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Sense and Sensibility

A multisensory approach to conservation of the Southeast Asia collection of the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden

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Cover photo: *Asmat Papuan woodcarver making an ancestor pole in the men's house*, unknown, 1950-1960, gelatine silver print, 12 x 18 cm (Amsterdam, Tropenmuseum, inv.no. TM-60045518)

"Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing."[1]

[1] Definition of the 'museum' as proposed by ICOM during the annual assembly of members in Kyoto, 2019. It was mainly inspired by the changes in the ethnological museums, whom are actively dealing with their colonial past. However, the definition was too bold for the majority of the members to agree on, postponing the agenda item to the assembly in June 2021.

Introduction

In this thesis current conservation practices concerning the evaluation and presentation of objects in Museum Volkenkunde are explored.[2] The topic was inspired by an anecdote told by the conservator Wouter Welling of the Afrikamuseum in Berg en Dal.[3] In a speech on the importance of non-western perspectives on ethnological collections he mentioned that as curator of an exhibition he encountered an object that – according to its so-called source community – required a bowl of water to be placed next to it for the object was viewed as a living entity which needed nourishment. This seemingly simple gesture instigated a heated debate between the preservation department and the curators before the object could be installed for exhibition. The debate resulted in the dismissal of the proposal: the water was never provided. The anecdote was used by Welling to exemplify the friction that arises when the conservation department is confronted with object engagement that transcends visual observation. It was caused by the widely accepted conservation theory that advocates the regulation and minimisation of all factors that could harm the material of an object. In this case the instalment of a bowl of water near an object causes fluctuations in the relative humidity which in turn causes stress in organic materials and increases the risk of biological damage.

The anecdote reveals tension between conservation as practiced in Dutch ethnographic museums and the aim to include source communities in decision-making processes. The safety of the materiality of the object was considered more important than the cultural significance of the object. This resulted in the dismissal of alternative preservation measures, justified by a material-technical approach to museum objects. However, one crucial thing is missing in the anecdote: the identity and meaning of the object itself. To understand the sensory restraint that is currently ensured by the museum, the process of evaluating objects before conservation should be included. In this thesis a multisensory approach to conservation is proposed as a tool to reconsider the current emphasis on material-technical research in conservation theory and practice. The benefit of a multisensory approach is that it allows for an object sensibility that is not limited to the visual. It acknowledges that all the senses are integrated and sustain each other. In this thesis it is used to allow alternative conceptualisations of heritage preservation to be integrated in the conservation department of Museum Volkenkunde. The effect of a

[2] The Dutch names of the museums will be adhered to as not all the names of the (historic) museums have an adequate English translation. Museum Volkenkunde will be referred to under the abbreviation 'Volkenkunde'.
[3] *Blikverruiming: van een westers perspectief naar een mondiale oriëntatie* speech given by Wouter Welling in the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum as part of a thematic day on the exhibition 'Anima Mundi' (23/09/2018).

multisensory approach to ethnological objects will be studied by researching object biographies. This results in the following research question: how does embedding a multisensory approach in conservation theory and practice affect the evaluation and presentation of ethnological objects in Museum Volkenkunde?

In the last decades, source communities have challenged (ethnographic) museums.[4] Source communities can include all groups, such as diasporic cultures, minorities, nations or cultural groups, of whom museums have collected objects. The objectives of these groups differ in every situation but have one thing in common: they confront museums with policies, views and values on material culture that have taken shape from a western or Eurocentric perspective. The groups interfere with the collections, the exhibitions and decision making processes, demanding the right to engage with objects that originated in their community or to be fully recognized and represented in the museum instead of being shown as the 'other'. This process where non-professional views are being involved in the decisions of conservators can cause a clash of ethical standards.[5]

In conservation theory, the former focus on the materiality of an object is gradually being replaced by a focus on the inclusion of the subject.[6] This shift is called the social or cultural turn. The implications of this turn are particularly prevalent in ethnographic museums as they preserve many objects that have been removed from their source communities under asymmetrical power relationships and are sometimes still important for living cultures. It is important to note that even without active input from source communities the social turn can have consequences for conservation. Implementing alternative ideas on heritage preservation has the potential to lift objects to a new level of meaning-giving – stimulated and supported by collaborative efforts but also possible without it. However, these 'alternative' ideas on preservation can often not be aligned with the way in which objects are protected against sensory interaction by western conservators.

This discrepancy also becomes apparent from the anecdote of the object. The conservator of the museum cannot abide any contact, albeit non-human, that could be harmful

[4] A source community can be defined as the "community of makers, users, and their descendants" of a museum object: M. Winslow, "Pushing the Needle: Collections Based Museum and Source Community Collaborations" (Dissertation at the University of Washington, 2002), 2.

[5] One of the authors who recognizes non-western conceptualisations of museums/museology and discusses the ethical issues involved is C. Kreps in *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003)

[6] One of the most influential authors on this matter is M. Clavir. She focusses on the difference between both museum practices and the preservation approaches of First Nation civilians, commenting on the efforts of museums trying to incorporate perspectives from 'new' social groups: M. Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued. Museums, Conservation and First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002).

to the object, fearing a loss of the material. The community where the object comes from however, feels the need to preserve more than just the material form of the object. They engage with the object with a broader sensibility which is not limited to visual observation. This sensibility is not something exotic: many examples of sensory engagement with objects can be found in western cultures. One need only think of rituals that include kissing or touching religious statues or relics.

In recent studies, material culture is linked to the study of the senses.[7] This movement aims to expose the colonial structures that have allowed the western sensorium to be privileged above others. In the western sensory schema of the 19th century museum seeing and hearing count as rational, whereas touch, smell and taste are irrational. This relates directly to the displays in which civilized and composed western cultures were juxtaposed with the corporeal, exotic other. The remnants of this sensory schema are exposed by the dominance of the visual in museums. The hierarchy of the senses is particularly important in museums as it is a space where objects are encountered and related to. The contact with an object is connected to the main objective of a museum: transmitting knowledge. Sensory restraint has not always be ensured in museums. In the early modern museum, hands-on interaction with objects was deemed indispensable. Touch was used to verify what was seen and to provide extra information, such as weight and structure. Smell was used to determine the material the object was made of. Even taste was used by certain collection owners when exotic foods were concerned. Touching an object was a display of social prestige, transferring the power of the original owner to the visitor. [8] Since then, sensory contact with objects was gradually been banned from the museum in the 19th century due to several factors: electric lighting, emphasis on the visual in modern scientific research, a growing non-egalitarian public and the development of the conservation profession.[9]

Currently, the senses are slowly returning to the museum. The focus on sensory restraint is gradually declining in the exhibition spaces as the doors have opened for new stakeholders. One of the main causes of this development is the effort to include people with a disability into the museum.[10] However, the conservation departments of most museums – including the Volkenkunde – operate to the traditional adagio of material preservation: "De algemene lijn is

[7] E. Edwards, C. Gosden, R.B. Phillips, *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2006)
[8] C. Classen, "Museum Manners: The Sensory Life of the Early Museum", *Journal of Social History,* 40:4 (2007), 895 - 908
[9] Classen, "Museum Manners", 907-909
[10] Classen, *The Museum of the Senses,* 126-127

dat zo min mogelijk wordt ingegrepen in de collectie om te voorkomen dat informatieverlies optreedt". [11] This means that all contact – including interventive conservation – with the object is discouraged to minimize the risk of material loss. It prevents the museum from creating reciprocal relationships with source communities as changes involving a different perspective on object materiality and preservation are viewed as risks.

In this thesis the assumed neutrality of current conservation theory and practice will be questioned. The research question will be built upon using the object biographies of three case studies. The case studies function as examples of the topics that are explored throughout the thesis. The chapters of this thesis are structured using the aspects of an object's biography that are studied before conservation treatment: materiality, meaning and their status in the museum. The materiality and meaning of an object are often mentioned separately, confirming the idea that they are two different things. The case studies disprove this dichotomy as they show that both aspects are intertwined and actually sustain each other. Both chapters explore the specifics of conservation when researching materiality and meaning while questioning current discourse. The case studies for this thesis have been selected from the South-East Asian collection – specifically the Indonesian subcollection - of the Museum Volkenkunde. The collection of the Volkenkunde is currently in the care of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMWC). The NMWC – a conglomerate comprising the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Afrikamuseum in Berg en Dal – was formed as a a governing structure in 2014 due to the crisis in the cultural sector caused by the financial crisis. This means that the objects from the case studies can be on display in one of the other museums as they are now part of one collection.

Methodology

To start with, the terms conservation and conservator will be defined. In the English and Dutch speaking world both terms are interpreted differently, complicating the understanding of this thesis. In 2008 ICOM-CC proposed a definition of the term 'conservation' to ensure international understanding: "All measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations. Conservation embraces preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration. All measures and actions should respect the significance and the physical properties of the cultural heritage

[11] Erfgoedinspectie, *De staat van de rijkscollectie: Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen,* 18

item." The English speaking world understands both the practices of conservation and restoration as conservation. Webster's dictionary (United States) defines the term conservator as such: "a person whose work is the preservation, reconditioning, and restoration of works of art"[12]. In the Netherlands, however, conservation and restoration are two separate professions: "Conservation is the set of measures and procedures aimed at consolidating the condition of the object, arresting deterioration […] or preventing deterioration. […] Restoration is the set of procedures and prior investigation aimed at returning a damaged or partially lost object to a predefined condition." [13] Broadly speaking, conservation is aimed at minimizing degradation of the object by optimizing its surroundings. Restoration actively intervenes with the materiality of the object. Furthermore, the profession of conservator in a museum has another layer to it in the Netherlands and the whole Latin world : curating the collection you are taking care of. Often, the conservator has the objects in their care but a separate collection care management team handles the preservation of the objects. The main purpose of the Dutch conservator is knowledge transfer through exhibition practice. The English definition which includes all professionals working in the collection care department (depot staff, conservators, restorers etc.) will be adhered to. However, as this thesis is also concerned with the presentation of objects special attention will be given to exhibition making.

Now that the terms conservation/conservator have been cleared of misinterpretation, the choice for ethnographic museums should be explained. The adjective 'ethnographic' is used to describe the type of museum which is concerned with the study of peoples and cultures. Many ethnographic museums are steeped in colonial history: they served as a public display of power showing imperial hierarchy: "the acquisition of objects – trophies of empire […], the intersection of taxonomy and chronology – situating the object while structuring the institutional world of museums itself".[14] The objects in these museums are called 'ethnographic objects', referring to the name of the museum. This means that ethnographic objects are a random collection of various object types such as religious artefacts, art and functional objects. In early collections, ethnographic objects were clearly distinguished from art and art museums and often exhibited in natural history museums. The categorisation 'ethnographic' is related to

[12] *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, Third Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997), 296-297.
[13] Translation from a Dutch quote: "Conservering is het geheel van maatregelen en handelingen dat erop is gericht de toestand van het voorwerp te consolideren, geconstateerd verval tegen te gaan, of verval […] te verhinderen. […] Restauratie is het geheel van handelingen en het daaraan voorafgaande onderzoek om een beschadigd of gedeeltelijk verloren gegaan voorwerp in een van tevoren gedefinieerd toestand terug te brengen". M. Otte, *Syllabus bij Basiscursus Preventieve Conservatie* (Amsterdam: LCM, 2002), 6.
[14] J.P. Nederveen, "Multiculturalism and Museums: Discourse about Others in the Age of Globalization", *Theory Culture and Society* 14:4 (1997), 123-124.

racial and cultural stereotypes as objects of all indigenous cultures are lumped together – related by what they are not: art. The term is still used as a remnant of institutional terminology, but is nuanced by the use of subcollections. Currently, ethnographic objects are evaluated by conservators of most museums from a both aesthetic and ethnographic perspective.[15]

Every museum of the NMWC has a different historical background. The Museum Volkenkunde is the oldest museum, established in 1837 from the collection of the scientist Franz von Siebold and served to stimulate scientific research. In 1864 the Tropenmuseum was erected as a colonial museum about the Dutch overseas territories by the Society for the Promotion of Industry. The museum and its collection were primarily focused on trade. The youngest museum is the Afrikamuseum, established in 1954 as the result of a collection assembled by missionaries who worked in situ with African communities. The museums aim to transcend their history of the representation of the 'other', creating spaces of intercultural dialogue. A good example of this is the publication *Words Matter* – a work-in-progress – in which contested museum language in general and certain words specifically are scrutinized.[16] The NMWC is also listening to and cooperating with activist groups such as Decolonize the Museum and innovative platforms as FramerFramed.[17] The winds of change in the outside world calling out to the museum have already reached the conservation departments in the 1990's, shown by the article of former head of conservation Graeme Scott on the preservation of culturally sensitive objects.[18] However, rigid standards advocated by technical development and research in preventive/active conservation practice and theory seem to be irreconcilable with a conservation mode that is shifting towards cultural preservation.

A multisensorial approach to objects fosters new possibilities for ethnographic conservators to evaluate objects. It entails a reconsideration of the sensory register, advocating a broader, holistic view of the senses in relation to material culture that is not limited to the visual. From this perspective, objects are seen as containing sensory properties that change and create relations between people and objects.[19] This influences conservation matters as sensory engagement with museum object is currently discouraged on the grounds of technical (scientific) research. The structure of this thesis will follow the standard structure of evaluating

[15] B. Appelbaum, *Conservation Treatment Methodology* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007), 163-164
[16] *Woorden doen ertoe: een incomplete gids voor woordkeuze binnen de culturele sector* (National Museum for World Cultures, 2016)
[17] An example is the conference 'Decolonize the Museum' of 2015, the result of an intervention staged by both Framerframed and Decolonize the Museum in collaboration with the Tropenmuseum. Accessed on: 05/01/2020 https://framerframed.nl/en/blog/conferentie-decolonize-the-museum-conference/
[18] G. Scott, "World's apart? The conservation of western and non-western objects", *KM* 25 (1998)
[19] Edwards, *Sensible Objects*, 8

objects for conservation: material values, immaterial values and provenance. The sensory engagement with objects throughout their 'lives' will be explored in every stage of the research on the object, questioning accepted truths in conservation. In the first chapter, the question of *why* objects are conserved is explored: for their material values or cultural significance? The importance of material research is discussed, including the more or less exclusive right of conservators to touch and smell objects. In the second chapter it is shown that the sensory biography is often closely connected to the spirituality of an object. Also, the relationship between the spiritual values of an object and its materiality is touched upon using the case studies. The third chapter is concerned with how the objects arrived in the museum and what that means for their current status. Furthermore, the importance of collaboration with source communities in this debate is discussed. To conclude a recapitulation of the arguments of this thesis is given to answer the research question.

