

12,770 km from home and what was lost along the way:

Preliminary notes on the Pustahas at the MAS

This essay contains preliminary notes on the three *pustahas* held at the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS). A *pustaha* is a manuscript made from a strip of bark taken from the *alim* tree (agarwood: *Aquilaria malaccensis*) and folded like an accordion; text in a *pustaha* is always rendered in black inks, whereas illustrations appear in red, black and, sometimes, yellow; it is compiled by *datu* (priests/medicine men).¹ The MAS database records these objects as [AE.1922.0001.1006](#), [AE.1922.0001.1007](#) and [MAS.0171.058](#). The first two *pustahas* are part of the Christoffel collection, while the third was donated by the congregation of the Brothers of Our Lady of Lourdes. This essay raises questions concerning *loss* of knowledge as a result of the current location of the *pustahas* at the MAS.

If you visit Google Maps and select Toba in northern Sumatra as your point of departure with the Hessenhuis in Antwerp as your destination, you will see that there is a distance of 12,770 km between the two.² That is how far the three *pustahas* ‘travelled’ before ending up at the Hessenhuis (the MAS storage facility). When taking into consideration the amount of movement from place to place that they had to undergo *en route*, that distance could certainly be a good deal more.³

The inventory cards tell us that the first two *pustahas* were acquired in 1958. Following their acquisition, both were displayed at *Magie* (Charleroi, 1959) and, later, at the Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp (1983). Moreover, [AE.1922.0001.1007](#) was part of the *Display of Power* exhibition (June 2011–February 2018). Meanwhile, [AE.1922.0001.1006](#) was part of a small-scale exhibition, namely *Teropong Indonesia (2018)*, at MAS Open Storage. The situation is somewhat different as regards [MAS.0171.058](#), which was acquired in 2016 and has

¹ For detailed descriptions of *pustahas*, see, for example, catalogues by Voorhoeve (1961, 1975, 1977), Manik (1973), Ricklefs and Voorhoeve (1977), and Pigeaud and Voorhoeve (1985). It is also worth noting that existing intrinsic studies of *pustahas* focus mainly on their texts while leaving aside the illustrations. Consequently, any future research focusing on the illustrations would make a significant contribution.

² The manuscripts can be specifically identified as coming from Toba by examining the Toba-style ‘ta’ used in the scripts.

³ For example, before they were put into storage at the MAS Hessenhuis, the first two *pustahas* were in the collection held at the Ethnographic Museum (Antwerp). When the museum ceased operation, its artefacts were then sent to the MAS.

not been exhibited since.⁴ It is food for thought that in the sixty-six years since their acquisition, the first two pustahas have been put on display at only three exhibitions. This means that they have been kept primarily in storage.

Undeniably, having the objects on display is not the only means of providing information about them to the public. In the case of the MAS, the former Ethnographic Museum (Antwerp), whose collection has been integrated into the MAS collection, used to publish a bulletin about its collections. As an example, Adriaan Claerhout, its then curator, wrote about pustaha [AE.1922.0001.1007](#) in one of the publications. Moreover, a database is another standard method of disseminating knowledge about a museum's collections. In a time when the world appears well-connected via the internet, this has become the most common method used when circulating this kind of knowledge. Nevertheless, this method is open to debate.

Firstly, museums started to use this technology only several years after its emergence in around 1993–1994. For instance, in 2011, following its opening, the MAS started to put its entire collection online. The implication is that this is still a relatively new method of informing the wider public about the museum's collection. It is also worth noting that, although the internet is becoming increasingly accessible and is democratizing information, it is still not accessible to all. A specific segment of the public can be pinpointed in this instance; when museums with ethnographic objects put their entire collections online, which members of the public do they have in mind? Do they consider the communities from which the objects have been displaced? If they do, is it not then worth questioning whether those places of origin have good internet access? Can the people who live there access the internet easily?

Secondly, an online database works like an archive. It is hermetic and has its own operating logic.⁵ It is not easy to find the objects one is looking for on a museum website. For example, one needs certain keywords to help find objects. Language is yet another barrier. A case in point is the MAS online database which mainly uses Dutch. Consequently, there is a better chance of finding objects on the website if keywords are entered in Dutch. This also leaves aside the fact that comprehension of Dutch can give the user a better grasp of the description.

⁴ Up until 2016, the pustaha was on display at the former missionary museum of the congregation of the Brothers of Our Lady of Lourdes, Oostakker.

⁵ For further reading on the (colonial) archive and its ontologies, particularly with the Dutch colonial administration in Indonesia as its focus, see: Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grains: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

It is true that numerous translation technologies can come in useful, however it is essential to consider the potential loss in translation. We also need to consider the amount of time that has passed between acquisition of the objects in question and the present day. The keywords for those objects might be terms that are now outdated or unfamiliar. Alternatively, one could search for objects by using their local names; however, they may be registered in the database in, say, English or Dutch. Such conditions could cause research difficulties.

