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The Role of National Archives in the Creation of National Master Narratives in Southeast Asia

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This article is a working paper for a research project in its initial stage. Its original inspiration comes from an article by German historian Stefan Berger in *Archival Science* from 2013. Using Krijn Thijs's definition of master historical narratives as "the big story" told by the dominant group in a given society," Berger analyses the role of national archives in the creation of master historical narratives in Europe.¹ His conclusions go against the traditional rhetoric used by archivists, which attempts to bolster the status of archives by strengthening their connection to societal remembering.² Berger finds that archival research is very rarely central to these master historical narratives. Instead, master narratives are written with an almost prefabricated notion that exists beyond the archive, "in a particular historical-political situation and out of particular sets of ideological-normative commitments of the national historians in question."³ He does, however, acknowledge several drawbacks to his argument. I use these as starting points for further research that will also increase the geographic scope of his work to cover Southeast Asia.

Berger admits to two major shortcoming in his paper, both of which shape my own research. First, his focus is entirely European, which I believe overlooks the place of European-introduced archives during the colonial period. Second, he "is not concerned with the contents of the archives (i.e. issues of acquisition and appraisal) but rather with the national archive's role for national histories and national identity formation."⁴ To rectify the geographic scope issue, I focus on the national archives of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. In these cases, the histories of both Dutch and British colonialism play a major piece in determining the content of the national archive. Therefore, I see a role for that content, as I view it as being directly connected to the writing of national history. In my research, I have found that for ex-colonial states, what is not in the archive can be just as important as what is.⁵ I thus take "content" to mean both.⁶

Given his focus, Berger's conclusions are not wrong. However, I see a limited focus in his work compared to what the title of the article suggests. Concerning himself only with the use of archival research leaves him with only a fraction of the role of national archives. There is a

¹ Stefan Berger, "The Role of National Archives in Constructing National Master Narratives in Europe," *Archival Science* 13, no. 1 (March 2013): 1–22, 3 (quotation).

² The clearest examples of these quotations can come from the websites of national archives. In Singapore it "houses the collective memory of our nation" (www.nlb.gov.sg/About/AboutNationalArchives.aspx). In Indonesia part of the archives' mission is "preserving archives as collective memory and identity of the nation and national heritage as well as cultural heritage" (www.anri.go.id/visi.html). Berger's claim also goes against Kenneth Foote's statement that the collective memory role of archives is "more than metaphor." Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 378–392.

³ Berger, "The Role of National Archives," 17.

⁴ Berger, "The Role of National Archives," 2.

⁵ I have previously written about the repatriation of archives from the Netherlands to Indonesia in Michael Karabinos, "Displaced Archives, Displaced History: Recovering the Seized Archives of Indonesia," *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 169, nos. 2–3 (2013): 279–294. Still other records from the Indonesian independence movement are in The Hague rather than Jakarta. The international story of the Migrated Archives also begins to show how history and archives were influenced by (de)colonization.

⁶ Jeanette Bastian pays particular attention to what is not available, or accessible, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, as I explain. Furthermore, the importance of the existence or nonexistence of records can be seen in the recent British court case filed against the state by Kenyan victims of violence during the colonial Mau Mau uprising. See David Anderson, "Mau Mau in the High Court and 'Lost' British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?" *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (2011): 699–716; Huw Bennet, "Soldiers in the Court Room: The British Army's Part in the Kenya Emergency under the Legal Spotlight," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (2011): 717–730; and Caroline Elkins, "Alchemy of Evidence: Mau Mau, the British Empire, and the High Court of Justice," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (2011): 731–748.

role for national archives in creating master narratives in the cases I study, but it comes from viewing the national archives differently than Berger does. The national archive has a role that transcends using its documents for historical research. I seek to determine this role by gaining a more complete understanding of the national archive through its content and context.

