



Problems in ‘Accessing’ Colonial Archives for Indonesian History Department Student

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Abstract. Historical research in Indonesia, especially during the colonial era, cannot be separated from the Dutch colonial archives. However, not many researchers or students were interested in using colonial sources for various reasons. Precisely with colonial archives, researchers will find knowledge both written and implied through analysis of colonial sources to strengthen research. The writing of this article uses an archival approach and qualitative descriptive methods and analysis of archival guides and digital innovations to access the Dutch East Indies colonial archives as an alternative to expand the research topics of history students in Indonesia. Finally, colonial archives as historical sources provide flexibility for researchers to explore, relate, and critique the information contained in colonial archives. Therefore, researchers or students who are conducting research in the colonial era must take advantage of the archives of the Dutch colonial government because without them we do not know anything about the past or events that occurred in the colonial era.

Keywords: Accessing colonial archives · student researcher and Indonesian History

1 Introduction

Since *Along Archival Grain* written by Ann Stoler was published in 2009, not much is known about the development of historical research conducted by students of the history department in Indonesian university using the Dutch East Indies colonial archives as the main sources. In the archival studies field, Stoler’s approach is still trending to this day, because she exemplifies the treatment of archives as a field of research which system of arrangement shows how the Dutch East Indies bureaucracy work. In her research for a murder case in Deli, Sumatra, she views the colonial archives as a collection of daily communication’s record that are processed into knowledge through structured filters, and therefore has a layered narrative character [1].

Approach introduced by Stoler requires a knowledge of the archival phase, since items in the form of letters are actively used as a medium of communication between two or more parties. This approach is famously called as ‘archive as process’, not merely ‘archive as object’. However, it is also acknowledged that in Indonesia, the archival

process is less known than archive as a pile of documents in the warehouse. This condition is related to the introduction of archives for the first time as historical sources used by official colonial historiographers such as van Hoevell to independent historiographers such as Hageman [2]. So, archives are identical as historical sources, rather than as a communication trail that have a cycle from active to static.

In the relation between history and archives, Jeurgens wrote that the two began to drift apart since archival science became an independent field of research. Previously, chronological system of archives was a manifestation of the principles borrowed from the historical field. Nevertheless, after the Dutch Manual as a guidebook for the arrangement of archives in Europe was published in 1898, the archives were then organized organically according to the organizational structure of their creators. The institution or unit of the archive creator then becomes an aspect that needs to be mastered by historians to determine the beginning of the search for the information needed. His analysis concludes that system administration should be considered as a topic that needs to be included in history courses [3].

Referring to the observations of undergraduate and master classes at several universities in Indonesia, history students' interest in topics that use colonial archives is still low. The first general obstacle is the limited ability of students in Dutch language. Many students then turned into writing about post-independence history because archives were mostly created in Indonesian language. This alternative is quite effective in reducing the duration of research because students are also required to complete studies within a certain period of time. The first problem has not been solved yet, then comes the concept of against the grain which shows the complex system of colonial archives. Frankly speaking, it adds the difficulty for Indonesian history students to use colonial archives. For this reason, this paper aims to introduce archival science to encourage the students in the history study program to use colonial archives as the main source of writing Indonesian history.

2 Methods

This research uses historical method [4] and the archive inventory as the final result of archiving practice and literature study as a source of thought about archival science. This study written in a qualitative descriptive method by placing analytical assistance through the archival guides and digital innovations to access the Dutch East Indies colonial archives as an alternative to expand the research topics of history students in Indonesia.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 What is Archives and How it Works?

After archival science become independent, it was closely approached with other sciences such as administration and information. This is because archival science does not only manage archives stored in the archival institution such as the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia. This science also needs another perspective to managing

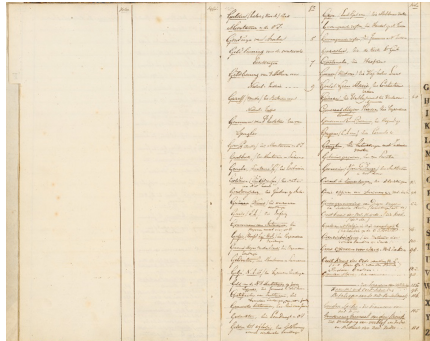


Fig. 1. Klapper Geheim Verbaal 1826–1831. Source: National Archief, Den Haag.

records, in Indonesian language it is called *arsip dinamis*. In archival science, the process since *arsip* are created in the form of ‘records’ to become ‘archives’ is called the *life cycle*. Therefore, archives in archival science can be said as traces of the occurrence of communication.

In the case of the colonial archives which are now kept in the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia, they can be seen as traces of communication in the formal administrative network run by European governments in the Dutch East Indies. This formal communication refers to vertical administrative lines from the residency level, the capital city of Batavia, to the *Ministerie van Koloniën* in the Netherlands, as well as horizontal administrative lines such as court offices (*Justisie*), finance (*Financien*) civil infrastructure (*Bouwerken*), forestry services (*Boschwezen*), military (*Militair*), and so on. The archival inventory, as a finding aid that we can find in the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia, is determined by the archival agency above. Therefore, it is necessary to know what kind of functions carried out by the agency to determine the creation of an archive.

