Cats and the vegetarian dish in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia: unsettling sources for environmental history

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Unsettling Sources for Environmental History

Marieke Bloembergen

Abstract

Taking cats and the vegetarian dish in Indonesia as a case study, this chapter explores the heuristic value of following the perspective of animals in studying histories of environmental knowledge and empathy in colonial and postcolonial contexts. It first figures out the politics and understandings of environmental empathy in a global context, turning, for the period under scrutiny, to forms of empathy that dwelled around gendered and theosophical recognitions of the suffering body of the animal, which unsettled dominant views on human–animal relationships in the West. How this mattered to cats in (post-)colonial Indonesia, and what the social history of the theosophical vegetarian dish can tell us further about empathy there, is the subject of the remainder of the chapter. The experiment turns out to be unsettling, and therefore insightful. The lives of cats and the vegetarian dish cross the spatial, moral, gendered, and racial structures of (post)colonial society, and help us look beyond these frameworks of understanding history.

Keywords: postcolonial, cats, vegetarianism, knowledge and empathy, environmental history, Indonesia

The tenderness for cats [amongst 'natives'] has moved us more than once, as has the way the natives valorize the *koetjing tiga belang*, the cat with three colours, white, red and black. […] the one who mistreats a cat, will receive special

Gender and Animals in History. Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis/Yearbook of Women's History 42
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024
DOI 10.5117/9789048565283_BLOEMBERGEN

punishment in hell, the one who nurses a disabled cat, reaches out to Allah's blessing, in short the cat deserves exceptional distinction
– *Bataviaasch nieuwsblad*, February 2, 1914[1]

The majority of the Javanese is already vegetarian, as they do not eat beef, but poultry
– Soewandi, 1907[2]

Cats in Indonesia today are prominent in places where people dwell or work. They seem to move people, and therefore lead a sufficiently fed, comfortable cat life. Street cats get fed by the rich and the poor and find homes across classes. Some cats from the past found a place in sacred Islamic graves (*kramat*), some others today, like a beloved three-coloured cat at the University of Gadja Madah in Yogyakarta, have their own Instagram account. Yet, a cat's life in Indonesia can be foul as well. Just consider the suffering body of the continuously pregnant female youngsters nobody really seems to care about. Moreover, as Indonesia scores high on the world's poverty scale, one could imagine that cats run the risk of being killed by people for consumption.[3] But this goes against the wishes of the prophet, as summarized from Islamic sources by the colonial newspaper quoted above. The phenomenon of vegetarianism out of empathy for the animal, is, in comparison to cats, less visible as a local phenomenon in Indonesia. There are plenty of local vegetarian dishes, like *gado-gado* and *tempe*, but these are more likely the result of beef-economizing cooking traditions in a predominantly agricultural economy.[4] They are abundantly available in street food *warongs* and restaurants, but are, beyond a recently growing 'global' trend in urban hipster spaces and touristic hubs, rarely offered as 'vegetarian'. Yet, there are older vegetarian restaurants and practices that I encountered during my research on theosophical knowledge networks and alternative reform in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia. These restaurants

1 All translations, from Malay, Indonesian, or Dutch, are by the author.

2 R. Soewandi, "Vegetarisme [Vegetarianism]," *Pewarta Theosofi* II (March 1907), 155 (translation from Malay).

3 Immediately visible, considering the double economy, in any Indonesian city. See also World Bank Group, "Poverty & Equity Brief. Indonesia" (April 2023), https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global_POVEQ_IDN.pdf.

4 Muhammad Ishlah (*Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia* [The Indonesian Forum for Environment] AHLI), conversation with author, Yogyakarta, November 23, 2022.

created new vegetarian dishes out of theosophical devices and needs, like one called *Biefstuk Theosoof* (theosophical steak). These vegetarian encounters were unsettling to me, as they did not match my own understanding and practice of vegetarianism.

The combination of the beloved cat, across gendered, economic, and religious boundaries, and the theosophical steak provides an intriguing example of potentially animal-friendly behaviour in Indonesia. There seems to be a moral economy at work here, one that allows for human empathy for the animal-eating cat, but leaves us with a puzzle when it comes to not eating animals. How to understand that moral economy in Indonesia for colonial and postcolonial situations? What can looking at the animal and a modern practice of not eating animals in Indonesia make visible if we want to understand what makes empathy for the animal colonial and why (not)? What forms of knowledge and care concerning animals and the environment, come together in the vegetarian dish and in the love for the cat in Indonesia?

