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RECLAIMING HERITAGE UNDER EMPIRE: THE FOUNDING OF SONOBUDOYO MUSEUM AS A SITE OF CULTURAL NEGOTIATION AND SYMBOLIC DECOLONIZATION

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Abstract

This article examines the founding of the Sonobudoyo Museum in 1935 as a form of indigenous cultural articulation within a space still governed by colonial power. Using historical methods and a postcolonial theoretical framework, the study draws upon primary sources from *Djāwā* journal archives and secondary literature on colonial museology, cultural nationalism, and tropical architecture. The findings indicate that while conceived within colonial frameworks, the museum served as a site of symbolic negotiation that enabled expressions of local cultural agency through traditional architectural forms, indigenous curatorial practices, and the active involvement of local rulers. The museum not only inherited the failures of a previous 1885 museum project but also served as a symbolic corrective. As such, Sonobudoyo represents a “third space” where cultural identity was hybridized and rearticulated at the intersection of colonial structures and local emancipatory aspirations.

Keywords: Colonial Museums, Sonobudoyo, Symbolic Decolonization, Postcolonial, Java-Instituut

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of colonialism, the museum has never been a neutral space. Since its emergence in Europe, the modern museum has functioned as an apparatus of archiving, classification, and legitimization of imperial power. In the Dutch East Indies, museums formed an integral part of the colonial project to define and contain indigenous knowledge through the logic of binary oppositions West versus East, modern versus traditional, civilized versus primitive. Institutions such as the *Bataviaasch Genootschap* in Batavia or the *Museum voor Volkenkunde* in Leiden embodied an approach that treated local cultures as exotic objects to be collected, categorized, and exhibited. As Bennett (1995) argues, colonial museums operated as “exhibitionary complexes,” spaces where the modern state could discipline and display its colonial subjects within carefully regulated visual regimes.

However, by the 1930s, new efforts emerged to challenge the dominant colonial modes of representation. A key moment in this shift was the founding of the Sonobudoyo Museum (Figure 1) by the *Java-Instituut* in Yogyakarta on 6 November 1935. The museum was the result of collaboration among indigenous intellectuals such as Hoesein Djajadiningrat, progressive architects like T.H. Karsten, colonial administrators such as S. Koperberg, and local rulers including Sultan Hamengkubuwana VIII. Unlike the centralized and Eurocentric curatorial logic of colonial museums, Sonobudoyo was envisioned as a living cultural space not merely a site for the preservation of artifacts, but a venue for performances, cultural lectures, and public dialogue.



Figure 1. Sonobudoyo in Alun-Alun Yogyakarta (1935)
Source. Djawa 1935

Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial theory, museums such as Sonobudoyo may be interpreted as "third spaces," where meaning is negotiated and hybrid cultural practices

emerge. These in-between spaces enable subversive rearticulations of identity, disrupting the binary logics of colonial discourse. Sonobudoyo exemplifies this third space: a museum that not only displays local cultural expressions but reanimates them through traditional architectural forms, indigenous curatorial practices, and active community engagement. Its architectural design, modeled on the *poera* or Javanese noble house, its collections including ceremonial bridal beds (*petanen*), and its opening events featuring classical dance performances all reveal a strategic deployment of symbolic decolonization.

Although the literature on museum decolonization in Southeast Asia remains relatively limited, it has begun to expand in significant ways. Anderson (1991) contends that museums alongside the census and the archive formed a triad of ideological technologies that facilitated the imagining of modern national communities. In the colonial Indonesian context, museums became contested spaces where classification systems imposed by the colonial regime intersected with local efforts to assert cultural identity. Kreps (2003), in her study of *indigenous curation*, highlights how non-Western communities have developed alternative museological practices rooted in local epistemologies and value systems. The Sonobudoyo Museum can thus be regarded as an early prototype of hybrid curation one that integrates scientific modernity with local traditions and cultural continuity.