Research Aims and Methodology

While the obvious aim of this research is to assess the role of national archives in the creation of historical master narratives in Southeast Asia, secondary questions include determining what the difference in influence is between the British and Dutch empires, how both empires recorded information, and what significance missing or hidden archives hold in the creation of master narratives in ex-colonial states. Furthermore, are the same “pre-existing interpretative frameworks” at work in Southeast Asia that shaped the master historical narratives of Europe, in Berger’s view?⁷ This working paper shows preliminary findings and begins to outline the research in progress. I introduce some other literature on postcolonial archives and memory. Finally, I offer some of my own findings and thoughts from archival and historical research.

Thus far my work on this project has been as supplementary research to my doctoral dissertation on using the records continuum model to visualize displaced archives in Southeast Asia. This has required a study of the contents of various national archives of former colonizers and colonies. Archivists and historians are well aware of the connections between archives and power, with control over archives leading to political control. What I have seen in my work, however, is that even in archives that are ostensibly controlled by their state (i.e., Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia), these nation’s former colonial powers still exert control over the archival collections. It is this link that I want to explore further.

My initial findings center on the fact that Berger’s definition of the role of national archives is too focused on archival research, while I am interested in expanding what is meant by the role of national archives. In this article I begin to show other ways that national archives can influence our understanding of the past, and, in turn, how master historical narratives are formed. I do not wish to ignore the role of archival research in writing master narratives, but it is not the only way to detect the influence of the archival institution. Therefore, as opposed to Berger, I propose that to determine the role of national archives in the creation of master historical narratives, research must focus on content (what is in the archive, what is not) and context (how was the archive created, how else does the archive operate as a memory institution), as well as the direct consultation of archival documents when writing narratives.

The research plan for the larger project begins with determining what constitutes master historical narratives in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. For Singapore, an important example of master historical narratives originating from the top would be founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s series of memoirs on the history of Singapore that begin with *The Singapore Story*.⁸ In a country where many records are still inaccessible, how important are archives to master historical narratives? Does it make a difference when the narrative is written by someone like Lee versus a professional historian? In Malaysia, there is a major

⁷ Berger, “The Role of National Archives,” 17.

⁸ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Prentice-Hill, 1998).

controversy over school history textbooks that can help expose how narratives are formed and propagated.⁹

After defining what the narratives are, I can begin to determine the national archives' role in their creation. This will be done in terms of content and context, as well as archival consultation. This combination has the potential to answer my questions. As my cases are all ex-colonial states, I am also interested in the transnational influence of national archives. For instance, what is the role of the National Archives of the Netherlands in the creation of master historical narratives in Indonesia? That question, and its inverse, may be just as relevant as ones about each country's own national archive.

Archival Importance

When archives as institutions write about themselves, they do so in ways that promote their perceived power. They display themselves as purveyors of collective memory, as heritage institutions, and as the formers of national identity.¹⁰ This is quite a lofty importance laid on organizations that are, in their most basic form, the collectors of records documenting the functions of government. The modern, Western notion of the national archive as an institution was transferred throughout the world by the colonization of other countries and peoples by European empires.¹¹ This can mean, following this general perception of national archives, that collective memory and national identity continue to be formed through colonial institutions and a colonial lens.

In searching for the role of archives on master historical narratives, I see an answer somewhere between how archives view themselves as memory institutions and how Berger sees them as inconsequential to the creation of master narratives. Archival institutions may overstate their importance, and may do so using vague terms like national memory as they fight for funding. They therefore lose sight of their actual influence. Similarly, by focusing on archival research, Berger misses the connection between national archives and master historical narratives. Just because archival material may not be directly consulted does not mean the national archive plays no role in forming historical narratives for a nation.

My own work on individual examples of displaced archives leads me to view archives more in the vein of Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, who state that archives “wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies.”¹² Rather than “hous[ing] the collective memory,” as the National Archives of Singapore states, national archives influence it through their content, lack of content, outreach programs, the granting of access—or lack thereof—of certain documents to historians, and many other ways.¹³

Neither archivists nor historians nor the public should think of national archives without completely contextualizing the archive in question: the holdings of national archives, how they were acquired, and how the institutions were founded. The national archives of both

⁹ Helen Ting, “Battle over Memory of the Nation: Whose National History?” in *Controversial History Education in Asian Contexts*, ed. Mark Baildon et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 41–57.

