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From Raids to Digital Returns: The (Im-)Materiality of Manuscripts in Decolonializing Heritage Practices

Des pillages aux restitutions numériques : l'(im)matérialité des manuscrits dans les pratiques de décolonisation du patrimoine

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En couverture : Horn manuscript 07.02 in the collection of Museum Siginjei Jambi (photograph by Hafiful Hadi Sunliensyar, 2025; image used courtesy of Museum Siginjei Jambi).

Panggah Ardiyansyah[*] *& Verena Meyer*[**]

From Raids to Digital Returns: The (Im-)Materiality of Manuscripts in Decolonializing Heritage Practices

On 20 June 1812, the Yogyakarta *kraton* (royal palace) fell to British forces. The Javanese troops of the Yogyakarta *kraton* were outnumbered, outgunned, and outmaneuvered by about a thousand British soldiers. Sepoy troops from India, which accounted for about half of the British forces, would give the events its Javanese name, the *geger sepehi*, or 'sepoy calamity.' Sultan Hamengkubuwana II and his close family were taken prisoner and all his belongings were picked over by the British senior officials who were in command of the attack. They were Governor-General of Java Thomas Stamford Raffles, Resident of Yogyakarta John Crawfurd, and Colin Mackenzie, the Chief Engineer. Among the looted articles were the Sultan's treasury, the secretarial archive, and—the primary concern of this paper—the *kraton* library, holding more than 150 manuscripts. In comparative perspective, the theft of manuscripts from the Yogyakarta *kraton* was an almost commonplace occurrence. Colonial powers all over the world raided indigenous libraries and collections or purchased manuscripts from dealers and even forgers (Press 2022). In early twentieth-century Java, the hunger for manuscripts was so great that many manuscripts were produced with the specific intent of having them sold to Dutch scholars (Behrend 1993).

On 7 March 2019, Moazzam Malik, then British Ambassador to Indonesia, presented to Sultan Hamengkubuwana X a hard drive with 30,000 digital

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images of 75 manuscripts that, having been taken out of the *kraton* library following the 1812 raids, had ultimately ended up in the British Library.[1] This initiative, which had been decades in the making, was greeted on both sides for its promise to make the manuscripts accessible again to the Javanese as well as a global scholarly community. At the *International Symposium on Javanese Studies and Manuscripts of Keraton Yogyakart*a (hereafter the *Symposium*) that accompanied the presentation of the digitized manuscripts to the royal house of Yogyakarta, Gusti Kangjeng Ratu (GKR) Hayu, the Sultan's fourth daughter and organizer of the *Symposium*, gave a speech remembering the raids of 1812 and commented on how they had affected the tradition of knowledge production at the *kraton*. While the royal palace continued to be a center of knowledge production, she said, there was no denying that some links in the chain of transmission had been broken and that knowledge on certain topics had been lost for subsequent generations of scholars.[2] The digitization of the manuscripts and the *Symposium*, featuring contributions from scholars in Indonesia and beyond, were ways to recenter the Yogyakarta *kraton* as a center of knowledge production amid an already globalized field of study for Javanese language, literature, and culture. In the Indonesian media mainly driven by the official narrative from the *kraton*, the presentation of digital images in March 2019 was greeted as (digital) *kembali* (return) and/or *pulang* (coming home) of the manuscripts (Setyawan 2019; Putri 2019).

In this paper, we seek to explore ideas underpinning the returns of manuscripts in digital form as part of broader decolonial and heritage discourses and practices. With its trajectories of digital copies and displays, the Yogyakarta digitisation project provides a point of departure for examining the cross-cutting processes of remembering (and forgetting) that underpin such a return. We investigate the political and cultural grounds in disseminating manuscripts' digital copies and ask what kinds of shifting assumptions about the nature of textuality and manuscripts are indicated by digital returns. This is especially relevant given that some manuscripts in traditional Java, those designated as *pusaka*, are not merely media transmitting textual information. That their materiality contains a power of its own complicates any attempt to capture their essence or content in digital form. We conclude with some reflections on how the meanings assigned to the materiality of manuscripts and textuality might affect our scholarly ways of approaching Javanese manuscripts; what ethical implications there may be, especially when the democratization of access through digitization is framed as part of a decolonial movement; and what this entails for future research.

1. For more on the manuscripts' trajectory after the raid and the digitization initiative, see Gallop (2018, 2019, 2020).

2. See Gallop (2020: 47). The speech of Gusti Kangjeng Ratu Hayu is accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uP3_N205Nzk>.

Memories of Violence

In their representations of the digitization of the 75 manuscripts seized from the palace library in 1812, both the British Library and the Yogyakarta *kraton* have taken the raids and the violence they entailed as a primary point of reference. Enacted to put the *kraton* under British control, this violence was most concretely physical. The military assault resulted in a significant loss of lives: the hundreds of Javanese troops that were killed far outnumbered the 23 casualties from the British side (Carey 2008: 335). We learn about how these events unfolded, and how they were perceived by the royal elites of Yogyakarta at the time, from two textual sources. The first, a chronicle titled *Babad Bĕdah ing Ngayogyakarta* written by Bĕndara Pangeran Arya Panular, offers a detailed account of the assault itself, including the humiliating experience of seeing the British officers within the *kraton* walls.[3] The second, the *Babad Sepehi,* was written by the deposed Crown Prince, Prince Mangkudiningrat, in March 1813 (Irawan & Saputra 2018: 106), and focuses primarily on the *kraton*'s antagonism with Raffles, who is represented as a person inconsistent in his actions (ibid.: 109). The two accounts make clear how the trauma of the raids exceeded the loss of lives, centrally including also the plunder of royal heirlooms, including manuscripts, as the prize of war (Carey 1992: 248). In the locale of Yogyakarta, the looting of its palace library during the 1812 raids has been understood to engender a *periode senyap* (silent period) owing to the loss of 'authentic knowledge' (read: royal manuscripts) produced between 1755 and 1812 (see pdm 2019). This language reflects the value of knowledge production and preservation as an active force for manufacturing political and cultural power. The theft of manuscripts, pervasive in colonized Southeast Asia and beyond,[4] thus represents an effective modality of the western colonial project in seizing power from local rulers. Today, the memory of the 1812 raids remains a powerful force that underlies the political aesthetics of both the British Library and the Yogyakarta *kraton* in and around the (digital) return of manuscripts.

