"MONUMENT WARS"
THE DESTRUCTION OF VAN HEUTSZ MONUMENT IN BATAVIA

Kresno Brahmantyo
Post Graduate Study, Department of Archeology
Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia
kresno.brahmantyo@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Monument Wars or the destruction of monuments is part of decolonization in various parts of the world. Monument Wars then occur almost in some countries in the world, ranging from Europe, America and Australia. In Indonesia the destruction of the monument with anti-colonialism pretext also occurred since the colonial period to independence. Monuments, sites or material cultural relics from the past were regarded as (collective) memory regarding the power struggle, national identity or the formation of the nation's character. The monument provides an opportunity for archaeologists and historians to delve the meaning of history behind the monuments. The monument as a material culture considered as a text so that the meaning is open to be interpreted. With the study of historical methods and and material culture, the monument considered no different from the archive. This study will examined the destruction of Van Heutsz Monument in Batavia as well as the vandalism occurred in the similar monument in Amsterdam as part of the monument wars. Visual narratives of how a monument has the meaning of those established it and have different meanings for the next generation will also be examined.

KEYWORDS: Monument wars, monument, decolonisation, material culture, history

INTRODUCTION

The concept of cultural heritage marks what is currently referred to as material culture or cultural property—all kinds of objects from the past and other cultural objects that could be collected. Material cultural heritage could be defined as all kinds of objects and places created by humans, or by the synergy of humans and nature that carries historical, cultural and aesthetic values. A monument is one example of human material heritage—which has existed since the pre-historic era up to the present day. By definition, a monument is regarded as a building or statue or structure that is built to commemorate certain events or figures in the history of human life. However, over the time, differences in human perception emerged regarding monuments. Those changes could be driven by studies that are evolving following the times or due to the reassessment made by one generation about the “legacy” of the monument in the past itself. Moreover, differences of perspective with the “regime” who built the monument could also lead to a debate over the existence of a monument. For example, colonial-era monuments are considered as part of a bitter past for an independent nation which then would try to eliminate their bad experiences of the past by destroying those monuments.
Monument Wars or Statue Wars or the destruction of monuments is part of decolonization in many parts of the world. Monument Wars occurred in almost half of the countries in the world, including in Europe, America and Australia. Looking back, The Black Lives Matters movement—which was sparked by the death of a black American citizen—sparked protests over the white race racial treatment against the black race. Protests that occurred in almost all the Western world (America, Europe and Australia) were then manifested in the destruction of monuments or statues of various figures who were considered as part of colonialism, racism or slavery in the past (cbsnews.com, 4 June 2021).

Quoting from historian Peter Carey, four hundred years of racism, genocide and injustice by white people against people of color has accumulated in the killings and was becoming an epic moment in world history. The powerful combination of pandemics, lockdowns, economic crises and the explosive power of social media has multiplied the historical impact of these events to million times.

It is almost like the world is being hit by two tsunamis at once: the coronavirus and racism. That is such a revolutionary moment in world history. Its echoes will be felt for years to come. One of the physical manifestations of this revolution was the demolition and removal of statues or monuments, mostly by anti-racist protesters and partly by local authorities. This vandalism generally targets statues of slave traders [Edward Colston (Bristol); Robert Milligan (London); Sir Francis Drake (Plymouth)], US Confederate officer [Robert E. Lee (Montgomery); JEB Stuart (Richmond)], a racist national hero [Winston Churchill (London); explorer [Christopher Columbus (Boston; Richmond)]; and the destruction of the statue of James Cook in Australia (tirto.id, 18 June 2020).

In Indonesia, from the colonial period until the independence era, the destruction of monuments under the pretext of anti-colonialism has also occurred. Monuments, sites, or material cultural legacy from the past store collective memories of struggles, national identity, or the formation of today’s national character.

Monuments also give archaeologists and historians a chance to appreciate the importance of history. Monuments as a material culture are viewed as texts, therefore their meanings are open to interpretation (Hale, 2016; Parks, 2017). On that account, by studying monuments through historical methods and the concept of material culture, it is appropriate to say that monuments are no different from archives. A researcher may conduct “interviews on monuments” by examining its visual narratives, focusing, for example, on how one monument means something to those who built it and how it holds a different meaning for the next generation. In recent decades, the concept of understanding cultural property has varied significantly and have different meaning in many parts of the world. UNESCO—which is the most recognized organization dealing with heritage, divided material culture into two sub-categories: moveable heritage—which includes paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts, etc. and immovable heritage—which includes buildings, monuments, archaeological sites, etc. Material heritage is related to an object and facts on objects that have been preserved over time (of a nation). Specifically, an object’s values could appear on multiple levels, and these could be interconnected within a single object. Relating to material cultural heritage, an object is considered aesthetically important. For example, a painting or building is viewed as remarkable due to its artistic execution. Material cultural heritage is also the evidence of the important beliefs and values that prevailed at the time the object or place was
created. For example, historical monuments are witnesses to events and places that are considered important.