Throughout the chapters, case studies will be presented. The case studies have been chosen from the Volkenkunde collection as this museum has historically been concerned with collecting objects for scholarly purposes. The case studies focus on three object groups that are all abundantly present in the collection: krisses (plural form of kris, borrowed from the Malay *keris*), gamelan instruments and bisj poles. They have been selected as most objects of these collections were acquired during the colonial era and are/were spiritually important. The objects have been chosen as they all represent different issues for conservation. Krisses are surrounded by superstitions and spiritual beliefs which are still alive today posing difficulties for the museum in handling and display. The gamelan has been important for the Volkenkunde Museum for a long time as music groups were using them for practice and performances. The instruments are so-called 'working objects' that lose an important part of their meaning if they are not used to make music. However, active use of the gamelan requires conservators to accept material loss. Additionally, the spirituality of the instruments is integral to its use. The conservation of the bisj poles poses the opposite problem: active intervention changes the original meaning of the object as the poles were given back to the earth to deteriorate. All three object groups are used as examples to study the effect of a multisensory approach in conservation of an ethnographic collection.

Status Quaestionis

The so-called social turn can be traced back to the 1990's and is characterized by the inclusion of non-professional views and values and the reconsidering of the dogma that material culture should be preserved for the sake of preserving it as long as possible. This movement away from classical conservation theory was triggered by a variety of factors: objects that are not considered cultural heritage but are still to be treated by conservators (e.g. Appelbaum); modern art that transcends all traditional concepts on art and materiality (e.g. Lange-Berndt); embodied experiences in the museum (e.g. Dudley); dismantling of the western hegemony in the art/museum world (e.g. Clavir).[20] In this process, the inclusion of new stakeholders questioning the pervasive colonial structures has been most influential for ethnographic museums. This attention to the interaction between the material and the social represents the new role of conservation today: culture heritage exists to facilitate the present community of users and is not just to be preserved for the future as long as possible. This democratisation of the decision-making process of conservators is a widespread movement supported by theorists such as Munoz Vinas, who deconstructs key concepts like reversibility and the original state implicitly complying to the core idea of an 'objective truth'.[21] Another important conservation theorist in this field is Sully, who observed a development from a material-based to a value-based and people-based focus. The focus on the physical stability of objects is now accompanied by emphasis on their cultural significance.[22]

In his latest book, *Decolonising Conservation*, Sully combines the empowering potential of people-based conservation with the efforts to 'decolonize' conservation. He attempts to "liberate Western conservation from its Eurocentric constraints" by the means of empowerment, de-centring and addressing asymmetrical power relations.[23] He frames his research within museums in New Zealand, United States, Germany and Great Britain, studying the social networks that connect Maori meeting houses and people through time and space. He uses people-based conservation both as a theoretical approach and practical tool to expose and

[20] Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued. Museums, Conservation, and First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002); S. H. Dudley, *Museum Materialities. Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2010); P. Lange-Berndt, *Materiality* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015); Appelbaum, *Conservation Treatment Methodology*

[21] S. Munoz Vinas, "Contemporary Theory of Conservation", Studies in Conservation 47:1 (2002)

[22] Sully, D. 2013. "Conservation Theory and Practice: Materials, Values and People in Heritage Conservation". In: S. Macdonald and H. Rees Leahy (eds), *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, Chichester: Wiley & Sons Ltd.

[23] Sully, D., *Decolonizing Conservation: Caring for Maori Meeting Houses outside New Zealand* (University College London: Institute of Archaeology Publications, 2016), 19-26.

address colonial structures underlying museum conservation. The efforts to 'decolonize' museum theory and practice are stimulated in the Netherlands by groups such as Decolonize the Museum and FramerFramed. Both groups were involved with the conference 'Decolonizing the Museum' in 2015 of which the aim was to expose colonial structures still present in the NMWC by "critiquing its Eurocentrism, white supremacy, its assumed neutrality and its excuses of 'only having so much time/space'".[24] Being part of the NMWC, decolonial efforts are endorsed by the Volkenkunde Museum. However, the most visible acts – such as research, exhibitions and events – on decolonization are taking place in the Tropenmuseum and the Research Institute for Material Culture.[25]

Using 'decoloniality' as a critical tool in the museum is not embraced by everyone. Before analysing this position it is important to understand the meaning of the term. Mignolo states that decoloniality cannot be seen separately from coloniality and modernity. Coloniality is viewed as a constitutive of the pillars of modernity: the civilizing mission and development/progress. These pillars of modernity have resulted in the invention of a universal history, where eventually everyone would follow history towards the western standard. Western epistemes of knowledge are firmly rooted in modernity. Decoloniality does not function as an academic discipline working within these epistemologies but seeks to disrupt them: "the goal of decoloniality is delinking".[26] It aims to delink from the 'colonial matrix of power', the structural relations that constitute the modern state (which cannot exist without colonialism). In a more practical way, as voiced by l'Internationale (an international collective of art museums), decoloniality means "resisting the reproduction of colonial taxonomies, while simultaneously vindicating radical multiplicity".[27] However, decoloniality has been accused of obscuring the complexity of geographically and temporally specific colonial processes as it de-links from formal decolonization. Another point of criticism with marking something as 'decolonial' is the danger that colonialism becomes the defining factor. It could lead to idealizing the pre-colonial situation and ultimately to simplifying history.[28]

A framework that is often used in research on the social dimension of coloniality in the

[24] Accessed on: 05/02/2020 https://framerframed.nl/en/blog/conferentie-decolonize-the-museum-conference/
[25] For example the permanent exhibition in the Tropenmuseum *Heden van het Slavernijverleden* on the effects of slavery in our current society and the conference *Caring Matters* (23-25 Sep) in the Research Centre for Material Culture on addressing colonial legacies in museums in a critical way.
[26] W. Mignolo, C. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics and Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 120.
[27] *Decolonizing Museums* (L'Internationale Online), publication of the conference Decolonising the Museum, MACBA Barcelona, November 2014.
[28] A. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2005), 20-22.

museum is the "museum as a contact zone", an idea developed by James Clifford.[29] In this model the museum becomes a space of social encounters – a space of dialogue – between subjects and objects that were previously separated due to colonial disparities. A space that invites source communities into the museum to add new narratives to the collection. However, as Robin Boast points out, the ultimate (institutional and financial) power lies with the museum or heritage organisation that organises these events, resulting in an asymmetric space.[30] If the relationship between the source communities and the museum is not long-term and reciprocal, the museum will not become truly inclusive. In Boast's words: "to do this, however, requires museums to learn to let go of their resources, even at times of the objects, for the benefit and use of communities and agendas far beyond its knowledge and control".[31] This sentiment is also shared by Peers and Brown, who advocate equal partnerships benefitting both parties, rather than the one-way consultation of source communities.[32]

Part of reciprocal and inclusive relationships with source communities is creating a discourse on the care and access of culturally sensitive materials. This care extends from the preservation methods in storage depots, to transport and handling, to displaying the objects for the public in an exhibition. The conservation methods of the western museum are in need of a new impulse as they sometimes fail to meet the demands of source communities: "They argue that the Western museum's ritual practices of sensory isolation and enforced statis are antithetical to indigenous forms of ritual correctness that may require that objects be fed, held, worn, played, danced or exposed to air, water or incense."[33] The question of access is therefore a question of ethics: "'I don't know why museums think that we don't care for [our ceremonial objects]' protests a Blackfoot man from Canada, responding to the argument that museums are better caretakers of indigenous artefacts than indigenous peoples, 'We smudge [cense] them every day]'".[34] The ease with which this native attitude to object care is dismissed and denied legitimacy in favour of minimizing material loss is exactly what this thesis is about: the disregard of non-western understandings of object preservation in museums.

One step in recovering these ways of understanding is to use sensory studies in the discourse on conservation. Senses, sensing and sensory are terms that can be understood purely

[29] J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 192.
[30] R. Boast, "Neocolonial Collaboration: Museums as Contact Zone Revisited" Museum Anthropology, 34:1 (2011), 65-67.
[31] Boast, "Neocolonial Collaboration", 67
[32] Peers, L. L., & Brown, *Museums and Source Communities : A Routledge Reader*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 1-15.
[33] Edwards, *Sensible Objects*, 20
[34] Classen, *The Museum of the Senses*, 140-141

scientific as being used in tools that can 'sense' something. In ethnography, however, sensing is something human and culturally bound: even though we are all equipped with generally the same sensory organs, variations in sensory perception exist among cultures. [35] This approach to anthropological research is called the 'anthropology of the senses'.[36] It has been instigated by the growing awareness of the western epistemological emphasis on the visual. In the 1970's and 1980's anthropologists started to recognize the limitations of their 'visual' readings of other cultures. Their answer was to emphasize the power of dialogue."[37] However, this approach, being centred around vision and text, was still lacking a sensory dimension.[38] The anthropology of the senses functioned as a discourse seeking to contradict the idea that reason and memory are the only modalities with which to measure intelligence. It has challenged the emphasis on the visual in a variety of disciplines such as museology, psychology and aesthetics. In this thesis, the notion that senses are culturally determined is explored to understand difficulties in the conservation of objects in ethnographic museums. Just as there can be multiple interpretations of facts, the senses can perceive the world in different ways. The five Aristotelian senses – sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing – are a cultural construct. Not everywhere in the world the same emphasis is placed on the same cognitive modalities. This notion can be exported to conservation theory, generating a perspective on objects that include all of their sensory properties. This allows alternative perceptions of object engagement to be included in the decision-making process concerning the evaluation and presentation of objects.

[35] E. Emerald, *Global South Ethnographies: Minding the Senses* (Rotterdam: Birkhäuser Boston, 2016), 2
[36] D. Howes, (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensual Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 3-21
[37] Howes, *The Varieties of Sensual Experience*, 7
[38] Howes, *The Varieties of Sensual Experience*, 8

1 Preserving the materiality of the object

The evaluation of an object for conservation encompasses many factors which are roughly divided into its material integrity and immaterial integrity.[39] The difference between material and immaterial values has been characterized as respectively "physical data and the feelings people have when they look at it or think about it [the object]".[40] This is a vague definition that does not do justice to the immaterial values of an object. Pomian has developed a theory in which the values or information of a (museum) object are divided in a material and a semiotic aspect. The material aspect constitutes the physical characteristics of the material such as form and function. The semiotic aspect constitutes the visible characteristics of the object that refer to something 'invisible': the meanings that are attributed to the object. This kind of object is what he calls a 'semiophore', an object with a semiotic aspect that is not only functional. It represents the unseen and has thereby been attributed a certain meaning. If more meaning is attributed to an object, less attention is given to its functionality. He differentiates the museum object from 'things': objects that are consumed or used – similar to commodities. As Pomian uses the dichotomy between the 'seen' and the 'unseen' his theory on collections and collecting can be applied to all cultures. [41] The theory of Pomian is used in this thesis to understand the correlation between the material and meaning of an object. Understanding a museum object as a semiophore helps to embed the senses in conservation discourse as they are connected to both aspects of the object.

In this chapter the materiality of objects will be discussed using the aforementioned case studies from the Indonesian collection of the Museum Volkenkunde. In the first part of this chapter the initial question of why the material object is selected for preservation is discussed. The reason for preservation is divided in two aspects: for future observation or for its cultural significance today. As will be shown the latter allows for more sensory interaction. The second part of this chapter examines the physical biography of objects. Issues such as the authenticity of the material and its degradation processes, but also the circumstances of its manufacture and original preservation measures are touched upon. Additionally, the paradoxical nature of the sensory engagement of conservators with objects and their advocation of sensory restraint its explored.

[39] Appelbaum, *Conservation treatment methodology*, 10-16
[40] Appelbaum, *Conservation treatment methodology*, 14
[41] K. Pomian, *De oorsprong van het museum: over het verzamelen* (Heerlen: De Voorstad, 1990), 40-48

1.1 Why is the material form of the object preserved?

1.1.1 Future observation

Conservation practice is aimed at preserving the material form of an object for the future. This results in a practice where conservators are concerned with the question of *how* to preserve. However, to create a thorough understanding of an object it is important to understand *why* they are preserved. To preserve an object can been seen as the effort to preserve the past. According to traditional conservation theory the preservation of the past in the form of an object consists of two aspects: preserving objects as physical evidence of the past and presenting objects on display.[42] The main goal is to preserve the object as long as possible. This results in limited display times that allow visual observation only.

Preserving objects as physical evidence of the past is the primary goal of a conservator. A conservator uses the object as primary data. The physical object should remain intact to avoid loss of information. Not taking measures to preserve a damaged object means that knowledge is lost forever.[43] An explicit example of preserving material culture as evidence of the past is the restoration project of bisj poles in the Tropenmuseum. In 2008 all the 57 bisj poles that were in the collections of the Museum Volkenkunde, Wereldmuseum and the Tropenmuseum were collected for the exhibition "Bisj poles – A forest of magical statues".[44] The bulk of the collection – 34 poles – was acquired in the 1950's and 60's by Carel Groenevelt who worked for the Tropenmuseum and Museum Volkenkunde.[45] Bisj poles are ritual ancestral statues created by the Asmat people from the Indonesian province Papua [see fig. 1]. The figures on the top of the pole are representations of the deceased. The poles were used during a ceremony to honour the dead after which they were left in the swamp to decay and return to nature.[46] The poles were 'rescued' from the swamp and inevitable material loss by the museum foremost because of their aesthetic quality: the intricate carving achieved using stones and shells as tools. Another factor that triggered preservation is the fact that the Asmat culture was slowly disappearing. In other words: Asmat culture can only be appreciated or understood using physical objects.

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[42] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 12-14
[43] Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued*, 27-28
[44] Translated by the author from the Dutch title "Bisjpalen – Een woud van magische beelden", on display in the Tropenmuseum from 3 November 2007 – 13 April 2008.
[45] D. van Duuren, lecture "Bisj-palen in het Tropenmuseum", Varkenssalon KIT Amsterdam (20/01/2008)
[46] Collectie NMWC. Accessed on: 29/04/2020 https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/8be09333-2594-4b61-a228-a1512acca80e

In 2018, 12 of the poles have been restored and are now on permanent display in the central hall of the Tropenmuseum. The restoration was executed in a public area of the museum, which allowed visitors to watch the process.[47] Public restoration projects are often used to demonstrate the skill and professionalism of conservation practice.[48] In this case it suggests that the museum is taking good care of objects that were otherwise lost. This is supported by the referral in the exhibition catalogue to "professional museal care".[49] A use of language which suggests that the original care was not professional or at least not up to the standard practiced in museums.

