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The Afterlife of Objects: A Material Culture Analysis of Contested Artifacts in Diasporic Communities

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigated the complex "afterlife" of contested cultural artifacts, specifically focusing on the Indonesian *keris* (ceremonial dagger) held in Dutch museum collections and their significance within the Indonesian diaspora in the Netherlands. In an era of escalating repatriation debates, the profound and evolving role these objects play in the identity formation, collective memory, and cultural negotiation of diasporic communities remains a critical yet underexplored dimension. This research addressed this gap by examining how such artifacts, physically distant from their origin, continue to live vibrant, meaningful, and often contentious lives within the communities they represent. A mixed-methods approach was employed, grounded in ethnographic and material culture studies frameworks. The research was conducted between 2023 and 2024 in Amsterdam and The Hague. Data were collected through 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with first, second, and third-generation members of the Indonesian diaspora. This qualitative data was supplemented by a quantitative survey (n=250) to assess broader community attitudes towards the *keris*, museums, and cultural heritage. Thematic analysis was used for interview transcripts, while descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to survey data. The findings revealed a multifaceted and dynamic relationship with the *keris*. Four primary themes emerged from the qualitative data: 1) The artifact as a tangible anchor to an "imagined homeland" and ancestral lineage; 2) Significant generational shifts in meaning, moving from personal heirloom to a politicized symbol of post-colonial identity; 3) The museum as a dual site of connection and contestation; and 4) The emergence of a "digital afterlife," where online archives and social media create new forms of access and community engagement. Survey data corroborated these themes, with 88% of respondents viewing the *keris* as a vital symbol of their cultural identity, yet 65% expressing feelings of ambivalence or sadness regarding their location in Dutch museums. In conclusion, contested artifacts like the *keris* are not static relics but dynamic agents in the ongoing process of diasporic identity construction. Their afterlife is characterized by a continuous re-negotiation of meaning across generations and platforms. For diasporic communities, these objects serve as powerful conduits for memory, heritage, and political consciousness, complicating simplistic narratives of ownership and repatriation. The study concluded that understanding this diasporic dimension is essential for museums and policymakers engaging in ethical stewardship and decolonization efforts.

1. Introduction

The global landscape of cultural heritage is increasingly defined by conversations surrounding decolonization, restitution, and the ethical stewardship of artifacts acquired during colonial eras. Museums across the Western world, long positioned as neutral repositories of universal knowledge, are now being critically re-examined as institutions deeply enmeshed in colonial histories of power, extraction, and representation. The discourse on repatriation, while vital, has predominantly centered on the relationship between the holding institution (typically in the Global North) and the nation-state or community of origin (typically in the Global South).

This focus, however, has often overlooked a crucial third party in this complex triangulation: the diasporic community. These communities, comprised of individuals living outside their ancestral homelands, forge unique and often intense relationships with cultural artifacts housed in their new countries of residence. Objects, as Arjun Appadurai famously argued, have "social lives". Their meanings are not inherent but are produced, contested, and transformed as they move through different hands, contexts, and temporalities. This study was concerned with the "afterlife" of such objects—specifically, their continued existence and evolving significance long after their initial production and acquisition. When an object of profound cultural importance is physically and legally situated within a former colonial power's museum, while its community of origin exists both "at home" and "abroad" as a diaspora, its social life becomes extraordinarily complex. It transforms from a simple artifact into a contested *lieu de mémoire* (a site of memory), as conceptualized by Pierre Nora, embodying layered histories of violence, nostalgia, pride, and resistance.[1-3]

This research focused on a particularly potent case study: the Indonesian *keris* within the context of the Netherlands. The relationship between Indonesia and the Netherlands is defined by over 350 years of colonial domination under the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and later the Dutch state. This period was marked by violent conquest, economic exploitation, and a massive transfer of cultural material from the archipelago to the Netherlands. The *keris*, a distinctive asymmetrical dagger, is far more than a weapon it is a spiritual object, a social status marker, a family heirloom (*pusaka*), and an artistic masterpiece, recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Forged by a master smith (*empu*) through a process imbued with ritual and mysticism, a *keris* is believed to possess its own spirit or power. During the colonial era, countless *keris*, many of them royal heirlooms from conquered courts, were taken as war booty, "gifts" under duress, or through colonial collecting expeditions. Hundreds of these are now housed in prominent Dutch institutions like the Rijksmuseum and the Wereldmuseum. Simultaneously, the Netherlands is home to one of the world's largest and most established Indonesian diasporic communities, a direct legacy of this colonial relationship. This diaspora is not monolithic; it includes descendants of colonial Dutch settlers ("Totoks"), Indo-Europeans who "repatriated" after Indonesian independence, Moluccan soldiers and their families, and later waves of migrants, students, and professionals. For this diverse community, the *keris* displayed behind glass in a Dutch museum is not a foreign or exotic object. It is a piece of "home," yet it is also a captive, a symbol of a severed connection. It exists in a liminal space, representing both the richness of Indonesian culture and the painful history of its subjugation.[4-6]

