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Two Unknown Letters from the Kartini Family to M.J. de Goeje

Deux lettres inédites de la famille Kartini à M.J. de Goeje

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NICO J.G. KAPTEIN *

Two Unknown Letters from the Kartini Family to M.J. de Goeje **

Introduction

M. J. de Goeje (1836-1909) was Professor of Arabic at Leiden University from 1869 until 1906 and, in his capacity of *Interpres Legati Warneriani* or curator of the manuscripts of Leiden University Library, was also responsible for the Oriental collections at Leiden University. He is mainly known as a philologist and editor of Arabic texts.¹ De Goeje had an extensive international network of colleagues, former pupils and others, and with many of them he was in touch through correspondence. This network was not confined to specialists in Arabic philology, but also included persons who have played a role in the administration and study of the Netherlands East Indies. Among those persons were his most famous pupil C. Snouck Hurgronje, and others, like P.J. Veth, L.W.C. van den Berg, Ph. S. van Ronkel, G.P. Rouffaer, J. Brandes, and N. Adriani.

In the Leiden University Libraries many letters addressed to de Goeje from a wide variety of persons have been preserved, including those just mentioned (BPL 2389). Among these letters, I came across two, coming from

*. Leiden University

** . I am most grateful to Merle Ricklefs for helping me with the difficult translation of the letters into English. All flaws are of course my responsibility. Moreover, I thank Leiden University Libraries for granting me permission to publish these letters.

1. Vrolijk and van Leeuwen, *Arabic Studies in the Netherlands*, pp. 103-113.

the Javanese aristocratic family of Kartini²; one from Sosro Kartono, the older brother of Kartini and one from Roekmini, one of the sisters of Kartini. These two unknown letters which shed some more light on Kartono's study days in Leiden, form the focus of this brief article.³

Kartono's study in the Netherlands

Raden Mas Panji Sosro Kartono was born in Majong 1877 as the third son of the later Regent of Jepara, Raden Mas Adipati Ario Sosroningrat, who held the position of *wedono* in Majong at the time. All in all, Sosroningrat was married in a polygamous marriage with two wives and would father eleven children, among whom Kartini, who was born two years after Kartono from the same mother Ibu Ngasira.⁴

After the European Elementary School (E.L.S., *Europese Lagere School*) in Jepara, Kartono continued his secondary education at the Higher Civil School (H.B.S., *Hogere Burger School*) in Semarang, where he graduated in 1897, which was an exceptional achievement for a Javanese at that time. He was a talented pupil and, in line with his progressive ideas on education, his father Sosroningrat decided to send his son for his tertiary education to the Netherlands. At the time, this was an extraordinary decision, because Kartono would become the first Javanese university student in the Netherlands.⁵

In the Netherlands he initially enrolled in the Polytechnical School in Delft, but the courses at this institute did not appeal to Kartono and before long he contacted the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Leiden to study "Languages and Literatures of the East Indian Archipelago". In order to be admitted to the Faculty he had to pass the compulsory preparatory exam, the so-called *Staatsexamen*, which included Latin and Greek. In this initial preparatory phase of his university study Kartono was active in intellectual life and thanks to the well-known professor of Sanskrit H. Kern he became a member of the Royal Institute (*Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*). In this period he also assisted Rouffaer and H.H. Juynboll with the research for their much later published book about batik art in the Netherlands East Indies. In September 1899 he received a prestigious invitation to give a lecture on the state of the Dutch language in the Netherlands East Indies at a congress

2. Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879-1904) is regarded as the first Indonesian feminist and as such enjoys an iconic status in present day Indonesia. For a general introduction to the period and Kartini and her family, see Coté, *Realizing the Dream*, pp. 1-49.

3. The rest of his very interesting biography falls outside the scope of this paper. Kartono died in 1951, see for a preliminary sympathetic account Purbopranoto, "Nagedachtenis".

4. Ngasira was not the Raden Ayu, the principal wife, but a concubine (*selir*) of less noble birth. See for the family tree, Jacquet, *Brieven*, p. XVIII.