PROBLEMS

Present discussion on Monument Wars or Statue Wars will specifically focuses on the destruction of monuments in Indonesia, with the case study of the destruction of the Van Heutsz monument. The Dutch colonial government has built many monuments to commemorate figures who were considered commendable. One of them is the monument of General Van Heutsz which is located in today’s Cut Meutia Menteng Park, Central Jakarta. The monument stood still until the early 1960s. General Van Heutsz was viewed as a successful figure who ended the Aceh War in 1903. Later, the man was appointed as the Governor-general of the Dutch East Indies for the period 1904 to 1911 due to his merit in the Aceh War. The monument to commemorate his success was made after Van Heutsz died in the Netherlands in 1927 (Republika, 24 December 2015).

The Van Heutsz monument was located on Teuku Umar Street, which was also called Van Heutsz Boulevard (Van Heutsz Highway) back in the day. The statue stood in Cut Meutia Park, and was precisely located in front of the Cut Meutia Mosque. When the Dutch built the elite Menteng area in the 1920s to 1930s, there were only three boulevards (wide highway): Orange Boulevard (Diponegoro Street), Nassau Boulevard (Imam Bonjol Street) and Van Heutsz Boulevard (Teuku Umar Street). The changes of the boulevards’ names have occurred since 1950 and choosing the name from heroic figures’ names was considered appropriate.

However, the Van Heutsz monument was then destroyed by freedom fighters because it was considered a symbol of colonialism. The destruction of the monument is considered a form of resistance to Dutch colonial rule. When the bronze statue collapsed, hundreds of onlookers cheered and applauded. The destruction of the Van Heutsz monument and statue was considered a proper thing and right on target. The nationalists view the statue and monument as an insult to the honor of the Indonesian people. By and large, the foundation of Van Heutsz’s legacy during his years in power was aimed only at financial gain for the benefit of modern capitalism for Dutch private companies, for the sake of maximum profit.

The destruction of the Van Heutsz monument is the main focus of this research, viewed from the perspective of monument as material culture. The theory regarding material culture will pave the way for interpretation of the Van Heutsz monument’s destruction event. This background will then provide a basis to answer the key questions: was the destruction of the monument appropriate? Is it proper that a monument containing historical value be simply destroyed in the name of nationalism? Whereas, a monument can be considered as part of real evidence of colonialism that was present in the archipelago. However, an interesting thing also happened when the Dutch government took the initiative to build a Van Heutsz monument in the Netherlands in modern times. It turns out that the Dutch community has opposed the initiative. The Dutch people considered the monument as a symbol of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. As a result, vandalism and doodles containing protest voices colored the Van Heutsz monument in Amsterdam.
RESULTS

“The general name of monument which comes from the Latin Monitor, to signify all things which call to mind the Memory of some subject to those absent from this place or time, seems to recommend itself all the more to our discourse in that the other name of monument is too limited in its vernacular usage (which is the master of language) signifying particularly the sepulchers of the dead, which are also made for memory” (Antoine Rascas, 1611; Hamilton, 2009)

In the 1990s, there was a debate about nationalism, heritage, and politics caused by the destruction of archaeological sites and the looting of archaeological objects that were circulated widely and aroused public awareness (Meskell, 2007). Meskell illustrated how the Gulf War that was aimed to destroying Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq affected the protection of archaeological heritage—it then resulted in public criticism regarding the safety of archaeological objects. The looting of the Baghdad Museum and the others became a turning point for archaeologists and the international community. This incident has made archaeologists aware of political influence for the protection of cultural heritage. Those were the things that archaeologists have not initially thought of before—that the discipline of archaeology could not be separated from the political arena. The events that occurred as mentioned before seeming to underline the very political nature of archaeological studies. Identity, past and present is continuously constructed around the ongoing process of archaeological practice which is also related to material culture. This configuration underscores the type of archaeology, the level of political involvement, and the point of connection of the experience of archaeologists (Meskell, 2007).