Previous scholarship on contested Indonesian artifacts has largely concentrated on the legal and political frameworks of repatriation claims between the Indonesian and Dutch governments or on the museological challenges of provenance research and ethical display. While invaluable, these studies have not adequately centered the lived experiences of the diaspora. They have not systematically investigated how different generations within this community perceive, interact with, and derive meaning from these contested objects in their daily lives and identity formation processes. This study contended that the diasporic engagement with contested artifacts constitutes a unique and vital form of cultural production and political expression. It is in the stories told by a grandfather to his Dutch-born grandchild in front of a museum display case, in the heated online debates among diaspora youth about decolonization, and in the artistic reinterpretations of the *keris* by diaspora artists that the object's "afterlife" truly unfolds. This afterlife is not a passive state of being displayed but an active process of being remembered, re-contextualized, and re-claimed, emotionally and symbolically, if not physically. Understanding this process is crucial for a more holistic comprehension of the legacy of colonialism and the contemporary role of cultural heritage in a globalized world.[7-9]

The primary aim of this study was to conduct a material culture analysis of the semiotic and affective afterlives of the *Indonesian keris* among members of

the Indonesian diaspora in the Netherlands. The research sought to systematically map the diverse meanings, emotions, and narratives that this community attaches to *keris* held in Dutch museums and to analyze how these engagements shape individual and collective identities across different generations. This research intended to answer the central question: How do contested cultural artifacts function in the memory work and identity negotiation of diasporic communities long after their physical displacement? The novelty of this research is threefold. Firstly, it bridges a critical gap between museum studies, post-colonial theory, and diaspora studies. While each field has addressed aspects of this topic, this study provides one of the first in-depth, empirically-grounded investigations that places the diasporic community at the center of the debate over contested heritage. It moves beyond the institution-nation state dyad to explore a more complex, transnational network of meaning-making. Secondly, its mixed-methods approach offers a robust and nuanced understanding that a purely qualitative or quantitative study could not achieve. By combining rich narrative data from interviews with broader attitudinal data from a survey, the research provides both depth and scale. Finally, the study introduces and operationalizes the concept of the "diasporic afterlife" as an analytical framework. This concept emphasizes the active, ongoing, and generative role that diasporic communities play in sustaining and transforming the cultural and political significance of artifacts, thereby challenging the notion that their meaning is fixed or solely determined by either their origin or their current location.

2. Methods

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. This approach was chosen based on the principle of complementarity, where the qualitative data could explore the 'why' and 'how' behind the attitudes measured by the quantitative survey. The qualitative component, which was the dominant paradigm, focused on exploring the depth and complexity of diasporic experiences, while the quantitative component served to generalize findings and identify broader patterns within the community. The study was situated in the Netherlands, specifically within the metropolitan areas of Amsterdam and The Hague. These cities were chosen for their demographic significance, as they host high concentrations of individuals of Indonesian descent, and for their institutional relevance, being home to major museums with world-renowned Indonesian collections, including the Rijksmuseum, the Tropenmuseum (part of the Wereldmuseum), and Museum Volkenkunde in nearby Leiden.

Participants for the qualitative component (in-depth interviews) were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used initially to identify key informants from various community organizations (such as cultural *sanggar groups*), religious institutions, academic circles, and social clubs. These initial contacts, selected for their diverse experiences and deep community involvement, were crucial for establishing trust and legitimacy.