Moreover, the descriptions provided in the MAS database are mostly preliminaries with a focus on the physical attributes of the objects rather than on their functions or heritage value. There are numerous entries either with poor quality images or none at all. This indicates the necessity of visiting the storage facilities for a better examination of the objects. If we agree on the need to consider the community of origin, we must also concede that, in general, people coming from those places are in less privileged or non-privileged positions when it comes to travelling to the museum's storage facilities. That positionality relates not only to their financial means but also to the visa regime that makes borders less permeable for certain groups. This discussion about accessibility then becomes entangled with more complex issues, such as power and coloniality.

The situation in which pustahas are being kept mainly in storage is not unique to MAS. As an example, the Dutch National Museum of World Culture (NMVW) holds about 300 manuscripts, yet by and large the public is familiar only with the [Great Pustaha](#) that is on display as part of its current [Our Colonial Inheritance](#) exhibition. On the other hand, putting pustahas on display is not free from complications. For instance, during the on-going study, there are recurrent discussions about the possibility of exposing sacred content to the public outside of its community of origin. Then there is the matter of how to present these objects in an exhibition. Would it be ethically correct for museums to display objects at exhibitions where the focus is strictly on their colonial history, such as in the current instance of the Great Pustaha? Or would it be acceptable to present them on other themes, while acknowledging their embedded colonial history?

Whether they are on display or in storage, the fact that they are displaced from their community of origin requires examination in terms of consequences. Obviously, there is a loss of

knowledge as a result of this displacement. As an illustration, when my former collective (Lifepatch) conducted research on colonial history in Toba as long ago as 2017, pustahas became one of the topics of conversation.⁶

Probably the most daring aspect of those conversations was their speculative flavour. Conscious that colonialism in the region seized those pustahas, among other items, our interlocutors speculated on the number of pustahas that were now scattered in museums around Europe. They reflected on the *loss* of knowledge: the manufacture of pustahas, their writing system, and their content and wisdom. The interlocutors wondered how the Batak community might have developed had those pustahas not been taken away – and if colonialism had never existed. Moreover, somewhat sarcastically, one of the interlocutors commented that pustahas represent a long history of Batak literacy, which is asymmetrical to the colonial depiction of the Batak people as savage.⁷

Our interlocutors are familiar with the narrative that pustahas contain knowledge and wisdom relating to medicinal herbs and rituals. Existing studies show that pustahas mainly display datu knowledge of black and white magic, as well as divination for deciding on the right moment to perform a ritual or to explain the possible outcomes it might have.⁸ Black magic refers to knowledge of the various ways in which to attack enemies; white magic applies to wisdom that protects and cures people. A datu uses a pustaha like a notebook, which leads to its growth over

⁶ Founded in Yogyakarta (Indonesia) 2012, Lifepatch is best described as a citizen initiative in arts, science and technology owing to its members' diverse backgrounds and interests. Despite all the differences, Lifepatch's core values – 'do-it-yourself' and 'do-it-ourselves' – bind its members together. For further reading on Lifepatch's practice, see: Rosalia Namsai Engchuan, 'Lifepatch. Situated Assemblages of Un-Situated Things', *Afterall Journal*, 51, 2021, <https://www.afterall.org/articles/lifepatch-situated-assemblages-of-un-situated-things-2/>. Lifepatch's 2017 research was part of the Europalia Arts Festival where we participated in two exhibitions: *Power and Other Things* (Bozar, Brussels, 18 October 2017–21 January 2018) and *The Tale of Lion and Tiger* (MHKA, Antwerp, 16 September 2017–7 January 2018). At that time, we were examining Hans Christoffel's collection at the MAS alongside field research in northern Sumatra. Our encounter with the MAS collection was initiated by Riksa Afiaty and Charles Esche, the curators of *Power and Other Things*. For our research the main questions were: what do people know about colonial history in Toba; how familiar are people with Sisingamangaraja and Hans Christoffel; what are the stories they gathered in relation to the Batak War (1878–1907); what are their thoughts on the Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP); what are their perceptions concerning objects taken away following the colonial period in the region, and how do they imagine Toba's communities before colonization?

⁷ Based on an interview with Wilson Pandapotan Silaen, a member of Forum Sisingamangara (Sisingamaraja Forum) that studies the history and legacies of Sisingamangaraja, July 2017. The depiction of the Batak people as savage is in the missionary records and travelogues. For further reading on the topic and how the depiction persists in contemporary Indonesia, see: Kai Siallagan, 'The 'Authenticity' of Cannibalism: Persisting Nineteenth-century Colonial Perceptions in the Present-day Tourism Dynamic of Lake Toba', *The Great Lake Journal of Undergraduate History*, Vol. 8, Iss. 1, pp. 27–41, <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol8/iss1/4/>.