5. Poeze, "Indonesians at Leiden University," p. 252, mentions a Moluccan student, who should be regarded as the very first Indonesian university student ever, because he followed some lectures at Leiden University. However Kartono was the first one to be officially admitted in 1901.

on the Dutch language in the Belgian city of Gent, and thus became the first Indonesian to speak in Dutch in Europe in a public event.⁶ However, study results were not forthcoming.

This lack of study results was a great burden on the family in Jepara; Sosroningrat had difficulty to fund the study of his son and was also under much pressure for his liberal ideas on the education of his children. Judging from the letters of Kartini to the wife of the “Ethical” colonial official J.H. Abendanon, this led to a real crisis in the family.⁷ Eventually, in August 1901 Kartono passed his *Staatsexamen*⁸ and from this time onwards he seems to have focused more on his study and the family occasionally received encouraging letters on the progress of Kartono from persons from the Netherlands, like his teacher Professor Kern.⁹ Finally, in June 1903, Kartono did his BA (*kandidaats*) exam.¹⁰

Kartono’s Letter to de Goeje

The first letter to deal with in this paper stems from the period in which Kartono was a student in East Indian languages at Leiden University, preparing for his MA (*doctorandus*) degree. In this period Kartono’s family in the Netherlands East Indies suffered a severe blow, namely the untimely and unexpected death of Kartini on 17 September 1904.

As part of the curriculum in East Indian languages, Kartono also had to follow the courses in Arabic given by M.J. de Goeje, who counted him as one of his best pupils.¹¹ Shortly after the death of his beloved sister, on 3 October 1904 Kartono wrote his professor a short message. The original letter is written in impeccable Dutch, which is transcribed in the Appendix.¹² This letter reads in my English translation as follows:

6. Purbopranoto, “Nagedachtenis,” pp. 287-291; Poeze, *In het land van de overheerser*, pp 29-32.

7. Jacquet, *Brieven*, pp. 32- 36; 216-218.

8. *Idem*, p. 78.

9. *Idem*, pp. 139; 285; 287; 293; 302.

10. Poeze, “Indonesians at Leiden University,” 253.

11. Jacquet, *Brieven*, p. 302.

12. The letter is kept in Leiden University Libraries, Special Collections, BPL 2389, sub Kartono.

Highly Learned Sir,

To my regret, I have been forced to stay a few days longer in Baarn.¹³ I hope that you are willing to forgive my absence. I have constant fear of Father who has lost so much in my sister. He is not so strong any longer. May God give him the strength to bear this sorrow. With the highest respect, I call myself

Very Learned Sir,

Your obliging servant and pupil

Sosro Kartono

Baarn,

3 October 1904

The letter is not more than a hasty scribble, but shows the good relationship between de Goeje and his student, as well the state of shock in which Kartono and his family were after the death of Kartini.

Roekmini's Letter to de Goeje

The second letter to de Goeje was written by a sister of Kartono, called Roekmini (1880-1951). This letter was written on 5 April 1905, a few months after yet another disaster had fallen on the family, namely the death of Sosroningrat, Roekmini's and Kartono's father on 16 January 1905.

Roekmini was a daughter of Sosroningrat and Raden Ayu Muryam, the other of his two wives; she was not the mother of Kartono and Kartini, and Roekmini was therefore actually a half-sister of Kartini and Kartono. Roekmini is less famous than her sister Kartini, but she is likewise a person who greatly contributed to the improvement of the position of Indonesian women and the promotion of social justice.¹⁴

Like her illustrious sister, Roekmini was a keen letter writer and many letters from her have been preserved. From these letters it appears that, like Kartini, she was much concerned about her brother Kartono in the Netherlands.¹⁵ In a letter from 16 February 1905 to Mr. and Mrs. Abendanon, it appears that she was deeply worried that Kartono was not able to cope with the death of his father, and that she felt great pity for him that he could not attend the funeral.¹⁶

Roekmini's letter was also written in Dutch in a flowery style and is presented in the Appendix.¹⁷ In translation it reads as follows:

¹³. Baarn is a city in the eastern part of the Netherlands, some 65 kilometres from Leiden. Perhaps Kartono was staying there as the guest of former Governor-General C.H.A. van der Wijck who had a house in Baarn and with whom Kartono was on familiar terms, see Jacquet, *Brieven*, pp. 172; 217.