¹⁰ See note 2.

¹¹ Ricardo Punzalan gives a history of the National Archives of the Philippines and the role of both the Spanish and Americans, as I explain. The Dutch colonial administration formed the predecessor to today's National Archives of Indonesia in 1892 and in Suriname in 1956.

¹² Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 2.

¹³ “About National Archives,” www.nlb.gov.sg/About/AboutNationalArchives.aspx.

Singapore and Malaysia, for instance, were founded after independence with the help of UNESCO-appointed expert Frans Rijndert Johan Verhoeven, who also happened to be the last colonial archivist of the Dutch East Indies before independence.¹⁴ Ever since its creation, the National Archives of Singapore has had to purchase a large number of documents from the National Archives in London.¹⁵ The self-described “memory” of the people has had to be bought. What Singapore’s archives have purchased are old British documents related to the colonial period, putting Singapore’s memory further into a colonial context. As Kwa Chong Guan of the Singapore National Archives Board writes, “The Straits Settlement Records which are today a core collection of the National Archives of Singapore is essentially the social memory of the Colonial administrators about governing a port city and its plural society as part of a British empire.”¹⁶ Indonesia has a slightly different situation, as the Dutch created a national archive during the colonial period, leaving Indonesia with the infrastructure to have its own archive after independence. In these cases, the national archive is influencing narratives whether or not archival research is even performed. As I show in the following two examples from other scholars, this is especially apparent in a colonial setting.

Literature on Other Colonial Archives

Ricardo Punzalan points out that in the Philippines, “although foreign and hardly used, [the National Archives’] mere presence as a national collection . . . reinforces the idea of the existence of the Philippines as a community with a common beginning. The National Archives, both as an institution of colonial creation and as a collection of records of colonial control, therefore, reinforces the imagined idea of nationhood.”¹⁷ In both these sentences, he uses the word “reinforce,” which is significant. He is not stating that a national archive is the only source of national history or identity, just that it has the symbolic function of uniting a community and reinforcing its collectivity.

In the case of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Jeanette Bastian questions how archival voids can be filled. She notes that “for post-colonial communities such as the Virgin Islands, archives seem to pose special problems that revolve around the contradictions inherent in the voicelessness.” Since they have “no input into the record-creating process,” Bastian asks, “how can these communities reclaim their history? How can the voices of those who were silent be recovered? How can communities that were the victim of records use these records to build reliable and positive constructs of their past?” Part of her answer to these questions lies in the fact that “archives can provide the keys . . . if the searcher recognizes that records have both a text and a subtext, that records are both evidence and action, and that behind the record lies the trace.” She has described a concept of “whispers in the archives,” which “relies on discovering the words or actions of the colonized.” These “whispers” are about re-

¹⁴ Verhoeven’s personal archive is in The Hague: Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Collectie 441 F.R.J. Verhoeven, 1921–1987, nummer toegang 2.21.281.04, inventarisnummer 30. His report on the creation of the National Archives of Singapore can also be found at the National Library of Singapore: NL27911, Report on the Setting up of National Archives and Records Centre, Singapore.

¹⁵ The Singapore National Archives has a special program dedicated to purchasing outside records, many of which come from the National Archives in London. Kwa Chong Guan and Leong Weng Kee, National Library Board, Singapore, personal communication with author, March 5, 2015.

¹⁶ Kwa Chong Guan, “Records and Archives: Power of Collective Memories and Evidence,” in *Power of Collective Memories and Evidence: Proceedings of the International Conference on Records and Archives, 17–18 July 2008* (Singapore: National Archives Singapore, 2009), 38.