Criticism of the archives has actually been formulated in the historical method, which is divided into internal and external criticism. Both internal and external criticism are understood to find whether the archive is authentic or fake, which in this case refers to authenticity from a diplomatic legal perspective. This perspective states that the archive is authentic if it was created by the organization with the identification of a signature, stamp, or other attributes of validity. However, in the dialogue between historians and archives, it is necessary to know the level of the archival reliability to reconstructing historical facts. Duranti, an archival expert from Canada, argues that archives can be authentic but not reliable in representing actual events [5] (Fig. 1).

To test the reliability of the archive, this paper argues that it is necessary to analyse the archive files of the same subject created by other agencies in the government network. This method can be used because it is hardly one subject was handled by only one agency, but it takes several agency functions works in the government. For example the subject of teak forest monopoly the north coast of Java Island was not only recorded in the *Boschwezen* inventory archive, but also in the decision archive in the inventory of *Algemene Secretarie* as the central secretariat and also correspondence archives in

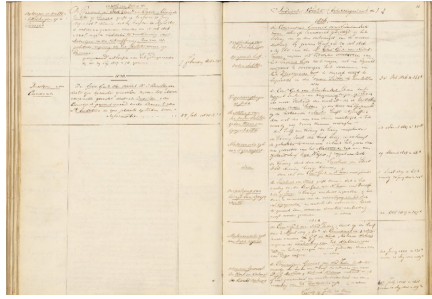


Fig. 2. Index Geheim Verbaal 1826–1831. Source: Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Koloniën.

residency archives inventory. Various forms of archives such as letters, decisions, statistics also show other facts of how information is processed. This process illustrates the journey of a certain subject information, whether it stops in Batavia, or it was passed on to the *Ministerie van Koloniën* as the final destination of colonial communication. The furthest path can also indicate the level of urgency of the subject's information, whether colonial officials felt the need to report an incident or decided to stop it for Batavia's internal communication [6].

Hence, archives reflect the reality captured by the archiver (whether they are archivist or not) in a certain political, social, economic, and cultural condition. Politically, archives are the result of the practice of collecting information that is filtered and classified in order to allow the authorities to control resources, both natural and human in a large area that cannot be directly accessed [7]. The process of forming archives was later called tacit narratives of the archives by Ketelaar [8], epistemic things by Rheinberger, as quoted by Lustig when describing archives as *the objects of history that are not found "in nature" but are actively cultivated and curated* [9].

3.2 Aids for Indonesian Student to Access the Colonial Archives

The most influential aid for the historical research today lies in digital technology. Digitization not only helps to access the archives online, but students can also expand their reach to archives not only belonging to the collections of National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia, such as collections in the National Archives of the Netherlands, as well as other providers such as delpher, archive.org, Leiden digital collections, etc.

Moreover, reading Dutch can also be assisted with digital translation. Not that this aid is used without criticism. One study that tested the translation accuracy of artificial intelligence applications for the field of translation, concluded that the translation would still follow the original structure of the source text. Despite the significant difference between human and machine translation, this artificial intelligence has a fairly large vocabulary, it can also recognize the correct word when we type it misspelling. This is quite helpful for reading foreign words in the 19th century archives that are partially damaged (Fig. 2).

But apart from all that technological help, the most important aid provided by the archival institution is the inventory. Reading the introduction to each inventory can help

trace the context of creating records in an archive. The inventory is indeed a guide or entry point into an archive collection that looks like an information forest. By reading this introduction, it will be known the function of an institution so that students can find the changes of the institution name. This change usually occurs when the one regime replaced by another [10]. An example of a crucial inventory that can be used as the first aid to trace a case is the *Guide Arsip Algemene Secretarie*, which now called *Sekretariat Negara*. This unit is a secretariat which act as a last resort in Batavia where every information flows in and from where everything must proceed. This inventory contains all decisions about the Indies which are arranged chronologically with a system called the *verbaalsystem*. It may be difficult for undergraduate students to find a single subject in a file sorted by year. Therefore, the *index* and *klapper* which contain various keywords, have a role to show the position of a subject in the *Algemene Secretarie*. Thus, the search can be further narrowed, although that does not mean that if a subject is not in the index, it means that the subject was never recorded. In a more advanced level, students can even analyse why a subject is sometimes hidden in keywords that they never even expected. But, of course this is closely relates to where and when the archive was created.

4 Conclusion

Through a short description of the relationship between Indonesian students of history and colonial archives as a legacy of the Dutch East Indies government, it is concluded that source criticism can be an entry point for an analysis of the nature of archives. It is hoped that this paper can reduce the anxiety and reluctance of Indonesian history students to use the colonial archives of the Dutch East Indies. It is also need to underline that archives stand on the hegemony of writing, therefore students need to consider what is not written, or written but not ended in the archival institution custody. This in itself provides discretion to exploring, linking, and presenting criticism of recorded information other than writing. But wherever the archive is positioned, without it we would know nothing of the past.

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