

Caring for a national hero's weapon: Object restitution in the Indonesian (legal) context

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On March 10, 2020, the President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, welcomed King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima of the Netherlands in one of the presidential palaces, the Bogor Palace, in West Java. In front of the invited journalists, they admired a special *kris*—the traditional weapon with a wavy blade from Java, Indonesia—inside a glass case. Even though the *kris* has specks of gold coating, it is not the artistic ornament that makes it highly valuable. This particular *kris*, named *Kyai Nogo Siluman* (Honourable Stealthy Dragon), once belonged to a national hero of Indonesia, Prince Diponegoro (1785-1855). Within the modern historiography of Indonesia, his Java War (1825-1830) has been epitomised as the leading early resistance to colonial rule. Just a few days prior to the royal visit, the dagger had been returned to Indonesia by the Netherlands. This return followed extensive provenance research by the Dutch National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. For this blog, I will look in particular at how the return unfolded in Indonesia and what it may mean for future returns.

At various stages throughout the provenance research process, Indonesian experts and officials were involved. In January 2019, a group of Indonesian *kris* experts, while in the Netherlands for other research, were asked to date a number of *kris*s, including *Kyai Nogo Siluman*, based on their iconography. The Dutch curators did not disclose they were looking for the one that belonged to Diponegoro due to its sensitive nature. Later that year, the Museum invited an Expert Reviewer of Indonesian descent based in Vienna, who considered the research comprehensive and agreed with the findings. At last, in February 2020, through the Indonesian ambassador for the Netherlands, I Gusti Agung Wesaka Puja, an update went to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which quickly assembled a small team of Indonesian historians to verify the provenance research. This team concluded that the research methodology was sound and accepted the identification of the *kris* as *Kyai Nogo Siluman*.

Article 20 of the Indonesian National Law Number 10 Year 2011 regarding [Cultural Heritage](#) stipulates that the government of Indonesia is responsible for facilitating the return of cultural objects.

The return of Cultural Heritage originated from Indonesia, which is outside the territory of The Republic of Indonesia, is carried out by the Government in accordance with ratified international conventions, bilateral agreements, or handed over directly by the owner, unless otherwise agreed as long as it does not conflict with the provisions of laws and regulations. (Author's own translation)

In practice, this means that returned artefacts automatically end up in the collection of the National Museum of Indonesia. Thus far, there has been no case where the returned artefacts are afterwards distributed to regional museums or local communities. Remarks made upon this retention practice typically emphasise the absence of a legal framework bestowed on the National Museum to re-distribute the artefacts.

In the case of the Diponegoro *kris*, relevant parties have indicated that this particular transfer should be referred back to the 1975 Joint Recommendations, signed by Indonesia and the Netherlands, in which both countries agreed on the return of a number of priority Indonesian artifacts in Dutch collections. This recommendation stated that objects belonging to Diponegoro should be the ones to be prioritised for returns. In 1978, this resulted in the transfer of saddle, spear, and stirrups to the National Museum, and in 2020 it was again the framework under which the *kris* was returned.

Once in Indonesia, the *Kyai Nogo Siluman kris* was officially handed over to the National Museum in Jakarta. It was first put on display for the visit of the Dutch king, followed by a special temporary exhibition for *Kyai Nogo Siluman* open to the general public in November 2020, where the *kris* was displayed together with other Diponegoro belongings. This gave the public an opportunity to admire and celebrate the return. There seems to be no public outcry that the *kris* is currently not on display, which allows me to reflect on what object restitution means for origin communities. In this context, the knowledge that the *kris* is back in Indonesia's hands does not translate into the obligation to have the object accessible to the broader public. Nonetheless, within this story, one can also ask about the apparent absence of the family of Diponegoro. There seems to be no active involvement of the Diponegoro descendants in both the provenance research and return process. Should they have played a stronger role?

"Diponegoro today belongs to Indonesia," stated Roni Sodewo during our conversation in April last year. Sodewo is one of the descendants of Diponegoro. In 2015, he founded *Patra Padi*, a local association to facilitate communication and gathering of disparate branches within the Diponegoro family. His brief statement is an astute reflection of how the nation-state Indonesia has made use of the historical figure of Diponegoro since the beginning of the 20th century. Being a well-known local rebel against Dutch colonial authority, Diponegoro is an important tool in provoking a sense of Indonesian-ness both before and after the independence in the 1940s. As such, Sodewo saw no contradiction with the government's decision to house the Diponegoro *kris* at the National Museum. His reasoning thus appears to fit perfectly with the general feeling at the time. There was goodwill all around in ensuring that *Kyai Nogo Siluman's* transfer happened unhindered. The government of Indonesia was more than willing to carry out its task in part because of the place afforded to the figure of Diponegoro within the national imagination. This imagination has resulted in the ubiquitous production of his statues, aimed to infuse a sense of nationalism in various public spaces in Indonesia. While occasionally Diponegoro can be found standing with a sheathed kris tucked at the front waist, he is primarily depicted sitting on a standing horse, with the right hand holding up a *kris*.

This raises a few essential questions for future restitutions to Indonesia from the Netherlands. What would happen when the object is not central to national and historical imagination? Would it be possible to engender return outside nation-state frameworks? How would the local community figure in the process of object restitution? It goes without saying that there is still work to be done to ensure that object restitution is an inclusive process in and of itself.

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This blog was amended on 23 June 2023 since the origins of the saddle, spear, and stirrups are not yet clear.

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URL: <https://www.biicl.org/blog/64/caring-for-a-national-heros-weapon-object-restitution-in-the-indonesian-legal-context>