the *Arsip Nasional* (National Archives) of Indonesia the process in which a post-colonial state can reverse the power structure of the colonial archives can be seen. Indonesia was able to make this possible by accepting the colonial nature of archives and working with the former colonial power, in this case the Netherlands. In doing so, Indonesian National Archivist Dr Raden Adjeng Sumartini was able to get nearly every proposal she suggested to the Dutch during her tenure implemented.³ As a result, Indonesia has been able to strengthen its national identity. Strengthening national identity takes place within the archive by allowing a national and independent historical narrative to be written.

From the story of Sumartini, director of the *Arsip Nasional* from 1970 to 1990, one can see how national history is affected and written by archivists. Most historians and researchers use the archive to tell history through its contents. I will take this further to tell a history that the archive, and its archivists, created. In order to do so I have chosen to start with one letter written by Sumartini in June of 1970 that showed a new mindset at the *Arsip Nasional*. Born in 1930, Sumartini would

receive her doctorate from the University of Indonesia in history and eventually make her way to the Arsip Nasional. Her letter becomes one of the most important documents in Indonesian–Dutch archival relations. At the writing of her letter Sumartini had only been back in Indonesia for one year, after two years in the Netherlands attending the *Rijksarchiefschool* (State Archive School) in The Hague in what can be seen as the first step in the new archival cooperation.⁵

This paper is therefore meant to show the Arsip Nasional in the early 1970s as a real world example of the changing theories on the role of archivists. Since the 1970s writings and research by archivists on all aspects of the profession – including custodianship, appraisal, outreach and more – have altered the way archivists view their work. Sumartini's story will not only show that archivists can move beyond being guardians or custodians of records to become active participants in history, but also how this changing role can influence colonised and coloniser relationships.

The regime change in Indonesia only five years prior made Sumartini's letter, and the type of thinking behind it, possible. It is in keeping with President Suharto's vision of history, particularly the period surrounding independence. Suharto believed he represented a return to the 'spirit of 1945'.⁶ Prior to 1965 Indonesia's relationship with the Netherlands was hardly stable. As such, it is no surprise that not only were archives of little importance to Indonesia amongst the litany of other tasks in nation-building, being a reminder of the recent colonial past, but also that the sharing of archival knowledge between Indonesia and the Netherlands was nearly non-existent. A Dutch archivist visiting the Arsip Nasional on a 1964 trip to archives throughout Asia stated 'it is clear that Indonesia is failing miserably in its duty' compared to Malaysia where '[t]he archival service ... is of recent date ... set up under strong British influence' and 'expertly managed'.⁷ Within only six years the Arsip Nasional had completely changed its outward view. Now realising the significance of the colonial collections it held, Indonesia returned to the Netherlands for the training and infrastructure improvements necessary to take on their new role.

Archival cooperation had been attempted before to little effect. A

microfilm project planned in 1955 was cancelled after two years of talks when the director of the Indonesian archives bluntly told his Dutch colleagues they were no longer welcome at his archive. It is important to note that this was not a microfilm exchange, but solely a one-sided accession of material by the Dutch who had initiated the project. Subsequent microfilm projects likewise would start and end without any results to show for the work undertaken.⁸

Sumartini's ability to work with the Netherlands on archival matters can be related to a phenomenon described by Benedict Anderson in his essay 'Old State, New Society'. Anderson speaks of 'ex-colonial states pursuing foreign policies that are remarkably similar to those pursued by their predecessors' and 'organizational structures, distributions of functions, personnel, [and] institutional memories in the form of files and dossiers' as evidence of the previous state.⁹ His thesis that 'the New Order [under Suharto] is best understood as the resurrection of the state and its triumph vis-a-vis society and nation' can be clearly seen in the archival example.¹⁰ On its own this is not noteworthy, of course. If under his leadership General Suharto invoked a return to the Dutch-structured state throughout Indonesia then the *Arsip Nasional* would no doubt be included. What is of interest then is the long-lasting effects and the role in history archivists can play.