At the time of writing, the British Library in London displays five manuscripts acquired from the royal library in Yogyakarta in the *Treasures of the British Library* permanent exhibition. These are *Serat Panji Angronagung Pakualaman*

3. The chronicle was published by Peter Carey (1992) as *The British in Java 1811–1816: A Javanese account.*

4. The perhaps most infamous case in Indonesia is the looting of the *Nāgara-kĕrtāgama*, the manuscript of a medieval text, from the royal compound of Cakranegara, Lombok, in 1894 (Kuitenbrouwer 2014: 92). The manuscript was already restored to Indonesia in 1974 (van Beurden 2017: 138). Another well-known Indonesian case is the VOC's theft of manuscripts from the princes of Macassar in 1776 (Groot 2009: 133). For outside of Southeast Asia, Jos van Beurden has assembled information on colonial thefts of manuscripts from Korea to Ethiopia and Mali to Iceland (van Beurden: 73–77).

(Add 12281), *Babad Sultanan utawi Mangkunegaran* (Add 12288), the Javanese *wuku* calendar (MSS Jav 36, in a bundle with *Babad Mataram* and *Babad ing Sengkala*), a *pawukon* manuscript (Add 12338), and *Serat Jaya Lengkara Wulang* (Add 12310). This display was specifically installed as part of the London Book Fair in March 2019, yet could also be viewed during the extended celebration of the completion of the digitization of Yogyakarta manuscripts (see Gallop 2019). The label for this display recognizes that these manuscripts came into their hands as a result of colonial violence:

> The British Library holds a rich collection of Javanese manuscripts. This includes works on history, ethics, Islamic practice and law, and a literature primarily written in verse, as well as archival documents and letters. Manuscripts are written on European paper or *dluwang*, Javanese paper made from beaten tree bark. Some books are beautifully illuminated in colours and gold, and illustrated with figures influenced by the angular shape of *wayang kulit* puppets from the shadow theatre, the pinnacle of Javanese art forms.
>
> On display here are five manuscripts from the royal library of Yogyakarta in central Java, acquired after an attack by British forces in June 1812. With the generous support of Mr SP Lohia, 75 Javanese manuscripts from Yogyakarta have recently been digitised and are now freely accessible online at https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/javanese.html.[5]

The display provides us with fascinating insights into notions of violence, aesthetic value, and restitution in relation to Javanese manuscripts over time. In the *Treasures of the British Library*, the manuscripts mentioned above are placed in the gallery section called 'Art of the Book'. This shows that those Javanese manuscripts are recognized for their artistic values and not necessarily for their textual contents only. This valuation is apparent from the aesthetic elements exhibited to the visitors, which are the manuscripts' intricate and finely executed paginal decorations (see Fig. 1). It reflects why palace libraries were targeted in the first place, why many manuscripts were taken from them, and eventually made their way into British collections. Oral tradition believes that the manuscripts plundered from the Yogyakarta *kraton* were divided between Raffles, Crawfurd, and Mackenzie, with Raffles, having priority, afforded the most beautiful and important ones (Carey, ed., 1980: 1). While it is difficult to historically substantiate this oral story, the tradition speaks volumes to the longing for these lost manuscripts as embedded into the collective memory of Yogyakarta people.

However, we should note that not all Javanese manuscripts on display were taken as part of the loot following the Yogyakarta *kraton*'s sacking. One of the manuscripts on display, *Babad Sultanan utawi Mangkunegaran*, written in 1800 and attributed to Hamengkubuwana II, was fitted with newly illuminated cover pages in 1814. We know that this manuscript was given to Crawfurd by

5. Label documented in December 2023.

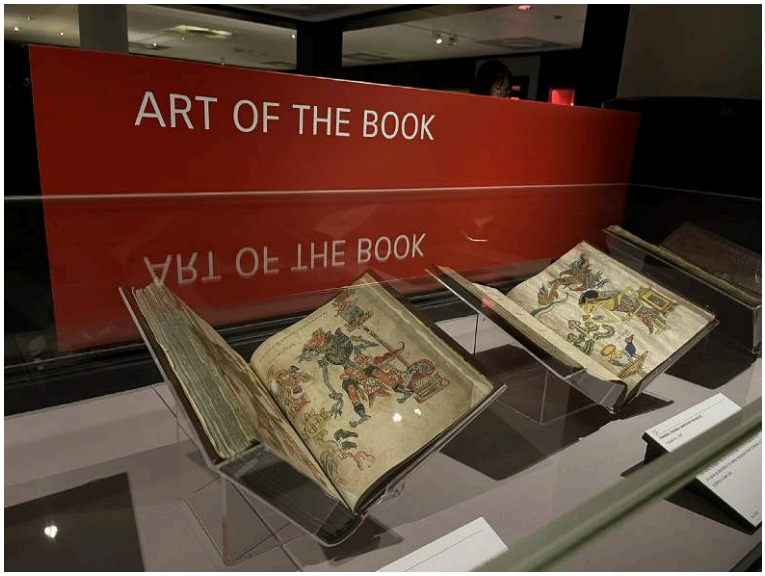

Fig. 1 – The display of Javanese manuscripts at the *Treasures of British Library* permanent exhibition (Photograph by Panggah Ardiyansyah, 2023).