Currently, the visitor is encouraged to visually observe the restored poles on permanent display in the hall of the Tropenmuseum. The meaning of the poles has changed dramatically since they were collected by the museum. In an article on decoloniality in museums de Swaan characterizes this process as follows: "When the statues or masks had fulfilled their ritual function, they were often discarded by their users for new items that also did not last a long time. Western museums have protected and preserved these fragile and transient art objects with the utmost care and dedication. They were thoroughly researched and elaborately described. The western perspective transformed them into study objects, after which they were assigned to a new exclusively western category: the art work."[50] After ritual use the poles were not "discarded" but got a new purpose by fertilizing the ground, thereby stimulating the growth of sago palms that would feed new generations. Collection and restoration of the poles caused a transition from transience to immortality. The poles are not part of an exhibition but are used to 'decorate' the main hall of the museum. Most information on their origin and purpose is hidden by the aesthetic appreciation of the poles. One of the most important factors for the selection of the poles for display is their visual appearance.

[47] Accessed on: 08/01/2019 https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/bisjpalen-restauratie
[48] Edwards, *Sensible Objects*, 273
[49] "De tentoonstelling bood een goede gelegenheid om de kostbare collectie de professionele museale zorg te geven die zij nodig had", citation from the introduction of P. van der Zee, *Bisj-palen – Een woud van magische beelden* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2007)
[50] Translated by the author from the Dutch citation: "Wanneer die beelden of maskers hun rituele werk gedaan hadden werden ze door de gebruikers veelal afgedankt voor nieuwe exemplaren die ook niet lang meegingen. Westerse musea hebben die vaak uiterst kwetsbare en vergankelijke kunstvoorwerpen met de grootste zorg en toewijding bewaard en beschermd. Ze werden daar grondig bestudeerd en gedetailleerd beschreven. Onder die westerse blik werden ze eerst getransformeerd tot onderzoeksobject en vervolgens ook ondergebracht in een andere exclusief westerse categorie: het kunstwerk." in A. de Swaan, "Oude Meesters, Nieuwe Moraal", Groene Amsterdammer 51-52 (2018)

Objects that are visually unattractive but have important olfactory or tactile modalities are scarcely exhibited and therefore often not conserved.[51] Even though it might not be intentional, the conservation of objects contributes to the sensory selection process in the museum.

1.1.2 Cultural significance

In the 20th century the key terms in conservation were 'objective truth' and 'authenticity'. It was a widespread belief that it was possible to find the true, authentic state of an object which could be achieved by scientific restoration and conservation. However, this idea is being revised: "scientific restoration is an oxymoron because no scientific, objective reason to substitute a presumed preferred past state of an object for the present one exists."[52] According to some contemporary theorists, the status of the conservator imposing an objective truth should be replaced by 'intersubjectivism'. This means that the people affected by the decision-making process should be included as they are the stakeholders.[53] This theoretical shift is called the subjective or social turn and indicates a radical change in conservation towards the facilitation of the community of users. This turn does not mean that the materiality of an object is deemed unimportant but rather advocates a middle ground where the focus on the physical stability of objects is accompanied by emphasis on their cultural significance. Conservation processes are opened up to a larger group of decision makers and require collaboration with different fields.[54]

This approach of conservation differs from the former approach focussed on physical preservation only. Preserving objects as witnesses of the past is not enough. The answer to the question 'why are physical objects preserved?' changes from the object to the subject: for the stakeholders invested in the objects. The stakeholders are the source communities, spokespersons but also visitors of the museum. It is expressed as the effort to allow alternative (often non-western) conceptualisations of conservation to be considered in the museum. An example of preserving the physical object at the expense of its cultural significance or vice versa is the treatment of gamelan instruments. Musical instruments are a difficult category for

[51] C. Classen, *The museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 127-128
[52] S. Munoz Vinas, "Contemporary Theory of Conservation", *Studies in Conservation* 47:1 (2002), 27
[53] Munoz Vinas, "Contemporary Theory of Conservation", 30
[54] Sully, D. 2013. "Conservation Theory and Practice: Materials, Values and People in Heritage Conservation". In: S. Macdonald and H. Rees Leahy (eds), *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, Chichester: Wiley & Sons Ltd., 294-296

conservators as they can be seen as 'working objects'.[55] Depending on its status as a 'working object', the conservation of instrument is usually guided by attention to both its physical and musical aspects. However, most museums regard their instruments as museum objects – physical evidence of the past – resulting in static display or preservation.

An important part of the Indonesian collection of the Volkenkunde are the gamelan instruments. The gamelan is a percussion orchestra originating from Balinese, Javanese and Sundanese cultures that can consist of more than 75 instruments. The name is derived from the Javenese words *gamel* = hammer and *-an* = action: the act of striking with a mallet. The instruments form a whole and cannot be played individually. The most important instruments are the metallophones and the gongs. The metallophones are made of iron or bronze and sit atop a decorated wooden frame [see fig. 3].[56] The CIMCIM (ICOM International Committee of Museums and Collections of Instruments and Music) provides strict guidelines regarding access of instruments: "Instruments from public collections should not be allowed to be played for motives of idle curiosity or individual pleasure; nor should they be considered as practice instruments".[57] For most gamelan instruments the Museum Volkenkunde follows this precedent: requests regarding access have been denied.[58] The guiding principles refusing the request are the loss of original material and anticipated damage when being used. Before the instruments would be ready for use, the plant-based red cords on which the metallophones and keys rest need to be replaced. Additionally, the gamelan needs to be tuned by a professional. The tuning process causes material loss, requiring hammering and filing of the metal and using wax to alter the key.

However, there are some exceptions to the strict guidelines regarding access of musical instruments when it comes to the gamelan. In both the Volkenkunde and the former Nusantara Museum, gamelan sets have been regularly used by amateur groups. In 1996, the Volkenkunde acquired a Balinese gamelan: the *Gamelan Gong Kebyar*. It consists of genders, gongs and drums that are decorated with figures influenced by Hindu mythology.[59] The group Sekar Alit (little flower) played on the instruments every Sunday morning in the museum from 1996 until

[55] Working objects in a museum are preserved not just for aesthetic or historic appreciation but for their sight, sound, smell and motion of the past. Working objects can be translated to Dutch as 'werkende objecten'. In Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 140-143.
[56] H. Jones-Amin, H. Tan, A. Tee, "Gamelan: can a conservation-conceived protocol protect it spiritually and physically in a museum?" *Studies in Conservation* 51:2 (2006), 138-139
[57] S. Quigley, Curatorial considerations guiding the conservation of a Javanese gamelan orchestra (Washington: The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic, 1994), 23
[58] Interview with drs. Pim Westerkamp, curator Southeast-Asia in the Volkenkunde Museum, 10/03/2020.
[59] Last seen: 22/05/2020 https://www.volkenkunde.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/activiteiten/muziek-op-zondag

June 2019, when the conductor of the group Henry Nagelberg retired. Every time the gamelan was used, offers were made to the Gong Kebyar. The importance of the gamelan sets to the musicians became apparent when the Nusantara Museum in Delft closed in January 2013. When the museum closed, the collection was relocated to Dutch and Indonesian museums and archives during an extensive rejection process. The whole process of redistributing around 40.000 Indonesian objects posed some difficulties. The plan was to repatriate all objects that did not transfer to the Collectie Nederland to Indonesia. However, after initial affirmation, the Museum Nasional Indonesia declared that they did not want any of the objects. An official reason was not given, but one of the explanations is that they did not want the 'leftovers' from the collection as the first choice was for Dutch museums (as dictated by the LAMO and Erfgoedwet).[60] Nusantara housed a gamelan 'Kyahi Paridjata' which was used and maintained by the music group Marsudi Raras. In a letter to the municipality of Delft written in 2013, Marsudi Raras asks a member of the city council to keep the gamelan in Delft, open to the public and to be played. It is an emotional plead, ending with the statement that they strongly believe that the gamelan should be used instead of hidden away in a depot: "As far as we are concerned, it is unthinkable that a unique gamelan such as the Kyahi Paridjata disappears in a depot to gather dust forever."[61]

As becomes clear from this example there is a strong interaction between ethnological museums and gamelan groups in the Netherlands. The tactile and auditory modalities of the gamelan are intrinsically connected to the users. If the object is displayed purely visual, the community of gamelan players is left out, losing an important part of the meaning of the object. The existing collaboration with the music groups can be used to establish protocols for the conservation of gamelan instruments that is approved by the players. This means that both the physical and spiritual characteristics should be guaranteed. The protocol should therefore be two-fold, including guidelines on respecting certain ritual practices performed for the gamelan. Additionally, anticipated and accepted user damage should be included in the protocol, centred around mechanical damage such as scratches, dirt from handling and the loss of tune. Additionally, a list of parts that are accepted to be renewed should be made including for

[60] *Herplaatsing collectie voormalig Museum Nusantara Delft: Lering en vragen 2013-2018* (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen en Museum Prinsenhof Delft), 53-56

[61] Translated by the author from the Dutch citation: "Wat ons betreft is het niet denkbaar dat een unieke gamelan als Kyahi Paridjata definitief verdwijnt en verstoft in een of ander depot." Letter to the council of Delft, regarding "Behoud Gamelan Kyahi Paridjata", written by Francis van Kruining, chairman of Marsudi Raras, dated 27 november 2013.

example the red cord, woven spacers and mallets.[62] This would result in a conservation method in which both the material of the object and its cultural significance are protected.

1.2 Physical biography

1.2.1 Material characteristics

In order to devise a plan for the conservation of an object or collection, the conservator needs know what they are conserving. The first step in this process is research on the materiality and the condition of the object. The historical information saved in the material of the object is partially extracted using the object itself. This information is retrieved using macro- and micro-visual analysis (using the human eye and microscopes) and technical analysis of the materials. During this examination, the object is observed with all the senses. Touching the object can determine weight and temperature of the material. Smell and hearing can also help in gaining more information on material qualities. Taste has been used in the past to determine materials but is the only sense that is not employed anymore.[63] The senses are also used as tools to diagnose the condition of the object: e.g. moving paper with your hands to test flexibility or tapping ceramics to hear if there are any hidden cracks under the glazing.[64] The ability to engage with the object in this way is often reserved for conservators, restorers and sometimes researchers.

During the technical research the physical state of the object is judged according to two principles: its status as an historical document and as an aesthetic entity. As an example, the historic and aesthetic qualities of an Indonesian kris derived from its material will be discussed. An object is partly an historic document as it contains information about the (raw) materials it was made of and bears traces of its life. An object is also an aesthetic entity which is tied to the intent of the maker in choosing the material, shape, colour and so forth.[65] In essence, the object shows traces of the 'hand' of the maker and touches of users. One of the most important krisses in the Volkenkunde collection is one that was made in 17th century in South Sulawesi [see fig.

[62] Jones-Amin, "Gamelan", 141-142
[63] Appelbaum, *Conservation Treatment Methodology*, 27
[64] E. Pye, *The Power of Touch* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007), 124
[65] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 29

2].[66] Krisses originate from the isle of Java. The manufacture and use of the krisses spread among some coastal areas but remained most important on Java. One of the other regions where krisses were made was in South Sulawesi as a type of iron with nickel content could be found there.[67] The raw material of this kris was thus found in the area where it was made. The iron with nickel is the most important material of the kris as it was used to forge a pattern in the blade. The unification of iron with different carbon contents is called *pamor* (from the verb *mor*: to blend) [see fig. 4]. Intricate patterns could be produced because the iron often had a nickel content. After the forgery the pattern was latently present. A mixture of arsenic and citric acid was spread on the blade with a brush: the iron was etched by the acid and darkened while the nickel stayed light. The patterning is a product of skill and appreciated due to its visual attractiveness. However, *pamor* shows more than that: it is seen as the soul of the kris.[68] As becomes clear from this example, the material has specific qualities that determine the manner in which a kris is appreciated. Moreover, the material and its condition determines the spiritual value of the kris.

The aesthetic information of the material is connected to the intent of the maker in the use of material and the form it takes. Historically, the kris smith – always a man – had a high status. The smith was called *empu* (master), a title which betrays his importance. The making of a kris was a ritual due to the sacredness of the weapon. The smith only forged krisses on certain days determined by the old Javanese calendar. During the forgery of the metal food offers and flowers were brought.[69] A kris is a pointed dagger with a straight or undulated blade. There are many varieties in shape, material and decoration but there are four characteristics that they all have in common: an asymmetrical basis of the blade; two sharpened sides of the blade; a metal pin fastening the blade with a slight decline to the front; symbolic decoration on the grip.[70] The symbolic decoration on the Sulawesi kris is influenced by the Hindu Majapahit kingdom that existed from the 13th until the 16th century. On the scabbard the *Garuda* is depicted – a mythical eagle from India – who represents the sun and heaven.[71] The blade represents a snake or *naga*, which symbolizes the earth. The kris unites Naga and Garuda, who

[66] The kris can be found in the online collection database by its inventory number "RV-360-6021". Accessed on: 29/04/2020 https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/8be09333-2594-4b61-a228-a1512acca80e
[67] D. van Duuren, *De kris : Een aardse benadering van een kosmisch symbool* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 1996), 11
[68] Van Duuren, *De kris*, 22-33
[69] Van Duuren, *De kris*, 11-17
[70] Van Duuren, *De kris*, 9-22
[71] Entry of kris "RV-360-6021" in the online collection database. Accessed on: 29/04/2020 https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/8be09333-2594-4b61-a228-a1512acca80e

together symbolize the whole cosmos.[72] The kris has been made with precious materials - iron, gold, gemstones and wood - for ceremonial purposes. The kris had to look luxurious and beautiful as it was used in ceremonies and eventually gifted to the head of the V.O.C., Stadhouder Willem IV.