¹⁷ Ricardo Punzalan, “Archives of the Possession: Spanish Colonial Records and the American Creation of a ‘National’ Archives for the Philippines,” *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 389.

reading archives for what is below the surface.¹⁸ Reading archives in this way can be used to fill voids that are caused by the removal or destruction of other documents. She sums up her idea as follows: “In very practical terms, if you do not have your records, many things become difficult. Just understanding the infrastructure of where you are living becomes difficult. The loss of records in the Virgin Islands has itself become part of the community’s collective memory.”¹⁹ The questions asked by Bastian, even though she herself does not concentrate on master historical narratives, should prove useful in conducting research on such narratives. If certain records are not available, how else is the history of a community written?

National Archives in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia

The movement of records in the period of independence was traditionally one way. British clerks in what would become Singapore and Malaysia were in contact with the Colonial Office in London, discussing the transport of colonial documents to the London offices in order to save space. This space was necessary for the new diplomatic missions that would exist when Malaya, which had been independent since 1957, joined with British Borneo and Singapore (temporarily) to form Malaysia in 1963.²⁰ A British clerk in Singapore wrote that “now that Malaysia is almost upon us, I am being pressed to destroy volumes and files in an effort to make space available.” Similarly, he was directed to send most documents to London while copies of telegrams were to be destroyed “by means of shredding . . . packing in suitably weighted crates and dumped at sea at the maximum practicable distance from the coast in current free deep water . . . [or] by fire.”²¹ The national archives of Singapore and Malaysia were thus created after independence, primarily with the records of their newly independent government, and without the records the British destroyed or sent to London.

In contrast, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Dutch East Indies government had created a central national archives (Landsarchief) in Batavia (Jakarta).²² After the transfer of sovereignty in 1949, this archive, including the building, became the Arsip Nasional (National Archives) of Indonesia.²³ The National Archives of Indonesia, therefore, is populated mainly by records created during the Dutch administration, and the biggest draw to researchers remains its Dutch records.²⁴ Nevertheless, the Arsip Nasional views itself as one

¹⁸ Jeanette Bastian, “Whispers in the Archives: Finding the Voices of the Colonized in the Records of the Colonizers,” in *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, ed. Margaret Proctor, Michael Cook, and Caroline Williams (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 28, 29, 33.

¹⁹ Jeanette Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 31.

²⁰ For histories of Singapore and Malaysia, see Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore 1941–1968* (Richmond, Eng.: Curzon Press, 2001); T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Edwin Lee, *Singapore: The Unexpected Nation* (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

²¹ Disposal of Singapore Archives (C.O. 1030/1595), National Archives, Kew.

²² For an overview of the history of the Landsarchief and its role in colonial times, see Intan Lidwina, “The History of the Landsarchief in Indonesia, 1892–1942” (M.A. thesis, University of Leiden, 2012).

²³ Excellent English-language histories of Indonesia’s colonization and independence include Robert Elson, *The Idea of Indonesia: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Frances Gouda, with Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia: US Foreign Policy and Indonesian Nationalism 1920–1949* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002); and Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁴ While Dutch-era documents are freely available to researchers to the Arsip Nasional, special permission must still be granted to access most post-1945 material.

of the creators of national identity.²⁵ Indonesia as a united country can be seen as the result of Dutch colonization, and unifying central state institutions such as the Arsip Nasional see themselves as fundamental to the creation of a single Indonesian identity.

The difference in British and Dutch approaches, which at the time was maybe the result of varying priorities or convenience, had profound effects on the relationship between state and history for both colonizer and colonized. The British Colonial Office was interested in keeping records in London rather than stocking the shelves of the national archives of newly independent countries. This has had an effect on the historical narratives of numerous former British colonies.