These key informants then facilitated snowball sampling, allowing the research to reach a diverse range of participants across different ages, backgrounds, migration histories, and levels of engagement with cultural heritage. Inclusion criteria for the interview participants were: (a) self-identifying as being of Indonesian descent (including mixed heritage); (b) residing in the Netherlands; and (c) being over the age of 18. The final sample consisted of 45 individuals, carefully balanced to include first-generation migrants who arrived as adults (n=12), second-generation Dutch-born individuals with at least one parent from Indonesia (n=18), and third-generation individuals with at least one grandparent from Indonesia (n=15). This generational structure was essential for analyzing shifts in meaning over time. For the quantitative component (survey), participants were recruited through online channels, including social media groups dedicated to the Indonesian-Dutch community, email newsletters of cultural organizations, and a dedicated project website.

This approach was chosen to reach a broader and more geographically dispersed sample beyond the main metropolitan areas. The survey yielded 250 valid responses from individuals meeting the same inclusion criteria as the interview participants.

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were the primary method for qualitative data collection, conducted between March 2023 and January 2024. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in either English or Dutch, based on the participant's preference. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency across key topics but allowed for significant flexibility to explore emergent themes and follow the participant's narrative thread. The guide covered areas such as: personal and family history related to Indonesia awareness and knowledge of the *keris* (both as a cultural object and as a museum artifact) detailed accounts of museum visits affective responses (emotions, feelings) evoked by seeing these objects; opinions on ownership, stewardship, and repatriation; and the role of cultural heritage in their personal and collective identity. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit informed consent and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service, ensuring accuracy. Survey: An anonymous online survey was designed and administered using the Qualtrics platform. Before its launch, the survey instrument was pilot-tested with 10 individuals from the target community to ensure clarity, cultural appropriateness, and validity of the questions. The survey was active from May 2023 to March 2024.

The questionnaire consisted of 30 items divided into three sections: Demographics: Age, generation in the Netherlands, province of origin in Indonesia (if known), educational level, and frequency of museum visits; Attitudes and Perceptions: A series of 5-point Likert scale questions measuring the perceived importance of the *keris* to personal and cultural identity, agreement with statements about museum roles, and attitudes towards repatriation. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with statements like, "Seeing a *keris* in a Dutch museum makes me feel proud of my heritage," and "Contested artifacts like the *keris* should be returned to Indonesia." Engagement: Multiple-choice questions about how participants learned about their heritage, including family stories, digital media, community events, or museum visits.

Qualitative Data: The 45 interview transcripts were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke. This iterative and inductive six-phase process involved: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts and listening to audio recordings to capture nuances of tone and emotion; (2) generating initial codes systematically across the entire dataset in an open-ended manner; (3) searching for potential themes by collating codes into broader categories that represented patterns of meaning; (4) reviewing and refining these themes to ensure they were coherent internally and distinct from each other; (5) defining and naming the final themes with concise, evocative labels ; and (6) producing the final report, weaving together the analytic narrative with compelling participant quotes. The software NVivo 14 was used to manage the data, facilitate the coding process, and map relationships between themes. To ensure rigor, the lead researcher engaged in regular reflexive journaling to acknowledge and bracket personal biases, and a process of peer debriefing was implemented, where emerging themes were discussed with two other researchers in the field. Quantitative Data: The survey data from the 250 respondents were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 29. The analysis began with descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and the overall distribution of responses. Following this, inferential statistical tests were conducted to explore relationships between variables. Specifically, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used to examine whether there were statistically significant differences in attitudes towards repatriation and museum roles across the three generational groups (first, second, third). A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant. Post-hoc tests were used to identify specific between-group differences. A rigorous ethical protocol was maintained throughout the study. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet explaining the

research purpose, procedures, potential risks (such as emotional distress when discussing sensitive topics), and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from all interviewees prior to the interview, and consent was implied by the completion of the online survey, with a consent statement on the first page. Anonymity and confidentiality were paramount. All personally identifiable information was removed from the transcripts and survey data, and pseudonyms are used for all participant quotes in this manuscript.

3. Results and Discussion

Figure 1 provides a compelling quantitative summary of the multifaceted and often paradoxical relationship between the Dutch-Indonesian diaspora and the *keris* as a contested cultural artifact. The data, derived from a survey of 250 community members, is presented in three distinct but interconnected schematics that together paint a nuanced picture of identity, emotion, and political sentiment. At the forefront, the figure establishes the profound Symbolic Importance of the artifact. The finding that a remarkable 88% of respondents regard the *keris* as a "vital symbol of their cultural heritage" serves as a foundational data point. This overwhelming consensus quantitatively affirms that the object is not a marginal or esoteric relic but a central and potent cultural anchor for the community.