All information listed above provides the conservator with arguments for a specific treatment. Conservators tend to see through the aesthetic qualities and immediately observe the materials the object is made of.[73] This tendency is influenced by the emphasis on scientific conservation. Scientific conservation is based on the idea that scientific data leads to objective facts which in turn lead to objective decisions. As a result, the collection management department focusses mainly on the composition and condition of the materials. The kris is made of both organic (wood) and inorganic (iron, gold, gemstones) materials. The organic material is more susceptible to changes in temperature and humidity. This has consequences for the climate control in exhibitions and storage as fluctuations can cause tension and damage. The *pamor* poses other issues: oxygen causes corrosive reactions which can obscure the patterns. Therefore, conservators often exhibit a kris inside the scabbard. The origin of the (raw) materials mainly helps in retrieving information on the context of the object. In this case it traces the kris to South Sulawesi.

1.2.2 Condition and original treatment

A conservator is trained to spot the degradation processes apparent in an object. The material of the object is analysed in order to "safely arrest the decay of the object and minimize any risk of damage to the object".[74] The composition of the material determines the treatment of the object for both preventive and interventive measures. Preventive conservation is concerned with optimizing the surroundings of the object and conservation with changing the material itself. Degradation processes can be grouped under three categories: mechanical damage, chemical damage and biological damage. Mechanical damage concerns tears, pieces that are broken off, folds and other damage that is caused by manipulation or bad storage. Chemical damage is cause by chemical processes that change the material. This can be caused by internal factors such as the quality of the material, but also by external factors such as staining, light or humidity. Biological damage concerns damage caused by pests or mould. The factors

[72] Van Duuren, *De kris*, 42-43
[73] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 30-31
[74] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 80

influencing the degradation of the physical object are all carefully mapped by conservators: age, relative humidity (RH), light, mould and pests and human manipulation.[75] In the museum manipulation and transport form the greatest risk to damage of the object. As far as possible, all these factors are controlled and limited.

The focus on minimizing the factors accelerating degradation has consequences for the way objects are displayed or kept in depots in museums. When looking at the display of krisses in the Volkenkunde collection, it is surprising that most of them are exhibited inside their protective sheath made of wood metal or ivory. This method of display hides their most important element: the blade. This choice is directly related to the material of the object. As was explained above, the *pamor* of the blade is made visible using a corrosive mixture of arsenic and citric acid. Conservators of the Volkenkunde do not use this treatment due to its high toxicity and because it causes loss of material from the blade. Exposure to light and air will catalyse the formation of a patina which obscures the pattern. Therefore, most blades are shown inside their scabbard. This decision is unfortunate for the visitor: they cannot see the most essential part of the object and as a consequence cannot fully comprehend the meaning of the kris. The patina that forms on the blade of the kris is an example of chemical damage that occurs due to the composition of the blade. As the cause is mainly internal, it is hard to control it from further deterioration. The only option for display is to show the blade without *pamor*, or to leave it in the scabbard to slow down the formation of the patina. The toxicity of the arsenic is a more pressing problem as once it has been applied to the surface of an object a small residue will remain.[76] If the object is handled, safety precautions such as gloves and masks should be taken. To be sure if there are any residues left the object can be tested.[77] In this case, the physical state of the object prevails over the meaning-giving role of object displays.

Sometimes, minimizing all risks can have the opposite effect of what the object is actually about. The bisj poles, for example, were meticulously restored before they were exhibited. As has been mentioned, the poles were originally left in the swamp to end the bisj feast. The ancestors represented on the poles hereby returned to the earth whilst fertilizing the palms that would feed new generations. In the museum, the poles are catalogued, conserved

[75] B. Kruijssen, *De Kunst van het Bewaren: Restauratie en Conservering van Kunstvoorwerpen* (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers), 30-32
[76] S. J. Simms, *Cheating the End: Native Artifacts Contaminated with Toxic Preservatives* (Thesis, Department of Art History Concordia University, 2007), 58
[77] Conserve O Gram No. 2/3 2000, *Arsenic Health and Safety Update.* Accessed on: 25/05/2020 https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/conserveogram/02-03.pdf

and displayed, forcing the object to stay 'alive'. However, the Asmat culture who produced the objects "believe in an encultured world in which the decay and death of people, objects, places, and time was and remains expected."[78] In *The Beauty of Letting Go,* Sven Ouzman argues for a conservation practice which views objects as 'being in transformation'. Part of the transformation are deterioration processes, which function as signifiers of how the object is understood in a specific cultural context. Ouzman proposes a museum in which some objects are allowed to decay under the eye and nose of the visitor.[79] A similar approach could be adopted with the bisj poles. Juxtaposing one decaying pole with the restored poles has the potential to overcome the transformation of the ritual poles turning into art objects, respecting its original function.

[78] S. Ouzman, "The Beauty of Letting Go: Fragmentary Museums and Archaeologies of Archive" in Edwards, E., Gosden, C., Phillips, R.B., *Sensible objects : Colonialism, museums and material culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 269

[79] Ouzman, "The Beauty of Letting Go", 269-271

2 Preserving the meaning of the object

2.1 Social and sensory biography

Objects can be understood as pure material entities. However, it can also be argued that objects have social agency that can create and influence exchanges between people and things.[80] To focus on the objects rather than the social exchanges helps to understand the potential of museum objects. The social biography of the museum object shows that the value of an object has a political dimension. The bisj poles in the Volkenkunde collection for example, were commodified by the collectors: they were transformed into objects that have economic value and are used in trading processes. As the bisj poles were seen as unique and culturally valuable for the Dutch nation, they were removed from the market. They were what Kopytoff calls 'singularized' by placing them in a museum and becoming part of the narrative of universal civilization.[81] Not just the social agency, but also the sensory values of an object change markedly when the object is transported to a museum. In the ethnographic museum of the 19th century – when most objects were collected – the engagement with the object was reduced to something purely visual. This was part of the civilization process which valued the mind over the body: the rational west versus the visceral 'other'. Source communities were being disciplined through their objects, losing touch, smell and taste.[82]

The social and sensory biography of an object consists of various aspects: its production, its circulation and its consumption (its use). Especially the sensory biography is closely connected to the spirituality of the objects. In this chapter the sensory value of the case studies will be unfolded by exploring their role in spiritual behaviour. The focus of this chapter will be on the spiritual lives of the objects before they entered the museum. To understand the (semiotic) meaning of an object, it is useful to study the way the objects were preserved and cared for before they arrived in the museum. In Indonesian communities this can be best observed through *pusaka*, or heirlooms.[83] *Pusaka* were and still are the tangible and intangible traditions and objects that form the essence of Indonesian cultural heritage. The importance of

[80] *The Social Life of Things*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3-63
[81] Kopytoff, I., "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 73
[82] Edwards, *Sensible Objects*, 209-211
[83] Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, 51

pusaka as an alternative conceptualization of heritage preservation will be explored by comparing it to the key concepts that constitute western conservation theory.

2.1.1 Connecting the spiritual and the sensory in object biographies

Ethnographic museums often have a lot of spiritual and religious objects in their collections. One of the reasons for this is that spiritual objects tend to be taken care of well and are therefore preserved longer than most objects.[84] Such objects often do not cease to be venerated when they are collected by a museum. Objects on display can still evoke spiritual sentiments by certain visitors. The objects that are discussed in this thesis all have spiritual connotations. The bisj poles in the collection were created purely for their use in a ritual. The krisses and gamelan sets have a spiritual dimension but also have other intended functions. Some of the beliefs and ceremonies surrounding these objects are still active and recognized by individuals and communities in the Netherlands and Indonesia.

Compared to the krisses and gamelan the objects with the most fixed cultural role and origin are the bisj poles. In the Asmat culture, several types of bisj poles are made and used. The ones that are currently in the possession of the NMWC are among the biggest and most decorated poles. They were made during the bisj-feast that symbolizes a parting with the deceased. A bisj-feast lasts several months and is held approximately once every two years. The feast can be divided into six phases which all have a specific ceremony. In the first phase the leader of the settlement announces that the feast will start. The men start looking for the trees that will be selected for the poles. Other men cut down palms, in the soft centre of which sago larvae are bred for the end of the feast. In the second phase, the nutmeg trees selected for the bisj poles are cut down during a ceremony called *déwen*. *Déwen* is dedicated to appease the spirit of the tree, which symbolizes an ancestor. The leader of the group declares their feat of arms to which the other men make cuts in the tree until it falls. The third phase consists of the men bringing the trees home. The women wait at home and gather weapons to show the men they do not want them back in the village. In the fourth phase the women try to stop the men from bringing the new ancestors – the trees – into the village. After a mock-battle, the trees are brought to the longhouse. It is not until the fifth phase that the poles are carved. The Asmat view the totality of the five phases which take around six weeks as the sixth phase. In the longhouse the carvers – all men – are protected from the views of women and children. The families of the deceased have chosen who will be the carvers. All actions of the carvers are

[84] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 191

accompanied by rituals in which singing plays a big role. The poles are covered every night with chalk to keep pests away. After the pole is sculpted it is covered with chalk and decorated with red and black pigments. The finishing of the poles is followed by a feast where the whole community shares the sago larvae. The poles are pulled outside and placed against the longhouse. After the feast they are brought to the forest where they will be allowed to return to the earth. The decay of the poles enhances the ground's fertility and the growth of new sago palms. The spirit of the deceased therefore feeds the palms that provide food for the living.[85]

The making of a bisj pole is used to strengthen social bonds and to confirm kinship in the community. Historically, the rituals were used for headhunting raids which existed until the second half of the 20th century. Headhunting was officially forbidden in 1963, when Dutch New Guinee became a province of Indonesia. It was already in decline since the beginning of the 20th century due to the missionaries send to civilize the Asmat. Although many Asmat converted to Christianity, the rituals that accompanied the raids remained and are still practiced today.[86] The bisj poles are most important during the time of their making. After they have been used in the bisj-feast their function ceases. It is at this point that they are collected by museums and collectors who are mostly interested in the intricate wood carving. The social role of the poles is closely connected to the sensory engagement of the community with the material. From the moment the tree is cut down until it is brought back to the forest there has been intimate contact with the wood. This is enhanced by the spiritual meaning of each action.

Opposed to the bisj poles, gamelan instruments are made to be used for a long period of time. The individual instrument are part of a whole: they are more valuable together than apart. Before they are collected by museums they are used to make music. Gamelan music is played in various contexts such as ritual celebrations, *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theatre) and *wayang topeng* (mask dance). The gamelan is only sporadically played for the sake of the music alone as it is supposed to be part of ritual ceremonies.[87] The gamelan set has a name which always starts with the prefix *Kyahi*: "the venerable". The most important instrument is the biggest gong: the *gong ageng* [see fig. 6]. The gong marks the beginning and the end of a musical piece. When it is not played it is covered with a cloth out of respect. The players do not wear shoes, this has both a spiritual and practical reason. Sometimes, menstruating women are banned from playing the instruments.[88] Before a performance offers of incense and flower

[85] Van der Zee, *Bisj-palen,* 41-49
[86] Van der Zee, *Bisj-palen,* 14-17
[87] Accessed on: 29/04/2020 http://sumarsam.web.wesleyan.edu/Intro.gamelan.pdf
[88] Jones-Amin, "Gamelan", 140

water are brought. Sometimes the players put offers directly into the *gong ageng*. The instruments are kept in one place where the musicians come to use them. The musicians remain anonymous and never play alone, during the wayang performances they are even sitting behind a screen. Together, the players represent an ideal society. They are all equally important and should listen to each other carefully. Restraint must be shown and no player should show emotion. Also, the players show submission to the group by sitting on the floor at the same level.[89] The engagement of the players with their instruments is unquestionably physical. All bodily senses are used (except taste): touching of the object; smelling the material of the object; hearing the sound that it produces. It can even be argued that sight is the least important of all: musicians are often able to 'feel' their instrument without even looking at it. The social role of the instruments in the rituals they accompany is equally important. The spiritual power should be protected as well as the physical structure.

Similar to the gamelan, krisses are believed to be connected a higher power. In their core, all krisses are both weapons and mystical objects. Some krisses were made solely for ceremonies, the so-called 'staatsiekris'. The latter were often gifted to high-ranking Dutch officers and members of the royal family, regularly ending up in collections such as the Volkenkunde's. The kris has always been surrounded with a mystical air and superstitions. Some Malays for example, believed that a kris could bring bad luck when pointed directly at someone. There are many stories of krisses that supposedly have magical powers. They have for example been said to warn the owner for coming disasters. The belief in the magical powers of the Kris is still alive today.[90] The 'magic' surrounding krisses that ended up in museum collections has influenced the perception of Indonesian culture as being 'superstitious' by Europeans. This perception influenced colonial ethnology, characterizing these types of objects as fetishes. The powers of the kris were nullified by the comparison the rationality of western cultures.[91] Currently, the idea that krisses are powerful as they influence many social relationships is reinstated: "Even if we set to one side the kris owners who suspect their sinister impact or light incense to keep them content, no one can deny that kris produce aesthetic pleasure, wonder, lust for possession."[92]

[89] Jones-Amin, "Gamelan", 139
[90] E. Frey, *The kris : Mystic weapon of the Malay world* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 12-16
[91] M. J. Wiener, "The magical life of things" in *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2007), 64-65
[92] Wiener, "The magical life of things", 65

The form and decoration of the kris all have symbolic meaning. The *pamor* of the blade represents the merging of the sacred (nickel) and the profane (iron).[93] Equally important for the kris is its scabbard: a protective sheath made of wood, metal or ivory. The scabbard restricts the power of the blade. This is reflected in the manner in which the kris is taken from its sheath: the kris is pointed upwards and the scabbard is held still in one hand, with the other hand the kris is vertically and slowly taken out.[94] The boundaries between superstition and religious rules that respect the identity of the kris are diffuse. Nevertheless, some of the guidelines are generally adopted: not pointing the kris at an individual and taking the kris carefully from its scabbard. The social role of the kris is connected to ceremonies, conflict and status. The kris is an object that is mostly enjoyed from a distance. The sensory engagement with the kris is therefore most apparent in the handling of the kris during ceremonies and accompanying offers.

2.2 Original preservation measures

2.2.1 The origin of western conservation theory and practice

The objective of the multisensory approach is to allow alternative ideas on object engagement to be included in the decision-making processes of conservators. To give an example of this mechanism, the essence of heritage preservation in Indonesia will be discussed and compared with key concepts of western conservation: *pusaka*. The comparison functions to pinpoint the areas of friction that arise when traditional conservators are confronted with a perspective on preservation that is not solely based on scientific research and the integrity of the physical object.[95] To understand where the emphasis on these concepts comes from, a brief summary of the conservation profession will be given first. Furthermore, the comparison will show that the ethical pillars are forming cracks when confronted with different sensory approaches to objects.