This experimental essay – a postcolonial thought experiment that anticipates further research – explores, with cats and the theosophical vegetarian dish in colonial Indonesia as a case, how following an animal-centred perspective may help us to understand what it means to decolonize the study of the history of environmental knowledge and the role of empathy therein. It is part of a larger research plan that aims to understand what environmental empathy – as well as its politics – may have been about in late colonial and postcolonial situations. Here, I focus on forms of knowledge relating to the animal and try to unpack the role of affections in this regard. The experiment, moreover, is mainly methodological: what is the heuristic value of following a cat- and vegetarian dish-centred perspective in studying histories of environmental knowledge in late colonial and postcolonial Indonesia? How would that approach influence the way we construct such histories, and how can it help us understand what makes the forms of knowledge we discern colonial (or not)? What is the role of gendered, racial, and (post-)colonial structures in the forms of knowledge that cats and the vegetarian dish generate? To what extent do cats and (theosophical) vegetarian knowledge practices ignore, transgress, or contest these structures?[5] How and why do these structures matter in history writing, when trying to understand them from the animal's perspective?

In following the cat and the vegetarian dish, I employ a 'social life of things'-approach, inspired by Arjun Appadurai's influential study, in the

5 Compare Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani (eds.), *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

analysis of a limited set of sources from late colonial and postcolonial times in which cats and/or vegetarian practices enter the stage.[6] While this approach runs the risk of 'objectifying' the animal, it enables us to see what vegetarian dishes, perceived as new, in different contexts, do, and it allows us to recognize the full agency of the cat. Following the perspective of a cat-in-motion, as she winds her way in full action, with grace, hunger, fear or anger, across space and time, illuminates what she actively does to the human social context, and to animal–human relationships, and what changing animal–human relationships do to the environment.

Before turning to the cat and the vegetarian dish, however, in the two following paragraphs I will reflect on the notion of environmental empathy, and how we can understand its gendered dimension for the period around 1900. I will then explore this further in relation to the vegetarian defence of the Theosophical Society (founded in New York in 1875), which spread its influence amongst followers worldwide from around 1900 onwards. This will complicate the question of what makes environmental knowledge, and empathy for the animal, in colonizing and colonized countries Western, colonial, or local.[7]

Unsettling Environmental Empathy: The Image of the Suffering Body

How to address environmental empathy, considering that it is such a fluid – and political – phenomenon? As is the case for cultural heritage formation, practices of empathy and care for animals or the environment at large are always political.[8] Empathy and care will mean different things to different groups of people in different contexts, and they will entail mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Also political is the kind of empathy that knowledge production concerning animals demands.[9] The challenge in this essay is to understand if and how human beings' empathy matters to the animal, and what following the animal and the vegetarian dish can teach us about the

6 Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

7 Compare Julia Hauser, "Internationalism and Nationalism: Indian Protagonists and Their Political Agendas at the 15th World Vegetarian Congress in India (1957)," *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 44, no. 1 (2021): 152–66.

8 Hauser, "World Vegetarian Congress."

9 J.S. Parrenas, *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 6, 191.

structures that we think rule the study of history and its colonial, gendered, and postcolonial dimensions.

When reflecting on what we mean, when using the concept environmental empathy in colonial situations (rather than e.g. 'domesticating nature'), and asking what would make this empathy local or colonial, it is insightful to return to Ramachandra Guha's classic 'Third World critique' of 'deep ecology'.[10] As a school of thought and concept, coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1973), deep ecology stood at the beginning of a movement, typical for the countercultural 1970s, calling for a philosophical and cultural revolution in human attitudes towards nature, moving away from the anthropocentric towards (re-)centralizing nature. Guha's central criticism is that this movement represents Western-centred forms of thinking, which ignore inequalities, both in ideas and in the policies of environmental protection. Deep ecologists, in Guha's view, overemphasize wildlife preservation at the cost of local human needs, and romanticize indigenous knowledge and Eastern spiritual traditions as forerunners of deep ecology. Amitav Gosh's recent best-selling effort to write an environmental history from the perspective of a nutmeg plant in Ambon, suffers, in that sense, from a comparable romanticism, particularly in its recourse to shamanistic knowledge as a solution to climate change.[11]

To understand the gendered dimension of forms of empathy, one way of approaching and defining empathy towards animals and nature is considering pain, and the awareness of the suffering body.[12] This kind of empathy towards animals, generated by recognition of pain, developed, in the West, in the late nineteenth-century, and, as gender historians have pointed out, especially amongst women.[13] (The first vegetarian restaurant in the Netherlands, founded in 1899, for example, was exclusively run by women.) Such animal-oriented empathy developed in the context of alternative social movements merging at that time, including radicalizing vegetarianism with older (religious and scientific) roots, anti-vivisectionist organizations,

10 Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," in *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays on North and South*, eds. Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 92–108.

11 Amitav Gosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

12 Gauri Viswanathan, "'Have Animals Souls?': Theosophy and the Suffering Body," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern language Association of America*, vol 126 (2011): 442.