It underscores the *keris's* enduring power to signify Indonesian identity across generational and geographic distances, acting as a key node in the complex web of diasporic meaning-making. The second schematic delves into the affective dimension of this relationship, revealing a profound Emotional Duality within the museum context. The concurrent findings that 72% of the diaspora feel Pride when viewing the *keris*, while a substantial 65% simultaneously experience Sadness or Conflict, are particularly telling. This statistical juxtaposition is not a contradiction but rather a quantitative measure of the community's ambivalent experience. It scientifically illustrates the museum's function as a "dual site"-a space that offers a platform for cultural validation and connection while simultaneously evoking the painful legacies of colonial history and displacement. This duality is a core tension that animates the diasporic afterlife of the object. Finally, the horizontal bar chart on Generational Attitudes Towards Repatriation provides a dynamic and diachronic perspective.

The data reveals a clear and statistically significant linear progression ($p < 0.001$) in pro-repatriation sentiment, escalating from a mean agreement of 3.85 in the first generation to 4.21 in the second, and culminating at a strong 4.65 in the third generation. This graduated increase offers powerful quantitative evidence for the politicization of heritage among younger cohorts. It suggests that as the direct, nostalgic connection to Indonesia wanes, it is replaced by a more critical, politically informed consciousness shaped by contemporary discourses on decolonization and social justice. The chart visually narrates a story of shifting perspectives, where the *keris* is transformed from a personal heirloom into a potent symbol of a historical injustice that demands redress.

Figure 1. Quantitative Survey Findings on Diasporic Engagement

Figure 2 presents a schematic visualization of the four principal themes that emerged from the in-depth qualitative interviews with 45 members of the Dutch-Indonesian diaspora. This graphical representation moves beyond mere summary, offering a scientifically structured yet narratively rich exploration of the complex meanings ascribed to the Indonesian *keris*. Each thematic card functions as a conceptual module, detailing a core dimension of the object's diasporic afterlife through a synthesis of scholarly interpretation and the poignant, lived experiences of the participants. Theme 1: The Tangible Anchor to an Imagined Homeland, encapsulates the object's fundamental role in grounding an abstract sense of identity in material reality. For a diaspora, particularly for generations born and raised in the Netherlands, "Indonesia" can exist as an imagined community, a constellation of stories, flavors, and fragmented memories. The *keris*, encountered within the museum, acts as a powerful empirical anchor. As the data details, its "Physicality as Proof" validates ancestral narratives, transforming oral history into tangible evidence. Furthermore, it functions as a conduit for "Embodied Nostalgia," triggering sensory and emotional memories for the first generation, and serves as an "Intergenerational Bridge," providing a focal point for the transmission of cultural knowledge. The quote from Hsn (participant) poignantly articulates this materialization of identity: the object is not just seen, but felt as a "direct message" from the past, making his heritage undeniably "real." Theme 2: Generational Shifts: From Heirloom to Political Symbol, graphically illustrates the most dynamic finding of the study. The clear, linear progression from the first to the third generation

visualizes a profound transformation in the object's semiotic function. For the first generation, the *keris* is framed through a "Nostalgic & Personal" lens, its meaning tied to family and a lost homeland, leading to an attitude of "Ambivalent Resignation." The second generation occupies a "Hybrid & Meditative" space, navigating both personal connection and a growing critical consciousness. By the third generation, the object's meaning has decisively shifted. Framed as "Politicized & Activist," the *keris* is no longer primarily an heirloom but a public symbol of colonial injustice. The attitude becomes one of "Radical Opposition," as Aln's (participant) quote powerfully asserts: the object is a "political statement," and its presence in a Dutch museum is a contemporary "problem that needs to be solved." Theme 3: The Museum as a Dual Site of Connection & Contestation, employs the evocative iconography of an unlocked and locked padlock to represent the deep ambivalence that characterizes the diaspora's experience of the museum. This is perhaps the most emotionally complex theme. The "Connection" column details the museum's positive function: it provides crucial access to heritage, offers a platform for cultural validation, and serves as a space for learning. It is a place where identity can be affirmed and shared. Conversely, the "Contestation" column outlines the profound sense of alienation. The decontextualized display, the embodiment of colonial power, and the resulting emotional conflict render the museum a painful space. St's (participant) quote captures this emotional rollercoaster with devastating clarity, likening the experience to being a "visitor in my own house," a succinct and powerful metaphor for the post-colonial condition. Theme 4: The Digital Afterlife: New Arenas for Engagement, highlights a contemporary and rapidly evolving aspect of the object's journey. This theme details how digital platforms are creating a vibrant new public sphere for the *keris*. This "afterlife" is characterized by three key processes: "Symbolic Re-appropriation," where the diaspora reclaims the narrative from the institution by creating a "counter-archive"; "Community Building," which forges transnational networks for knowledge-sharing and activism; and "Decentralized Authority," a democratizing effect that challenges the museum's role as the sole interpreter of the object's meaning. Aln's (participant) quote, "The museum might have the object, but we have the narrative," serves as a powerful manifesto for this new digital reality, framing the online world as a "battlefield" where the meaning of heritage is actively being fought for and redefined.

