The vast majority of objects from Aceh in Dutch museums came there through the hands of the military. This fact is related to the long period of the Aceh War (1874–1914) that was followed by continued popular resistance. The following is an analysis of the collecting practices of army officer G.C.E. van Daalen (1863-1930), which provides insight into how high-ranking officers acquired objects, against the backdrop of varying degrees of pressure and violence. An overarching question is what it means that almost all collecting was done by military staff and in the context of conflict and resistance to colonial rule.

Fig. 1 (above): Frits van Daalen, 1909. Photograph W. Karsen Jr. Collection Leiden University Library KTLV 7810.

Fig. 2 (right): Sikin panjang, 19th century. Collection Rijksmuseum NG-2004-47.

Fig. 3: Display of the Van Daalen collection in the Ethnographic Museum of the Royal Military Academy. Objects from Aceh in Dutch museums. Collecting in the context of conflict and resistance to colonial rule.

By Force of Arms

Collecting During the Aceh War

Mirjam Shatanawi

Gottfried Coenraad Ernst van Daalen, also known as Frits van Daalen, was a high-ranking military officer of Indo-European descent in the Royal Dutch East Indies Army (Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger or KNIL) [Fig. 1]. Already notorious during his lifetime, he owed his infamous reputation to the brutal campaigns he headed in Aceh during the first years of the 20th century. What is less known is that he was also an avid collector who assembled collections for a wide range of museums in both the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies. Today, these objects are dispersed over more than a dozen museums, libraries, and archives in Jakarta, Amsterdam, Leiden, Rotterdam, Breda, and Cologne.1 For the PPROCE project, the provenance of two objects was further investigated. One of the objects under investigation was an Acehnese sword, a sikin panjang, that is currently in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam [Fig. 2]. The sword has a decorated sheath, the blade is damascened (featuring pamar), and it has a decorative crown (gagal) of gold adorns with plant motifs filled in with blue and green enamel. In other words, this is a weapon of high aesthetic quality, which was probably acquired from the bequest of Theodorus A.W. Ruys van Beekhoven, who was the first governor of the Netherlands Overseas in Aceh during the period before the Aceh War. Two military campaigns in particular provided him with the opportunity to assemble systematic collections: the 1901 exploratory mission to the Gayo region and the extremely violent campaign to conquer the Gayo and Alas regions in 1904. The latter military expedition also had a scientific purpose, as the official report explains: “the goal is to get scientific results too, as far as the military aims and the difficult circumstances in which the column has to operate will allow […] finally a very complete and extensive report on the Alas people, who were entirely without description until now, will be brought out.”2 To this end, a botanist of the ’s Lands Plantentuint in Buitenzorg (the present-day Keuning Raja Bogor) came along to collect specimens of plants and insects; cartographic mappings of the terrain were carried out; and a mining engineer collected specimens of the ground. The specimens were sent to the Plantentuint as well as the Rijkssherbarium in the Netherlands (these are currently held by Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden). Van Daalen took it upon himself to collect ethnographic objects and manuscripts. The objects were distributed to museums in Batavia, Leiden, and Rotterdam, and the manuscripts were sent to Christian Schmidt (1879-1953), Van Daalen habitually confiscated looted weapons to add to his collection: “During a battle under his command, a lieutenant captured a golden shafted lance and asked Van Daalen if he could keep this weapon as a souvenir. Van Daalen took the weapon with an ice-cold shaft and asked: ‘if anyone is entitled to this weapon, it is me’. And the lance went behind him and said: ‘[mine], but ‘gua punya’ [mine], but it is me’,”4

The outcome of the research carried out for PPROCE was that it cannot be determined how exactly the sword was acquired. This is because Van Daalen wrote only in general terms about the weapons he obtained, so only rare and unique items in his collection can be identified. The sikin panjang that is now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, although of high quality, has no unique appearance nor striking features that testify to its individual history, which makes it more difficult to identify in written sources. However, a general picture of how Van Daalen acquired weapons can be sketched. The KNIL did not have official guidelines until 1928, but in practice looted weapons had to be handed over to the highest commander in the field, who would keep them at the discretion of the government. That Van Daalen did not always keep to this informal rule is clear from letters he wrote to his wife Betsy. For example, on 4 July 1896 he wrote about a battle in the village of Angalung: “At around 9:30 am we drew up to the place, the first shot was fired at 10:45 followed by the assault and hand-to-hand combat in the benteng [fortress] and at 5 pm it was all over. It was an interesting thing, that battle, all quite dark and no sound other than the cracking of gunfire and the yelling of the natives. Not surprising given that the Acehnese left in our hands 110 dead bodies and two little boys of five and six years old with minor injuries. Naturally several weapons were captured of which I have three fine specimens.”