Conservation is a relatively new profession, stemming from its older counterpart: restoration. Restoration descends from an ancient tradition where craftsmen and artists repaired broken objects. From the Renaissance onwards, this tradition developed into something more: the aim was no longer to merely fix broken objects, but to alter the appearance of the object to its 'original state'. Artist-restorers started to develop additional treatments for objects such as

[93] Tropenmuseum, *Budaya Indonesia: kunst en cultuur in Indonesië* (Amsterdam: KIT publishers, 1987), 208
[94] Van Duuren, *De kris*, 35-47
[95] Clavir, *Preserving what is valued*, 3-4

lining and adding missing parts. Most attention was given to the aesthetic outcome of a treatment and not to any degradation it might cause: "at this stage, the restorer restored, but did not yet conserve".[96] Restoration did not change much until the 18th and 19th century, when archaeological artefacts started to enter museum collections. These artefacts were often found in the ground and were prone to rapid degradation due to the sudden exposure to oxygen. The traditional methods proved to be insufficient to treat these objects. As a result, scientists – mostly chemists – were hired to research the nature and condition of materials. The scientific approach to objects was marked by systemic analysis of materials and respect for the integrity of the objects. This differed from older restoration treatments, where restorers sometimes invented new images in their retouches. The scientific approach to restoration was also stimulated by the belief in reason and fact – western Enlightened ideals. This also had as a result that museum objects were being used more as primary sources.[97]

In the 19th century, museums opened their doors for a broad public which changed their status and mission completely. Using Foucault's ideas on 'the problem of order', Bennett shows how museums were used to transform the individuals of a society into citizens. Objects were displayed as representations of a history seen as a progressive development towards a civilized society. Civilization was framed as a universal development, in which western nation-states functioned as its culmination.[98] Ethnographic objects were actively collected to remember cultures that would soon be extinct as they were developing into civil societies. These objects were stored in science museums with no attention to living cultures. The increase in visitors also meant an increasing demand for objects to be collected and therefore to be treated before being displayed.

A new surge in conservation science was caused by World War I's large-scale damage of cultural heritage. After the war, technological development was considered to be of national interest, generating a flow of financial support from which museums profited.[99] One of the first museum directors to establish a conservation department was Edward Forbes of the Fogg Art Museum. He educated students in material studies and the basics of artistic crafts – a method

[96] P. Coremans, "The training of restorers", *Problems of Conservation in Museums: A Selection of Papers Presented to the Joint Meeting of the ICOM Committee for Museum Laboratories and the ICOM Committee for the Care of Paintings* (1965), 8
[97] Clavir, *Preserving what is valued*, 4-13
[98] T. Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex" in T. Bennett, *The birth of the museum: history theory politics*, (Routledge, 1995), 88-89
[99] Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued*, 21-24

which is employed even today in conservation schools.[100] After the First World War, conservation became an academic profession with its own ethical standards.

2.2.2 *Pusaka*: heritage preservation in Indonesia

Pusaka can be explained as a concept that combines the semiotic and material aspects of an object. It is both aimed at preserving the physical object as well as its meaning, which is mostly constituted of spiritual engagement. The meaning attributed to a *pusaka* object during its lifetime evolves as its relation to other objects and people changes. This can occur through changes in its social location and environment, its verbal context, ways of exposition, its public and behavioural engagement.[101] *Pusaka* can be translated as 'heirloom', which can be both tangible and intangible. A wide range of objects or customs can become *pusaka* as it not something inherent in an object: the unique status is created by the society who owns it. *Pusaka* is not limited to material objects but is also used to transmit traditions.[102] The heirloom objects are used to establish links with the authority of ancestors. Pusaka can be seen as a 'consciousness' that creates bonds between the past and the present, establishing a future.[103] The transfer of objects is therefore limited by strict rules and laws. The most important *pusaka* were the objects of a royal family: they were "the "essence" of a palace and vital to its very existence".[104] Many of the *pusaka* objects in current museum collections are royal *pusaka* as they were often used in diplomatic exchanges and are highly decorated and made of precious materials. *Pusaka* function both as prestige objects and ceremonial objects.[105] Often, they are only displayed for special events and ceremonies.

The objects deemed worthy of *pusaka* are attributed with special powers: "Pusoko objects are considered sacred and richly endowed with spiritual powers. They are not merely inanimate objects, but can possess human qualities, have names, feelings, and desires".[106] Therefore, *pusaka* need to be taken care of in the form of offers and 'washings' with liquids and smoke such as coffee, flowers or incense. These treatments are executed to protect both

[100] From my personal experience as a student 'conservatie-restauratie' at the Antwerp University (2014-2017) I can conclude that the curriculum is still centred around studying crafts and materials, causes of degradation and ways to halt processes of degradation.
[101] Pomian, *De oorsprong van het museum*, 70-74.
[102] Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, 51
[103] P. Lunsingh Scheurleer, "Collecting Javanese antiquities: the appropriation of a newly discovered Hindu-Buddhist civilization" in *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2007), 71
[104] Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, 52
[105] Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, 58
[106] F. Kerlogue, *Performing Objects: Museums, Material Culture and Performance in Southeast Asia* (London: The Horniman Museum, 2004), 5

the spiritual and physical integrity of the object but are in sharp contrast to object care in western museums. The *pusaka* are kept in sacred spaces which only specific people can enter. The spaces provide ventilation and even measures to keep out insects and other pests. For example wood that has properties preventing mould is used just as *akar wangi* (vetiver), a root that has a pungent smell that protects against pests.

The practices involved with *pusaka* are fluent and can adapt to new situations. *Pusaka* is still a vital concept and important to understand the way heritage is viewed and preserved in Indonesia. Many museums in Indonesia, in particular provincial museums, have objects in their collections that are still treated as *pusaka* by their source communities. The care for *pusaka* in museums is mostly expressed with offerings. An interesting example is the story of the Balanga Museum in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, that wanted to buy a certain *sapundu* (ancestral pole) from one of the villages upriver from Palangka Raya. Instead, the *sapunda* was offered to the museum by the community for free. However, before the *sapundu* could be transported and installed in the museum, a ritual releasing the spirit of the deceased had to be carried out. The ritual also made sure that the community did not need to make any more sacrifices to the *sapundu*.[107] This example shows the locality of the care for *pusaka* and the adaptability to new situations involving the collection of objects by museums.

2.2.3 *Pusaka*, reversibility, minimal intervention and preventive conservation

Historically, interventive conservation or restoration was applied less in ethnographic museums than in art museums. This was caused by the idea of "ethnographic dirt": matter deposited during the use of the object.[108] Conservators were apprehensive of removing this dirt as it contained information, but also because ethnographic objects were less aesthetically valued than art works.[109] Currently, the distinction between ethnographic and regular dirt is no longer relevant as any material should be carefully judged before removal.[110] Additionally, the distinction between art objects and ethnographic objects is no longer strictly adhered to. The concepts of reversibility, minimal intervention and preventive conservation are especially important in ethnographic museums where more restraint regarding conservation is shown.

[107] Kreps, *Liberating Culture*,, 59-60
[108] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 90
[109] Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued*, 33-35
[110] V. Greene, "Using case studies to examine the decision-making process for cleaning ethnographic objects", *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 45:3 (2006), 183

The concept of reversibility was first introduced in the American Institute of Conservation Code of Ethics of 1961.[111] It emerged as a result of frequent encounters of conservators with old treatments that proved to be insufficient or damaging to the object over time. This led to the adagio that all treatments that cannot be reversed if necessary should be avoided. The concept of reversibility requires conservators to acknowledge the limitations of the knowledge that is available when they perform the treatment.[112] It creates awareness that materials can be unreliable when they age. Reversibility means that it should be possible to safely remove all added materials such as varnishes and infills. Reversibility can never be achieved completely as all cleaning is irreversible, residues can never be perfectly removed from porous materials, aging changes the solubility of the used products and all products and materials instigate irreversible chemical reactions with the surrounding original material.[113] Reversibility is therefore not used by professionals as an absolute goal, but rather as a notion that can be aspired to. It seems that the spiritual offerings and washings of *pusaka* cannot be aligned with the principle of reversibility. Especially washings will leave residues on the object. The offers are not used to preserve the physical object but the spirit of the object. As has been mentioned, reversibility can never be achieved completely: irreversible consolidation of flaking paint, drilling metal pins in stone to strengthen broken parts of statues, it is all accepted under the premise of preserving historical information. In reality, most of these interventions are carried out to enhance the legibility and aesthetics of the object. In these interventions, extensive violation of the material is accepted. So why is the 'damage' done by a washing that is used to appease the spirit of the object so different?

That the difference does not have to be as substantial as it seems becomes clear when the principle of 'minimal intervention' is explored. This concept was first used by Cesare Brandi in his book *Theory of Restoration* (original title was *Teoria del restauro*, published in 1963) as a way to protect the aesthetic and historic characteristics of paintings.[114] Both reversibility and minimal intervention are derived from a positivist belief in the objectivity of conservational decisions. However, it has been pointed out that minimal intervention cannot be objective as it means different things under different conditions: e.g. preserving an object inside or outside, for display or for preservation in a depot. It only means something in relation to the goal it is trying to achieve.[115] Minimal intervention is basically the damage deemed

[111] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 63
[112] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 63-64
[113] S. Munoz Vinas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 186-187
[114] C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*. Firenze: Nardini Editore (2005)
[115] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 64-65

acceptable to achieve the goal: "[it] implies that the conservator's intervention is a 'necessary evil'".[116] It is therefore a principle that ultimately leads to the idea that the perfect treatment option is not doing anything. The conceptual use of 'minimal intervention' has led to a decline in the use of chemicals and destructive research. At the same time, more attention was given to preventive conservation.

Minimal treatment is an approach that is adopted by museums more radically than in the private (commercial) sector.[117] A museum can validate this position by constantly monitoring and controlling the temperature and relative humidity. However, it can be argued that strong intervention is sometimes necessary to enhance access of the collection. The Volkenkunde for example, actively promotes equal and open access to the collection in its mission statement: "Door ons publiek en stakeholders actief te betrekken bij het verzamelen, duiden en delen van deze getuigenissen, vergroten we het besef van deze onderlinge verbondenheid."[118] It would therefore be helpful if the assessment of an object would include its intended use. 'Use' can be defined as everything that constitutes the objects current cultural significance. Although the concept of minimal intervention is still actively used by practicing conservators – often in the private sector – many scholars have questioned its legitimacy. Villers argues that minimal intervention cannot be used as a principle but rather should be viewed as an attitude: minimal intervention is "not objective and impartial but relative and interpretative".[119] Therefore, she advocates a 'post minimal attitude' that acknowledges the agency of the conservator. It accepts that various treatments can be used for one problem according to its context. As minimal intervention is primarily concerned with preserving the history of an object apparent from its materiality, post minimal intervention recognizes the other values of an object. It promotes the use of objects and sharing the decision making process with the stakeholders involved.[120] Following this reasoning, it could be ethical 'wash' an object in a museum as part of its conservation process if requested by for example source communities or museum curators.

As ethnographic museums house a lot of objects made of different materials, they rely heavily on preventive conservation. Preventive conservation includes managing the risk an object has of damage occurring and environmental control.[121] It is primarily used to preserve

[116] Munoz Vinas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 190
[117] C. Villers, "Post Minimal Intervention", *The Conservator* 28:1 (2004), 7
[118] Mission National Museum of World Cultures. Accessed on: 29/04/2020 https://www.volkenkunde.nl/nl/over-museum-volkenkunde/missie
[119] Villers, "Post Minimal Intervention", 8
[120] Villers, "Post Minimal Intervention", 8-9
[121] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 152

the physical object. Preventive conservation consists of changing the environment of the object instead of the object itself. Examples are climate control, exhibition cases and standards, packaging et cetera. Even though the physical object is not intervened with, it can change during a preventive treatment: e.g. a parchment-bound book that curls if it is too dry inside a glass case. The goal is always to optimize the environment to prevent any damage from happening. Today, almost all caring methods of *pusaka* can be interpreted as preventive conservation. The environment is controlled by using ventilated spaces and pests and mould are controlled by using certain pungent woods. Care for *pusaka* includes methods that would be characterized as invasive and creating unnecessary risks for the material. The comparison with the key concepts of western conservation shows that they will not hold when examined carefully. This means that the inclusion of the senses in conservation can be achieved within current conservation ethics.

3 Preserving the materiality and meaning of the object in Museum Volkenkunde

In this chapter the life of the object in the museum is studied as the last aspect concerning the recovering of its full sensory potential. The status of this particular collection of the Volkenkunde is closely connected to colonial history. As will be shown in this chapter, most objects were acquired during the domination of the Netherlands over the region that is now called Indonesia. Studying the provenance of the objects helps to understand the sensorial connection people still have with the objects that is related to its history. The objects were not collected in an equal relationship resulting in unbalanced collections and display, of which remnants are still visible (literally, as no other engagement is possible) today. Unravelling the paths the object has taken to get to where it is now expose the limitations of its current presentation and preservation in the museum.

Another aspect of the object in the museum is the interaction with source communities in a consultative fashion, as visitors or as partners in a reciprocal relationship. Especially for colonial collections, objects and source communities are still connected: e.g. the repatriation process of the Diponegoro kris. They are literally the *source* that should be turned to first to study original conservation methods that were used for certain collections. They can teach their ideas on preservation which may or may not be included in the museum. Using the multisensory approach eases the communication with these communities as ideas on object engagement can be given serious consideration. In this chapter, an example of community involvement in Indonesia is given to demonstrate the importance of community surrounding *pusaka.* A concept that can be compared to a museum collection being sustained by its community of users.