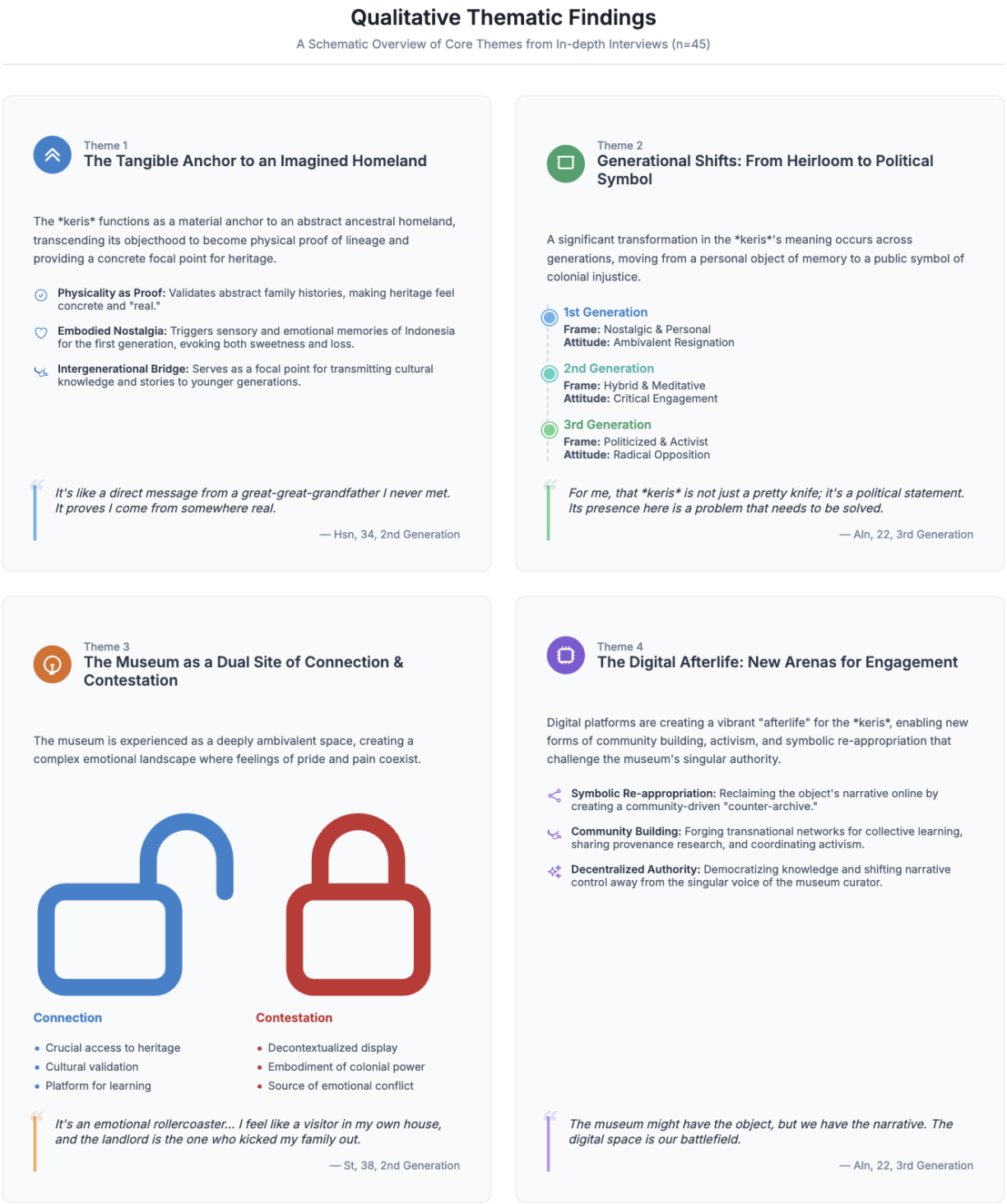

Figure 2. Qualitative Thematic Findings

The findings of this study provide a robust and nuanced portrait of the "diasporic afterlife" of contested artifacts. By centering the lived experiences of the Indonesian diaspora in the Netherlands, this research moves beyond the often-reductive political and legal debates surrounding repatriation to reveal the deep, complex, and evolving role these objects play in the ongoing project of identity formation and memory work. The first theme, the *keris* as a "tangible anchor," directly speaks to the core tenets of material culture theory, which posit that objects are not merely passive reflections of culture but are active agents in its creation and maintenance. For the Dutch-Indonesian diaspora, particularly for generations born

in Europe, Indonesia exists as what Benedict Anderson termed an "imagined community". It is a community imagined not through face-to-face interaction but through shared narratives, media, and symbols. Our findings demonstrate that material objects like the *keris* are crucial in this process; they are the physical evidence that materializes the imagined. As Hsn (34, 2nd Gen) stated, the *keris* is "physical proof" that he comes from "somewhere real." The object reifies the abstract, transforming a grandparent's story into a tangible reality that can be witnessed, albeit through glass. This function aligns perfectly with Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or "sites of memory". Nora argued that as modern societies lose their environments of lived, organic memory (*milieux de mémoire*), they create repositories—archives, monuments, museums—where memory is consciously invested. For the diaspora, separated from *the milieux de mémoire* of Indonesia, the *keris* in the museum becomes a potent lieu de mémoire. However, it is a complicated one. Unlike a national monument built by a community to celebrate its own history, this is a site of memory located within, and controlled by, the institutional structures of a former colonial power. This creates a fundamental tension: the object is a site of their memory, but the terms of engagement are not their own. This tension fuels the ambivalence seen in both the survey and interview data, where pride and sadness are inextricably linked. The object anchors them to their heritage while simultaneously reminding them of the historical rupture that necessitated such anchoring in the first place. This tension can be further understood through Svetlana Boym's work on nostalgia. The first-generation participants often exhibit what Boym calls "restorative nostalgia," a longing for a lost home and a desire to reconstruct it, even if only in memory. [9-12]