13 Amongst others: Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine. Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 121–51. For an overview of recent studies on vegetarianism in European and colonial contexts, see Hauser, "World Vegetarian Congress."

and the Theosophical Society; and it did so alongside, or in reaction to, a dominant lack of awareness of the suffering (female and animal) body, which defined and still defines societal interhuman power relations, and the relations between human and non-humans.[14] This insight, I argue, may be of use for a working definition to understand and compare the forms of empathy this essay scrutinizes for colonial and postcolonial situations. First, empathy, here, entailed awareness and recognition of the suffering body – the animal's and the female's as a starting point – which may be experienced as love. Second, ideally, it entailed (promotion of) protective or empowering actions prompted by this awareness.[15]

The Animal and the Vegetarian Dish in the Theosophical Worldview

The forms of knowledge and empathy that come together in the Theosophical Steak that I encountered as a legacy of a theosophical past in Indonesia, will, like the notion of environmental empathy, differ in meaning and impact in comparison to other (European, Asian, colonial, postcolonial) contexts. Yet, the way the forewomen and -men of the internationally growing Theosophical Society began to defend vegetarianism, and prescribed empathy for the animal both as a moral device and as a means for spiritual cleansing and empowering, must have spoken to those who experienced inequality and suppression of their own bodies in gendered, racially, and/or colonially organized societies.

The still existing Theosophical Society (hereafter, TS) is an international spiritual reform movement that experienced its peak of popularity in the period 1900s–1930s. It was founded in New York in 1875 by Ukrainian-born Russian-German Helena Blavatsky and American Henry Olcott. In 1883 its headquarters moved to Adyar/Madras, in (then) British India. Aiming towards the highest spiritual wisdom through the study of all religions, and of preferably Vedic texts, the TS connected spiritual seekers, scholars, school teachers, administrators, artists, and 'Asian Art' collectors in both Asia and the West. It gained followers worldwide, including in the colonized world, amongst colonizers and colonized, and amongst them a remarkable number of women. While celebrating inclusiveness, through its ideal of an

14 Compare Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990).

15 Compare Parrenas, *Decolonizing Extinction*, 6: empathy needs 'work'.

international spiritual brotherhood, the TS, in practice and in its ideology, also reproduced racial hierarchies. At the same time, it was an emancipatory tool, to women worldwide, and to various groups in Asia, amongst whom, in the Dutch East Indies, a growing group of Javanese and Chinese emancipators, school teachers, shopkeepers, and administrators.[16]

While vegetarianism was neither a central theosophical device nor an obligation for its members, the TS propagated a worldview that called for empathy for the animal. Key to the theosophical defence of animal care was the lecture 'Vegetarianism in the Light of Theosophy' – delivered in 1897, in Manchester, and printed in multiple translations worldwide – by the British feminist, socialist, theosophical spokeswoman, and future president of the TS, Annie Besant (1847–1933).[17] In the lecture, she explained how the theosophical worldviews situated the bodies of minerals, animals, human beings, and astral bodies in a chain of connectedness, which reflected a hierarchical development towards spiritual redemption of the world at large. This development, moreover, revealed a growing of consciousness: from the level of animals and their capacity to feel happiness and pain, to human beings' capacity to express and act according to consciousness. The higher aim of spiritual redemption and the suffering body of the animal made it a responsibility of human beings to act with respect towards animals, and not to slaughter or eat them.

To further emphasize the urgency of not eating animals, Besant dramatically re-imagined for her audience the biggest slaughterhouse in the United States, in Chicago, and the fear, horror, and pain animals experienced there. Those who slaughtered thereby helped poison the environment, which she felt through – as she explained – astral vibrations, when passing Chicago by train. Thus, given the chain connecting all bodies, she implied: 'We are not free from the brutalizing results of that trade simply because we take no direct part in it'.[18] The violent acts of slaughtering animals, and eating

16 Marieke Bloembergen, 'New spiritual Movements, Scholars, and 'Greater India' in Indonesia, 1920s–1970s', in: Susie Protschky and Tom van den Berge eds, *Modern Yimes in Southeast Asia, 1920s-1970s*. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 57-86. Iskander P. Nugraha, *Theosofi, Nationalisme & Elite Modern Indonesia* (Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2002). H.O. De Tollenaere, *The Politics of Wisdom; Theosophy and Labour, National and Women's Movement in Indonesia and South Asia, 1875–1947* (Nijmegen: Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1996);

17 For the original lecture by Annie Besant, see Annie Besant, *Vegetarianism in the Light of Theosophy* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 3rd edition, April 1932), uploaded by Anand Gholap in 2016, https://www.anandgholap.net/AB_Vegetarianism_In_Light_Of_Theosophy.htm.

18 Besant, from her vegetarian lecture, tellingly quoted on a website on the history of vegetarianism: International Vegetarian Union IVU, "Annie Besant (1847–1933) Text of a Speech Given at Manchester UK, October 18, 1897," https://ivu.org/history2/besant/text.html.

them, affected and obstructed the potential transformation of mankind and the world's spiritual redemption, and vice versa. Since all creatures were connected, and fed into the development of the Spirit, not eating animals served a higher goal beyond respecting them: the cleansing of the human body, the Spirit's development, and thereby the world's spiritual redemption.