⁸ Roberta Zollo, *Manuscript Culture*, Hamburg: Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, 2020, p. 5.

the years. One datu might pass a pustaha to another datu who is willing to share his knowledge.⁹ This circumstance could be one of the reasons why several manuscripts seem to have more than one author.

Taking into account the magical content of pustahas, there is the possibility that Christianity was a significant factor in the process of pustaha seizure at that time. As Christianity grew in the community, and as people converted to it from their beliefs, we might speculate that they surrendered their pustahas – either ‘deliberately’ or because the missionaries told them to do this. We might also speculate on the degraded status of the datu, as priests began to enjoy greater prestige. The sacred objects in Pura (East Nusa Tenggara) might provide a good case in point. The missionaries had asked the people to stop worshipping the gods and their sacred objects. They even prohibited sacred, magic-imbued swords, known as *aring* in Bahasa Blagar and *klewang* in Bahasa Indonesia. This led to many men throwing their swords into the sea.¹⁰ Further studies are certainly necessary if we are to know whether missionaries prohibited pustahas and whether people also threw away or hid their pustahas as a result. However, this could explain why missionary organizations appear in the list of sources for pustaha acquisitions.¹¹

Concerning the ‘magic’ swords of Pura, prohibition led people to stop using them to dig the ground for water during the dry season. In the case of pustahas, we can imagine a situation in which people could no longer refer to them for the preparation of household medicine. It may have started off in that way and then led to people forgetting the recipes and plants they could use to make medicines. It might also be worth examining the problems surrounding the word ‘magic’, which has been used to describe these sacred objects. What was the origin of that description? Did it appear in the travelogues or scientific works produced by foreigners in the colonial period? If that was the case, why did they attach ‘magic’ to those sacred objects? Was it because the communities’ way of valuing those objects was somehow beyond their level of

⁹ Ibid, p. 14–15.

¹⁰ For further study, see: Susanne Rodemeier, ‘The Deity’s Human Wife. Analysis of a Myth from Pura, Eastern Indonesia’, *Anthropos*, 2009, pp. 469–82, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40467186>.

¹¹ A good example is one of the pustahas held at the MAS and donated by a missionary organization (the congregation of the Brothers of Our Lady of Lourdes). Furthermore, the research conducted by Lifepatch and Zollo on the NMVW’s pustaha collection might present a better perspective on this where it concluded that a missionary organization (namely Vrije Evangelische Gemeenten) was among the four main sources for the museum’s acquisition of the objects.

comprehension? To what extent did this relate to the act of mystifying and/or exoticizing the objects?

Taking pustahas as a case study, it is clear that dealing with ethnographic collections requires a great amount of attention and consideration. With that in mind, Lifepatch takes a collaborative approach to the study of pustahas alongside people in Toba, arts and culture organizations based in Medan, the Batak diaspora collective known as Kawan Pustaha (Friends of Pustaha) and Roberta Zollo, a philologist who specializes in Batak manuscripts.¹² Certainly, this process of learning and unlearning is not without its flaws. Nevertheless, the hope is that a collaborative approach will lead to greater accountability for those involved.

It has emerged from Lifepatch and Kawan Pustaha's 2024 field research that pustaha manufacture continues to occur. Nowadays, however, the purpose is purely tourism-based.¹³ There are several aspects that distinguish contemporary pustaha manufacture from that of the past; the main difference is that a datu is no longer in charge of the process. Moreover, contemporary pustahas do not use the same script as before. They also lack authentic pustaha content, although some may contain oral traditions or tales.¹⁴ Despite that, some aspects are the same, such as the materials and manufacturing stages. Therefore, while it is true that there has been a *loss* of knowledge with regard to pustaha manufacture, it is also safe to conclude that a certain amount of its wisdom remains. Of the few pustaha-makers that Lifepatch and Kawan Pustaha have met, one of them is especially worthy of note owing to his method: Jorliman Parmonangan Sidabutar from Siharbang Tomok. Although he no longer uses the old writing

¹² Currently, this collaborative work is part of the Pressing Matter programme which aims to investigate the potentialities of 'colonial objects' to support societal reconciliation with the colonial past and its afterlives, and to deal with conflicting claims by different stakeholders for these objects within museums. For further information, see: <https://pressingmatter.nl/>. However, Lifepatch aims to expand this collaboration beyond the programme.