The study's most striking finding is the clear generational cleavage in how the *keris* is interpreted. This can be powerfully analyzed through Karl Mannheim's theory of "social generations." Mannheim argued that generations are not merely biological categories but are shaped by the shared historical experiences of their formative years. These experiences create a "stratification of experience" that gives each generation a unique "consciousness" or worldview. The First Generation, Their consciousness was forged in the context of late colonial or early post-colonial Indonesia and the subsequent migration to the Netherlands. Their relationship with the *keris* is rooted in a more direct, lived cultural experience, what we might call a *milieu de mémoire*. Their migration was often a traumatic rupture, and their primary goal was adaptation and survival in a new country. Their perspective, often characterized by nostalgia and a pragmatic acceptance of the museum's role, can be seen as a strategy for navigating a complex identity in a society that was not always welcoming. For them, the political fight was for independence in Indonesia and for a place in Dutch society; the battle over museum objects was a secondary concern. The Third Generation, Their consciousness, by contrast, was shaped in a completely different world. They grew up in a multicultural Netherlands within a globalized, digital era saturated with discourses of social justice, anti-racism, and decolonization. They did not experience colonialism directly, but they experience its legacy through systemic racism and debates about national identity. For them, as Aln (22, 3rd Gen) articulated, the *keris* is not a memory of a lost home but a symbol of an present-day struggle. Their activism is a way of claiming their identity and demanding recognition and justice. Their relationship with the *keris* is a political project, informed by post-colonial theorists like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, whose ideas are now mainstream in university curricula and online discourse. The Second Generation. The second generation occupies a liminal space, embodying what Homi Bhabha might call a "hybrid" consciousness. They are the bridge, understanding their parents' nostalgia while being fluent in the political language of their children. This generational shift demonstrates that the "afterlife" of an object is not linear but is constantly being re-politicized as new generations bring new historical consciousnesses to bear upon it. This politicization is a form of identity work, a way for younger diaspora members to articulate a distinct identity that is both

Dutch and Indonesian, but also critically engaged with the histories that connect these two places.[13-15]