Archival Influence Outside of Document Consultation

The most obvious impact on historical narratives came to light in 2011 after the discovery of the so-called Migrated Archives in London, in which records from nearly forty former colonies were found to be hidden in a Foreign Office warehouse. It became clear that decisions made by colonial administrations regarding archives directly influenced the way history would be understood and written in those countries. For Malaysia, the Migrated Archives included records created in the lead-up to independence by the British colonial government regarding the writing of the Malayan constitution and on the fight against the Malayan Communist Party.²⁶

At the start of the decolonization process, one official was chosen for each colony in Borneo who would join those in Malaysia to oversee decision making regarding records. Terence O'Brien in North Borneo and Michael MacMullen in Sarawak were each tasked with determining whether records would be destroyed, left for Malaysia, or sent to London.²⁷ Those that were sent to London would eventually become part of the Migrated Archives. These two men were choosing what would be seen in the future National Archives of Malaysia. In one final statement before the United Kingdom transferred sovereignty, these decisions left a lasting imprint of the colonial past on how history would be researched and written in and about Malaysia.

Communities whose reinforcing agent—the archive—is incomplete can have a skewed representation of their past. In archives of former European colonies, the voids directly affect the historical narrative. If Malaysia, and the rest of the world, never had access to the Migrated Archives, researchers could never use certain documents to write history. When key records are inaccessible, it is a clear detriment to any historical narrative. In former colonies, the archives may have a symbolic aspect, but they are symbols of something quite concrete. Archives of colonialism symbolize the control of information and thus of the people of one country by those of another. Failing to link archives' role in postcolonial narrative creation overlooks the extreme importance colonizers put in the accumulation of knowledge.

Shortly after the Migrated Archives were made public, Ian Cobain of the *Guardian* wrote that the victory “challenges not only the foreign office, but the British people’s narrative of their

²⁵ Djoko Utomo, “Arsip as National Identity: Case of Indonesia,” paper presented at the International Council on Archives 2012 Conference, ica2012.ica.org/files/pdf/Full%20papers%20upload/ica12Final00096.pdf.

²⁶ Mandy Banton, “Destroy? ‘Migrate’? Conceal? British Strategies for the Disposal of Sensitive Records of Colonial Administrations at Independence,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 2 (June 2012): 321–335.

²⁷ Edward Hampshire, “‘Apply the Flame More Searingly’: The Destruction and Migration of the Archives of British Colonial Administration: A Southeast Asia Case Study,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, no. 2 (2013): 334–352.

imperial past.” Cobain asked, “What other arguable claims could be out there, lurking in the memories of ageing rebels, and within documents that have been concealed or withheld for a generation?” Furthermore, “is it possible that such claims could challenge not only the government and its lawyers, but also the British people’s carefully nurtured narrative of the final days of their imperial mission?”²⁸ Questions like these remind us that this relatively recent history still can be revisited and re-evaluated, actions made possible with the discovery of the Migrated Archives. For all the faults that archival documents have—that they are only written by the powerful, that they are only a sliver of reality—the fact remains that in the writing of history, they are still one of the most important sources. From written history comes historical narratives that people use to evaluate themselves. The narrative of colonialism, decolonization, and the post-independence period are all subject to, if not revision, then at least serious retrospection and re-evaluation in the midst of these recent discoveries.

With the location of the Migrated Archives in London, the amount of missing knowledge and information can began to shrink. Geoffrey Yeo calls records “*persistent* representations of *activities* or *occurrences*.”²⁹ Representations can be used to “shape reality.” The Migrated Archives show that the inverse is true as well, and that the absence of representations just as equally shapes reality. The absence of the Migrated Archives created the propagation of a constructed narrative intentionally keeping certain records hidden. With researchers now able to read through these documents, there is the opportunity for a new reality to come forth, one that was recorded but that the British government attempted to hide.

