'The Eurasian Question' : the colonial position and postcolonial options of colonial mixed ancestry groups from British India, Dutch East Indies and French Indochina compared

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5 Changes in the discourse on Eurasians around 1900

5.1 Introduction

In all three colonies, a negative change in the discourse on Eurasians occurred in the late colonial period. The population of mixed ancestry came to be regarded with suspicion, and both Europeans and indigenous people denounced mixedness. This negative portrayal made the Eurasian group more visible in colonial society. The colonial officials set them apart, and as a result the Eurasians started to behave as a separate group, and founded organisations that promoted their interests and demanded rights.

5.2 British India: Set apart as a separate group and acting as one

In British India, the process of westernisation and simultaneous disapproval of mixed relations started before the middle of the nineteenth century. That was earlier than in the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina. While in the middle of the eighteenth century, 90 per cent of British colonists in British India were married to Indians or Anglo-Indians, one century later this trend was almost inexistent.[1]

British authorities became aware of the wealth that people (including Anglo-Indians) could earn in India. They could profit from them through the exploitation and development of the colony. As mentioned earlier, Eurasians were excluded from the military and civil services of the British East India Company at the end of the eighteenth century, also under influence from the revolt of mixed peoples in Haiti, Mexico and Peru. The direct cause was a power struggle within the higher ranks of the East India Company. Their exclusion meant a deterioration in the standard of living of the Eurasians, and therefore, as the Anglo-Indian historian Goodrich wrote in 1952:

> It is hardly surprising that within a few years the Eurasians themselves recognised that they had been set apart as a separate group and began to act as one.[2]

According to the most well-known leader of the All-India Anglo-Indian Association (AIAIA) in the twentieth century, Frank Anthony, the Anglo-Indian community developed 'distinctive racial-cum-linguistic-cum-natural' characteristics in the second half of the nineteenth century, that included 'certain common customs, manners and cultural affinities, with the supreme bond of English as their mother-tongue.'[3] At the same time, a social malaise had already set in among the community as a result of repressive measures taken by the British colonial officials. They identified this social

malaise as a 'Eurasian problem' and this made the community more visible as a distinct minority group.[4] A correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* noted the complicated, tragic position of the Eurasians (or Anglo-Indians) of British India in 1933 by writing:

> The history of these people, the 'Eurasians' of a former age, persons of mixed blood with European descent on their fathers' side, is one of the tragedies of racial contact. Shunned by Indians of pure blood, despised by the white, with that arrogant colour prejudice which mounted steadily after the Mutiny, the unfortunate Anglo-Indian found himself cut off entirely from the main economic and social bases of Indian life.[5]

5.3 Dutch East Indies: *Eereschuld* and educational opportunities for the colonised

From 1900 onwards, there was a growing awareness among progressive Dutch people that there was an *Eereschuld* ('a debt of honour') towards the indigenous people of the Dutch East Indies. The liberal member of Parliament C.Th. van Deventer developed this idea in his article *Eereschuld* in the Dutch magazine *De Gids* in 1899.[6] In 1901, Queen Wilhelmina in her annual address to the nation (*troonrede*) did not merely portray the Dutch East Indies as an exploitation colony, which existed for the benefit of the Dutch people, as she had in previous years, but also for the first time ever she spoke about the civilising duty the Dutch had in the Dutch East Indies.[7] Her talk marked the beginning of the *Ethische Politiek* ('ethical policy') in the Dutch East Indies. The idea that the indigenous people could not achieve a decent level of civilisation without Dutch leadership guided this policy. The ethical policy strengthened the distinction between the – supposedly – civilised coloniser and uncivilised colonised people. In 1900, the Javanese princess Kartini, an indigenous woman who had received a European education, made use of the new opportunities and opened a school for the daughters of native officials. Teaching was in Dutch and the idea behind the school was, that in the future 'the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands may be ever more closely associated.'[8]