Historically, the *Java-Instituut* played a central role in facilitating cross-cultural dialogues between Dutch scholars and Indonesian intellectuals. Reid (2011) identifies the 1930s as a pivotal moment in the emergence of cultural consciousness among the indigenous elite. Figures such as Ki Hadjar Dewantara, Mohammad Yamin, and Hoesein Djajadiningrat utilized institutions like the *Java-Instituut* as platforms to articulate a nascent national cultural discourse. In his speech at the museum's inauguration, Hoesein emphasized that museums should not merely function as repositories of the past, but rather as "living institutions" capable of animating cultural memory and transmitting values for future generations.

Architecturally, Karsten's contribution was equally significant. He rejected the rigid formalism of colonial urban planning and instead advocated for a synthesis of Western and Eastern architectural styles. In his 1930 writings, Karsten proposed a design philosophy emphasizing intimacy, sustainability, and harmony with the local environment. The layout of the Sonobudoyo Museum featuring *pendhapa*, *pringgitan*, and *dalem* reflects this vision, where architectural forms are inseparable from the ethical and spiritual values of Javanese society. The building itself thus becomes an artifact, embodying the ideals of cultural rootedness and symbolic resistance.

This article adopts a historically grounded and postcolonial analytical framework to investigate how the founding of the Sonobudoyo Museum constituted a cultural response to colonial domination. The museum is examined not only as an institution but as a performative and symbolic site through which indigenous actors articulated new forms of cultural identity and agency. Drawing upon the interplay between space, power, and representation, the article explores the entangled roles of intellectuals, local rulers, and colonial collaborators in realizing a museum that mediated rather than merely reflected colonial cultural politics. By situating the museum within broader discussions on museology, nationalism, and architectural hybridity, this study contributes to the rethinking of museums as sites of contested meaning, resistance, and postcolonial rearticulation.

Preview Literature

Using a historical-critical framework and a postcolonial theoretical approach, this article focuses on how the establishment of the Sonobudoyo Museum can be interpreted as an articulation of

indigenous cultural identity within a space still governed by colonial power. The author argues that this museum was not merely an institution for storing artifacts, but rather a cultural arena that facilitated symbolic negotiations between colonial knowledge systems and the emergent spirit of localism among indigenous intellectuals during the final decades of the Dutch East Indies. As articulated by Bhabha (1994) in his concept of the *third space*, cultural practices in colonial societies often inhabit a liminal zone a hybrid space that enables reinterpretation, subversion, and the emergence of alternative cultural expressions. The Sonobudoyo Museum, with its traditional architectural design, revived Javanese social structures, and active involvement of local rulers and native scholars, exemplifies this third space: a site that is not entirely colonial, yet not fully liberated either.

Additional perspectives that frame this analysis come from studies on the ideological function of museums. Bennett (1995) emphasizes that colonial museums were not only spaces for displaying objects, but also pedagogical tools used by the state to cultivate subjects who would internalize hierarchies of knowledge and power. In the Dutch East Indies, the discourse and practice of museology often mirrored the logic of classification and racial superiority that underpinned the colonial system itself. However, as noted by Kreps (2003), in various postcolonial contexts across Asia and the Pacific, new forms of *indigenous curation* have emerged curatorial practices grounded in local traditions and values, rather than in European classificatory systems. In this respect, the Sonobudoyo Museum is significant as it reflects an early attempt to formulate a curatorial model rooted in living local structures, spirituality, and aesthetic systems.

Within the broader framework of cultural nationalism, Anderson (1991) has situated the museum as part of the modern state's ideological apparatus alongside the census and the archive—in constructing the “imagined community” of the nation. In colonial Indonesia, museums were not merely colonial tools but also potential arenas for contesting meaning and representation. The *Java-Instituut*, which initiated the Sonobudoyo Museum, served as a discursive field in which European scientific knowledge and nascent national cultural consciousness converged. Reid (2011) highlights the 1930s as a turning point in the rise of emancipatory cultural discourses among Indonesian elites. Figures such as Hoesein Djajadiningrat and Ki Hadjar Dewantara advanced a notion of national culture that was not solely anchored in a static past but involved the capacity to reinterpret and revitalize heritage within a non-oppressive modern framework.