¹⁴. Coté, *Realizing the Dream*, pp. 50-56.

¹⁵. Idem, pp. 156-183.

¹⁶. Idem, p. 108.

¹⁷. The letter is not catalogued, but is kept together with Kartono's letter to de Goeje in Leiden University Libraries.

Japara 5 April 1905

To the Highly Learned Sir
Professor M.J. de Goeje
Leiden

Highly Learned Sir!

It is but an inner necessity that emboldens me, a sister of Kartono, to present this writing to you, to inform You of our deeply felt gratitude for what You are to him in particular in his days of most bitter sorrow and struggle.

Kartono wrote to us of the great and fatherly friendship and sympathy he receives from You, who have given him such indescribably splendid support to wish living worthily henceforth. Words nearly failed him in explaining all of this to us truthfully.

O, how deeply, deeply do we not feel, especially our mother, how You care for him. What sorrow have we not had for him in his bitter, bitter experiences, where, with all our love for him, we felt powerless to give him the necessary solace. How we have been consumed by the secret fear that fate's blows would break him irretrievably. But now he is before us, indeed with great anger in his heart, but on the other hand with such proud courage for life, in which he impressed upon us no longer to be concerned about him.

O, could we ever be grateful enough to You and Your esteemed friends, his noble protectors, for all the good that you do not only for him, but also for all of us here?

O, how could it not often become a deep desire to actually express our gratitude to You, to be able to press Your hands?

Our deeply beloved Father departed with the greatest inner peace. His deathbed was so strangely calm, as if His heart could have held no sorrow, even as he must leave behind all his family. Could perhaps a premonition have contributed to that, that even for him who would miss Him most bitterly, there would be no lack of "blessing", as it now appears? God bless You for having held Your hand in so fatherly a way over the head of our poor, poor Kartono.

This is our prayer that ascends to the Highest whenever we think of him.

May we entrust him further in the favour of Your esteemed Fatherly friendship and sympathy.

After offering our polite respects, I call myself

Respectfully Your grateful servant

Roekmini

Like the previous letter, this one underscores the excellent relationship which existed between de Goeje and his student Kartono, as well as the state of shock in which the entire family was after the death of Kartini, and slightly later the head of the family Sosroningrat.

Conclusion

The two letters presented here capture a short period of time in the student days of Raden Mas Panji Sosro Kartono, when he was working towards his MA degree in East Indian languages at Leiden University. After a rather slow start with his studies, amongst other things caused by the obligatory preparatory university exam he had to take, Kartono's studies finally ran smoothly. However, in this period he lost both his sister Kartini and his father

Sosroningrat at the other side of the globe, and the two letters presented here underline that the loss of two beloved members of his family would not have been very conducive in concentrating on his studies.

Postscript

After the death of his sister and father, Kartono continued his study at Leiden University, but notwithstanding the “fatherly” care of de Goeje and others, in addition to coping with the loss of his beloved, he encountered many problems. The precise nature of those is not clear, and it took him until 8 March 1908 to obtain the MA degree. In a letter from 28 March of that year to Mr. and Mrs. Abendanon, Roekmini expressed her gratitude for helping her brother with the obtaining of this degree.¹⁸ In another letter, dated 10 May 1909, another member of the family, the younger sister of Roekmini, Kartinah (1883-1963?) repeated this gratitude to Mr. Abendanon, and mentioned that after all Kartono’s misery his graduation had brought much joy to the family. However, this joy had sad undertones, as Kartinah continued: “Father and our dear sister Kartini should have been alive to witness this - how overjoyed they too would have been”.¹⁹

In a later letter to Mrs. Abendanon in 1911, Kartinah optimistically made inquiries about the incumbent submission of Kartono’s PhD dissertation.²⁰ This PhD thesis would deal with Middle Javanese²¹, but Kartono was not able to meet the high expectations and his thesis never saw the light.²² The reasons for this are not clear yet and should be the object of further research.²³ In this research the position of C. Snouck Hurgronje should certainly be taken into account, because after his return from the Netherlands East Indies in 1906 he succeeded de Goeje as Professor of Arabic at Leiden University and in this capacity will surely have been involved in the education of Kartono.