Not only was the New Order a return to the Dutch-structured state, but it was similarly a re-introduction to the West, especially the Netherlands. Suharto's quest for stability included an initial strong push to the West, including the return of previously nationalised companies to their former owners, an interest in Western investment, and a desire for aid which manifested itself in the archive in the form of monetary development and professional training. Within the general goal of the *modernisation* of Indonesia, Suharto even physically returned to the Netherlands, with a visit to The Hague to meet the Queen and government officials in September of 1970.¹¹ Sumartini's letter therefore preceded Suharto's visit, with archival exchanges on the agenda of the meetings.¹²

In the early Suharto years, the push for normality and stability led to an acceptance of Indonesia as a continuity of the Dutch East Indies.¹³ This acceptance partially revealed itself in the outreach towards the

Algemeen Rijksarchief (Dutch National Archives, ARA) from the Arsip Nasional in order to link their histories. It is here that archivists' tendency to equate – and not simply note the connection between – archives and memory reveals itself as problematic. Should the national archive be the nation's memory, then this argument can be taken further to mean that the memory of Indonesia is the result of a Dutch institution created with Dutch records and Dutch archival practices. This puts the way that Indonesia *remembers* in colonial terms.

Moving away from the idea of archives as memory allows the post-colonial national archive to write its own past and future, and free Indonesia and other countries to use their own concepts of memory and identity.¹⁴ Michael Piggott placed part of the problem of equating archives with memory in the fact that this oversimplification overlooks the true relationships that exist.¹⁵ Breaking from this belief would allow archivists to discover deeper relationships between their colonial collection and their independent history. Learning to live with the fact that the national archive is a remnant of colonialism that can be used to build an independent history is a necessary step for an archivist to take if they wish to fully utilise their collection.

In the letter's opening, Sumartini puts the proposed cooperation in the context of 'our countries' mutual interest'. This makes it clear that she knows how to frame the letter in order to receive a positive reaction from the Dutch government. In reference to the exchange of microfilms, her plan is that 'the Netherlands would acquire microfilms of all documents containing information of interest to the Netherlands from Indonesia, and vice versa'.¹⁶ As the letter is addressed directly to the Dutch Minister of Culture, the benefits for the Netherlands take precedence. Sumartini offers numerous documents held in Jakarta of interest to the Dutch that would be microfilmed for the Netherlands¹⁷ before listing what the Arsip Nasional is interested in from the ARA.¹⁸ This makes her plan appear more mutually beneficial than it was, given the state of both archives at the time.

Despite its poor working condition by the start of the 1970s, the Arsip Nasional contained some of the most important records relating to Dutch colonial history. The colonial administration had kept its archives in a special *Landsarchief* (National Archives) in the capital

Batavia (modern day Jakarta), which also included the archives of the old Dutch East India Company that had traded in the Indies for over one hundred years before the Dutch crown took control of the islands in 1816. After Indonesian independence these records stayed in Jakarta as the Landsarchief became the Arsip Nasional. Records relating to the colonies held in The Hague included those of the Ministry of Colonies and other government offices that contained information on the Indies. A microfilm exchange would therefore allow the colonial administration records to be available to Western historians and researchers in The Hague. With the help of the ARA the Arsip Nasional could improve its standards and enable Indonesian researchers to have local access to records spanning from the colonial period to those created at the formation of the Republic of Indonesia.

Attached to her letter was Sumartini's draft 'Proposal for an Agreement' that similarly focuses on mutual benefits:

The 'Algemeen Rijksarchief' of the Netherlands and the 'Arsip Nasional' of Indonesia, being profoundly aware of the necessity to cooperate together in endeavours to promote the development of their respective national archives in the interests of both the Netherlands and Indonesia ... wish to indicate agreement with respect to the following matters.¹⁹

For such work to take place the Arsip Nasional was in desperate need of major structural work. Sumartini lists six points in her draft, half of which required the ARA to allocate more funds or partake in more work. The other three split the work evenly between the two archives. As this was merely a draft sent to the Dutch government, Sumartini may have been making more grandiose proposals than what she expected to be included in the final agreement – should an agreement ever be reached.