Archaeology as a discipline was forged along with the development of national identities both in Europe and in other countries and is very specific in reconstructing identities. During this era and afterward, criteria regarding the construction of identity and ethnic boundaries have become a part of the supremacy of one government. Ethnicity has become important since the 19th century, supported by writers such as Morgan, Kossina and Childe (Trigger, 1989) and driven by changes in national boundaries, diaspora, and 20th century ethnic tensions.

Meanwhile, in modern times, other events have occurred which later triggered the destruction of several monuments and statues in several countries. There were various incidents of destruction of monuments and statues by anti-racist protesters. Vitiation, vandalism or even the destruction of statues generally targets statues of slave traders such as the statue of Edward Colston (Bristol); Sir Francis Drake (Plymouth); Robert Milligan (London), England’s racist national hero Winston Churchill (London) and the discoverer of the Australian continent, James Cook (Sydney) as mentioned by Sieborger (2015), Parkes (2017) and Cauvin (2017). Therefore, how to place the destruction of the Van Heutsz monument in this context?

The Van Heutsz Monument was built in 1932 in Batavia, located on present-day Teuku Umar Street (which was known as Van Heutsz Boulevard). The relief in this monument portrayed the completion of the pacification or peace efforts carried out by Governor-general Van Heutsz with reliefs depicting the people of Aceh, Java and Papua. Van Heutsz was a Dutch colonial official who was famous for his role in conquering Aceh together with his colleague Idenburg, the Minister of Colonial Affair, while implementing Ethical Politics. For most ordinary Indonesians, the name Van Heutsz might not be as well-known as Snouck Hurgronje.
Van Heutsz’s monument was not the only statue of the Dutch East Indies’ colonial officials. There were at least two other Dutch East Indies governor-generals whose statues were erected in Batavia: Jan Pieterszoon Coen and Daendels. The establishment of these three political figures’ monument has historical as well as political information if we were to associate it with the history of the Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. At least, the three governor-generals also represented the magnitude of their contribution to the Dutch (and partly Napoleonic French) colonial power. Coen’s contribution could be seen during the Dutch trading period—the VOC era, and Daendels’ contribution reflected during the transition between the VOC period and the colonial period—who was famous for his infrastructure projects by building the Post Highway from Anyer to Panarukan. Meanwhile, Van Heutsz’s contribution was represented in the colonial period.

Since its establishment, Van Heutsz’s monument has attracted a lot of controversies. Dutch-language newspapers at that time such as Persatooan Indonesia reported the opinions of Indonesians regarding the Van Heutsz monument. As reported by Persatooan Indonesia: “Yes, van Heutsz did pacify the Indies, but with a lot of bloodshed,” and “the people need to see this statue as the representation of injustice and have trust in the eventual freedom.” Van Heutsz was considered successful in reconciling the Dutch East Indies hence he was later appointed as governor-general (1904-1911). However, this effort was carried out with bloodshed here and there, including Aceh—notably during the time when Van Heutsz acted as the Dutch warlord to quell the rebellion in Aceh.

In July 1935, a member of the Dutch parliament, Anton Mussert, visited Java and was invited by Governor-general De Jonge to the Bogor Palace. Mussert was a member of the National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands who was considered a fascist before and after World War II. He collaborated with Germany, and he was later sentenced to death for being considered a traitor in 1946. On his visit to Batavia in 1935, he placed a wreath on the Van Heutsz monument which has caused quite a stir at the Batavia City Council. The City Council reluctantly agreed to the wreath-laying ceremony as long as it did not lead to a fascist demonstration. Police were then stationed around the monument to keep the ceremony running smoothly and peacefully and not to become a political scene. Three years later, Mussert asked for a similar visit to Java. However, the sitting governor-general during that time, Tjarda van Starkenborgh-Stachouwer, strongly opposed fascism and refused Mussert’s request for a visit. The wreath-laying ceremony took place in a ceremony on 26 July 1935, where on that occasion many people came with the spirit to spread fascism. Due to the fear of fascism propaganda, the Dutch East Indies colonial government became very careful and prevented this kind of thing from happening again.
Three years later, after the establishment of the Van Heutsz Monument in Batavia, on 15 June 1935, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands inaugurated Van Heutsz monument in Amsterdam amid strong criticism from communists and socialists. The 18.7-meter-high monument depicts a statue of a woman holding a law sheet and other relief sculptures. In 1943, Van Heutsz's son, a Nazi German SS officer, Johaan Bastian Heutsz, appealed to the Mayor of Amsterdam by letter for the monument to be restored. The Van Heutsz monument in Amsterdam has been the target of vandalism several times, with protest doodles written on the monument's background wall. This monument was finally can be restored in 2004 by changing its name to the Dutch-Indonesian Monument to commemorate the historical relationship between the two countries.