Archival content and the decisions as to what would and would not be held in national archives are only one way national archives influence master historical narratives. Archival outreach, oral history, and other programs require extending the definition of the role of the national archive in the creation of historical narratives. In Singapore, the National Archives oversees multiple World War II “Interpretive Centres.” One, “Reflections at Bukit Chandu,” is meant to commemorate the Malay Regiment that defended Singapore during the war. Part of the reasoning behind the building of these centers, as Donna Brunero explains, has been to move the scope of the war away from one “between imperialists . . . to that of local participation.” However, owing to the fact that the Malay Regiment at the time was part of the British colonial army, “Reflection at Bukit Chandu” still comes from a “colonial viewpoint, as evidenced by the fact that information is sourced predominantly from British official documents.”³⁰ Despite this lens, Singapore has been able to use that colonial information to tell its own story of how Singapore and Singaporeans made their own history even under colonial rule.

Conclusion

All this, however, still leads us back to the central question of how important are archives *really* in the formation of master historical narratives? My work on this question will continue on the path of determining the various ways this influence can be measured. I will look beyond archival research toward content, access, outreach, and any other influences that I have not yet determined. I must also not only focus on the colonial past but the current

²⁸ Ian Cobain, “The Mau Mau May Rewrite the History of the British Empire,” *Guardian*, October 28, 2012, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/28/mau-mau-rewrite-history-british-empire.

²⁹ Geoffrey Yeo, “Records and Representations,” paper presented at the Conference on the Philosophy of the Archive, Edinburgh, Scotland, April 10, 2008, 3.

³⁰ Donna Brunero, “Archives and Heritage in Singapore: The Development of ‘Reflections at Bukit Chandu,’ a World War II Interpretive Centre,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12, no. 5 (2006): 430, 435.

contexts. In countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, where access to government records is limited, how does that lack of access find its way into historical narratives as crafted by historians? Is the lack of access to records its own form of influence on master historical narratives? Theo Thomassen reminds us that archival science as a discipline must be independent from the archival profession and archival institutions. The quotations on national identity from national archives provide a good case for the relevance of Thomassen's stance.³¹ In archival science, it is important to look beyond what the profession and institutions say about archives, as their perspectives can be tainted. The writings of men like Kwa Chong Guan point to a strong archival influence on historical narratives, but his position as a member of the board of the National Archives of Singapore must be taken into account.

It is also important to note the changing movement within narratives. The historical narrative of Singapore is slowly expanding, moving beyond the founding of the modern city by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819. This is good for an understanding of pre-British Singapore but further shows the relatively low relevance of archives to narrative formation. The early archives of Singapore, after all, only put the modern country in a colonial context. Opening the narrative to the period before the British begins to truly put Singapore in the central position. Kwa refers to this when he states that "no NAS archivist could before the 1980s have anticipated the need to reach out to collect Dutch and Portuguese records on Singapore. The implications for our reconstruction of Singapore's past on the tacit narratives of the British records is that Singapore's history started with Raffles, and all before that is of antiquarian interest."³²

In Indonesia, the master historical narrative has likewise shifted. The changing of the political landscape there in the past twenty years has influenced the historical narrative. I must discern whether the same can be said for the archive. Charles Jeurgens has previously examined the writing of history in colonial Java and the use of indigenous sources and records.³³ While his focus is on the nineteenth century, I can attempt to update the story of history writing in Indonesia for the twenty-first century.

I do not wish to presuppose the importance of national archives in the creation of master historical narratives. Rather, I have seen in my work that traditional archival research alone is only one aspect of how national archives impact such narratives. These narratives then directly influence how people and communities remember their past. By the end of my research I therefore would like to have compiled a scientifically sound overview of the influence of national archives on historical narratives. The results should go a long way toward increasing our understanding of how national communities, especially postcolonial nations, form unifying stories of their history.

³¹ Theo Thomassen, "Archivists between Knowledge and Power—On the Independence and Autonomy of Archival Science," *Arhivski vjesnik* 42 (1999): 149–167.

³² Kwa, "Records and Archives," 39.

³³ Charles Jeurgens, "The Untamed Archive: History-Writing in the Netherlands East Indies and the Use of Archives," *History of the Human Sciences* 26, no. 4 (2013): 84–106.