This worldview, which we might now term holistic, seems to resonate with environmental concerns today, which try to re-situate human animals back into nature and the cosmos. Its popularity amongst and beyond TS followers around 1900 is telling. It problematizes present-day theorizing and timing of the Anthropocene, and, much in line with Guha's criticism on 1970s deep ecology, the ways environmentalists, animal-rights activists, and sometimes also scholars in the field of environmental humanities, tend to romanticize 'indigenous environmental knowledge' of societies 'elsewhere' as being closer to nature. Such views, as the theosophical case illustrates, were developing as part and parcel of modernity, in the Global North and South.[19]

But to what extent would such variants of empathy matter to the cats dwelling in the colonial Dutch East Indies around 1900? How can following the perspective of the cat and the vegetarian dish help us to further complicate our understanding of the moral economy of empathy for the animal?

What the Cat Wants

In proposing to follow a 'cat-centred' perspective, I do not pretend to be able to enter the mind of the cats (however much I wish). Throughout, I cannot but follow the perspective of human beings, which is also limited by these sources' (colonial) framings. But when we 'read' the sources in which cats enter the stage consequently from the cat's vantagepoint, we see how they *choose* to spend a short or long time with human beings. For cats 'seek for, and absorb energy', as an Indonesian friend explained, when, in August 2023, we visited his grandparents' graves, and a young stray cat joined us and stayed, playfully attentive to the ritual homage.[20] My friend's interpretation presented as common knowledge is illustrative of what we human being cat lovers project on cats, and where we recognize each other's empathy for the

19 Compare Hauser, "World Vegetarian Congress."

20 Visit of the author to Pulo Menteng, Jakarta, with Dimas and Kiki Djajadiningrat, August 18, 2023.

cat. On the other hand, the cat in that graveyard effectively preferred to stay with us, even when the grave's caretaker tried to send it away: it returned, and, at the same time, had generated different forms of energy and affections. By reading sources 'cat-centred', we see how cats bring together various forms of energy, affections, and knowledge. For colonial times, these forms of knowledge include those of medical science-in-development, hygienics, and beliefs, which were of local and foreign/colonial origin.

A quick search into Delpher, the digitization project of the Dutch National Library, and into its colonial and postcolonial newspapers from the period 1890–1965, delivers a hit of 62,279 cat-related articles. They reveal, as the first quote above illustrates, how cats charmed colonial and local audiences in the Dutch East Indies, in ways cat lovers and cat-video-watchers today might relate to. Limited as these sources are, as they convey the view of colonial reporters and colonial scientists, who were writing for a Dutch public, they are still quite insightful for our query here. Considering the fact that a particular sort of news report is clearly occasioned by the *effects* of contacts between cats and human beings, and written against the background of the new phenomenon of rabies outbreaks and medical research, we also might detect awareness of environmental changes. This awareness, however, seems to be mainly driven by concern for what these phenomena do to human beings.

Turning now to the social lives of cats, I look into two larger framings of knowledge that, as we shall see, cats have generated, and unpack the affections that have been applied to them, in particular love: 1. Religious and civilizational thinking; and 2. Science, race, and gender.

Religious and Civilizational Thinking

The quotation at the start of this chapter, from an article in the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* in 1914, discusses the meanings and beliefs regarding cats in 'native life' in the Dutch East Indies. It reveals that the love or care for cats, whether expressed by local or colonial inhabitants, was both common and a thing to notice in the colonial media. Importantly, these cats' active appearances in colonial society generated explicit awareness of differences and sameness in quite separate spheres of life. Cats, actively charming human beings, spurred reflections on the place of the cat in human civilizations, perceived as religions. The article's author explains the love for cats in local (predominantly Islamic) society, through religious and civilizational motives. He tells the story about Prophet Muhammad's love for cats, exemplified by his favourite. While it was napping 'in his wide sleeve', Muhammad had

to leave. In order not to disturb the cat, Muhammad cuts off the sleeve of his coat. Without mentioning it, the article also refers to the *Hadith* as a source for understanding cat's social lives in Islamic societies: 'The one who mistreats a cat […] would get a special punishment in hell, the one who takes care of a unhappy cat, gains Allah's mercy'. In short, so the article concludes, within Islamic practices 'the cat deserves special distinction'.[21] Comparable stories, illustrating Muhammad's deep care for cats, and the remarkable love cats seemed to generate in local society, also appear in other articles published in colonial newspapers.[22]

