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## Introduction Western and Asian travel perspectives on Indonesia (1850-1950)

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# Introduction

## Western and Asian travel perspectives on Indonesia (1850-1950)

RICK HONINGS, JUDITH E. BOSNAK, AND COEN VAN 'T VEER

The “beautiful realm of Insulinde that coils yonder round the Equator, like an emerald sash.” This is how Eduard Douwes Dekker, Multatuli, describes the Indonesian archipelago in his novel *Max Havelaar* (1860) (Multatuli 1992: 237). Hundreds of writers before and after him have recounted their experiences in Indonesia. It cannot have escaped anybody that in the Netherlands a great deal of attention is currently being directed towards the Dutch colonial past. Hardly a week goes by without newspapers or journals writing about the subject and without studies, documentaries, and films coming out. For all Multatuli’s characterization of the Netherlands as a “robber state on the sea, between East Friesland and the Scheldt” (Multatuli 1992: 236) and his emphasis on the excessive violence used by the Dutch, it took the Netherlands a relatively long time to take a critical stance and relate to its erstwhile role of colonizer.

However, the Netherlands’ perception of itself as a benevolent colonizer has started to waver in the past few years. Colonial “heroes” of yesteryear have toppled from their pedestals, or elicit violent reactions. The last has not been heard, for example, about whether the statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen in the North Holland town of Hoorn shall or shall not remain in its place. In 2020, the Dutch king, Willem-Alexander, offered apologies for the Dutch violence during the Indonesian War of Independence to the Indonesian President. Two years later, Prime Minister Mark Rutte, speaking on behalf of his government, similarly made his apologies for the cruelties perpetrated by the Netherlands during the 1945-1949 period. Current studies and the recently completed research project *Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950*, in which Dutch and Indonesian scholars worked closely together, show that the Netherlands is now, finally, waking up to its colonial past.

The history of colonialism is, nevertheless, still primarily written on the basis of Dutch-language sources. Even so, increasingly louder voices are calling for a greater focus on non-Dutch, especially Indonesian perspectives, experiences, and stories. The Belgian cultural historian David van Reybrouck, for instance, extensively interviewed the last surviving eye-witnesses in

Indonesia for his book *Revolusi* (2020). The exhibition *Revolusi!* (2022) in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum also saw the collaboration of Indonesian curators, including Bonnie Triyana. *The Great Indonesia* exhibition, which opened in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam in 2023, similarly presents the colonial past in a wider context, devoting a great deal of attention to divergent views, long concealed or unheard stories, mainly from Indonesia.

Yet, foregrounding these other views and stories is far from easy as non-Western sources and counter-narratives are scarce. This scarcity can be partly accounted for by the language policy imposed by the Dutch. Learning the oppressor's language was reserved for a small elite. In contrast to the British in their colonies, the Dutch generally did not allow the Indonesian population access to western education, for fear that an unchecked dissemination of knowledge gained through the language might endanger the existence of the colony (compare Kees Groeneboer 1998: 1). This is how the Dutch author Rudy Kousbroek (2013: 249) puts it: a surplus of Indonesians with a command of the language was considered a "threat to the so-called 'harmonious development of the indigenous population', read: a threat to Dutch supremacy."

This divergent language policy of the Dutch has had a decisive impact on the literature. While British, Spanish, Portuguese, or French research typically includes indigenous perspectives, given that the colonized also wrote in the language of the oppressor, this poses more of a problem in the Indonesian context. As said, the number of Indonesians using Dutch in the colonial period was limited. Kousbroek (2013: 255) remarks that the body of Indonesian literature in Dutch is indeed small: "A few novels (how many? five?), poems, memoirs, letters, and some essays, a meagre yield for the famous three glorious centuries of Dutch colonization. Enough to write a paper about, but too little for a PhD thesis."

The importance of studying different international perspectives on Dutch colonialism was the starting point of the Vidi research project *Voicing the Colony: Travelers in the Dutch East Indies, 1800-1945*, financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), which has been ongoing at Leiden University since 2020. The project is a collaboration between researchers in the field of Dutch Studies and Southeast Asian Studies, aiming to achieve a (more) multi-voiced perspective on the colonial past and to build a bridge between the Netherlands and Indonesia and between scholars from Europe and Asia. The *Voicing the Colony* project examines travel literature, thereby positioning itself in the field of *travel writing studies*, a discipline that has seen a surge in international interest over the last decades. Travel-writing publications include numerous monographs and edited volumes, while a great many review studies, reference works, and research companions have also appeared over the past years. Further, the field has its own journal, *Studies in Travel Writing* (1997-present), published by the International Society for Travel Writing. Travel literature also takes centre stage in this present double special issue of *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* on "Western and Asian travel perspectives on Indonesia (1850-1950)", one offshoot of the Leiden research project.