According to fellow officer Harko Schmidt (1879-1953), Van Daalen habitually confiscated looted weapons to add to his collected items: “During a battle under his command, a lieutenant captured a golden shafted lance and asked Van Daalen if he could keep this weapon as a souvenir. Van Daalen took the weapon with an ice-cold stare, handed it over to an orderly standing behind him and said: ‘if anyone is entitled to this weapon, it is me’. And the lance went to the museum. With the troops, the ‘iron’ general therefore had the name that in his eyes everything was ‘guau punya’ [mine], but that was not known there – and Van Daalen thought it unnecessary that people knew – that all such loot was sent to the museums.”

The research disclosed that, in addition to spoils of war and other ‘finds’ during
military operations, Van Daalen also acquired weapons by purchasing them from Acehnese contacts. In correspondence with Snouck Hurgronje, he writes about high-ranking members of the nobility selling precious weapons and manuscripts to him, making it clear that sometimes pressure was necessary to get things “out of their hands.” Occasionally, he commissioned blacksmiths to make a new weapon, if it was a rare type that was not otherwise available. It is clear, however, that the objects that Van Daalen obtained through purchase tended to be unusual and unique pieces. It is therefore more likely that the sikhin panjang in the Rijksmuseum collection was obtained as a spoil of war rather than through purchase or other means.

The second case of research into Van Daalen’s acquisition practices concerned two pencil drawings. In the repository of the National Museum of World Cultures (Museum Volkenkunde collection), there are 15 drawings, all with imaginative depictions of various scenes. They were made by Teuku Teungoh, ulèëbalang (aristocratic leader) of the village of Pate on the west coast of Aceh. The drawings are exceptional because little figurative drawing is known from Aceh. Prior to the provenance research, little was known about Teuku Teungoh, addressed to the civil commander (Fig.5). One of them there is also a note in Dutch, written by Frits van Daalen, stating that the Teuku is writing from prison in Pulo Raya, and that he is requesting: (1) grace, (2) a small knife, and (3) permission to take a walk. However, according to Dr. Annabel Gallop, Lead Curator of the British Library’s Southeast Asia collections, Van Daalen made a mistake in interpretation. The first line in Malay is not a specific request for grace or a pardon, but just the conventional preamble appropriate for a humble request made to an overlord. The request reveals that the Teuku tried to use the presentation of the drawings to the civil commander to send out a cry for help. During the research it was discovered that the civil commander in question was most likely Theo Veltman (1868–1943), who held the office between October 1903 and March 1905; alternatively, it might possibly have been Henri Swart (1863–1914), who was appointed as the first civil gezaghebber of Pulo Raya in July 1902. Both officers were avid collectors (although Swart focused more on weapons), and Teuku Teungah is strengthening his plea by referring to an object, possibly a receptacle, which the civil commander apparently had requested him to make: “Many greetings, I proffer my pARDS beneath the shoes of Sir, with my hopes for permission from Sir, that Sir should give the order for me to be taken for a walk each day, because for so long now I have been kept in, unable to see anything, and I have frequently fallen ill: this is my never-ending hope entrusted to Sir.” Thus, while in prison, Teuku Teungah asked the governor to lighten his regime, requesting time out of his cell to see the daylight and to go for a walk. The investigation did not make clear why he was imprisoned, nor whether he was punished for political or criminal activities. However, in the years directly after the death of famed resistance leader Teuku Umar (1899), there were pockets of resistance active on the mainland, and, apart from a handful of objects, left Aceh, collecting stopped completely, and, apart from a handful of objects, therefore, everything in the museums was taken during the 1942–1945 period of colonial rule. Around 20% of the total collection of Acehnese objects in the National Museum of World Cultures are weapons, reflecting the fact that most collecting was done by the army. In contrast to other parts of Sumatra and Java, where curators undertook collecting trips from the 1900s onwards so that museums could recover their traditional components following WWII, the Dutch museums contain virtually no Acehnese objects from the post-independence period. This effectively freezes Aceh in its image as a setting of colonial conflict.


The Focus