Point one required the ARA to 'provide support for ... training programs designed for new recruits of the staff of the Arsip Nasional'. The ARA would also 'accept Indonesian archivists for advanced special training'. The benefits to the Arsip Nasional are obvious, and put the ARA in a position whereby any future cooperation and microfilm transfer that it entered into became dependant on the provision assistance via the training of Indonesian archivists.²⁰

The next matter discussed in the letter relates to creating inventories of the relevant documents in each national archive. 'At least one Indonesian archivist or historian has to locate the various archival collections in the Netherlands that would be of interest to Indonesia, while at least one Dutch archivist or historian has to assess the archival material at the Arsip Nasional that would be of interest to the Netherlands'.²¹

Point three referred to the creation of a massive microfilming project that would be necessary to have all documents relating to the Netherlands available in the Netherlands and vice versa. The final three points focussed on financial matters and the openness of the collections to researchers from either country.²²

With such lavish demands, the finalised agreement is comparatively sparse. Signed nearly two years after Sumartini's first letter, the agreement was signed in The Hague on 1 September 1972. The differences with the initial proposal are testament to either the amount of negotiations required to agree on the core principles for the project or to Sumartini's wistfulness in her proposal. Each of the five points are one sentence long rather than the paragraph that Sumartini originally wrote. The demands of the signed agreement are more equal than those proposed, as none explicitly state that one side will perform more work than the other. The agreement is simple and in plain language:

The General State Archives in The Hague and the Arsip Nasional in Jakarta have agreed as follows:

- 1) There will be an exchange of microfilms between both institutions.
- 2) The purpose of this exchange is to facilitate research by the reciprocal supply of microfilms of records which are thought to be of importance for the history of the countries concerned.
- 3) The microfilms will be exchanged in the form of negatives.
- 4) The right to supply copies of the microfilms to third parties remains with the authority which has the custody of the original records.²³

5) Both parties declare that restrictive measures concerning accessibility of the original records will be adhered to by the authority which has received microfilm copies of these records.

Point two may be the most interesting in a discussion of archives, memory and the post-colonial state's perception of archives. That the purpose could be the same for two nations in adversarial roles in history – coloniser vs. colonised – is dubious. While it may be true for the Dutch side, Sumartini's proposal indicated that the Indonesians hoped for more from the partnership, specifically raising the standards of the Arsip Nasional. The negotiations over two years reduced the agreement down to, more or less, the first sentence of term three of the 1970 proposal: there will be a microfilm exchange. It is then worthwhile to compare the original proposal to the reality that came forth after bilateral archival cooperation became official doctrine. Doing so reveals how Sumartini's initial draft nearly became reality.

Through Sumartini's leadership, by the time of her retirement in 1990 nearly every one of her original plans had been implemented. The majority of the cooperation that took place, therefore, is not stipulated in the agreement but rather comes through other means and future correspondence. The agreement can be summed up in the statement that there will be cooperation, while the specifics that follow are the result of organic, less formalised discussion. While the political situation changed shortly after her departure in part due to comments by Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation Jan Pronk regarding human rights violations, in general the archival cooperation continued.²⁴ The hardest part in the post-Sumartini Arsip Nasional seemed to be keeping up with the work already in progress, as shown when Dutch National Archivist Eric Ketelaar wrote to Dr Magetsari, Sumartini's successor, stating that he had heard from various researchers that certain collections were unusable due to a lack of progress on the part of Indonesian archivists.²⁵

The ARA provided training of Arsip Nasional staff in archival science and in Dutch language courses to read and comprehend old records, with many being sent to the same Archive School that Sumartini herself had attended. This was formally requested by Sumartini in

1974 and continues in different forms today. Staff from each archive travelled to the other archive, and created inventories of relevant archives, many of which were in turn microfilmed and sent back to their home archive.²⁶