Paku Alam I (Gallop 2020: 40), Hamengkubuwana II's half-brother and rival, who had used the British presence for his own political advantage by siding with them against the Sultan. Paku Alam I, possibly inferring the potential padded value placed upon the artistry associated with Javanese manuscripts, took it upon himself to beautify the *Babad* before presenting it as a gift. Along with the *Babad,* the beautifully illuminated *Serat Panji Angronagung Pakualaman* (written in 1813) was also gifted by Paku Alam I to Crawfurd (ibid.: 40). While seemingly innocuous, this kind of gift-giving practice, particularly in Java, should not be separated from the implicit or explicit violence of colonial forces as the very act employed to control the local population. It is notable that the quoted label above does not emphasize that the two manuscripts were gifted and accepts that all manuscripts on display were all taken/acquired under duress. However, by not referring to the manuscripts as loot, the label also attempts to steer clear of the legal and moral ambiguities for the manuscripts' ownership by the Library as relates to the explicit or implicit aim of the British colonial project.

As a modality of the Western colonial project, the appropriation of manuscripts often served to intervene directly into the power dynamics of the day. Western colonial officials noticed early on that certain manuscripts had a special political significance at the colonized courts. Those were considered *pusaka*, heirlooms with an inherent power. Control over their ownership implied political control, even to the extent that their mere possession

bestowed onto a person the status of the ruler.[6] In the eighteenth century, the VOC intervened in a war of succession through (not immediately successful) attempts to get *pusaka* to their preferred successor to the throne, the later Pakubuwana I.[7] The raid of the Yogyakarta palace and the looting of its library contributed to a similar brokerage of political alliances. Not only did Paku Alam I gift manuscripts to the British to solidify their alliance—his gift was also reciprocated. Among the looted manuscripts was a beautifully decorated chronicle entitled *Babad Panjĕnĕngan,* a register of all the rulers of Islamic Java beginning with Amangkurat I in the mid-seventeenth century (see Carey 1992: 96). We learn that Raffles, although impressed by the manuscript's beauty, handed it over to Paku Alam I, who, in turn, claimed that this manuscript was at the *kraton* library only because it had been stolen from him and that he had been the rightful owner all along. Raffles' gift was a token of gratitude that Paku Alam I had helped the British in their campaign (ibid.: 96, 250). In the exchange between Paku Alam I and Raffles, the decorated manuscript, the *Babad Panjĕnĕngan,* is not explicitly called a *pusaka*.[8] Panular's description of the handover of this manuscript that "has no equal in Java,"[9] and especially the culmination of the process in Raffles' embrace of Paku Alam I and the men's mutual delight in each other,[10] makes clear, however, that both parties understood the book's significance to exceed its informational value. Indicative of the violence and political maneuvering undergirding such processes of gift-giving, the presentation of these manuscripts also heralded political privileges. Raffles and Crawfurd gave Paku Alam I an independent political position vis-à-vis the Yogyakarta *kraton* through the establishment of the Pakualam I duchy, a strategy to further weaken the *kraton*'s position (ibid.: 24).

Nowadays, a similar longing for lost manuscripts and the power they bestow, as displayed by Paku Alam I, has driven the efforts to get those taken during the British raids in 1812 returned. The idea of such a return has been conceptualized by the Yogyakarta *kraton* as a way to fill the void of *periode*

6. In some cases, the logic of rulership could even be reversed. In his discussion of *pusaka* (although not specifically about *pusaka* manuscripts), van den Berg (1901: 72–80) stated that in some communities in South Sulawesi, the ruler is considered to rule on behalf of the *pusaka* but can be deposed if he is considered unworthy of them (ibid.: 75). For more on *pusaka*, see also Anderson (1972: 12) and Mulaika (2024).

7. See Ricklefs (1986) for more on this affair. While Ricklefs mentions no manuscripts as major *pusaka* in the collection, the colonial handling of the situation shows how *pusaka* of any sort—including manuscripts—were used for political maneuvering.

8. It is, however, considered a *pusaka* of the Pakualaman court today. See Gallop (2020: 50).

9. The Javanese text reads, '*ing Jawi datan amanggih*' (Carey 1992: 250).

10. The Javanese text reads '*gumujĕng suka/kadyinya rĕsĕp galih*,' which can be translated as the two men enraptured in 'laughter, happiness/that seemed to penetrate the heart' (ibid.: 51).

senyap, both figuratively and literally. This desire is embedded in an active remembrance of loss through the memorialization of the *geger sepehi* and ongoing debates about what this historical injustice means for the present. To give an example, memorialization was planted into the geo-historical landscape of Yogyakarta through an inscription of *geger sepehi* made in 2000 and placed on the wall of northwest *jokteng* (short for *pojok beteng*, or palace wall corner).[11] This inscription, however, was torn down in 2022 due to the reconstruction of northwest *jokteng* executed by the *kraton*. Notably, this reconstruction has been a subject of fierce debate among archaeologists and heritage practitioners since its inception in 2019 due to its plan to demolish the original structure in order to build a new like-to-like replica (see Wijoyono 2019). Rather than perceiving the newly reconstructed *jokteng* as an act of forgetting, we could see it as the *kraton* signaling that they are not to be burdened by past injustice. This reconstruction might be understood as a move towards the future, in a similar vein to Hamengkubuwana X's belief that digitizing manuscripts is indispensable for making the *kraton* relatable for the current generation.[12]

For another instance of *geger sepehi* remembering, we turn to Diorama Arsip Jogja (Diorama for Archives of Yogyakarta) established in November 2022 by the Libraries and Archives Service of Yogyakarta. This diorama was set up as a museum narrating the development of the Yogyakarta *kraton* through the perspective of manuscript culture and historical archives. One of the rooms is designed primarily to recount the event of *geger sepehi*. The room label describes what happened to the manuscripts during this event:

> Thousands of manuscripts were looted during the *geger sepehi* (1812) by British colonial officials. Thomas Stamford Raffles got first priority. The Lieutenant Governor of Java 1811–1816, who was obsessed with Javanese culture, took the most historical and beautiful texts related to classical cultures from the Hindu-Buddhist era. After Raffles died in 1826, Sophia Hull Raffles, his wife, handed over the collection to the Royal Asiatic Society in London in 1830.
>
> The next part was taken by John Crawfurd, a resident of Yogyakarta who was fluent in refined Javanese, who chose manuscripts of *pawukon*, *primbon* and teaching books. However, in retirement, he had difficulty caring for them and thus sold the manuscripts to the British Museum after failing to auction them in Paris.
>
> Not to be left behind, the commander of British troops, Colin Mackenzie, also took part. He kept a number of manuscripts left over from the sorting results of his two superiors. He was then transferred from Java to India. When he died while

11. The inscription is written in Indonesian and states, 'This ruin is part of the bastion of the Yogyakarta *kraton*'s fortress, destroyed by the attack of British troops in 1812 during the reign of Sultan Hamengkubuwana II. This event is known as GEGER SEPOY or GEGER SPEI.' Of note, *spei* is variation of *sepehi*.