From the beginning, the Van Heutsz Monument has become a focus of protests due to its representation of colonial rule, oppression and even alleged war crimes by Dutch troops as
described by Willeke Wendrich in his article "Visualizing the Dynamics of Monumentality in Archeology" (Osborne 2014).

Figure 3:
Van Heutsz Monument in Amsterdam, 2004
(Source: http://www.hansvanhouwelingen.com/projects/statue-of-shame/#selected-8)

The Van Heutsz Monument was located on present-day’s Teuku Umar Street and the monument stood in Cut Meutia Park, in front of the Cut Meutia Mosque. Back then, Teuku Umar Street was known as Van Heutsz Boulevaard (van Heutsz Highway). When the Dutch built the elite Menteng area in the 1920s to 1930s, there were only three boulevards, namely: Orange Boulevaard (Diponegoro Street), Nassau Boulevaard (Imam Bonjol Street) and Van Heutsz Boulevaard (Teuku Umar Street). The changes of the boulevards’ names have occurred since 1950 and choosing the name from heroic figures’ names was considered appropriate. This name change, whether it was realized or not by Sukarno’s government, showed that there was a political element contained in it. The reason might be that name changing was in accordance with the nation’s struggle for independence. Therefore, finding a name “opposite” to the name given by the colonial government seemed to be appropriate. In addition, it also could be seen as a form of protest to show nationalism. Since the independence era, almost every statue, street names, and even buildings related to Dutch colonialism have been vandalized or even broken down as if they represent the destruction of the memory of the past as a colonized nation. The Van Heutsz monument was also destroyed by freedom fighters because it was considered a symbol of colonialism. The destruction of the monument was viewed as a form of resistance to Dutch colonial rule. When the bronze statue collapsed, hundreds of onlookers cheered and applauded. The destruction of the Van Heutsz monument was seen as a representation of nationalism; therefore, it can be considered as a fair course. The nationalists considered the presence of the Van Heutsz monument as an insult to the honor and sovereignty of an independent nation—Indonesia. In the nationalists’ opinion, the foundation of Van Heutsz’s legacy during his years in power was aimed only at financial gain for the benefit of modern capitalism for Dutch private companies, for the sake of maximum profit.
The destruction of monument or Monument Wars is also a major study from the point of view of the monument as material culture. The theory regarding material culture will pave the way for interpretation of the Van Heutsz monument’s destruction event. This background will then provide a basis to answer the key questions: was the destruction of the monument appropriate? Is it proper that a monument containing historical value be simply destroyed in the name of nationalism? Whereas, a monument can be considered as part of real evidence of colonialism that was present in the archipelago.

The existence of monuments and memorials is intended to improve historical narrative. Monuments could provide stability through the collective memory of a particular event or character. This is part of an effort to provide an understanding of why tangible heritage objects, archives, museums, and monuments as well as memorials are considered a form of identity (Rowland, 2006).

The study of monuments is currently viewing monument as a text. As with all “texts”, the meaning of monuments is open to interpretation. Historical monuments have an inherent ambiguity to not only commemorate the past but also to document something about the historical culture at the time the monument was created (Black, 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that there are different perceptions or perspectives of people who live in different times. The monument that was built during the colonial period was a manifestation of the colonial society at that time for the colonized nation. Meanwhile, the independent community then had their interpretation of the monument building which was considered arrogant and was part of a form of colonialism in the past.