Architecturally, Karsten has been widely recognized as a pivotal figure in the development of tropical design philosophies that adapted to local cultures. In his 1930 writings, he rejected colonial approaches that imposed European models onto the landscapes and living spaces of the Indies. The architectural design of the Sonobudoyo Museum featuring the *pendhapa*, *pringgitan*, and *dalem* as well as spatial arrangements that followed the value structures of Javanese culture, serves as evidence of a hybrid architectural approach that did not negate locality. In this context, the museum building becomes more than a container for cultural objects; it is itself an artifact a physical manifestation of symbolic decolonization through architecture.

Drawing on these various strands of scholarship, this article aims not only to address a gap in the historiography of colonial museums in Indonesia, but also to offer a new reading of the dynamics of cultural decolonization as enacted through symbolic institutions like the museum. The Sonobudoyo Museum is presented as a case study through which to examine how cultural space becomes an arena for negotiation, resistance, and reinterpretation of meaning within a colonial structure that remained hegemonic. This analysis contributes to postcolonial discourse in Indonesian cultural history and museology, while opening up critical space for rethinking the museum as a site of symbolic and cultural resistance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs the historical method as its principal approach to analyze the establishment of the Sonobudoyo Museum within the broader context of late colonial cultural politics in the Dutch East Indies. The historical method is particularly well-suited for this research, as it enables a systematic reconstruction of past events while also allowing for the interpretation of symbolic meanings embedded in institutional practices, spatial arrangements, and discursive representations. Following the model proposed by Kuntowijoyo (1994) and elaborated by Renier (1950) and Sjamsuddin (2012), the historical method encompasses four key stages: heuristics (source collection), source criticism, interpretation, and historiographical construction. These stages, though analytically distinct, are integrated into a continuous process of critical engagement with both primary and secondary sources.

The central archival source for this study is *Majalah Djawa* (The Java Journal), particularly the 1935 editions published by the Java-Instituut. As a cultural-scientific periodical, *Majalah Djawa* offers rich contemporary accounts of the museum's founding, including inauguration speeches, architectural reflections, curatorial discourses, and responses from local intellectuals. These texts are not only descriptive in nature but also ideologically charged, offering insight into the cultural negotiations, symbolic strategies, and hybrid identities that characterized the intellectual milieu of the 1930s. By analyzing these materials, the study aims to uncover the ways in which indigenous actors articulated a cultural vision that both engaged with and contested the colonial framework.

The heuristic phase of the research involved identifying and collecting relevant volumes of *Majalah Djawa*, along with other archival documents related to the Java-Instituut and the Sonobudoyo Museum. In the process of source criticism, both external and internal methods were applied to evaluate the reliability, authorship, and discursive position of the texts. This includes assessing the political and institutional affiliations of figures such as Hoesein Djajadiningrat, S. Koperberg, and T.H. Karsten, as well as examining the rhetorical strategies employed to frame the museum as a site of cultural renewal rather than merely a colonial repository. Interpretation plays a central role in this study, particularly in identifying how architectural forms, exhibition choices, and ceremonial performances reflect broader shifts in cultural consciousness and aspirations for symbolic decolonization. The museum is not examined as a passive container of cultural objects, but rather as an active space where identities were performed, negotiated, and reimagined. Theoretical insights from postcolonial studies, particularly Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," are used to interpret the museum as a hybrid zone where colonial power and local agency coexisted in tension. The final stage of the historical method, historiographical construction, involves synthesizing these various strands of evidence into a coherent narrative that situates the Sonobudoyo Museum within the broader historiography of Indonesian cultural institutions. Rather than treating the museum as a peripheral colonial initiative, this study argues that it represents a significant moment in the emergence of indigenous cultural agency and in the articulation of a modern yet locally rooted vision of heritage. Through this approach, the research contributes not only to the study of colonial museology, but also to broader discussions on cultural nationalism, symbolic resistance, and the politics of memory in Southeast Asia.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A Failed Predecessor: The Forgotten Museum Project of 1885 and the Limits of Colonial Museology