12. The statement about digitising manuscripts was made during the speech opening the *Symposium*. It is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uP3_N205Nzk>.

serving in India, his collection was taken over by the India Office Library. Later, the British government moved these manuscripts to London.

The British government then put together most of the looted manuscript collections in one place, namely the British Library.

Meanwhile, when the looting occurred, several manuscripts survived and remained in the Yogyakarta *kraton*, namely: *Serat Suryaraja* (1774), *Arjuna Wiwaha* (1778), and *Kanjeng Kiai Al-Qur'an* (1797).[13]

By putting the names of British officials in a public display, the label in the Diorama Arsip Jogja makes sure to hold Raffles, together with his subordinates, Crawfurd and Mackenzie, accountable for the manuscripts' loss. Already foreshadowed in the *Babad Sepehi* by Prince Mangkudiningrat, the antipathy toward Raffles is especially tangible here. It highlights how synonymous the figure of Raffles is with the term *geger sepehi* for the people of Yogyakarta.[14] The diorama label is tellingly in contrast with the British Library one that does not specify the person(s) responsible for nor specifically state that most manuscripts were looted during the raids.

The Political Aesthetics of Restitution

Like in colonial times, the ownership of manuscripts today continues to be embedded in a complex web of demands, representing a dense node where a multitude of political and cultural frameworks converge and clash. While the digitization of the Yogyakarta manuscripts must be seen against the background of the *kraton*'s endeavor to have them restored, this initiative is also embedded in a wider context, in particular two trends that have shaped global discourses over the last decades. The first is a deepening commitment to decolonial initiatives among certain segments of societies worldwide, including the redress of historical injustices. The second, related to the first, has been called a 'global heritage turn' and has entailed an increased interest in history and its material remnants, like manuscripts. This latter trend arose in the 1960s in Western countries (Walsh 1992), producing heritage discourses based on particular Euro-American understandings of commemorating the past that were globalized by powerful actors like UNESCO. In their conventional form, heritage discourses are characterized by an identification of certain objects or practices as representations of a community's shared past (Bendix et al. 2013; Bloembergen & Eickhoff 2019).

In the context of the heritage turn, formerly colonized nations are now demanding the right to be stewards of their own heritage while calling

13. Translation from Indonesian by the authors. Label documented in November 2023.

14. On the other hand, Moazzam Malik, in his speech during the presentation ceremony in March 2019, notably tried to portray Raffles in a more positive light by emphasizing his 'love' towards Javanese cultures. The speech is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN8n2FA14Ic>.

for decolonial initiatives that aim for the return of material objects. Such initiatives are, however, often complicated by a range of factors that point to continued forms of violence in the postcolonial world. They include legally binding regulations governing collections and archives (Godwin 2020); issues of preservation and facilitating scholarship, where western institutions have often argued that they are better equipped to preserve the artifacts or manuscripts and to make them accessible to researchers both now and in the future, even claiming to hold their collections as a form of trusteeship on behalf of humanity as a whole;[15] and anxieties that comprehensive repatriations would diminish the prestige of western institutions or even lead to their decline or disappearance (for a critique, see Losson 2021). In this fraught context, a digital return promises all the advantages of the physical manuscript, restoring indigenous sources of knowledge and heritage to their rightful owners, without any of these complicating factors.

In addition to its promise to restore local knowledge, digitization is also praised for its potential to make knowledge more accessible for a broad public. In this context, we should note that the Yogyakarta digitization is not a rarity within the British Library. By the late 2010s, the institution had become known for its digitization of heritage worldwide, alongside its own collections. The British Library's digitization initiatives can be traced back to the mid-1990s with the Electronic Beowulf project in cooperation with the Royal Library in Copenhagen (Prescott & Hughes 2018). Nowadays, one of the best-known digitization projects organized by the British Library is the Endangered Archive Programme (EAP), which was started in 2004 and is ongoing. The purpose of EAP is to create digital copies to preserve endangered documentary heritage while ensuring that the heritage stays with its communities whenever possible (Case 2015). As such, the project seems to break away from colonial attitudes by not taking manuscripts away and being sensitive to how the communities care for them. In turn, the Arcadia Fund, which generously supports the project, has appraised the British Library as one of the few institutions capable of building a massive digital repository for the digitized manuscripts from EAP and ensuring widespread dissemination for academics, individuals, and communities (see Case 2015). Here, EAP stands in the long (European) tradition of discovering and preserving endangered documents to be utilized as historical evidence for academic studies (Kominko 2015: l).