The role that the ARA played should not be overlooked, including the work of individual archivists on the Dutch side with just as much of an interest in the cooperation as Sumartini. Dutch National Archivist AEM Ribberink made much of the continued cooperation possible through his consistent communication throughout the 1970s and 80s with the Ministry of Culture, securing funds from the Dutch government, and with the Ministries of Defence and Interior requesting documents they held related to the Indonesian independence movement.²⁷

To bolster the Arsip Nasional the central government of Indonesia restructured its Sukarno-era organisation and clarified its core goals. In 1971 the government passed a law stating how the Arsip Nasional would be organised and based its existence on 'the purpose of national responsibility to coming generations'. The role of the archive, according to this early New Order law, was 'to preserve tangible, authentic and complete materials of evidence concerning the past, present and future national life of the Indonesian People'.²⁸ 'The People', Suharto would later say, 'are the source of our strength. The People are the real capital in the struggle of our nation'.²⁹

At the time of Sumartini's letter, Indonesia acted in the opposite manner to the 'pathetic phenomenon' described by Charles Kecskemeti where 'newly independent countries ... [o]blivious of the archival heritage existing within the national borders ... concentrate their attention on the records relating to the nation's history that are located ... [in] the former metropolitan power'.³⁰ While it is certainly true that Indonesia's interest lay with acquiring documents from the Netherlands – which can be expected from any young country working to compile its history – Sumartini showed an awareness of the importance of what was held in Jakarta. Without offering to the Netherlands the 'archival heritage' in Indonesia, the Arsip Nasional may never have had the chance to complement those documents with those held in The Hague.

Archival cooperation was not only of benefit to Indonesia, a point Sumartini made clear in her initial letter. Dutch history is intrinsically

connected to that of Indonesia. The two countries share a joint heritage that cannot be hidden. No reading of the past of either country would be complete without mention of the other. The fact that Indonesia and the Netherlands share a history is rooted in colonialism. That shared history turns into shared heritage in the archives. Without cooperation continuing, updating and documenting it, there is little to the claim that the Netherlands and Indonesia share a heritage. But their joint heritage does exist in the archive. Arguing against a joint heritage – whether claiming it does not exist or that it is neo-colonial in nature and thus should not be discussed or promoted – is counter-productive given the past and current circumstances.

Colonialism existed and left a lasting impact on both coloniser and colonised. It is therefore a necessity that archivists are aware of their ability to transform the colonial power of archives into a new power for them to wield as former colonies. Easier access to these documents in Indonesia would benefit local historians and other scholars and allow Indonesians to write their own history – albeit with many Dutch-produced documents.

While historians are the ones who are seen as *writing* history through their use of archival institutions run by people like Sumartini, this paper has attempted to make clear that through the work they do, archivists play as important a role in how history is written. Archivists make the decisions as to what documents can be viewed by researchers. In this case Sumartini affected the writing of history by doing her own writing and requesting specific records to better complete the story of Indonesia that lives in the Arsip Nasional.

For Indonesia in 1970, transforming the power of these archives required reaching out to the Dutch, the former wielders of power. The new Indonesian government had an interest in strengthening its standing and uniting the distant islands as one nation, a struggle faced by every previous and successive government in the archipelago. Already showing their comfort cooperating with the West through policy changes, it was only a matter of time before archival policy similarly changed. With Sumartini as diplomatic head of this project Indonesia was able to work within the realities of their colonial past and the system it created to share the power of their shared heritage.

Through Sumartini's efforts it is clear that archivists can influence the way history is written in such a way that they become part of the historical story.

Endnotes

¹ This paper, a slightly modified version of which was presented at the 2011 Annual Conference of the Social History Society in Manchester, UK, is part of a larger PhD research project devoted to the role of colonially-produced archives in the decolonisation process and the formation of an independent national identity.

² A short list can include Kerry Ward's *Networks of Empire*, Zoe Laidlow's *Colonial Connections*, CA Bayly's *Empire and Information*, and HV Bowen's *The Business of Empire*.