Long before the Sonobudoyo Museum was inaugurated in 1935 as a hybrid cultural space for symbolic negotiation and indigenous representation, there had been a lesser-known but revealing attempt to establish a museum in Yogyakarta. In 1885, the *Archaeologische Vereeniging te Jogjakarta* (Archaeological Association of Yogyakarta) was founded with the aspiration to collect and exhibit artifacts significant to the archaeology, ethnography, and history of the *Vorstenlanden* the semi-autonomous native principalities in Java. This initiative coincided with a broader wave of archaeological enthusiasm in Europe, sparked by high-profile discoveries such as those of Schliemann in Troy and Mycenae and Flinders Petrie in Egypt. This global intellectual current of scientific excavation and cultural reconstruction found echoes in colonial Java, where European officials and local elites increasingly viewed archaeological objects as valuable signifiers of both native antiquity and imperial mastery (Gosden, 2001; Stoler, 2010).

The association's vision was ambitious. It aimed to transform Yogyakarta into a provincial center of colonial heritage and learning, with a museum that would house Javanese antiquities and enable comparative cultural studies. With support from the Resident of Yogyakarta and the Bataviaasch Genootschap, the association secured land near the Resident's compound and even erected a rudimentary wooden museum structure by 1894. The collection grew to include 93 objects mainly Hindu-Buddhist sculptures from the Prambanan region and a descriptive catalogue was published by J.F. Groneman. On the surface, this resembled a success story in the making: the institutionalization of colonial knowledge and the projection of Java as a legible, collectible past.

Yet beneath this appearance lay deep structural problems that eventually led to the project's collapse. The museum's collection methods were increasingly seen as illegitimate. Allegations surfaced that the association had looted temples and sacred sites, displacing statues from their original ritual contexts under the guise of preservation. This sparked backlash from both native communities and other colonial institutions. More damaging still was the lack of sustained institutional support, professional curation, and community involvement. Internal disputes and administrative inertia further eroded the association's credibility. As Krom later noted in a 1912 report, the site had become a neglected, dusty space devoid of educational value. By that time, not only had the objects fallen into disrepair, but the entire museum was slated for demolition to make room for urban development a poignant metaphor for the erasure of memory under colonial modernity.

The failure of the 1885 museum reveals fundamental tensions at the heart of colonial museology in the Dutch East Indies. First, it exposes how the preservation of indigenous culture was often subordinated to colonial utility, framed through extractive logics that divorced objects from their living social contexts. As Kreps (2003) argues in her studies of indigenous museology, institutions that fail to account for local epistemologies, rituals, and communal custodianship risk reproducing epistemic violence, even under the banner of conservation. Second, the episode exemplifies what Tony Bennett (1995) calls the "exhibitionary complex": the use of museums as instruments for ordering and displaying colonial subjects and artifacts, thereby reinforcing imperial

hierarchies. The 1885 project, though local in scope, remained embedded in the broader asymmetrical structures of European scientific knowledge production, where “native” objects were valued primarily as material for colonial pedagogy, not as embodiments of living traditions. Third, the association's dissolution underscores the fragility of institutions built without inclusive governance. Unlike the later Sonobudoyo Museum, which involved the Java-Instituut, Javanese courts, and Dutch administrators in a more collaborative structure, the 1885 museum operated as a closed circle of amateur antiquarians. Its downfall is a testament to the limits of top-down, colonizer-driven cultural institutions, especially when disconnected from local participation and meaning-making processes (Anderson, 1991; Clifford, 1988).

In contrast, the Sonobudoyo Museum's foundation half a century later can be interpreted as both a response to and a rectification of the earlier failure. By incorporating Javanese architectural forms (*pendhapa*, *pringgitan*, *dalem*), welcoming active roles from local rulers, and foregrounding indigenous artistic expressions during its inauguration, the 1935 initiative marked a shift toward what Bhabha (1994) would call a *third space*: a site of cultural hybridity that disrupts binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized. The memory of the failed 1885 project, then, casts the Sonobudoyo Museum not only as a new institution, but also as a historical corrective a materially and symbolically reconstituted space for negotiating modern Javanese identity under colonial conditions.