Likewise, in the British Library display label quoted above, the last sentence referring to the availability of digital copies of Yogyakarta manuscripts indicates the expectation of both the restoration of local knowledge and wider accessibility through manuscripts digitization. Digitization is thus being presented as a pathway to dealing not only with the historical injustice that happened two centuries ago in Java, but also to helping reconstruct aspects

15. See the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums (2002).

of Javanese heritage that were considered lost.[16] The fact that the *kraton* manuscripts that have already been digitized have renewed cultural practices in Yogyakarta and beyond should warrant special attention. In this context, Annabel Teh Gallop, the Lead Curator for the Southeast Asian collection in the British Library, has observed that some digitized manuscripts were immediately studied by scholars from Yogyakarta and presented in the 2019 symposium (Gallop 2020: 47). While attending the symposium, she also recognized how Beksan Lawung Ageng, a dance performance created by Hamengkubuwana I (r.1755–1792), could be re-staged in its original form based on the information provided by the digital access to the *kraton* manuscripts (ibid.: 48). In addition, some of these manuscripts are transliterated by the Solo-based Yayasan Sastra Lestari for the broader public to access them.[17] Narrated as such, digitization democratizes resources of knowledge production, since scholars and practitioners based in Yogyakarta are now able to read and utilize the *kraton* manuscripts at little or no cost.[18] Studying the Yogyakarta manuscripts presently kept in the British Library is no longer a privilege only for those living in the UK or with the financial means to visit them physically. In comparison, copies of other *kraton* manuscripts are mostly accessible for the public through the library of Sonobudoyo Museum in Yogyakarta, though these are yet to be available via digital platform. Notably, those still regarded as important *pusaka* are kept in the *kraton* compound and can only be accessed by the Sultan and his family.

Both the restitution of knowledge and its increased accessibility are not merely achieved through the digitization initiatives; they are also publicly performed. This can be discerned especially from another British Library project aimed at digitizing 120 further Javanese manuscripts between 2020–2023. This particular project deals with manuscripts not created by the *kraton* scriptorium proper, though most were written and collected during the British interregnum in Java (Gallop 2023, Gallop 2018). The digital copies from this project were presented twice to different Indonesian institutions. In May 2023, the copies were given by the curators of the British Library to the head of the National Library of Indonesia during his visit to the British Library (the authors of this article were present in the audience during the presentation). In November 2023, the British Ambassador to Indonesia, Dominic Jermey,

16. In his speech during the presentation ceremony, Moazzam Malik stated that the handover of digital copies was to "rectify the mistake happened in June 1812." The speech, delivered in Indonesian, is accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN8n2FA14Ic>.

17. See <https://www.sastra.org/british-library-bollinger>.

18. Of course, a device and internet connection cannot be universally assumed. For more on the 'digital divide' in the Global South, see Ragnedda & Gladkova (2020). Specifically for Indonesia, see Slama (2021).

presented another set of digital copies during his visit to the Yogyakarta *kraton*. Sultan Hamengkubuwana X received the copies, though he had not yet been briefed on their contents at the time of the presentation (Pandangan Jogja 2023). This kind of presentation of multiple copies to different parties is not unique. In March 2019, multiple hard drives containing the same digital copies of manuscripts from the Yogyakarta digitization project were not only handed by Moazzam Malik to Hamengkubuwana X, but also to the head of the National Library of Indonesia and the head of the Libraries and Archives Service of Yogyakarta. This free replicability and production of copies is completely at odds with traditional understandings of texts as inherently powerful, pointing to the manuscripts' desacralization (Mulaika 2024: 18). Yet the repeated public act of presenting hard drives has performed a process of return while emphasizing that this return is only made possible by the British Library's digitization initiatives.

Similar processes of political posturing are also discernible on the Indonesian side, especially in the narrative extended by the government and royal house of Yogyakarta related to the return of digitized manuscripts from the British Library. The article in *Mata Budaya,* a periodical published by the Cultural Service of Yogyakarta, titled *Kisah Awal Upaya Kembalinya Manuskrip* (Initiation of the Attempt to Return the Manuscripts) emphasizes the role of the Libraries and Archives Service of Yogyakarta in initiating the effort to track down the Yogyakarta manuscripts taken during the British raids in 1812.[19] According to this article, this process started when Hamengkubuwana X instructed the Service to look for the manuscripts taken away by Raffles, which was followed by an official visit to the British Library in 2014. Upon hearing that the manuscripts were not allowed to be transferred physically, the officials from Yogyakarta were content with having them digitized (bdn 2019: 10). Hamengkubuwana X, upon receiving the digital copies of Yogyakarta manuscripts from the British Library in 2019, was adamant about narrating the handover as *kembali*.[20] He used the active verbal variation of the word (*mengembalikan*) in his speech to open the *Symposium*, and repeated it two days later during the presentation ceremony, to refer to the act done by the British Library in handing over the manuscripts' digital copies.[21] Thus, the reiterated word 'return,' describing the chains of events leading to the digitization and

19. See bdn (2019). The chain of events described in this article is corroborated by Gallop (2020).

20. Interestingly, when Moazzam Malik chose to deliver his speech in Indonesian during the presentation ceremony, he adopted the same language by using the language of '*mengembalikan naskah digital*' (returning the digital manuscripts). The speech is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN8n2FA14Ic>.

21. The two speeches are available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uP3_N205Nzk> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN8n2FA14Ic>.

presentation ceremony, implies a claim of success in preserving and advancing the *kraton* cultures, of which the manuscripts are significant parts. It speaks to the notion of the Yogyakarta and Surakarta *kraton*s as the center of *budaya adiluhung* (the great culture) and the idea of '*kraton* cultures' as one of the pillars—along with the 'golden age' and 'national heroes'—in the building of a national identity for Indonesia (Wood 2005: 33–82). The essentialization of *adiluhung* cultures, which were practiced mostly by local elites, originates from nineteenth-century colonial discourse, regarding the production of *kraton* literature as *adiluhung*'s ultimate embodiment (Florida 1995: 31–33). This notion is to some degree still operative today and has in turn allowed the royal house of Yogyakarta to position itself as an able custodian of Indonesian culture in enacting the 'return'.

Tacitly encouraged by *kraton* officials and Yogyakarta governmental channels,[22] the Indonesian media has continued to adopt the language of a 'return' used at the time while further broadening the scope of meanings assigned to the term. The official website for the Yogyakarta provincial government, for instance, discusses the prolonged effort to return manuscripts from Yogyakarta that are currently scattered in foreign collections (see Humas DIY 2019). *Mata Budaya* published a special issue in early 2019 covering the digital return and other stories related to manuscript culture in the *kraton*. The repeated use of the word *kembali* effectively reminds everyone that the *kraton* was, and continues to be, the origin of those digitized manuscripts. From this idea relating to the origin, another phrase, *pulang*, was used by *Kompas*, the biggest news agency in Indonesia, to cover the stories (see Putri 2019). In all these versions, the language of return and homecoming relates to the notion that the Yogyakarta *kraton* is essentially the 'true' home for those digitized manuscripts. Both terms obliquely bring up questions of the British Library's authority to be their current owner.