Due to the availability of more educational opportunities for the indigenous population, people within and outside colonial governmental circles felt the need to stress the distinction between coloniser and colonised. Newly arrived *totok* women (with full Dutch ancestry) were 'educated' at the *Koloniale School voor Vrouwen en Meisjes* (Colonial School for Girls and Women) in The Hague (founded in 1920), before they travelled to the Dutch East Indies. The most important lesson at this school was that European women had to live up to 'white' values, norms and prestige. The colonial school urged the women to carry out 'active mothering' in the colony.[9] Mothering referred to how to treat the indigenous population. According to the school and public opinion, the worst thing that could happen when living in the colony was *verindischen* (losing European traits), which meant adopting the lifestyle of the indigenous people. This resulted in social disapproval and exclusion by European colonial circles.[10] Guidebooks like C.J. Rutten-Pekelharing's *Waaraan moet ik denken? Wat moet*

ik doen? Wenken aan het Hollandsche meisje dat als huisvrouw naar Indië gaat (What to take? What to do? Advice for the Dutch girl going to the Indies as a housewife) gave newcomers a thorough introduction and detailed guidelines about how to manage a household in the colony. This kind of manual reflected the sharpening of boundaries at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Dutch East Indies. European children were not to be given food by servants and instead the mother should feed her children herself. Furthermore, Rutten-Pekelharing advised that European children should not associate too closely with Indonesian servants to avoid learning bad manners.[11] There were many *baboes* (nannies) in the late colonial period, and Dutch women were advised to no longer use their services, or less extensively.

Because of increased educational possibilities in the Dutch East Indies, Indo-Europeans could achieve a better position within the colonial government and therefore became an extension of the upper class *totok* colonial society. The lower Indo-European classes were a constant concern for colonial society. They could damage the prestige and superiority of the white colonial elite and revolt against them.[12] One of the solutions was that Indo-European boys would follow military training at a strict military school specifically founded for them in the Javanese garrison town of Gombong. Dutch colonial authorities were certain that a military training would guarantee Indo-European loyalty to the colonial state. The school would produce soldiers for the Royal Dutch colonial army. The curriculum at the school consisted of training in a military atmosphere, with much attention to discipline and order. Similar to boarding schools in the mother countries, not all pupils were happy with this regime. For the younger children in particular, the harshness was hard to bear. In 1879, 85 children ran away from the school in Gombong, which had only a few hundred pupils.[13]

The *Ethische Politiek* provoked a lot of criticism, as expressed by H. Steengracht in an article published in *De Indische Kroniek*. According to him, Indo-Europeans should not make use of all the generous new regulations offered to them by the government: 'because they are just laggards by nature.' Steengracht emphasised the negative characteristics of Indo-Europeans and above all they were, according to him, a *schandvlek* (a smudge) on the character of the western race and nation.'[14]

5.4 French Indochina: A rejected, isolated and socially unstable category

In Indochina, the process of westernisation and the denouncement of mixedness started in the 1920s.[15] French colonial officials – like their counterparts in other colonies – were continually afraid that abandoned Eurasian boys would become 'déclassé' nationalist rebels as adults and would lead a revolt against French colonial hegemony. In 1920, Charles Gravelle, the president of the Eurasian welfare society in Cambodia, warned that Eurasians in Indochina could follow the example of the Spanish-Filipino *mestizos* who cooperated with Emilio Aguinaldo in their quest for Philippine independence.[16] Furthermore, they were worried about the fate of abandoned Eurasian girls who could damage white prestige by becoming prostitutes. French government officials were generally concerned that abandoned Eurasian children would become a source of white poverty once they were adults in Indochina. They referred to the