The emergence of national collective memory in Europe occurred amid a crisis of authority. For example, the basis for the establishment of the Louvre Museum in 1793 occurred during the French Revolution, where agents who were in the midst of the revolution needed a picture of the stability of the past. As stated by Lowenthal, the projection of the stability picture seems to be a tool to ignore the reality of change (Lowenthal, 1985).
Monuments create extraordinary public spaces and rituals that also function to display, what Boyer calls, the civic composition that teaches us about national heritage and public responsibility by assuming that urban landscapes are symbols of power and memory (Boyer, 1994). Meanwhile, Johnson emphasizes more on the dualism of monuments which on one side shows the practice of memory materially and on the other side functions as a social symbol (Johnson, 2004). Monuments become very strong because of their nature as absolute markers of memory and history. In other words, monuments can evoke feelings through their materiality and shape which symbolizes the social narrative of an event that is being conveyed to the public (Rowland, 2006). Alois Riegl also argues that the appearance of “modern monuments” hinges on a combination of different judgments: ‘historical value” and ‘life value’, which include temporal signs, such as damage or incompleteness as a result of everyday events that contribute to change (Starn, 2002).

Further, Daniel Miller in "Artefact and the Meanings of Things" (1994) also describes monuments. Generally, monuments are described as enormous material forms specially constructed to embody ideas across generations—for example, to symbolize the timeless nature of the ‘kingdom of a thousand years’. However, the same idea could also be realized as in a simple ancestral shrine. In the case of national monuments like the Eiffel Tower, it is a symbol of the nation-state. And in the case of a deceased relative’s burial place, it is established and determined by certain genealogical rules. The irony of this process is that while material objects may transcend generations, the group of corporations associated with them tends to change. Stonehenge is now a symbol of England but was originally founded by several tribal groups in the Wessex region, and in the intervening period has undergone many changes in its symbolic appeal (Miller, 1994).

Historical facts show that since the early 19th century, monuments and statues have attracted both controversial and violent attention. The widespread destruction of monuments to unwanted memories of the past is common in some Eastern European countries and Russia. To illustrate, in Budapest, the city council has demolished more than 20 monuments erected during the communist era. Statues in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and several other regions of Russia were demolished and placed in special parks or a kind of heritage park so that people could come and see them. Further, Forest and Johnson (2002) examine the post-Soviet form of national identity through a study of the political struggle over monuments and memorials in Moscow. The study shows how the new elite decided to preserve or demolish the monument or memorial structure in connection with their current position in the new political hierarchy and try to attract public attention to gain honor for their actions, as well as an effort to legitimize their power.
However, monuments and memorials do have some influence over oppression in historical discourse and shaping feelings about the past in both definite and figurative ways. On the other hand, many writings on memories or remembrance of the past tend to show natural discourse to people without historical knowledge (Rowland, 2006). Thus, material culture has played an important role in the reconciliation between history and memory.

Figure 6:
Demolition of the Goddess of Justice on the Atjeh War as part of the Destruction of Van Heutsz Monument (Source: Karya Jaya, 1977)
In addition to the Van Heutsz monument, on 10 June 1961, the Goddess of Justice Monument (Karya Jaya, 1977)—which represents the success of the Dutch in resolving the Aceh War, was demolished as well. However, the coverage of this incident seemed to escape the mass media coverage at that time. This demolition shows how a monument or statue is considered no longer following its era, therefore it needs to be destroyed to erase memories of past wounds as a colonized nation.

The destruction of the Van Heutsz monument in 1960 can be studied from a political point of view in archaeology theory, by stating various examples by Meskell and Preucel (2007). It can also be studied under the view of monuments as part of material culture by considering the political power as the causes of the destruction. Although it is not as simple as one imagines, the problems surrounding it were similar. Resistance to the presence of such a monument also occurs in the Netherlands and various other parts of the world.

CONCLUSION

Ever since the Neolithic times, monuments and memorials have been part of the landscape of the past and present. Its material appearance clearly shows significant strength. There are two main aspects regarding monuments, which are what signifies it or what can be interpreted to signify it (Rowland, 2006). The presence of monuments as material culture is closely related to groups, nation-states and others related to identity (of a nation). The main concept is memory, although it is still in the middle of a debate that is alienated and associated with modernity. Of course, many cultures in the past and present do not need to openly address their identities in this way. According to Rowland (2006), it is an exclusive culture with no history in the modernist sense and is documented archaeologically and ethnographically.

Culture, however, has authenticity and unalienated memory. Thus, it is inappropriate to say that we do not require a monument. Culture itself—although without involving history—still builds and uses monuments. We still have a poor comparative understanding of why it was necessary to erect monuments under different social and historical backgrounds. To simply connect the construction (of a monument) with a crisis of legitimacy, in whatever form, it is not easy to generalize it all. Perhaps, part of the problem we face is the limited cultural understanding of the true definition of a monument.

REFERENCE