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18. Coté, *Realizing the Dream*, pp. 144-145.

19. Idem, pp. 224-5.

20. Idem, p. 232.

21. Purbopranoto, “Nagedachtenis”, p. 291.

22. Poeze, *In het land van de overheerser*, p. 127. The first Indonesian ever to get a PhD degree from Leiden University was Hoessein Djajadiningrat in 1913.

23. Poeze, “Indonesians at Leiden University”, p. 253.

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Appendix

Transcripts of the Letters in the Original Dutch

a) Kartono to de Goeje (UBL BPL 2389, sub Kartono).

Hooggeleerde Heer,

Tot mijn leedwezen heb ik mij genoodzaakt gezien een paar dagen langer te Baarn te blijven. Ik hoop, dat U mijn wegblijven zal willen vergeven. Ik heb voortdurende angst voor Vader, die zooveel verloren heeft in mijne zus. Hij is niet meer zoo sterk. God geve hem de kracht om dit leed te dragen.

Met de meeste hoogachting, noem ik mij,

Hooggeleerde Heer

Uw dw. di.²⁴ en leerling

Sosro Kartono

Baarn,

3 October 1904

b) Roekmini to de Goeje (UBL BPL 2389, sub Kartono).

Japara 5 April 1905

Aan den Hooggeleerden Heer

Professor M.J. de Goeje

Leiden

Hooggeleerde Heer!

Het is hier slechts eene innige behoefte, die mij nu, een zuster van Kartono, dan verstout U dit schrijven aan te bieden, om U ons diepgevoelden dank hier, te kennen te geven voor 't geen U hem is in zijn dagen in 't bijzonder van 't bitterste leed en strijd.

Kartono schreef ons dan welk eene groote, vaderlijke vriendschap en belangstelling hij van U mag // genieten, die hem zulk een onnoemelijk heerlijken steun geven voor een waardig verder willen leven. Het ontbrak hem

24. Brief for dienstwillige dienaar.

ook schier aan woorden, om dat alles ons op zijn waarlijkst kenbaar te maken.

O, hoe innig, innig gevoelig zijn wij er nu niet voor, onze Moeder in 't bijzonder, hoè U zich over hem ontfermt. Welk een leed hebben wij toch maar niet gehad om hem zelf in zijne bittere, bittere ervaringen, waar wij met al onze liefde voor hem, ons dan niet bij machte voelden om hem de noodige vertroosting te geven. Hoe verteerde ons die heimelijke angst, dat hem die slagen van 't noodlot onherroepelijk zouden breken. Doch nu is hij dan vòòr ons, wel nog met een groote woede in // zijn hart, maar daarentegen met zulk fieren moed weer voor 't leven, waarin hij ons ook op 't hart drukte, niet meer ongerust over hem te zijn.

O, zouden wij U en Uwe hooggeachte Vrienden, zijn edele beschermers wel ooit genoeg dankbaar kunnen zijn voor 't geen U hem dan niet alléén weldoet, maar ook ons allen hier?

Hoe kan 't ons dikwijls niet een innig verlangen worden om bij U daadwerkelijk voor onze dankgevoelens uit te komen, Uwe handen te mogen drukken.

Onze innig geliefde Vader was heengegaan als met de grootste zielevree. Zijn sterfbed was zoo wonderlijk kalm, als kon Zijn hart geen leed ingehouden hebben, nu al de zijnen te moeten verlaten. Kon dan nu misschien een // vooruit weten daartoe bijgedragen hebben, dat 't hem zelfs, wien 't gemis Zijner 't grootst en 't bitterst zou zijn, niet aan "zegen" zou ontbreken, zooals 't nu blijkt? God zegene U hiervoor, dat U Uw hand zoo vaderlijk boven het hoofd heeft gehouden van onzen armen, armen Kartono.

Dat is het gebed, dat uit ons ópstijgt tot den Hooge, wanneer wij nu hem gedenken.

Mogen wij hem nu verder in de gunst van Uw hooggeschatte Vaderlijke vriendschap en belangstelling aanbevelen.

Na aanbieding onzer beleefde respecten, noem ik mij
Hoogachtend
Uw dankbare di.sse²⁵

Roekmini

25. Brief for dienaressse.