Epistemic (De-)Coloniality and the Matter of Text

In the context of the global heritage turn and a growing decolonial impulse, the continued physical separation of objects from their point of origin is increasingly understood as a perpetuation of the colonial violence originally responsible for their seizure. Could the restitution of knowledge and increased accessibility of texts through a digital return pave ways to deal with this violence? We can go back to the speech by GKR Hayu in the *Symposium,* where she specified the types of knowledge that were lost after *geger sepehi* but recovered through digital return. One of her examples pertained to Yogyakarta's spatial planning and its spiritual values, as well as traditional disaster mitigation related to earthquakes, on which specific manuscripts

22. With Yogyakarta being a special province, Sultan Hamengkubuwana X acts both as the *kraton* ruler and the provincial governor of the province, a dual status which will be handed down to his successors.

provided information and instruction.[23] Her statement emboldens the notion that the digitization of manuscripts does in fact rectify a historic injustice and constitute a meaningful act of return. Yet this understanding is by no means agreed upon by all members of the Royal House of Yogyakarta. Responding to the presentation of digital copies from the Bollinger project in November 2023, the descendants of Hamengkubuwana II continue to call for the manuscripts' physical return, maintaining that the process will not be complete without having the books themselves back in Java (Suryati 2023). Hamengkubuwana X, however, seems buoyant over the solution of a digital return. Considering the difficulties in fighting for physical return, he thought that the *kraton* could basically reproduce the manuscripts based on their digital copies (Humas DIY 2019).

The issues of epistemic violence, however, go even deeper. While both the British Library and the Royal House of Yogyakarta have framed the return of the manuscripts—whether digital or physical—as a redress of a violent history, neither side has acknowledged that the historical processes of collecting manuscripts and curating them for a certain audience constituted a form of epistemic violence in their own right. It is a violence that is operative until today, as postcolonial archives or libraries are still limited by their inheritance of colonial archives with all their erasures of content deemed irrelevant or uninteresting by the colonial collectors (Proudfoot 2002; Risam 2018: 47–50), or severances of manuscripts from the 'cultural ecology' of which they were a part (Carey 1974; Mulaika 2022). The bodies of scholarship that were built onto this epistemic violence continue to influence our contemporary scholarly understandings of manuscripts and textuality. The philological study of 'Oriental' texts had, for the most part, been built upon the domination of the very people and cultures from which the manuscripts originated. There was a tendency to justify the European collecting practice of 'Eastern' manuscripts as an attempt to 'rescue' them from decay and extinction while ignoring different ways communities connected with their manuscript culture (Kominko 2015: li-liv). Philologist Wayan Jarrah Sastrawan characterizes this as the 'original sin of Oriental philology' and further observes how the texts have been subjected to 'alien procedures of analysis, dismemberment and reassembly in the form of critical editions, translations and commentaries' (Sastrawan 2021: 122). While these procedures have merits in shedding light on the cultural history of local literature, Orientalists rarely paused to consider how Indonesian textual practices made sense in their own context, disparaging them instead as 'sloppy' or 'bastardised' (ibid.: 122). In particular, the prevailing scholarly inquiries forced onto these kinds of texts have historically created the assumptions that Javanese manuscripts, including *sĕrat* and *babad*, were not adequate sources for (Western) historical inquiries (see Purwanto

23. The speech is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uP3_N205Nzk>.

2006: 88–126). In other words, these texts were thought to be chronologically incoherent and inundated with literary imaginings. Such condescending views of Indonesian manuscripts dominated Western philological studies for many decades and continue to have lingering effects, for example when comparing Indonesian Islamic texts unfavorably to writing traditions elsewhere in the Islamic world (Proudfoot 2002: 118). In addressing these issues, Sastrawan (2021: 122–124) has advanced sensitivities towards distinct written traditions, conceding that it can only be achieved through 'free, equitable and impartial access' for the manuscripts in question. In this regard, digitization initiatives are a welcome contribution toward these ends.

And yet, there are problems that remain. Although the digitization of manuscripts hinges upon the principle of universal access to knowledge, in reality, the proposition of universal access has led to amassing digital access to manuscripts within major Euro-American library repositories, including the British Library, as discussed above. In this vein, decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo (2011: 71) has observed that 'museums and universities were and continue to be two crucial institutions of the accumulation of knowledge and the reproduction of the coloniality of knowledge and beings.' In parading the colonial project as the engineer for modernity and progress, Western ways of knowing and worldviews were thrust on other (presumed to be backward) indigenous practices (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 135–152), thus totalizing and universalizing Western epistemologies. Coloniality of knowledge thus arises from the realization that these supposedly universal epistemologies, in their primordial manner, are based on Christian Europeans' conception and image of the world (ibid.: 195). In turn, the conflation between indigenous Europe and universal modernity works in transplanting Western epistemologies outside its locality through (post)colonial foundations of museums and universities. Often unwittingly and sometimes perhaps inevitably, the practices of curating and producing knowledge about manuscripts at these institutions—either in the West or other parts of the world—always harbors the potential to continue extending the same epistemic violence through which these collections were originally built.