We may wonder, however, how much it helps us to seek religious motives to understand why cats generate a particular fondness from human beings, if only because cats, entering (not-so) civilized places, can get kicked by believers, too. In two colonial news items, Christian colonial military men, in toxic gendered spheres, abuse individual harmless cats, just for the game of it. One example, entitled 'The Cat and the Rat' (1939) also reveals cat empathy, and what empathy may have generated *despite* colonial situations: a man named Dasan, thus probably not European, reported that a military man, sergeant St., shot his cat. The sergeant declared to have mistaken her for a rat.[23] The empathic outcome of this news item: the authorities took the sergeant's gun, to prevent him from further animal abuse. The other example, 'Officer's Entertainment' (1905), describes a cat experiencing terrible abuse by some military men's dogs (at their order, just for fun), with the cat's violent death as result.[24]

These cases of cat abuse would have fitted well in the next paragraph, because of the gendered and racial structures that they reveal and, to a certain extent, complicate. However, I mention them here to nuance the idea of cats generating a shared love and compassion in colonial society, and to warn against the use of civilizational-cum-religious worldviews to gauge empathy for the animal. The point, much in line with Guha's argumentation above, is that we should be cautious of romanticizing

21 "De kat [The Cat]," *Bataviaasch nieuwsblad*, February 28, 1914, 5, https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:011036634:mpeg21:p005.

22 See also: "De kat van Mohammed," *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, March 4, 1916, 2; "Waardeering van de Kat [Appreciation of the Cat]," *Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, January 14, 1936. Compare "Islam and Cats", Wikipedia, last edited December 22, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_and_cats; Ceyda Torun (director), *Kedi*, 2017, about cats' and human beings' lives in Istanbul.

23 "De kat en de rat [The Cat and the Rat]," *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, November 29, 1939.

24 "Officieren genoegens [Officers' Entertainment]," *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, April 29, 1905.

when we consider the affections that cats generate in different societies, as determined by different religions. From the gendered perspective, following the female cat, it may be a question, moreover, how much it helps her that 'care' also implies 'let the cat be and live', and thus that procreation is not prevented. The examples of cat abuse show that, for the cat itself, human beings' religions, or their civilizational worldviews, make no difference.

Modern Science, Race, Gender

So far, we can argue that (observations on) love for the cat does not necessarily help colonial journalists to become critically aware of the (intersectional) gendered and racial structures of colonial society. Nor does such love generate explicit concerns about (being part of) the environment, which might have helped them to question or transgress these structures. Now, turning to the sphere of medical science, examples include the anecdotal news reports on cat bites, which indicate an awareness and fear of rabies. While these reports reveal affections and medical knowledge generated by the cats, they also reflect the daily racism and gendered, racial, and class structures that typified colonial society. In the example below, a journalist – in one random enumeration – mentioned the brains of a cat, and four nameless indigenous servants, all framed as just 'samples', to be sent to the 'Institute Pasteur' for research.

> A cat of Mr. de Sturler in Soekaboemi attacked the servants. She bit four natives. Because the veterinarian feared rabies, the natives, and the brains of the cat were sent to the Institute Pasteur in Bandung.[25]

This anecdote also shows how empathy for the cat was restricted: the cat, here, while featuring in full action, is the biggest victim of the effects of changing human-animal relations. The cat can be used for testing of medication or bacilli, her brains can be sent for research to the Institute Pasteur, without any comment. Any recognition of the suffering body of the animal is absent. But the same goes for the suffering bodies of the four nameless indigenous servants – except that their brains are not dissected. Thus, a class-, racial, and moral differentiation in cat-centred versus human-centred forms of empathy develops in the context of new scientific

25 "Dolle Kat [Crazy Cat]," *Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, October 24, 1925.

questions and methodologies.[26] Intriguingly, these forms of empathy were generated by the agency of a specific cat: through her attacking, biting or scratching bodies of specific human beings, who happened to be local servants. We can compare this to a slightly more extensive report featuring another cat biting:

> Mrs. J. E., living at Sendjojoroad [in Bandung], reported that she and her 19-year-old daughter Miss C. had been bitten in the hands by her cat. Both ladies were nursed in the C.B.Z., while the cat was transferred to the Animal shelter at Kobong. There, shortly after, the cat drew her last breath, and we hope out of remorse. In the meantime, both the biting and the passing away of the cat were sufficient reason to send both ladies to the Institute Pasteur in Bandoeng. The brains of the crazy cat will also be sent there, to be analyzed in Bandoeng.[27]

Here, the story is also triggered by a cat in clear action. Although, ultimately, the fate of this cat is comparable – her brains being sent to the Institute Pasteur – there is an important difference. The cat's victims, identified as women of higher class ('ladies'), are treated with much more empathy, both by the reporter, and, in practice, than the four unnamed indigenous servants above: they get 'initials', we get to know them to be a mother and her daughter. They get immediate care.