Dutch East Indies with its mass of Indo-European paupers, which according to the French officials was numbering 200,000 people.[17] In 1911, journalist Albert Pouvourville reported in an article that it was not unthinkable that 'sons of French colonials would pull rickshaws.'[18] This article was meant as a warning. In the colonial ethnography, the *Métis* were viewed as mentally unstable. They were believed to have contradictory inner instincts, and were rejected by both the European and indigenous society. Colonial ethnographers considered them as a rejected, isolated and socially ambiguous category and therefore potentially criminal.[19] One of the solutions the French colonial government suggested in the autumn of 1938 was to raise abandoned Eurasian boys in so-called *Ecoles enfants de troupes Métis* (military schools for Eurasian children). A French lieutenant-colonel had proposed this in 1910.[20] The combination of military and civil training at the military school was considered the best way to raise Eurasian boys to be good and loyal Frenchmen.[21] At the end of their training the pupils were enlisted in the French colonial army for five years. On 27 June 1939, construction of the most important *Ecole de troupes* started in Dalat, the first Indochinese hill station located in the central Highlands of the province of Annam.

It was not the only military school in French Indochina. In Phulang-Thuong, located in the north of Tonkin (in the north of current Vietnam), there was also a military school, although it was not exclusively meant for Eurasian boys. The regime of the military school was characterised by order and discipline. Children were sent away when they misbehaved, when they were seriously ill or if they violated military honour and discipline.[22] The criteria for admission were strict and not every *Métis* boy was admitted. The father could be unknown, but it had to be assumed that he was French, whereas the mother was usually Indochinese. French officials could not imagine, let alone tolerate the attendance of the offspring of the opposite kind of union: a French mother and an indigenous father. Children of a French father and a French mother were not admitted either. Boys had to be between 8 and 14 years old when they entered the school, although parents tried to circumvent this rule and get their older sons admitted; boys also had to pass an entrance exam and be in good physical condition, proven by a medical certificate presented by a military doctor. In a typical certificate which had a positive message for the candidate, it was noted that the *Métis* child was 'healthy, strong and with a good constitution'.[23] Many children from the institutions and orphanages did not pass the entrance exam and were not admitted.[24]

5.5 Comparison and conclusion: A similar process of Europeanisation

As has become clear, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Eurasians had largely come to be seen as 'the source of all evil' by the majority of colonial society in all three colonies.[25] More European women arrived in the colonies, and they were expected to live up to western values. Disapproval of miscegenation became more widespread.[26] As a result of the arrival of more European women and the increasing disapproval of miscegenation, boundaries between the colonisers, colonised and mixed ancestry groups were more sharply drawn. The process of Europeanisation of the colonies, which started around 1870, accelerated at the beginning of the twentieth century. The

mestizo pioneering culture from the early-modern times gradually gave way to a more western colonial culture in the Dutch East Indies and British India. This development started earlier in British India than in the Dutch East Indies, but also in the Indies archipelago 'being European' became the highest ideal in colonial society.

In Indochina, the transformation that started with the arrival of more European women in the colony began later and was less marked than in the Dutch East Indies and British India. This was caused by the recent settlement and the rather small European population. However, the role of French women in the young colony was the same: they were asked to create European or French households.[27] The oppositional process of Europeanisation, 'going native' or disappearing into indigenous society, was increasingly feared. In all three colonies, this disappearance could happen more easily with Eurasian children, who were not recognised, abandoned by their European fathers and raised in an indigenous environment. Colonial authorities set up orphanages and boarding schools for Eurasians in all three colonies to raise Eurasian children in a European environment and to prevent them from joining revolutionaries or nationalists. In French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies, colonial authorities offered Eurasian boys military training to ensure their loyalty to the colonial state. These institutions were usually located at a higher altitude, in the mountains, where the temperature was cooler, far removed from the supposedly injurious influences of the lower plains. The Eurasian children were raised and educated in a western sphere. Therefore, education was important to the decision of Eurasians to stay or to leave the former colony after decolonisation. In addition, the possibilities for Eurasians in the labour market in the three colonies gradually decreased so they started to feel threatened in their possibilities to gain a livelihood.