During colonial times, the theft of books and other objects and their incorporation into Western institutions like the museum and the library served as instruments of colonial control, and their incorporation into these collections and institutions re-enacted the military, political, and cultural conquests of the lands from which they were taken (Hodgson 2020). Official loot prioritized objects that were either marked as 'treasures,' like the beautifully illuminated manuscripts of the British library, or articles like manuscripts that could be used as evidence in the production of knowledge of an ethnologized and Orientalized conquered people. Like what Susan Stewart called a 'souvenir of the exotic,' they were marked as foreign and savage, but simultaneously allowed the holder to claim intimate knowledge of the strange world they represented (Stewart 1993: 147). Musealizing and archiving these objects

entailed a deliberate iconoclasm, rendering them powerless and asserting the superiority of Western ontologies over those of the colonized subjects who wrongly treated dead objects like agentive subjects (Wiener 1994; see also Masuzawa 2000). By and large, these same ontologies continue to underlie our contemporary practices of curating and studying these manuscripts, or of privileging the narrative content of the text as the primary meaning-bearing object more broadly (Fox 2018: 181). The very idea of granting access to texts through digitization is thus premised on an understanding of manuscripts and textuality that continues to inscribe an ontology onto these manuscripts that was not assigned to them when they were raided in 1812.

This becomes especially clear if we think about the status of books in traditional Java more broadly. Scholars of Javanese literature have emphasized that the stated goal of *yasa* (producing text), which could mean to say, to copy, to compose, or to commission a text, was not to produce new works of literature or bodies of knowledge, but to hand down pre-existing works by producing new copies that were meant to be exact replicas of the old ones (Ricklefs 1998: 34, 46–48). This is not to say that the authors were not creative or even innovative in our sense of the word—they often were. It is rather to emphasize that these literary works were undergirded by a temporal vision where the power and knowledge of the past was supposed to be carried in its intact form into the present and future. Sometimes, the process of transmitting a literary work 'in its intact form' could require quite a bit of creativity and innovation (Florida 1995: 255–257). This temporal vision of manuscripts as connecting past, present, and future applied especially to *pusaka*, royal regalia or heirlooms that had special powers. In traditional Java—and some contexts in contemporary Java as well—manuscripts that are *pusaka* are rarely read, and if so, only by those who were able to handle and match their power, like the sultan or king (Ricklefs 1998: 7–8). At the royal courts of Central Java, *pusaka* are wrapped in specially fitted cloth and stored away, inaccessible to most people, most of the time. Their narrative content is not meant for public consumption. As Ben Anderson wrote in his classic text on Javanese power, their potency rests precisely in their opaqueness to all but a few select (Anderson 1972: 47). When taken out, they are subject to strict ceremonial protocol. Their power resides not just in the narrative content of whatever text they were transmitting, but in the materiality of the manuscript itself. Rather than being consulted or read, their status is more comparable to other *pusaka* like weapons or musical instruments than to books. For this reason, as Gallop has noted, the very division of labor among Western institutions of preserving texts in libraries and other types of *pusaka* in museums is already incompatible with local curatorial practices (Gallop 2020).

Not every manuscript is a *pusaka,* but even for less prestigious manuscripts, their physical form or materiality is far from insignificant. To the best of our knowledge, no systematic studies exist of the meanings assigned to the

materiality of script and writing in the Javanese context, but scattered references give us a clear—if somewhat incomplete—impression. In traditional Java, according to Dutch Orientalist philologist Theodoor Pigeaud, letters were regarded with religious awe as visible signs of invisible, superhuman powers (Pigeaud 1967: 34). The scholar of Javanese literature Nancy Florida has noted that because power in Java is transmitted by contagion, manuscripts are physical sites where the power of former writers and readers may have rubbed off (Florida 1995: 35). *Jimat*, talismans with the power to protect or make stronger, are often objects like shreds of paper, glass, or copper strips that are inscribed with letters—both Arabic letters, calling upon the authority and knowledge of Islam, and Old Javanese letters, invoking Java's pre-Islamic sources of power (Mutakkin et al. 2019; Meyer 2022; Pigeaud 1967: 271; Ricci 2015). And a comparative glance at Java's neighboring Hindu island Bali[24] presents a well-researched picture where letters are considered to be 'alive' (Fox 2018), to have an agency of their own and a transformative effect on those who engage with them (see also Fox & Hornbacher, eds., 2016; McGowan 2022). The same situation of agentive letters presents itself a bit further afield in Southeast Asia, as scholars have shown in relation to the Buddhist worlds of the mainland (Edwards 2022; Patton 2022). This goes to show that what has come to be known as the 'ontological turn' in academic disciplines like anthropology over the last decade, the shift to questions 'about what kinds of things might exist, and how' (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 6), has long been premediated in Southeast Asian intellectual and aesthetic traditions, as well as in indigenous traditions elsewhere (Todd 2016).

Today, a different understanding of the purpose of books and libraries is present in Java. In the nineteenth century, Javanese individuals' or groups' first initiatives to found 'modern' libraries—like the Radya Pustaka Museum in Solo—were undertaken in reaction to the Dutch amassments of manuscripts and embedded in the climate of attributing value to cultural preservation and education (Florida 1993: 14–15; 2012: 27). Similar transformations were under way elsewhere in the Malay-Indonesian world. In Bali, traditional understandings of the potency of letters came to coexist, albeit sometimes uneasily, with modern state-bureaucratic notions of letters as bearers of a textual and symbolic function of representing Balinese language and tradition (Fox 2018). In Sumatra, the colonial philologist P. Voorhoeve described how Orientalist Dutch scholars visiting the area of Kerinci in the first decades of the twentieth century identified inscriptions written in the Kerinci alphabet on buffalo horns, bamboo, and paper. Whereas the Dutch scholars were eager to read the texts, the locals were allegedly unable to read the Kerinci script and

24. Likewise, Nancy Smith-Hefner's study on textual traditions among Java's Hindu Tengger community shows that texts as recorded words of ancestors are considered powerful and ritually effective (Smith-Hefner 1989: 202).

thus had no idea of the inscriptions' content. This alleged lack of knowledge did not deter them from treasuring the inscriptions as *pusaka.* 'When the owners of the Kerintji documents learned that they could be read,' Voorhoeve tells us, 'the interest in their contents became stronger than the fear of evil consequences that might result from showing them to outsiders' (Voorhoeve 1970: 370). In the case of Kerinci, this transition has, however, not been a complete one. Decades after Voorhoeve, German philologist Uli Kozok returned to Kerinci to study the *pusaka* manuscripts, but was kept from following through with his plans because a spirit medium determined that it was inopportune to do so at that point (Kozok, ed., 2015: 2 ; see Sunliensyar [this volume]).