¹³ To conclude that pustaha manufacture in the past did not entail any element of creation 'for the tourist market' is a somewhat knotty issue. For instance, based on Roberta Zollo and Lifepatch's preliminary findings on the NMVW's pustaha collection, out of 90 pustahas that we catalogued, one of them may raise questions as regards the tourist market. Although this pustaha has a more standard type of writing in its initial pages, the writing in its subsequent pages is more irregular. Zollo suggests that a datu might have started to write the pustaha but left it unfinished, whereupon, at some later time it was reutilized by some local craftsman who added text and drawings, probably with the aim of selling the object.

¹⁴ Uli Kozok in his *Surat Batak: sejarah perkembangan tulisan batak: berikut pedoman menulis aksara Batak dan cap Si Singamangaraja XII* (Jakarta: KPG, 2009, p. 16) states that several pustahas belonging to Van der Tuuk and Ophuijsen also contain folklore at their request. The Van der Tuuk collection belongs to the Leiden University Library.

system and language, in terms of content he writes on topics similar to those seen in the old versions, such as divination and charms. He can recall the old pustaha scripts that he had read, and his grandfather, from whom he learned about the manuscripts, was a datu himself.¹⁵ This proves that, however limited it may be, the process of knowledge transmission has occurred.

Regarding the matter of language, Rachel Leow's *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* (2016) may provide a meaningful contribution. Although it focuses on the Malaysian context, Leow's research poses significant questions that could be comparable to the case of Indonesia, given that the British Empire, similar to the Dutch, faced a 'brew of languages'. Leow asks, "How was it that British colonizers were able to assert claims of governance over a whole population of people to whom they could not actually speak? How did colonizers govern, or try to govern, polyglot subjects?"¹⁶ By linking Leow's questions to the pustaha case, it is probably relevant to ask whether taking pustahas from the community was a means of Dutch colonial rule seeking to govern a people whose language they could not speak? By seizing the pustahas, those benefiting from colonial power also took away people's knowledge of the script and the language. The violence of this may not appear obvious, it is true, but it remains a type of violence all the same.

Although the colonial period in Toba has ended, the enduring legacy of colonialism (coloniality) remains.¹⁷ We can employ the study of pustahas to show how power and coloniality of knowledge exist. Kawan Pustaha, Lifepatch's collaborator, consists of the Batak diaspora who went to work and study in Java (mainly Yogyakarta), focusing their activity on the study of pustahas. They have been engaged in a series of activities that involve writing and reading Batak script, given that they are detached from it. Additionally, they have also been discussing Batak culture and history, including the colonial period's effect on them. The circumstance typical of post-colonial individuals is to understand their disconnection from their cultural roots, while trying to relearn them and unlearn coloniality.

The most troubling circumstance is that their willingness to engage in all these processes often comes up against complex issues. Firstly, getting access to the physical objects undergoing

¹⁵ Lifepatch and Kawan Pustaha interviewed him on 24 May 2024.

¹⁶ For further reading, see Leow: pp. 23–56.

¹⁷ For further reading about the concept of coloniality, see, among others: Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, Iss. 2–3, 2007, pp. 168–78, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>.

study (pustahas in this case) means, in all likelihood, having to travel abroad in view of the number of pustahas located there compared with the number in Indonesia. The points raised earlier concerning financial means and visa regimes now come into direct play. Secondly, in the main, existing studies on Batak culture and society have been conducted by foreign researchers. While it is true that this research has yielded significant contributions, there might be elements of colonial bias. At the same time, local researchers might be subject to internalized coloniality. Given that situation, both sets of researchers need self-awareness on the subject. The real challenge is not to build a house of knowledge using colonial bricks, and whether that is possible. Lastly, the coloniality of knowledge persists to this day. For instance, when discussing Batak language scholars, it is commonplace, especially in Western academic circles, to refer to those in academia. Meanwhile, knowledgeable people in the Batak community do exist, but they are mostly afforded limited recognition because they do not fit the standard. Under such a colonial mindset, those people are considered ‘autodidacts’ and ‘amateurs’ with possibly questionable skills.

The question remains of how to deal with such complexities with care. One worthwhile experiment might be to have increasing numbers of provenance-research initiatives on ethnographic objects being driven from within the local communities. Of course, this may not be the most radical course of action, but, at the very least, it would allow local communities to start the process of taking back knowledge, even if the process of taking back the objects (with its own intricacies) could take longer. Collaboration with all manner of different entities can take place in community-driven provenance-research initiatives, including museums and (Western) scholars, with the community of origin’s aspirations as their central point. In such a setting, the community might be able to explore questions, doubts, anxieties, answers and delights relating to its history and culture on its own terms. This could also put scholars on a more equal footing – one not defined in terms of superiors and inferiors. Moreover, in exchange for providing a decolonialized perspective to the collections (perhaps in the form of publications on provenance research, exhibitions, etc.), museums would be able to give funding to people probably very much deserving of it to conduct research that might enable them to understand and, possibly, *find* what has been lost.