³ Like many other Javanese names (Sukarno, Suharto), Ms Sumartini not only has the 'Su' preface, but is also generally known by one name only and from hereon will be referred to simply as Sumartini. This name is sometimes spelled 'Soemartini' under the old spelling system, though for this paper I will use the new system where 'oe' became 'u'.

⁴ Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Nederlandse Ambassade in Indonesië [standplaats Jakarta], nummer toegang 2.05.188, inventarisnummer 590.

⁵ Mona Lohanda, 'In Memoriam: Soemartini (1930–2005)', International Council of Archives, available at <<http://wien2004.ica.org/en/node/756>>, accessed 8 August 2011.

⁶ RE Elson, *Suharto: A Political Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 174.

⁷ Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Collectie 441 FRJ Verhoeven, 1921–1987, nummer toegang 2.21.281.04, inventarisnummer 55.

⁸ Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken: Code-archief 1955–1964, nummer toegang 2.05.118, inventarisnummer 13156.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, 'Old State, New Society', *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, Equinox Publishing, Jakarta, 2006, pp. 94–95.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹¹ 'Heavy Guard for Suharto in Holland', *The Straits Times*, 4 September 1970, p. 1.

¹² National Archief, Den Haag, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Tweede Afdeling, nummer toegang 2.14.04, inventarisnummer 201.

¹³ Anderson, p. 109.

¹⁴ This can be seen in most post-colonial national archives. For example, the website of the National Archives of Ireland claims 'The National Archives holds the records of the modern Irish State which document its historical evolution and the creation of our national identity', despite the fact that much of its historical collection dates from the British period. See <<http://www.nationalarchives.ie/research/archives.html>>, accessed 8 August 2011.

¹⁵ Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed and Frank Upward (eds), *Archives: Recording/keeping in Society*, Centre for Information Studies, Wagga Wagga, 2005.

¹⁶ NL-HaNA, Ambassade Indonesië 1962–1974, 2.05.188, inv. nr. 590.

¹⁷ "'Burgerlijke Stand" documents, "Dooop en Begraaf" rolls, genealogical and

biographical cards collection, death wills and notary acts, church archives, and other V.O.C. materials, such as Dagregisters, Resolutions, etc.'

¹⁸ 'Public documents and other materials from the period 1945–1950, political reports, especially concerning activities of the Indonesian national movements since the beginning of the Twentieth Century, "Memories van Overgave" of the various government administrators, parliamentary records pertaining to Indonesia, other such documents'.

¹⁹ NL-HaNA, Ambassade Indonesië 1962–1974, 2.05.188, inv. nr. 590.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Charles Kecskemeti and Evert Van Laar, *Model Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements and Conventions Concerning the Transfer of Archives*, UNESCO, Paris, 1981, Appendix 2a. A Dutch version can be found in the archive of the KITLV, inventory number H1710, Nederlandse Commissie van Advies voor de tenuitvoerlegging van de culturele overeenkomst met Indonesië; met stukken van en over Bureau Indonesische Studiën, Programma Indonesische Studiën, folder 28.

²⁴ Mei Li Vos, *International Cooperation Between Politics and Practice: How Dutch Indonesian Cooperation changed Remarkably Little after a Diplomatic Rupture*, Het Spinhuis, Amsterdam, 2000.

²⁵ National Archief, Den Haag, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Tweede Afdeling, nummer toegang 2.14.04, inventarisnummer 318.

²⁶ NL-HaNA, Ambassade Indonesië 1962–1974, 2.05.188, inv. nr. 590.

²⁷ National Archief, Den Haag, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Tweede Afdeling, nummer toegang 2.14.04, inventarisnummer 201.

²⁸ National Archief, Den Haag, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Tweede Afdeling, nummer toegang 2.14.04, inventarisnummer 190.

²⁹ Suharto, 'Dalam perjuangan dibidang apapun, kekuatan andalan dan modal utama kita adalah rakyat', quoted in RE Elson, *Suharto: A Political Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 302.

³⁰ Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Trophies of War and Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. xi.