3.1 History of the collection

3.1.1 Provenance of the Indonesian collection

Most ethnographic museums in Europe were established in the second half of the 19th century. Ethnography and ethnology in the Netherlands flourished during the colonial time and were

deeply influenced by (ethical) politics.[122] The Museum Volkenkunde has a 200 year history of collecting ethnological objects. The museum is based on 2 collections: the ethnographic collection of Phillip Franz von Siebold (1796-1866) and the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden (KKvZ). In 1831 the King bought the ethnographic collection comprising of 5000 objects from Von Siebold. As the KKvZ did not have any space, Von Siebold was allowed to manage the collection in Leiden.[123] For this collection the Nationaal Japans Museum Von Siebold was established. When Von Siebold moved to Japan for the second time in 1859, he left his collection under the care of Conradus Leemans (1809-1893), the director of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.[124] Leemans actively stimulated the acquisition of other ethnographic collections. In 1864, he established the Nationaal Ethnographisch Museum with the expanded collection of Von Siebold. In 1883, the KKvZ was closed and the collection transferred to the Nationaal Ethnographisch Museum. Due to the growing importance of the colonies to the Netherlands at the end of the 19th century, the collection was growing exponentially.[125] The collections that were acquired were all bought from external collectors. It wasn't until after the World War II that objects were collected in situ by the conservators of the museum.[126] In the 19th century, many objects were collected to use in the training of civil servants going to Nederlandsch-Indië.[127] Most ethnographic objects collected by Dutch institutions were used to enhance the governing of the colony. Individual field collectors largely determined which objects ended up in museums. The majority of the collectors were Dutch government officials or scholars. Another important group of collectors were missionaries.[128]

The crafts production in Indonesia has known a period of decline during the colonization period. In the 17th and 18th century, when the VOC reached the islands to trade, most communities were living in isolation. They were under the protection of kings, who were bound to religious and traditional laws. Most products – including religious objects – were made and used within the same village. In the royal courts, special craftsmen were employed

[122] R. Effert, *Volkenkundig Verzamelen – Het Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden en het Rijks Ethnographisch Museum 1816-1883* (PhD Diss., University of Leiden: 2003), 6-8
[123] Effert, *Volkenkundig Verzamelen*, 145
[124] Effert, *Volkenkundig Verzamelen*, 160-161
[125] F. Brinkgreve, J. Leijfeldt, "The Chinese-Indonesian collections in the National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands", Wacana 18:2 (2017), 279
[126] G. van Wengen, *'Wat is er te doen in Volkenkunde?': De bewogen geschiedenis van het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden* (Leiden : Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde: 2002), 24
[127] P.M. Taylor, "Collecting Icons of Power and Identity: Transformation of Indonesian Material Culture in the Museum Context", *Cultural Dynamics* 7:1 (1995), 108
[128] Brinkgreve, "The Chinese-Indonesian Collections", 282

to make unique and beautiful objects to show off the richness of the kingdom. The most important objects they produced were spiritual. Krisses were among the most significant religious objects in the courts. After the bankruptcy of the VOC, the Bataafse Republiek took over its assets. In 1814, Java and the other isles officially became a Dutch colony called Nederlandsch-Indië. In 1830, the 'Cultuurstelsel' was introduced by Johannes van den Bosch. This system embedded the isolated communities in an industrialised economy by forcing them to deliver products for export. In the 19th century, cheap industrial products produced in the west reached the Dutch East Indies. They pushed aside traditional handmade objects as they were more labour intensive and therefore more expensive. Craftsmen tried to compete by using cheaper raw materials and simpler decorations. This led to a downfall in the knowledge and skills of the traditional arts and crafts.[129] The downfall of crafts enhanced the belief that the objects needed to be saved by museums in order to preserve the information of the disappearing or "civilizing" cultures.

The decolonization period marked a change in all ethnographic museums. Material culture was not frequently used for scientific purposes anymore and Indonesian objects started to be sought after by art museums instead of ethnographic museums. The most important change, however, is the acknowledgement that the cultures that made the objects in the collections were now also spectators of the collections. The perspective of source communities on the manner of display was starting to be seen as valuable.[130] In 1935, the museum moved to its current location in the buildings of the former academic hospital in the Steenstraat and was renamed the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde.[131] Soon, it became clear that the buildings were unfit for the preservation of a museum collection: leakages, broken floors and sewer problems caused problems for the housing of the objects. It wasn't until the 1990's when the Deltaplan for state museums was launched that a professional preservation department was established. 25 people were trained in depot management, restorers were hired and the objects were cleaned and registered. The collection itself was relocated to a climatized depot in 's Gravenzande.[132] The next big change for the museum was the merger with the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, forming the National Museum of World Cultures in 2014. Both the Tropenmuseum and the Museum Volkenkunde have a large collection of Indonesian objects, most of which were acquired during the colonial period. Since then, the

[129] Tropenmuseum – Royal Tropical Institute, *Budaya Indonesia – Kunst en Cultuur in Indonesië*, (Exhibition catalogue: Budaya Indonesia – Arts and Crafts in Indonesia, 16/12/1987 until 21/08/1988), 66-77
[130] Taylor, "Collecting Icons of Power and Identity", 110-111
[131] A. Kouwenhoven, M. Forrer, *Siebold and Japan: his life and work* (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2000), 88-89
[132] Van Wengen, '*Wat is er te doen in Volkenkunde?'*, 126-131

reasons for acquiring objects have changed: "Recent acquisitions … for the most part are supposed not only to be intrinsically beautiful or interesting objects, but should also have a story to tell about their makers or users".[133] In other words, the meaning of the objects is gaining equal importance to its material form and function. As new acquisitions are assessed by the conservation department it is important that their approach to the evaluation and presentation of objects matches this attitude.

3.1.2 Provenance of the case studies

In the first paragraph of this chapter, a general summary has been given of the provenance of the Indonesian collection of the Museum Volkenkunde. The objects have been removed by the collectors from their local context under colonial rule. The collection can be viewed as the material result of social relationships between the colonizer (the collector) and the colonized (the producers). [134] Studying the provenance of the objects exposes the complexity of the colonial society. In most literature and the online collection database on the Indonesian collection, the moment of collecting is viewed from the perspective of the collector. The name of the collector is stated, the time of acquisition and sometimes the cultural context in which the collector operated. However, no information on the circumstances of the transfer itself is given: were the objects paid for?; who gave permission for the transfer and why?; was the transfer in any way pressured by the presence of colonial officials?; did the collector investigate the provenance of the object before acquiring it? A lot of this information can be found in the archives of the museum and the state. To counteract the one-sided and biased information that is currently provided, a new perspective on the archival material could be used to extract the information that was until now ignored. Additionally, the agency of the indigenous communities should be given attention. It was not just the collector that was impacted by the exchange of objects. In this paragraph, the provenance of the case study objects is paraphrased. All three examples show different social exchanges in which the indigenous communities played an active role.

The collection of krisses in the Volkenkunde collection is large. The search on "Keris RV" (RV is the prefix of the inventory number of the Museum Volkenkunde) shows 282

[133] Brinkgreve, "The Chinese-Indonesian Collections", 275-276
[134] R. Torrence, A. Clarke, "Creative Colonialism: Locating Indigenous Strategies in Ethnographic Museum Collections" in R. Harrison, S. Byrne, A. Clarke, ed., *Reassembling the Collection: Ethnographic Museums and Indigenous Agency* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2013), 171

records.[135] All the individual krisses have a different provenance: some of them have been donated, some of them collected during the colonial period and some of them were diplomatic gifts. The diplomatic role of the kris has always been substantial. This is mainly because of its value as the most important royal *pusaka*.[136] One of the objects that has been selected as a 'topstuk' of the Volkenkunde collection is the 17th century Sulawesi kris that was mentioned before [see fig. 2]. It was a gift to enhance social relations from the sultan of Goa to the Stadhouder William IV (1711-1751) and became part of the KKvZ collection.[137] Krisses still play a role in the diplomatic relationship between the Netherlands and the Republic of Indonesia. In 2019 the NMWC started a research project with the Rijksmuseum and NIOD Institute on the provenance of the Indonesian collection. The project aims to contribute to the development of policies for repatriation.[138] One of the results of the research project was the case of the missing kris of prince Diponegoro (1785-1855), who was an important Indonesian resistance leader during the Java War (1825-1830). After extensive research the kris was found in the Volkenkunde collection and in March 2020 handed over the Indonesian ambassador.[139] The diplomatic role of the kris has switched sides: they used to be given to the colonizer and now the former colonizer is returning them. The return of the kris is seen by some as a symbolic gesture that shows the willingness of the Netherlands to enhance its relationship with Indonesia. However, there is some criticism regarding the matter of repatriating Indonesian objects as an agreement was already reached in 1975, as few objects have been repatriated since.[140]

Another social role of the ethnographic collection was the relationship between indigenous cultures and the western spectator in Europe. One of the gamelan sets of the Museum Volkenkunde was first used in 1883 during the Internationale Koloniale en Uitvoerhandel Tentoonstelling in Amsterdam. The Volkenkunde benefitted greatly from this exposition as it received around 4000 objects from the state after it closed – including the

[135] Online collection database of the NMVW: search query "keris RV". Accessed on 22/05/2020 https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/?query=search=packages=OnViewRV#/query/a3bd5417-ed38-4fe6-8a5e-7d41d0b7f244

[136] Kreps, *Liberating culture cross-cultural perspectives on museums,* 53

[137] Online collection database of the NMVW: lemma RMV 360-6021 https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/ Last seen: 22/05/2020

[138] Kamerbrief van I. Engelshoven, 10 april 2019, betreft reactie op commissiebrief met verzoek om reactie op het bericht in Parool van 7 maart 2019 over roofkunst (2019D10592)

[139] Rijksoverheid: niewsbrief 04/03/2020 https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/03/04/nederland-geeft-dolk-van-javaanse-verzetsheld-terug-aan-indonesie Last seen: 22/05/2020

[140] Referring to the 'Joint Recommendations by the Dutch and Indonesian Team of Experts, Concerning Cultural Cooperation in the Field of Museums and Archives Including Transfer of Objects' formed in 1975. In J. van Beurden, *Treasures in trusted hands: negotiating the future of colonial objects* (Leiden: Sidestone press, 2017), 141-144.

gamelan.[141] The aims of the exposition were: "to expand the commercial enterprises, to encourage the various industries, to boost the moral strength of peoples, and to tighten the ties which united the nations – all for the good of the colonies, as well as for the motherland".[142] The gamelan was part of the 'living' examples of Javanese culture: a village with 60 Javanese people who provided the visitors with Javanese music, wajang performances and ploughing [see fig. 5]. The gamelan instruments were slightly bigger than usual and tuned differently. This was supposed to make the instruments fit to play both western and Javanese music. National anthems were played during royal visits. This was not a huge success as the western and Javanese tuning systems are completely different.[143] The gamelan was a product of the new identity which was formed by the relationship between the Dutch and the Javanese. The gamelan represented traditional Javanese culture but also the dominance of the Dutch nation over its colonies. Most literature focusses on the effects of the spectators with the 'exotic' people from other cultures. However, the experience of the Javanese people – downgraded to being subjects of the exhibitions – must have influenced their perspective on the relationship with the Dutch.

The collection of the bisj poles by the museums of the NMWC is documented well as they have been the subject of several exhibitions. Most of the poles were collected in the 1950's and 60's as New Guinee was still under Dutch rule until 1962. Starting in the beginning of the 20th century, scientific organisations and military expeditions brought back objects made by the Asmat people. In 1951 the collector and tradesman C.M.A. Groenevelt (1899-1973) was sent by the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen and the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde to acquire objects from New-Guinea. His mission was clear: it was seen as the last change to collect objects from "mensen die nog grotendeels in het Stenen Tijdperk leven".[144] The missionary priests living in the Asmat region mediated between Groenevelt and the communities that made the poles. Another important collector was René Wassing, a Dutch anthropologist employed by the Dutch government. From 1960 onwards he collected objects that were going to be on display in a (still to be established) local museum for Papua culture. He acquired objects – among them bisj poles – in return for tobacco and iron axes. In 1962, Indonesian air forces attacked to Dutch troops in New-Guinea which led to the Ellsworth Bunker proposal where it was agreed that the territory would become an Indonesian province.

[141] Brinkgreve, "The Chinese-Indonesian Collections", 280
[142] A. Molendijk, "Religion at the 1883 Colonial and Export Trade Exhibition in Amsterdam", *Zeitschrift Für Neuere Theologiegeschichte, 11:2 (2004)*, 222
[143] Van Wengen, '*Wat is er te doen in Volkenkunde?'*, 28-30
[144] Van der Zee, *Bisj-palen,* 52

This put a stop to all plans to build a local museum and the objects were transferred to the Rijks Ethnographisch Museum in Leiden.[145]

As headhunting became a forbidden practice, the woodcutting lost its importance to the Asmat. The carving had always been intertwined with the rituals of the bisj-feast during a raid, which was now missing its primary purpose. Since the Dutch started showing interest in the bisj poles, they have been saved for the market in ethnographic objects. Since 1954, when a harbour opened in Agats, many objects have been transported to the west. Currently, the poles are made using harder wood and freer decoration to increase its value for export.[146] The Asmat have adjusted to the demand of the western world for the export of bisj poles. They have even changed certain features of the poles to meet the wishes of the collectors. The bisj pole that was used purely for the bisj-feast ritual has transformed to a commodity with which the Asmat can generate income.

3.2 Source communities, P*usaka* and the museum

3.2.1 Source communities and Indonesian heritage organisations

In the last paragraph the provenance of the collection and the case studies has been explored. It has become clear that there is a structural lack of information on the circumstances of the actual exchange of objects and the agency of the producing communities. One of the methods to generate a more balanced perspective on the collection is collaboration with source communities. As has become clear in this thesis, the attitude towards objects changes when such collaboration occurs. The physical objects become less important than preserving the culture and traditions surrounding the objects. Objects are sometimes viewed as living entities that need to be treated as such. This requires a balancing of the dominance of science in conservation theory and practice. Both the curator and conservator should be aware that they are not just representing cultures, but facilitating them.[147] To increase the understanding of how the objects of the Indonesian collection in the Museum Volkenkunde are to be treated, it is helpful to observe the collaboration of source communities with Indonesian museums.