Thus, the ruins of the 1885 museum serve not merely as evidence of bureaucratic failure, but as a critical lens through which to understand the complex interplay of imperial power, indigenous erasure, and the fragile politics of cultural representation in colonial Java. Their story, largely buried under dust and archival silence, re-emerges here as a vital prehistory to the success and contradictions of Sonobudoyo.

Integrated Archival Reconstruction: Museum Sonobudoyo as a Liminal Space of Cultural Negotiation

The archival documentation surrounding the establishment of the Sonobudoyo Museum in 1935 particularly the ceremonial speeches (Figure. 2) preserved in *Djawa* serves as a complex textual corpus through which the ideological tensions of late colonial cultural politics can be unpacked. These records reveal the museum's inauguration not merely as a celebratory event, but as a carefully staged performance of negotiated power between colonial authorities and indigenous elites. In this ceremonial contact zone, meanings were contested, affiliations were performed, and the very identity of cultural heritage was symbolically renegotiated.



Figure. 2 The Opening Sonobudoyo Museum in 1935
Source. Djawa 1935

The speech of the Chair of the Java-Instituut sets the tone for this intricate choreography of allegiance. By expressing simultaneous gratitude to both the Dutch Governor and the Sultan of Yogyakarta, the Chair enacts what Bhabha (1994) describes as the *ambivalence of colonial discourse*: a discursive structure that depends on the mimicry and validation of the colonized subject in order to sustain colonial authority. This dual acknowledgment is not neutral it implicitly affirms the institutional dependence of indigenous heritage projects on colonial patronage, while at the same time opening space for indigenous actors to assert symbolic presence within that very structure.

The address delivered by P.A. Soerjaamidjaja, the representative of the Susuhunan of Surakarta, provides a compelling instance of indigenous voice within this colonial framework. His speech, while respectful of the Java-Instituut's leadership, foregrounds a distinct vision of the museum as a pedagogical tool for cultural transmission: "a stimulus for the dissemination and deepening of knowledge of Javanese and Balinese arts and sciences." Such a statement subtly repositions the museum from a colonial archive into a site of active cultural regeneration. This framing resonates with James Clifford's (1988) call to reimagine museums not merely as containers of frozen culture but as zones of cultural production shaped by indigenous epistemologies and historical subjectivities.

Other colonial and academic dignitaries echoed similar themes of ambivalent collaboration. The Governor of Yogyakarta, speaking on behalf of the Governor-General, emphasized the need for mutual support between indigenous courts and colonial administrators, casting the museum as a joint project that would reflect both loyalty to the state and respect for local tradition. Yet beneath the diplomatic language lies an enduring asymmetry of power, a hierarchical structure in which indigenous contributions were welcomed only insofar as they aligned with the epistemic and administrative frameworks of the colonial state.

Dr. F.D.K. Bosch, representing both the Department of Education and the Bataviaasch Genootschap, extended this ambivalence further. On the one hand, he lauded the museum's

founding as the culmination of decades of scholarly efforts in archaeology and ethnography, positioning it within the genealogy of Dutch scientific inquiry. On the other hand, he warned against the unregulated proliferation of cultural institutions, suggesting the need for centralized oversight and bureaucratic discipline. His reference to the failed 1885 Archaeological Association served as a cautionary tale a symbolic foil against which the success of Sonobudoyo could be projected, yet also a subtle reminder of the fragility of local initiatives when left unguided (Stoler, 2002; Anderson, 1991).