While most people will have a clear picture of what travel literature is, it is by no means a homogeneous genre. It encompasses log books, diaries, memoirs, expedition reports, accounts, ships' logs, travel guides, letters, serials, and much more besides. Some texts are encyclopaedic in set-up, while others focus more on the individual experience. What, if anything, unites all these sub-genres? Famously, there is the definition by the English writer Jonathan Raban, who characterizes travel writing as "a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed" (Carl Thompson 2011: 11; Tim Youngs 2013: 1). The rich diversity of sub-genres also finds expression in the present issue of *Wacana*: from adventure stories to scientific expedition reports, from medical and religious writings to fictionalized travel stories, and from memoirs and letters to journalistic articles.

What all these sub-genres have in common is that they contain information about mentalities and ideologies in a certain time span. It is for this reason that Tim Youngs (2013: 1) calls travel writing "the most socially important of all literary genres". While travel accounts may, at first glance, have a semblance of objectivity, they never are objective. As Youngs puts it: "The biggest fiction is travel writing's own claim to being an objective genre" (Youngs 2013: 10). This statement applies to all travel literature, but especially to colonial travel literature. The genre was greatly influenced by prevailing notions about gender, class, and race. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Saïd writes about the Orientalist discourse that held, and still holds, sway in the West. In the nineteenth century, this Orientalism assumed a new shape under the influence of Darwinist race theories, which regarded the white race as the highest level of human development. This presumed superiority gave Western travellers *imperial eyes*, in the words of Mary Louise Pratt (2008): the power to gaze, judge, and rule.

In their articles in this special issue of *Wacana*, an international group of scholars examines European as well as Asian travel accounts pertaining to intercultural encounters in the Indonesian archipelago. They study travel texts not only in Dutch but also in various Indonesian languages, which have so far mostly received less attention. Analysis of depictions and representations of the "Other" and the "Self" could yield new insights into the power relations in colonial society, thereby problematizing these.

As Western travellers entered what they experienced as a strange, often "exotic" Asian world, they were forced to write about the "Other" and therefore, inevitably, also about themselves. The process in which the differences are stressed and magnified is known as *Othering*. As they focused on what was strange, travellers also presented an image of themselves: their depiction of the "Other" as different or inferior conveyed their own superiority as well. On the other hand, Indonesians were confronted with Westerners. The colony was, therefore, in the words of Pratt, a "contact zone", a geographical space in which different cultures encounter each other, which frequently resulted in oppression, inequality and conflict (Pratt 2008: 8). Most authors of the articles here have chosen, each in their own way, to adopt a postcolonial-

tinged approach, with attention directed towards unequal power balances between "West" and "East" and between the "Self" and the "Other" (see Rick Honings, Coen van 't Veer, and Jacqueline Bel 2021).

The articles in this double issue of *Wacana* span a long historical period, roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century to halfway through the twentieth century. Thus, the first article deals with the journey of the Austrian explorer Ida Pfeiffer, who arrived in the Netherlands East Indies on her second trip around the world in the 1850s, while the last article is about Dutch journalists who returned after the World War II to describe the (nowadays much-discussed) violence during the Indonesian War of Independence.

We have chosen a chronological set-up: Part I refers to the nineteenth century, Part II to the twentieth. What these contributions bring to the fore is colonialism's transnational character. They feature not only Dutch authors, but also Austrian, Norwegian, Hungarian, Italian, Polish-Russian, Danish, and American writers. Equally represented are Indonesian perspectives. We are told about the letters by Sutan Sjahrir and about the journey that Raden Aria Abdoerachman made when he and his family travelled to Europe in 1928. Further, a spotlight is turned on a more "hybrid" author, the Eurasian writer Dé-Lilah (Lucy van Renesse-Johnston), who was born in Java and subsequently settled in Deli. In 1896, she returned to the island of her birth for five months to set out on a tourist trip, on which she based her fictionalized *Mevrouw Klausine Klobben op Java* (Mrs Klausine Klobben in Java, 1899).

This double issue of *Wacana* can be truly said to contain a multi-coloured mosaic of perspectives, views, stories, experiences, and voices. We would like to thank all the authors who have contributed to this issue. We are grateful to the editors of *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia*, for the chance to act as guest editors, and would like to thank them for their excellent cooperation with us. We wish the reader an instructive journey to the times when Multatuli could still call Indonesia the "beautiful realm of Insulinde".

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