Colonialism, Jacques Derrida suggested, imposed a kind of 'monolingualism' (Derrida 1998) on its colonized subjects, globalizing a singular sense of understandings of textuality and the Protestant, partly secularized, 'fear of matter' (Pels 2008) that rejected any understandings of the material efficacy of textuality as backward superstition. Scholars of postcolonial theory and multiple modernities have shown us that this imposition of a singular Western modernity has never produced uniformity, their epistemic violence notwithstanding—as the example of Kerinci shows. What is more, the monolingualism of the colonizer, as Derrida argued, was never a genuine monolingualism but, in truth, little more than a ruse, the unkept promise of a privileged epistemic status of an idiom that was in truth not singular and whole, but fragmented and contested. In particular, the colonial powers' amassment of manuscripts seems to suggest that for them, too, there was something irreducible and powerful about holding ownership of the physical object, something they simultaneously denied in their production of philological apparatuses. In the amassment of manuscripts, we see an often unacknowledged tension between the modern, Protestant emphasis on the meaning of the text on the one hand (Keane 2007), and a lingering understanding that the material object was irreducible to all aspects of knowledge that could be gained from it. Stewart called the exotic souvenir a magical object because it envelops the present with the past (Stewart 1993: 147). It bears an authenticity that is more than the sum of all the knowledge and information that can be gleaned from it. Against the background of such unstable and ambivalent understandings of the significance of manuscripts in both Indonesia and the West, what does it even mean to return manuscripts in digital form?

We have argued that the digitization of manuscripts promises to make accessible and democratize knowledge, thereby redressing colonial theft and violence. This promise, we have agreed with other scholars, is complicated by the problem that these collections have already become inseparable from the epistemic violence they represent, including their erasures of content deemed uninteresting by colonial collectors, decontextualizations, and bodies of scholarship built upon them. In some final considerations, we would like to add the even more fundamental question whether free access and the democratization of knowledge do not constitute yet another layer of epistemic

violence. Irrespective of the digitizing institutions' intent, a digital return has the potential to inscribe a very specific understanding of what matters about the textual heritage of manuscripts. By making available the digital copy in lieu of the physical one, they reinforce the idea that the only relevant thing about manuscripts is the content of the text, in addition perhaps to other visual characteristics like script and colouration. By contrast, the environment in which the manuscripts were originally produced would have likely had a very different understanding of what texts do and how they 'matter.'

Grappling with a similar difficulty in relation to the presentation of heritage in Aboriginal Australia, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli argued that a truly 'postcolonial archive will never be compatible with the colonial archive because it opposes the sense of limitless public access to knowledge on which the colonial archive is based—and it exposes how all archives restrict access to all sorts of material based on the assumption that free access is free of social figuration' (Povinelli 2011: 158). In her own curating practices of Australian Aboriginal traditions, Povinelli created a digital archive that constantly reminds the outsider of their outsider status through pop-up windows and geographic access restrictions. Yet, as she herself was aware, any such efforts to control access are complicated by the fact that indigenous understandings of access are not static. Indeed, as we have shown earlier, media reports of the digital returns seem to suggest that there is little ambivalence in Java today about open, universal access. And the enthusiastic embrace of programs like EAP and DREAMSEA (Digital Repository of Endangered and Affected Manuscripts in Southeast Asia),[25] digitization programs of manuscripts that are funded by Western institutions but often carried out by teams of locals, undermines any perceived binaries between digitizing Westerners and passive but ambivalent Southeast Asians. Of course, these changed attitudes may have precisely to do with the decade-long presence of devices like microfilms and digital copies. This history notwithstanding, today, refusals to digitize on the grounds that digitization is incompatible with traditional Javanese ideas of textuality would constitute yet another act of violence as well as a reification and imposition of an essentialized 'tradition' that was always more complicated and highly contextual.

For us, this raises another question. Conventional understandings of a digital copy would have it that an image on a screen cannot possibly be an entry point into an invisible power and the wisdom of former readers and writers transmitted by contagion, as is the case with a physical copy. But is

25. DREAMSEA aims to preserve Southeast Asian mansucripts, in particular by way of digitisation. It is co-managed by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) of the Syarif Hidayatulah State Islamic University in Jakarta and the Center for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) of the University of Hamburg and supported by the Arcadia Foundation.

this assumption warranted? Mulaika Hijjas has recently shown that Malay understandings of *pusaka* were never completely static to begin with, but that Malay royal houses were quite adept at reconfiguring the constellation and meaning of their regalia, depending on changing circumstances (2024: 7–8). A similar situation has been prevalent in Java (Pemberton 1994). Could the digitized copies of Javanese manuscripts become the most recent example of changing understandings of what and how *pusaka* act, and somehow become re-enchanted, as scholars have observed with other technological products in the contemporary era (Gell 1992)? Could a digitized library become a third space in Bhabha's (1994) sense, where old and new understandings of letters intersect and intermingle (see also Hoover & Echchaibi 2014)? We are not yet able to answer these questions with any certainty but hypothesize that this might well be the case—and hope that empirical research can be carried out to shed more light on these matters.

Conclusion

What we are left with is not a critique of digitization. Nor are we critiquing the digital return, of which the Javanese public is largely supportive. Based on our findings, we would, however, like to call attention to the fact the digital return is embedded in and enacts the powers of both Western and Javanese institutions that complicate any notion of a straightforward reparation of the violence of nineteenth and twentieth century colonial power. Moreover, we would like to call for an increased awareness of the fact that when the conditions under which a text is accessible are being changed, the process also changes what it means to be a text in the first place. If the very materiality of a text has a power of its own, we may need to reckon with what our responsibilities as scholars, whether Javanese or non-Javanese, to these objects themselves are. And this will, at the very least, require that unacknowledged understandings of the materiality of manuscripts be made more explicit.

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