For the cat in this story, her fate is different as well: she was already dead when her brains were dissected, to be sent to the Pasteur Institute. We get to know a bit more of her previous social life, too. First, in her performance as the (probably beloved) pet of mother and daughter, then, after the bite, as the fear-causing wild animal whose suffering body is being ignored. Then, she changes places from a colonial home to a colonial animal asylum. There she dies – probably of rabies. For, it is not the cat's potential pain or her death that is alarming to the experts, but only the prospect of sending the two human beings to the Pasteur Institute. In that process, through the reporter's hope that she died 'out of remorse', the cat transforms into a guilty creature. The empathy for the suffering body is centred around the human beings, not the cat. Cats entering the sphere, frame, and mindset of medical science, were not lucky.

26 Compare Fenneke Sysling, *Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

27 "De rare kat [The Strange Cat]," *De Locomotief*, October 20, 1938.

The Theosophical Vegetarian Dish in the Dutch East Indies: Phase One

In the final part of this essay, I turn to implications of the theosophical plea for not eating animals, as it took shape in the Dutch East Indies, following the perspective of the vegetarian dish. Based on very preliminary research, I look at this in fragmented ways.

Besant's legitimation of the vegetarian dish was, from 1902, also food for debate in journals and lodges of the TS in the Dutch East Indies – only a year after it kicked off in Semarang. The way it came to be digested there is exemplary for how the TS helped to unsettle dominant categories and ways of looking at the world for a widening circle of initiates and enchanted members. In the Dutch East Indies, the first theosophical lodges were set up by Europeans in the early 1900s, but the Society soon also involved Javanese and Chinese as members and, to a lesser extent, as leaders of lodges. There, the conversation was in Javanese and Malay. Interests in theosophical stances towards vegetarianism go back to gatherings of these lodges, and, notably, to the readings and discussions in the libraries and reading clubs its members set up. There, TS members exchanged animal-friendly knowledge and ideas, based on publications of anti-vivisectionist and vegetarian organizations, journals, as well as vegetarian recipe books, imported from Europe.

Tellingly for the gendered network of theosophical knowledge exchange, Besant's vegetarian lecture appeared in print in the Dutch East for the first time in a Dutch translation by one of the TS female members there, Wilhelmina P.F. von Wolzogen Khür-Wijnmalen, wife of a – likewise theosophist – colonial administrator in Sampang (East Java). Notably, it appeared four years earlier than it did in the Netherlands, in a new translation by another female member, Clara Streubel, and at a time when the TS in the Dutch East Indies was still part of the Dutch section of the TS (which had a very active publishing house, too).[28] The Dutch East Indies' publication of the text was followed by a small section, 'Questions', in which the translator addressed the riddle why cruelty in nature also entailed animals devouring other animals – cats eating birds, and predatory birds eating cats. The answer to this was that, for lack of consciousness, animals were not accountable for their cruelty. Only mankind could be, and therefore carried a responsibility to neither eat nor kill animals.

28 Annie Besant, "Vegetarisme, van een theosofisch standpunt bezien," trans. Wilhelmina P.F. von Wolzogen Khür-Wijnmalen, *Theosofisch Maandblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* II (1902–1903): 194–210; idem, *Het vegetarisme in het licht van Theosofie*, trans. Clara Streubel (Amsterdam: Theosofische Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1906).

In 1907, the Javanese theosophical newsletter *Pewarta Theosofi* featured, in one of its first issues, a Malay translation of Besant's vegetarian lecture, by Javanese TS member Raden Soewandi. It was based on a Dutch translation, and included a Dutch introduction delivered by Dutch theosophist M. Koot. While Koot was visible as an author in the heading, Besant was not. Koot belonged to the very active founding members of the TS lodge in Surabaya (East Java). Through the translation in *Pewarta Theosofi*, Koot and Soewandi could reach out to the mostly lower-elite Indonesian members of the TS.

Intriguingly, in a footnote to Koot's introductory section, addressing the theosophical device not to kill animals, Soewandi, thinking further, observed that vegetarianism *was* already a Javanese practice: 'The majority of the Javanese is already vegetarian, as they do not eat beef, but poultry'.[29]

While, at first sight, this observation seems a remarkably selective form of vegetarianism, on further thought it appears that Soewandi, here, was referring to a vegetarian practice that was not driven by empathy, but by economic needs. It also shows that theosophical vegetarianism – out of empathy for the animal – was presented and perceived as a new practice, as a new morally right way of living. The vegetarian translation, moreover, triggered Soewandi's awareness of particular differences and new forms of cultural behaviour and criticism, which could shape status and new friendships around certain ideals.

The vegetarian dish became part of a common theosophical practice, through which TS members in the Dutch East Indies could communicate across different (racial) backgrounds and standing. This happened, for example, at the first congress of the TS of the Dutch East Indies in 1908, in Yogyakarta. From there, the mixed company of Dutch, Chinese, and Javanese members visited the nearby eighth-century Buddhist shrine Borobudur, for a solemn climb, towards enjoying, presumably in equal togetherness, an imagined Nirvana.[30] Tellingly, before climbing the monument together, the members had shared – almost self-evidently – a vegetarian dish.