[145] Van der Zee, *Bisj-palen*, 54-55
[146] Van der Zee, *Bisj-palen*, 55-56
[147] L. Peers, A. Brown, *Museums and source communities a Routledge reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 19-27

After the independence of Indonesia in 1949 many museums were established with financial aid of the state. The museum as an institution was first introduced during the colonial period: i.e. the Bataviaasch Genootschap established in 1778 in Jakarta, currently the National Museum. The museum was therefore perceived as an inherently western and modern institute. This influenced Indonesian museum professionals to generally adopt the western museum model and ICOM standards. As was recorded in the constitution of 1945, the government was responsible for cultural development. Following this plan, museums were used as part of a 'modernization campaign'.[148] Certain aspects of traditional culture were promoted whereas others were thought to slow down the modernization of the country. The outcome of these policies (developed by the 5-year plans of The People's Consultative Assembly) was a development programme in which traditional culture was mostly viewed as something that was disappearing. This resulted in traditional objects being collected by (new) museums: "Material culture is collected and preserved in museums under the assumption that objects and the traditional way of life they represent will disappear and become obsolete as local communities become "developed" and "modern"."[149] The Indonesian museum became very similar to the western museum in their paradoxical nature of preserving objects of disappearing cultures whilst contributing to the downfall of these cultures. However, in spite of the international guidelines propagated by the state, some provincial museums did incorporate local traditions on curating and preserving *pusaka*. These museums were often struggling to find the balance between the conflicting aspects of the stately goal of professionalization versus traditional methods.

An example of these conflicting aims can be found in the Balanga Museum, located in central Kalimantan. It was established in 1973 and has a collection pertaining to the heritage of the Dayak peoples. Most of the employees of the museum are Dayak people with close connections to traditional culture. The museum consults with local cultural experts and ritual specialists: the *basir*. The *basir* have assisted with registering objects but also with questions regarding authenticity in exhibitions. They have even conducted rituals to cast out bad spirits and bless the museum.[150] This shows that people are invested in the local museums, as they are trying to incorporate traditional methods of preservation. These practices are not unopposed: it is direct conflict with the aim of stately museums to adhere to international standards. Even

[148] C. Kreps, "Museum-making and Indigenous Curation in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia", *Museum Anthropology* 22:1 (1998), 5-17
[149] Kreps, "Museum-making and Indigenous Curation", 10
[150] Kreps, "Museum-making and Indigenous Curation", 6-8

within the museum staff members have expressed concerns.[151] The situation in this museum brings to mind the model of James Clifford of the museum as a contact zone. Although the encounter is not directly one between subjects and objects of colonialism, it is an encounter between western museology and indigenous practices.

From the 1990's until 2010, there was little engagement of the public with heritage sites. The state's vision on the conservation of heritage was questioned as the sites did not generate enough attention. One of the solutions that was introduced by heritage professionals was the active involvement of local communities. In 2006 the *kota pusaka* (heritage city) management was established. This idea revolved around the collaboration of the state and local communities to conserve urban heritage. The term *pusaka* was deliberately chosen to show the function of heritage in Indonesian society as it is a community-based practice.[152] The efforts regarding the involvement of local communities culminated in the Law No11/2010 on Cultural Heritage (Cagar Budaya, Government of Indonesia 2010): "it aims to protect heritage assets with historical, scientific and cultural values and share the responsibility of heritage conservation between the central government, local government, and community".[153] The law ensures the enforcement of collaboration and encourages local communities to share their conservation practices with heritage institutions. The programme has been successful in achieving sustainable heritage preservation in several places, such as the rebuilding of heritage sites in Kotagede between 2006 and 2012 after the earthquake of 2006.[154]

3.2.2 Conservation within the Museum Volkenkunde

The Museum Volkenkunde does not have the 'convenience' of being located in the territory of the source communities. Since the museum was established, however, it was closely connected to the colonies through collectors. To truly deal with this colonial past it is useful to find groups who function as spokespersons of descendant and diasporic communities. The Volkenkunde is already connected to several these groups who are for example consulted in repatriation processes or involved with events in the museum. Including these communities in the exhibition and conservation processes would help in creating sustainable conservation

[151] Kreps, "Museum-making and Indigenous Curation", 13
[152] P. Wijayanto, K. Silva, "Community involvement in heritage conservation: The case of Kotagede, Indonesia" in *The Routledge Handbook on Historic Urban Landscapes in the Asia-Pacific* (Routledge, 2020) 445-447
[153] Wijayanto, "Community involvement in heritage conservation", 445
[154] Wijayanto, "Community involvement in heritage conservation", 459-460

measures: “Preservation that focuses on the people and culture behind the objects helps sustain living cultural traditions rather than fossilize them in the museum”.[155] As the example of pusaka heritage management in Indonesia has shown, mobilizing the community can create strong bonds with heritage organisations. However, it is not just the input of source communities that can aid a conservation department that is open to alternative ideas. Conservators must be made aware of the history of their profession and the mechanisms of exclusion that are still present in the dismissal of foreign concepts.

This notion is not new to the conservation department of the Museum Volkenkunde. In the 1990’s similar views on the care of culturally sensitive objects were shared by the head of the conservation and restoration department Graeme Scott. In 1998, he wrote a controversial article about the conservation of non-western objects. In the article he states that when ethnographic objects became part of the Volkenkunde collection they are treated the same as all other objects. He observes a change in this attitude in countries with an indigenous population who demand collaboration with museums. Scott cites Des Griffin, the Director of the Australian Museum: “museums are about ideas, not objects, and that it is the preservation of ideas which is their essential role.”[156] This idea ultimately results in a collection policy that does not just conserve the material form but also the ideas that the objects represent. Scott recognizes one area in the museum where cultural specifications on conservation can be easily incorporated: storage. One example that resonates with the case studies of this thesis, is the storage of krisses. The blade should always be preserved with the scabbard around it and not separate from each other. Scott also mentions that most conservators/restorers have been trained in one specific material (glass, textiles, paper etc.). As ethnographic objects often consist of various materials a more holistic approach should be adopted with the emphasis on preventive conservation. He concludes with this statement: “The conservation of non-western objects demands a ‘generalist’ approach to materials, an ‘inclusive’ approach to ideas, a preparedness to accept ‘foreign’ cultural concepts as factors governing the approach to preservation, a ‘minimalist’ approach to treatment, and a great deal of humility in thinking that conservators know best how to look after objects.”[157]

A year later in 1998, Graeme Scott published another article with Birgit Kantzenbach formulating the goal of the museum conservation department to incorporate “the wishes of the

[155] Kreps, “Museum-making and Indigenous Curation”, 13
[156] No information on the date or location of Griffin’s quote available. In G. Scott, “World’s Apart? The Conservation of Western and Non-western Objects”, *KM* 25 (1998)
[157] Scott, “World’s Apart”

communities from which the collections came" into policies for collection care.[158] This plan was initiated as part of the 1990 'Delta Plan' for all public museums, when the Volkenkunde was renovated and the collection transferred to new depots. The Delta Plan resulted in the registration, cleaning and packaging of all the 190.000 objects of the museum. Additionally, during this process people were trained to handle, register and clean objects. These employees became the first conservation technicians (translated from the Dutch term *behoudsmedewerkers*) of the country, which laid the foundations for new courses and schools.[159] Additionally, a conservation department of 4 employees was established. The department led by Scott wanted to develop policies for culturally-sensitive objects by consulting both curators of the museum and source communities. Around the same time, the wish to develop policies and procedures for these type of objects also became apparent in other museums with ethnographic collections. One of them was the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington. The difficulty in providing certain culturally sensitive objects with the care that was wished for by the invested communities, the conservation department decided to write protocols and policies for these situations to benefit both the physical and spiritual preservation of the object.[160] However, the dominant position in the process was still that of the conservation department as the alternative ideas should be "in balance with the highest standards of modern museum practice".[161] Scott seemed to be aware of this as he acknowledged the biased position of the conservator. The publications by Scott signify an important change in both academic discourse and the conservation department: the awareness that objects stored in the museum are more than their visual/physical form. Adopting the mission statement of the Australian Museum as formulated above is a radical turn from traditional conservation theory.

As noted by the Erfgoedinspectie of 2000-2005 most state museums did not have a long-term plan and vision for restoration (or interventive conservation).[162] Most of the treatments are carried out ad hoc when objects are needed for an exhibition. There is almost no consultation of external experts or any discussion outside the conservation/restoration department. As the Erfgoedinspectie states it: "met veel arrogantie gaat men ervan uit dat onze

[158] B. Kantzenbach, G. Scott, "Changing Cultures? A Dutch Museum's Experience", CAC Workshop *Critical Issues in the Conservation of Ethnographic Collections* (1998)
[159] J. van der Burg, "The Deltaplan, The Way it Worked" (transcript of a paper for the ICOM-CC meeting in Edinburgh, 1996) https://cool.culturalheritage.org/byauth/vanderburg/delta.html Last seen: 22/05/2020
[160] G. Flynn, D. Hull-Walski, "Merging Traditional Indigenous Curation Methods with Modern Museum Standards of Care", *Museum Anthropology, 25*:1 (2001), 31-32
[161] Flynn, Hull-Walski, "Merging Traditional Indigenous Curation", 39
[162] Erfgoedinspectie, *Beheer Rijkscollectie 2000-2005: verslag van bevindingen* (2006), 38-39

wetenschappelijke kennis nu zo groot is, dat er geen fouten meer worden gemaakt".[163] In 2014 and 2015 the Erfgoedinspectie evaluated the collection care of the NMWC again.[164] The inspection included the registration, collection care and management and safety and visibility of the state collection. The inspection was executed after the merger of the 3 museums and their respective collections (Afrikamuseum, Tropenmuseum and Museum Volkenkunde). The report characterizes conservation in the museum as conservative and focussed on preventive conservation.[165] In 2017 the name of the department 'collectiebeheer' was changed into the department of 'collectiemanagement'.[166] The change in names foremost refers to the professionalisation of the department, but also signifies a change towards a broader interpretation of conservation. In both annual reports of 2017 and 2018 the focus of collection management is on registration and depot management.[167] The specific policies of the conservation department remain hidden inside the organisation. Openness regarding conservation practice would increase the understanding of the public to the way museums operate. Also, it would be easier for stakeholders to express concern or make a case for alternative treatments. The Research Centre for Material Culture has a research programme (Collections Histories, Ethics and Responsibilities) which is aimed at developing more ethical approaches to museum practices. The programme includes research on "preserving and utilizing museum collections", indicating a willingness of thinking beyond material preservation towards cultural preservation.[168] One of the publications this has resulted in is an article on musical instruments in colonial Micronesia by Diettrich.[169] He explores their material and historical context by discussing sound and silence and addressing the agency of musicians and listeners. The research is connected to the importance of the senses when it comes to instruments in museum collections, but is does not address any conservation issues. Most publications so far do not focus on conservation. This reveals the blind spot of the museum when it comes to conservation issues, but it also creates the opportunity to fill this gap in the museum discourse.

[163] Erfgoedinspectie, *Beheer Rijkscollectie 2000-2005*, 38
[164] Erfgoedinspectie, *De staat van de rijkscollectie: Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen* (2014-2015)
[165] Erfgoedinspectie, *De staat van de rijkscollectie: Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen*, 18
[166] Jaarverantwoording NMVW 2017, 11
[167] Jaarverantwoording NMVW 2017 en 2018
[168] Accessed on: 22/05/2020 https://www.materialculture.nl/en/research/themes/past-research-themes
[169] B. Diettrich, "Instruments in motion: flutes, harmonicas and the interplay of sound and silence in colonial Micronesia, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 126:3: 283-312

Conclusion

The point of departure of this thesis was the difficulty the NMWC experienced in including alternative ideas on the care for the collections. The topic was inspired by the barrier the conservation department raised when a source community asked for a statue to be nourished by placing water next to it. The context of this particular object is unknown, highlighting the importance of object biographies in the research on this topic. Nevertheless, even without knowing the specifics it can still be said that the denial of the request is emblematic of current conservation practices that place their trust in material science, allowing little room for collaboration with other disciplines and or cultures. The limitations regarding object engagement ensured by conservators have consequences for the curators, visitors and source communities alike. In this thesis a multisensory approach to conservation was adopted to transcend the focus on the physical integrity of the object. The multisensory approach was used to study the effect on the evaluation and presentation of the Indonesian collection in the Volkenkunde. The thesis shows that the enforcement of sensory restraint in current museums can be traced back to the origin of the conservation profession in the 19th century museum. Furthermore, the multisensory approach exposed the parts of object biographies that signify alternative conceptions of heritage preservation: conceptions that constitute a different sensory engagement with objects. In this conclusion the research question 'How does embedding a multisensory approach in conservation theory and practice affect the evaluation and presentation of ethnological objects in Museum Volkenkunde?' will be answered by means of the three chapters and corresponding themes. At the end of the conclusion suggestions for further research will be given.

In the first chapter the examination and evaluation of the physical object was explored using the theoretical frame of Pomian that views museum objects as semiophores. Firstly, the two reasons for preserving the physical object were discussed. The stance that advocates future observation is substantiated by the notion that the object is physical evidence of the past that should remain intact to avoid the loss of information.[170] As was shown, this perspective can lead to the appropriation of cultural objects by categorizing them as (western) art works. Additionally, it attributes to a selection process where visually attractive objects are given preference. The second stance adds to the focus on physical stability an emphasis on the cultural significance of the objects for its stakeholders today (i.e. source communities and visitors). The

[170] Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued*, 27-28

case study of the gamelan showed that this perspective on conservation allows for a broader sensory engagement with museum object.

In the second part of the first chapter, the material characteristics and condition of the object are discussed. In this paragraph the importance of sensory engagement to the conservator's understanding of the object became apparent. After the initial research phase the paradox of conservation is revealed as no-one is allowed near the object anymore. The conservators' privilege is legitimized by training and a controlled environment. After the research of the material, it is the goal of the conservator to minimize all risks potentially harming the object, stabilizing its material condition. Studying the bisj poles, however, it can be argued that objects should be viewed as 'being in transformation'. Sven Ouzman argues that deterioration processes are part of this transformation and function as signifiers of how the object is understood in a specific cultural context.[171] Decay of the bisj poles, for example, signifies the understanding of the object as a dying entity by the Asmat people. To withhold treatment for display would require the acceptance of material loss. A loss that can only be accepted if the conservation department perceives the olfactory modalities of the object as equally important to its visual modalities.