Through these layered voices, the museum's inauguration emerges as a moment of strategic entanglement. It exemplifies what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) terms a "contact zone" a social space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and negotiate under conditions of asymmetrical power. The museum's architecture, which intentionally revived the spatial logic of the Javanese *kraton* through the use of the *pendhapa*, *pringgitan*, and *dalem*, was not merely aesthetic; it was a performative claim to local legitimacy. Likewise, the inclusion of heirlooms from Javanese courts and the participation of native rulers in the ceremonial proceedings functioned as acts of symbolic restitution—gestures that attempted to recentralize indigenous knowledge within a domain long dominated by colonial narratives.

Yet these acts must also be read through the lens of mimicry not as passive imitation, but as a tactical engagement with colonial forms. As Bhabha (1994) argues, mimicry can operate as a form of strategic camouflage, one that reveals the slippages in the colonial project itself. The Sonobudoyo Museum, while structurally dependent on colonial support, staged a cultural script that subtly destabilized the very binaries on which colonial authority rested authenticity versus imitation, tradition versus modernity, colonizer versus colonized.

The museum, then, functioned as a *liminal space* neither entirely inside nor outside the colonial regime. It was a threshold, a site of cultural in-betweenness where the boundaries of power and representation were blurred, contested, and redefined. In this sense, Sonobudoyo was not simply an institution of heritage, but a performative arena for the articulation of what Partha Chatterjee (1993) calls the "inner domain of sovereignty," wherein colonized elites forged cultural autonomy through the strategic appropriation of modern institutions.

In conclusion, the archival materials surrounding the opening of Sonobudoyo reveal a museum born not out of pure colonial initiative nor out of isolated indigenous aspiration, but from the dense negotiations of a hybrid modernity. Its ceremonial language, architectural form, and curatorial logic embody the contradictions of colonial cultural politics: control and emancipation, appropriation and authenticity, preservation and transformation. To read these materials critically is not merely to historicize the museum it is to expose the deep political labor involved in crafting a space where cultural identity could be both remembered and remade under empire.

CONCLUSION

The founding of the Sonobudoyo Museum in 1935 reflects the complex interplay between colonial authority, local elite participation, and the cultural aspirations of indigenous intellectuals. The museum was not merely an institution for collecting cultural artifacts, but a symbolic space where various interests colonial, local, and national converged, negotiated, and co-constructed. Archival findings from *Djāwā* journal reveal that the inauguration ceremony was carefully choreographed as both a diplomatic and cultural event, with speeches that conveyed a spirit of collaboration as well as the desire for cultural autonomy expressed by local rulers and native scholars.

The architectural decision to incorporate traditional Javanese spatial arrangements such as the *pendhapa*, *pringgitan*, and *dalem* was not simply an aesthetic choice but a symbolic assertion of local cultural values within a modern institutional framework. Likewise, the selection

and presentation of collections sought to represent the cultures of Java, Bali, Madura, and Sunda not as exotic objects, but as living heritage deserving of preservation and public engagement. In this context, Sonobudoyo stands as a prototype of a cultural institution that foregrounded local participation and asserted the sovereignty of indigenous knowledge within the constraints of colonial modernity.

Moreover, the museum's establishment serves as a corrective to the failed museum project initiated in Yogyakarta in 1885. Unlike its predecessor, which was exclusive and ultimately collapsed due to administrative disorder and a lack of public legitimacy, Sonobudoyo was successfully built through multi-stakeholder collaboration: the Java-Instituut as scientific initiator, colonial architects and bureaucrats as facilitators, and local rulers as guarantors of social and cultural legitimacy. This shift signifies a major transformation in the relations of power and knowledge production in the final decades of the Dutch East Indies.

The overall process of establishing the Sonobudoyo Museum illustrates that, even within a dominant colonial structure, cultural spaces could emerge that enabled the rearticulation of identity and the assertion of local values. The museum functioned not merely as a repository of objects, but as a discursive arena that hosted, mediated, and voiced indigenous cultural interests. Within the broader history of museology in Indonesia, Sonobudoyo marks a significant milestone in the transition from colonial dominance to a more equitable cultural participation, offering a valuable historical lesson on the importance of cultural negotiation in the pursuit of symbolic decolonization.

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