As Leela Gandhi has argued, the charmed knowledge networks and friendships, like those bred by the TS, crossed formal colonial hierarchies and structures of gender, class, and racism. At the same time, the theosophical trip to Borobudur and the vegetarian dish consumed there show how economic, gendered, and racial differences were being ignored as unproblematic, and, to

29 Soewandi, "Vegetarisme," 155.

30 Marieke Bloembergen, "Borobudur in 'the Light of Asia': Scholars, Pilgrims and Knowledge Networks of Greater India, 1920s–1970s," in: *Belonging across the Bay of Bengal: Religious Rites, Colonial Migrations, National Rights*, ed. Michael Laffan (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) 35–57.

a certain extent, reproduced by the new practitioners, while they tried to think from the perspective of the animal. While Gandhi reasons that these friendships contested such structures, we can argue that they may have supported them as well, also in the long term.[31] It may be there that the social life of the vegetarian dish and that of the cat, after all a semi-wild, half domesticated, but an independent creature that may 'leap' away, differ.[32] What they share, in this essay's historical construction, however, is the capacity to unsettle.

Next Phase of the Vegetarian Dish: Theosophical Steak (1930s–1970s)[33]

In 2017, I spoke in Jakarta with the well-known Indonesian intellectual Adji Damais (1942–2021).[34] We were talking about his father, the French philologist Louis-Charles Damais, who arrived in Java at the end of the 1930s, for research (briefly as staff of the Dutch Colonial Archaeological Service). In Java, he met and married Adji's Indonesian mother, Raden Roro Soejatoen Poespokoesoemo (1912–2005), who made him stay. My questions about his father's spiritual, theosophical quest evoked a specific memory in Adji. Like the novelist Marcel Proust, tasting a madeleine, which famously plunged him into memories of his French elite past, Adji Damais was able to evoke an ancient theosophical world through a dish, the meaning of which he did not realize at the time: 'Biefstuk Theosoof' (Theosophical Steak). In 1950s independent Indonesia, the Damais father and son often visited Solo (Central Java) for Louis-Charles' philological and epigraphic research. There, they invariably visited the restaurant Pak Ahmad, named after the owner. On the menu was: 'Biefstuk Theosoof'. The name fascinated Adji immensely as a little boy, and he kept asking his father about it. But now, in 2017, he summed it up by saying, 'But, yeah, so I realized later, that was, of course, the vegetarian dish'.[35]

31 Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

32 Leigh Claire La Berge, *Marx for Cats: A Radical Bestiary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 4-5.

33 This section is an abbreviated version of a paragraph in my Inaugural Lecture: Marieke Bloembergen, *Last van koloniale dingen: kennisvorming, Indonesische perspectieven, en de zoektocht naar verlichting* [*The Burden of Colonial Things: Alternative Knowledge Production, Indonesian Perspectives, and the Search for Enlightenment*] May 25, 2022, Leiden University.

34 Conversation between the author and Adji Damais, Jakarta, March 12, 2017.

35 Conversation between the author and Adji Damais, Jakarta, December 3, 2017.

At a time when the term vegetarian meatball has become commonplace, we may no longer be surprised by the combination 'vegetarian' and 'steak', but, still, they also struck me as a remarkable remnant, or heritage, of theosophical knowledge networks going back to colonial times. However, the dish *Biefstuk Theosoof*, which would adorn Pak Ahmad's menu until at least the late 1960s, did not seem to fit into the framework in which little Adji Damais was familiar with eating and interpreting his world in the 1950s, and also not in mine now.[36] What that implied, how insightful the name of this dish could be for understanding alternative learning in Indonesia, I only realized when, a year later, two elderly Indonesian theosophists in Surabaya wanted to take me out to dinner, to *the* vegetarian restaurant further in town.[37] I saw the little square I had passed before, opposite the Theosophical Lodge, full of *warung* where the most delicious vegetarian dishes beckoned. Why not *gado-gado*, or *tempeh* with delicious *sayur lodeh* and rice, I suggested? But no, my hosts emphasized, that was different. If we were going to eat vegetarian, we were supposed to do it in *the* vegetarian restaurant.