The second chapter is concerned with the (semiotic) meaning of the object. The meaning of the object can also be viewed as its social role: the production, circulation and consumption that influences the relationships between people and things. An important aspect of the social role of the case studies is their spirituality. The case studies show that the spiritual dimension is key to understanding the sensory engagement with the objects in the museum. The bisj poles were created during the bisj-feast, which evolves around the honouring of dead ancestors represented in the material form of poles. After the poles have been used in the bisj-feast their function ceases, at which point they are 'saved' from material deterioration by collectors. The spiritual role of the poles is closely connected to the sensory engagement of the community with the material. The woodcarving especially is a matter where spirituality and craft cannot be separated. The spirituality of the gamelan and the kris is also connected to ancestors, but in a less direct way. The kris receives its spirit during its making while the *empu* forges the *pamor* of the blade. The social role of the kris is mostly connected to ceremonies and status. The sensory engagement with the kris is apparent in the handling of the kris which is guided by the veneration for the sacredness of the object. The spirituality of the gamelan is expressed by its role during ceremonies and the engagement of the players with the instruments. The players sit

[171] Ouzman, "The Beauty of Letting Go", 269-271

on the floor, take of their shoes and offer to the *gong ageng* before the performance. All examples show that meaning cannot be viewed separately from the material of the object. Consequently, the material is spiritually experienced through sensory interaction integrating touch, taste, smell, hearing and seeing.

In the second part of the second chapter the Indonesian concept of *pusaka* is compared to the ethical pillars – reversibility, minimal intervention and preventive conservation – of traditional conservation. The comparison is used to confront the latter with a perspective on preservation that is not solely focussed on the physical integrity of the object. Both reversibility and minimal intervention are problematic terms: complete reversibility is technically impossible and minimal intervention only means something in relation to the goal it is trying to achieve.[172] It is therefore important that in the assessment of the object its intended use is included. This creates a new use of the concept as it becomes interpretative: various treatments can be used for one problem according to its context. Following this reasoning, it could be ethical to adopt *pusaka* treatments such as smoke or liquid washings in a museum as part of its conservation process. This adaptation of minimal intervention is concerned with the meaning of an object and promotes the use of objects in the museum.[173] Another important part of conservation are preventive measures to minimize risk of material damage. Almost all caring methods of *pusaka* can be explained as preventive conservation, to preserve the materiality and spirituality of the object. As is shown, the key concepts of conservation are not set in stone and can be used to include alternative ideas on object engagement in the museum.

The third chapter is concerned with the life and provenance of the object in the museum. The circumstances of collecting lay bare the complexity of the colonial society and the way in which objects were acquired and displayed. The obscuring, ignoring and dismissing of certain aspects of Indonesian objects during the colonial period has influenced the way objects are perceived now. Certain physical and spiritual engagements with objects have been downplayed and forgotten. Furthermore, the case studies show that the role and agency of the source communities during these transactions have been marginalized. The case study of the royal kris has shown that the diplomatic role of the kris has changed: in specific instances, krisses are returned to Indonesia as part of repatriation processes. The social role of the kris is dynamic and subject to changing power relations. The modified gamelan that was played by Javanese people during the Internationale Koloniale en Uitvoerhandel Tentoonstelling of 1883, on the

[172] Caple, *Conservation Skills*, 64-65
[173] Villers, "Post Minimal Intervention", 8-9

other hand, shows that it was a product of a new identity that was formed by the relationship between the Dutch and the Javanese. It was a product of changing social relationships that influenced both the Dutch spectator and the Javanese performers. The last example of the production of bisj poles shows clearly that the Asmat have adjusted to new political circumstances and to the demand of the western world. The bisj pole that was used purely for the bisj-feast ritual has transformed to a commodity with which the Asmat can generate income.

To provide the museum with a more balanced perspective on the collection, collaboration with source communities is promoted. To increase the understanding of the Indonesian collection in the Volkenkunde as being sustained by a community of users, it is helpful to observe the collaboration of source communities within Indonesian heritage organisations. One of the most successful collaborations was based on the community-based practice of *pusaka*. [174] The concept was used by the movement *kota pusaka* to empower communities to share their conservation practices with heritage institutions. The Volkenkunde Museum is not located in the country of source communities. However, there are possibilities of working together with descendant and diaspora communities. Source communities are not the only stakeholders that can be consulted to include new perspectives on the conservation of the collection. Researchers on sensory studies, anthropologists, historians and so on, should also be included when it comes to opening up the conservation department to alternative ideas on preservation. The research shows that collaboration with stakeholders has been on the mind of the Volkenkunde conservation department for a long time. [175] Scott already posited ideas on cultural preservation and the acknowledgement of alternative approaches in the 1990's. The publications by Scott signify an important change in the conservation department: the awareness that objects stored in the museum are more than their visual/physical form. Currently, the museum does not have a public collection plan. Most information regarding museum management can be found in the annual reports which focus on registration and depot management. [176] In the Volkenkunde Museum, conservation is something that mostly happens behind the scenes. As has been shown the multisensory approach affects the presentation and evaluation of objects in the Volkenkunde in its core. The dominance of sensory restraint on the one hand and the focus on the prevention of material loss have been exposed. Focussing on the sensory properties of the objects has demonstrated the mass of meaning that is still be discovered by the visitor and the museum.

[174] Wijayanto, "Community involvement in heritage conservation", 445-447
[175] Scott, "World's Apart"
[176] Jaarverantwoording NMVW 2017 en 2018

This thesis aspires to open up conservation in the ethnographic museum by involving the senses in the process of evaluating and presenting objects. The acknowledgement of differences in sensory ratios helps to expose colonial structures that are still present in the museum. This thesis focusses on the Indonesian collection of the Museum Volkenkunde but all other collections can be explored in the same way. Nevertheless, the multisensory approach does not have to be limited to colonial collections. It can be useful in exposing the provenance and meaning of all object types that are displayed for the eye only, downgrading all other sensory aspects. Future research could include for example performative art, design and religious objects. In a wider context, this thesis aims to contribute to the discourse on the role that the senses play in relation to material culture. It is important to include conservation in the process to overcome the omnipresence of the visual in the museum as it plays an important role in enforcing sensory restraint. The first step in overcoming the sensory model on which conservation has been built is the inclusion of source communities – i.e. alternative ideas on preservation – in the decision-making processes. The second step is the acknowledgement of alternative preservation concepts by museum conservators. Including multisensory interaction with objects in the museum will enhance cultural understanding of the objects. This is not to say that museums should become a place of total sensory immersion. However, it is possible to create spaces for handling of 'real' objects and reproductions. This could be realised with aids such as texts, digital devises, audio and through workshops and presentations where objects are taken from their display positions behind barriers.[177] Even ceremonies could be held, where the senses are stimulated by the use of substances such as incense, flowers or smoke. The execution of such measures is only possible if museums continue to enhance collaborative efforts and keep reflecting on their position in society. Hopefully, this thesis will contribute to a reconsideration of traditional conservation theory where alternative ways of preservation are included in the evaluation and presentation of objects.

[177] Edwards, *Sensible Objects*, 219

Illustrations

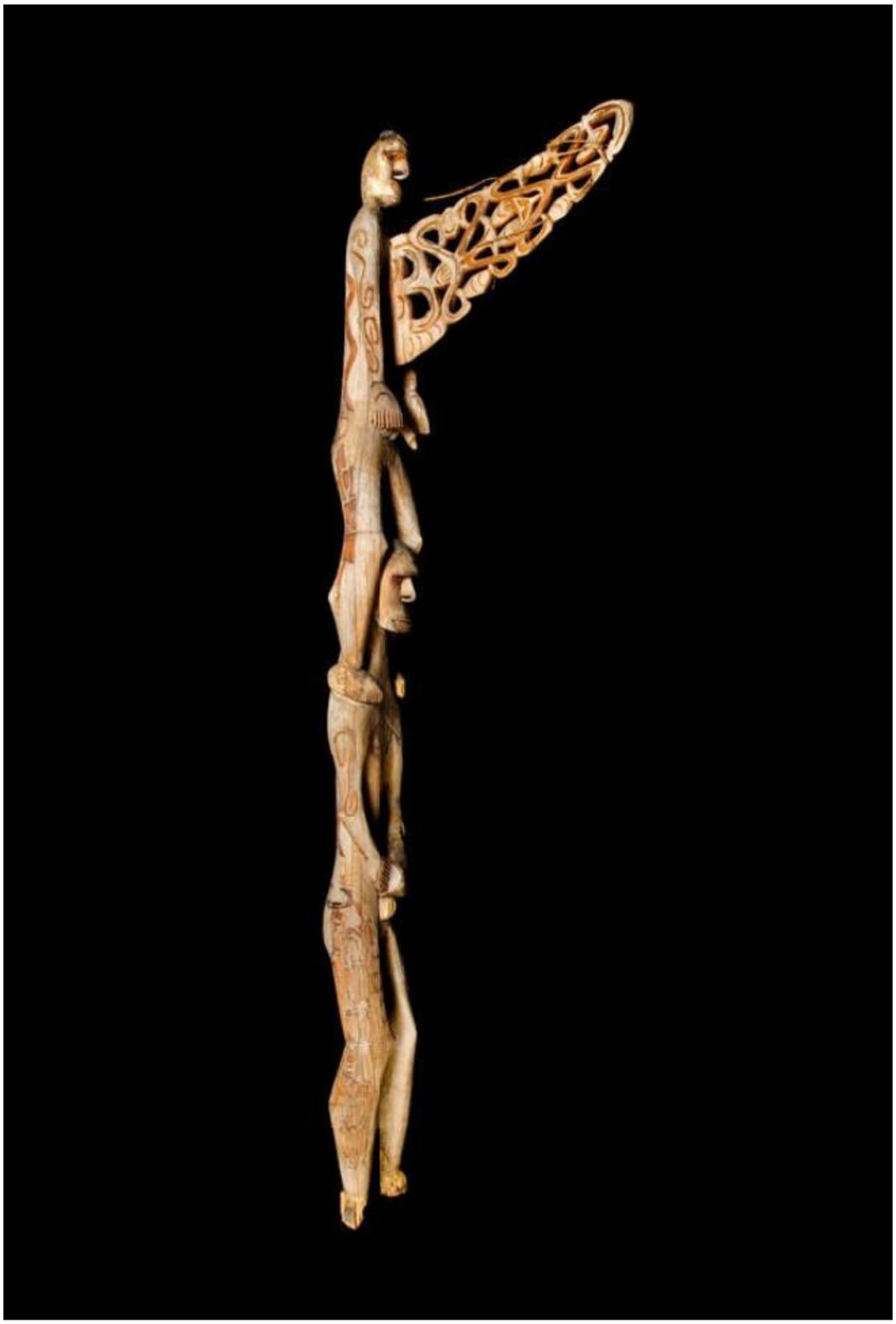

Fig. 1 Bisjpaal, 20th century, wood/lime/colourant, 350 x 100 x 35 cm (Leiden, Museum Volkenkunde, inv.no. RV-09-835)

Fig. 3 Metallophone, part of a Gamelan orchestra, wood (originally made of bronze) /bone/cotton/horn, (Leiden, Museum Volkenkunde, inv.nr. RV-360-5796b)

Fig. 2 Ceremonial kris, < 1750, iron/gold/gemstones/wood, 2,5 x 13 x 44 cm (blade) 4,5 x 9 x 46 cm (scabbard), (Leiden, Museum Volkenkunde, inv.no. RV-360-6021)

Fig. 4 Kris with a pamor blade, < 1913, iron/nickel/wood/gold/diamond/enamel, 2,5 x 9,5 x 48 cm (blade), 3 x 14 x 41 cm (scabbard), (Leiden, Museum Volkenkunde, inv.no, RV-1838-6)

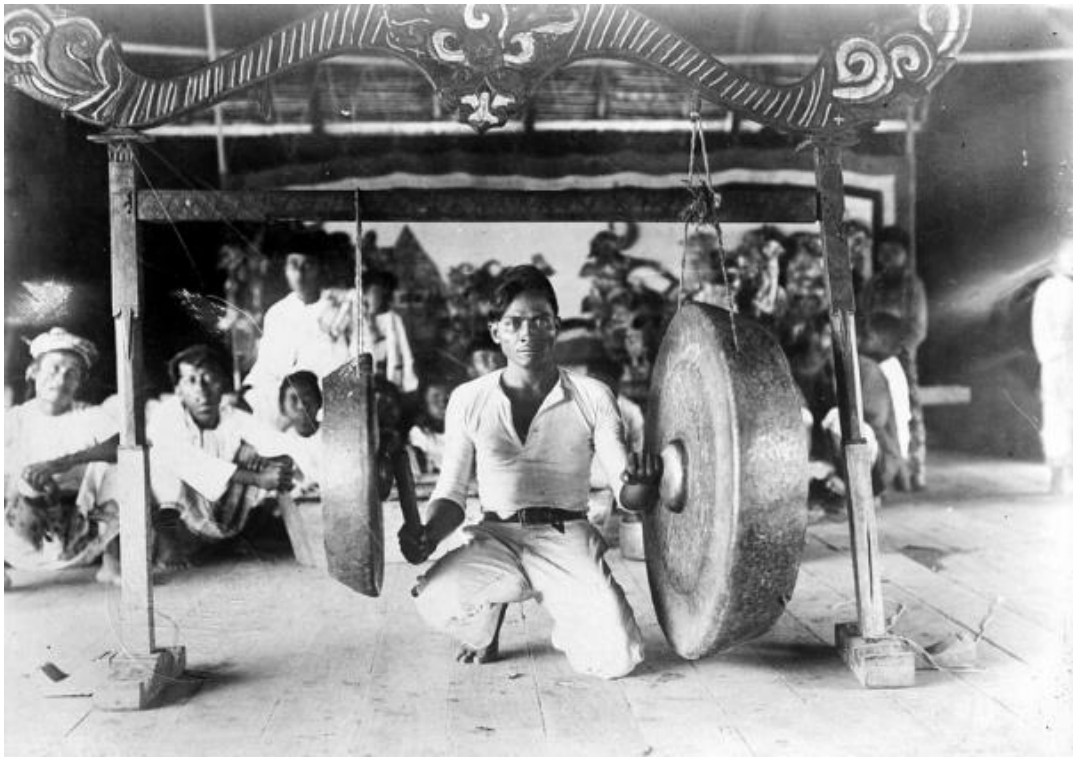

Fig. 5 Sundanese musician plays a gong ageng, glass plate negative, 9 x 12 cm (Amsterdam, Tropenmuseum, inv.no. TM-10017807)

Fig. 6 Gamelan orchestra with Javanese players during the Internationale, Koloniale en Uitvoerhandel Tentoonstelling 1883 in Amsterdam, 1883, albumen print (Leiden, Volkenkunde Museum, inv.no. RV-A52-1-56)

List of illustrations

All images have been downloaded on 28/05/2020 from the online collection database of the National Museum for World Cultures: https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/#/query/bcd0107d-4686-4f5f-8a86-e5f5a090cc4a

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