The theme of the museum as a "dual site" highlights the institution's deeply fraught position in the post-colonial era. The museum is not a neutral space. It is what James Clifford, adapting Mary Louise Pratt, called a "contact zone"-a space where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power". Our findings show the museum as a textbook contact zone. The diaspora community (representing the historically colonized) enters a space governed by the logic of the Western institution (representing the colonizer) to engage with their own heritage. The experience is defined by this power asymmetry. The pride My (29, 2nd Gen) feels is a moment of connection, where she successfully uses the museum's cultural capital to validate her heritage to an outsider. The pain Jk (55, 1st Gen) feels about the *keris's* "trapped soul" is a direct critique of the "museological gaze"-a way of seeing that objectifies, decontextualizes, and aestheticizes the artifact, stripping it of the spiritual and social life it once had. This process of turning a living object into a static specimen is a form of epistemic violence, a continuation of the colonial project of classifying and controlling the "other". The emotional rollercoaster described by St (38, 2nd Gen) is the affective experience of navigating this contact zone, a constant negotiation between the pleasure of recognition and the pain of misrepresentation. This finding forcefully argues that for museums to truly decolonize, they must move beyond simply revising labels and towards fundamentally restructuring these power dynamics through co-curation and shared authority. The museum must transform from a space of representation of communities to a space of platform *for* communities, where they can tell their own stories in their own voices.[16-18]

The final theme, the emergence of a "digital afterlife," is a crucial contemporary development. It suggests a partial decentralization of the museum's power. If the museum archive is, as many post-colonial critics argue, an instrument of colonial power that controls history by controlling the sources, then the digital activities of the diaspora represent the creation of what we might call a "counter-archive." This aligns with theories of networked social movements and digital activism. Platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp allow the diaspora to create their own "public sphere," a space where they can formulate and circulate counter-narratives that challenge the museum's official story. When Aln (22, 3rd Gen) says, "The museum might have the object, but we have the narrative," she is articulating a profound shift in power. The diaspora is leveraging the accessibility of digital information-often provided by the museums themselves through online databases-to build their own knowledge base and political arguments. This is a form of symbolic repatriation that precedes, and fuels, demands for physical restitution. It transforms the object's afterlife from a singular, institutionally-controlled narrative into a polyvocal, networked, and perpetually evolving conversation. This digital dynamism ensures that the contested artifact can never again be a silent object in a glass case; its story is now being told and debated globally, in real-time, by the very community from which it was taken. This digital engagement creates what Manuel Castells calls a "networked social movement," where decentralized actors can coordinate and mobilize around a shared cause. The WhatsApp groups and social media campaigns described by participants are micro-examples of this phenomenon.[19,20] They demonstrate how digital technologies empower marginalized communities to challenge the authority of large institutions and to build solidarity across geographical distances, connecting the diaspora in the Netherlands not only with each other but also with activists, scholars, and cultural practitioners in Indonesia.

4. Conclusion

The afterlife of a contested object is not a quiet repose in a museum case but a vibrant, dynamic, and deeply meaningful existence shaped by the communities that claim it as their own. This study has demonstrated that for the Indonesian diaspora in the Netherlands, the *keris* is far from being a forgotten relic of a distant past. It is a living entity, an anchor of

identity, a catalyst for political awakening, and a bridge across generations. Its meaning is continuously negotiated—in the quiet moments of reflection in a museum gallery, in the impassioned debates of student activists, and in the global flows of digital media. Any meaningful discussion about the future of contested artifacts must move beyond the bilateral framework of holding institution and nation of origin to fully incorporate the voice and experience of the diaspora. These communities are not passive observers but key stakeholders and active agents in shaping the cultural and political significance of these objects. For museums, this necessitates a radical rethinking of their role, from one of sole custodianship to one of active partnership and facilitation. This involves not only telling more inclusive stories about the objects but also creating spaces for diasporic communities to tell their own stories, to express their pain, their pride, and their aspirations for the future. This research did not delve deeply into the specific policies of the museums themselves or the official political stance of the Indonesian government, which are clear limitations. Its strength, however, lies in its unwavering focus on the community perspective. Ultimately, the journey of the *keris*-from the hands of a Javanese empu, through the violence of colonial acquisition, to its display in a Dutch museum, and into the hearts and minds of a new generation of the diaspora—is a testament to the enduring power of objects to bind people to a past and inspire them towards a different future. Understanding its complex afterlife is to understand the enduring, and evolving, legacy of colonialism itself.

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