The vegetarianism that struck me in Surabaya and Solo did not seem to fit into the frameworks I was familiar with myself. Apart from that, there are, of course, other reasons and frameworks to consider when pondering why vegetarianism in Indonesia seems difficult to place. Religious frameworks: pork, yes, but most meat and fish are not taboo in Indonesian Islam.[38] Hindus in Bali, if they can afford it, eat their *babi guling* with relish, and fish is no problem either. The more important framework, already mentioned, is economic inequality. People still suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition in Indonesia. So do cats. Anyway, the two men in Surabaya drew a line for themselves that I did not understand. But that makes it all the more interesting for the researcher. The point is: the challenge is not to fit that strange thing/strangeness into the frameworks we already know, but to make understandable why that strange thing/strangeness is not strange from the perspective of 'the other'. And thus, how it might help us to get out of ossified structures, practices and politics of knowledge. And we might transfer this question, while running the risk of objectification, to the cat and to the environment.

36 Claire Holt, "Indonesia Revisited," *Indonesia* 9 (April 1970), 163–88.

37 Conversation between the author and chairman pak Untung (1941) and secretary Rudiyanto (1956), Theosophical lodge in Surabaya, June 2, 2018.

38 George Quinn, *Bandit Saints of Java* (Burrough on the Hill: Monsoon Books, 2019) (unnumbered page of front material).

Concluding Remarks

The exercise of following the perspective of the cat and the vegetarian dish to reconstruct and perhaps decolonize a history of environmental empathy proves insightful because it unsettles us. It helps us to get out of the framings we are used to, precisely because the stories actively formed by cats and the vegetarian dish are hard to fit in. The vegetarian dish reveals a spatial moral economy where the meatless dish can only be recognized as such in a particular place, and by actors of different classes. The forms of knowledge that come together in the theosophical vegetarian dish in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia reflect a gendered awareness of the suffering body, and the responsibility of active respect towards animals, and therefore empathy. But they are also about the idea of spiritual cleansing. The vegetarian dish is, moreover, a means of communicating about all of this, to connect and feel empowered while ignoring and maybe supporting structural difference. Cats, likewise, unsettle the spatial, moral, gendered, and racial structures of (post)colonial society, because they seek energy and act – 'do' – differently than human beings. Through their actions they sometimes bring about awareness of the consequences of human–animal interactions, and, when cruelty to cats is at stake, awareness of the cat's pain and her suffering body. The protective actions towards cats may have had further political aims, which makes them colonial. Unsettled by cat- and vegetarian dish-centred thinking, we may begin to understand the spatial, moral economy, changes, and politics of – what might be – environmental empathy in colonial and postcolonial situations; and begin to make a difference there, also as scholars.

The social life of the vegetarian dishes, the restaurants that delivered them, and the vegetarian encounters they generated in this chapter, show how memories and different academic, alternative, and local forms of knowledge come together and blur the boundaries between what could be 'local' and 'colonial', or 'established' and 'alternative'. They reflect alternative structures of power that influence practices of knowledge production. In which for one – the less educated, not wealthy chairman of the languishing theosophical lodge in Surabaya – vegetarianism means status, but is also born of necessity; while the Indonesian hipster in Jakarta eats vegan spaghetti because she can. There, we see the spatial, moral economy of environmental empathy at work. What is empathy here, and what is local, colonial, or global about it, why (not) there, and what does theosophical steak actually offer an alternative for in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia?

Comparably, in their social lives, cats, like the vegetarian dish, in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia, cross the – gendered, racial, and colonial – structures of difference at work, and show their spatial and moral dimensions. They can unsettle ideas we have about such spatial, moral structures or the framings of knowledge that guide us. They do so partly because they reveal something many people from different classes, gender, and ethnic groups seem to share: love for the cat. But we need to be cautious about deeming such love environmental empathy, or empathy for animal life in 'civilized places' at large. To understand what affections for the cat are and what they 'do', depends on the places, sites, and framings of knowledge that cats have entered and the particular spatial moral economy, be it a graveyard, city streets and homes, military barracks, servants quarters, a white ladies' house of standing, the Colonial Club, or a physician's lab.

Future research aiming to decolonize environmental history might need to combine the animal turn with a sites-centred perspective – with sites, both in urbanized places and in natural landscapes, conceived as sites of knowledge production and learning. This enables us to study the encounter, exchange, and moral dynamics of knowledge at multiple layers of time, and from local and global perspectives, beyond framings of state or science. Following that animal-sites-centred approach, we might begin to value, in the light of other creatures' conscious efforts not to kill animals for food, the role that cats play in the moral economy of environmental empathy, not only as beloved enigmas, but also as rat- and bird-eating intruders in the environment we are all part of.

About the Author

Marieke Bloembergen is senior researcher at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), and professor in Heritage and Postcolonial Studies in Indonesian History at Leiden University. Her research interests concern the political dynamics of cultural knowledge and heritage formation in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia, as understood in their local, inter-Asian and global dimensions, focusing on sites, objects, non-human species, religion, violence, and (environmental) care. Her most recent monograph, co-authored with Martijn Eickhoff, is *The Politics of Heritage in Indonesia: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Currently she is working on a book manuscript, entitled *Indonesia and the Politics of Greater India: A Moral Geography, 1880s–1990s*.