

The Dutch Empire. An Essential Part of World History

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179

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In this article, a number of aspects of the history of Dutch colonialism are linked to developments in world history. A number of themes are covered by this approach, such as the consequences of the worldwide revolutions around 1800, the Cultivation System, modern imperialism, the rise of the colonial state, nationalism and decolonisation. The aim is to show that the development of specific parts of the world was linked to major, worldwide historical processes through links that arose thanks to Dutch colonialism. I further argue that knowledge of the history of Dutch colonialism is essential to an understanding of these major, worldwide processes.

When the Netherlands was still a colonial power nobody needed to be convinced of the necessity to study the Dutch example. After what the British called the Indian Mutiny, a Calcutta-based English lawyer, J.W.B. Money, wrote his famous *Java: Or How to Manage a Colony. Showing a Practical Solution of the Questions Now Affecting British India*. In the book, Money concluded that India, if

raised to the same condition as Java, would form the grandest empire it has ever yet entered into the heart of man to conceive. Without annexing another mile of Native territory, the same population per square mile, and the same revenue per head, would give us upwards of 170 millions of people, yielding a revenue of more than 130 millions of pounds sterling per annum, not only without impoverishing themselves, but while daily increasing in wealth, in contentment, and in civilization.¹

After Money, other writers looked at what was happening in the Dutch colonial empire: from the colonial civil servant John S. Furnivall, who published his famous *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* in 1939, to the French scholar H.H. Bousquet, who in the same year published *La politique Musulmane et colonial des Pays-Bas*. American observers were more critical, as can be seen in Rupert Emerson's, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule* (1937).

Much has changed since the end of the colonial era. With the end of colonialism, interest in the Dutch colonial example waned. In addition, language barriers have meant that the history of the Dutch experiences overseas has somewhat lost the attention of the international historical community, although there have been some major exceptions. Another important – and more recent – development, however, is the process of globalisation. This process is transforming not only the world, but also our views of the past. Historians are increasingly widening their research to a worldwide perspective from which to understand the past. A central feature of this historical approach is the constant transfer of people, goods, services and ideas across the globe that has taken place in the past. As the American global historian Patrick Manning has pointed out, the word ‘connection’ conveys the essential character of global historical analysis, because it acknowledges locality and uniqueness, yet also invokes broad patterns. In his words: ‘world history is the story of connections within the global human community’.² It is within this story of connections that the Netherlands and the parts of the former Dutch colonial empire re-enter global history. The significance of this story is undisputed; yet language barriers mean the number of historians working in the field is limited.

The historiography of the interaction between Europe and the wider world was dominated for a long time by two opposing traditions, namely colonialist and nationalist approaches. What these had in common was that they both made a one-dimensional and powerful colonial state central to their discourse, be it in a positive or in a negative way, while disregarding the political, economic and social dynamics of the interaction between Europe and the wider world. To counter this tendency, historians in the 1970s disregarded the state and the European presence in Asia, Africa and other places in the world entirely, in an attempt to write an autonomous history. It is only in recent years – perhaps as a result of the ongoing globalisation process – that historians have attempted to reintegrate the European presence into local histories. Asian historians in particular now write about the development of European governance in Asia in terms of ‘synergy’ and ‘converging interests’, and point to local foundations and global patterns to explain the emergence and functioning of colonial states. Even the origins of colonialism, in all its manifestations, have again become a ‘hot’ subject of analysis.³ With regard to the Dutch presence in Asia, such research is still in its infancy; largely because the number of Asian historians who have mastered the Dutch language is limited.

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1 J.W.B. Money, *Java: Or How to Manage a Colony. Showing a Practical Solution of the Questions Now Affecting British India* (London 1861) 310.

2 P. Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York 2003).

The following article will touch upon a couple of important themes in the history of the Netherlands on the global stage. Although the article concentrates on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, given the available space for the subject in this volume some important issues will not be discussed. The opportunities the Dutch empire provided for Dutch businesses such as Royal Dutch Shell, the discovery of the ‘Third World’ by the Dutch after decolonisation, the ecological impact of Dutch colonialism or the Dutch ambition to strengthen international law and democracy worldwide are histories in themselves.⁴ The article will also not touch upon the theme of culture and imperialism, even although this is indeed an important and interesting subject as demonstrated by, for instance, works on the representation of the Dutch colonial world at the world exhibitions or Dutch colonial literature.⁵ Even without touching on these and other important themes, however, this article will show that Dutch colonial history or the history of the Netherlands on the global stage is connected with that of important parts of Asia, Africa and the Americas, and is therefore an essential part of global history. The article will do this by concentrating on a few issues which have been and still are the subject of fierce debate among historians and other scholars: the Cultivation System on Java, the ‘new’ or ‘modern’ imperialism at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the emergence of a strong colonial state and the subsequent emergence of a nationalist movement in the first half of the twentieth century and finally the partly violent end of the Dutch colonial empire. The choice of these subjects is in a way arbitrary, but will give the reader an idea of how the Dutch empire developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The history of the Dutch empire in these centuries differs in important ways from Dutch overseas history in the preceding centuries. The global revolution of the years around 1800 marks the transformation.

- 3 Just to give some examples: H.K. Kwee, *The Political Economy of Java's Northeast Coast, c. 1740-1800: Elite Synergy* (Leiden 2006); A. Ota, *Changes of Regime and Social Dynamics in West Java: Society, State and the Outer World of Banten, 1750-1830* (Leiden 2005); C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge 1983); D. Henley, *Jealousy and Justice: Indigenous Roots of Colonialism in Northern Sulawesi* (Amsterdam 2002). In 2004, *Modern Asian Studies* devoted its autumn issue to the subject of colonial transition in South Asia.
- 4 See: Joost Jonker and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Van nieuwkomer tot marktlieder, 1890-1939. Geschiedenis van Koninklijke Shell*, volume 1 (Amsterdam 2007); Peter Boomgaard, Freek Colombijn and David Henley (eds.), *Paper Landscapes: Explorations in the Environmental History of Indonesia* (Leiden 1998); Peter Boomgaard, *Southeast Asia: An Environmental History* (Oxford 2007); Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, *De ontdekking van de derde wereld. Beeldvorming en beleid in Nederland, 1950-1990* (The Hague 1994).
- 5 Marieke Bloembergen, *The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies at the World Exhibitions, 1880-1931* (Singapore 2006); E.M. Beekman, *Troubled Pleasures: Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950* (Oxford 1996).

1. The global revolution

The period around 1800 marked the beginning of a new era in world history, which began with a worldwide revolution, of which the American Revolution was perhaps the start and the French revolution the culmination. The shockwaves of these revolutions would be felt for a long time, not just in Europe but in other parts of the world as well. The political revolutions in the decades around 1800 were, in turn, a consequence of the great European cultural and intellectual revolution referred to by the term ‘Enlightenment’.

This is not the place to go into these complex developments in any detail, but it was this revolution – during which a dogmatic belief in authority was replaced by an inquisitive rationalism – that finally meant that the Western World could develop in a completely different way in the nineteenth century from the other great cultures of the world. Western curiosity led, among other consequences, to systematic exploration of the world; the voyages of James Cook in the Pacific Ocean and Alexander von Humboldt to Latin America are examples of this. The Enlightenment also led to the idea that progress had been made in Europe because of rational thinking about such issues as the economy and society, whereas other parts of the world were characterised by a standstill. In the extremely popular *The History of British India* by James Mill, one could read that the large Asian civilisations had hardly changed at all since ancient times. In contrast to Europe, Asia had not made any form of progress.

By conversing with the Hindus of the present day, we, in some measure, converse with the Chileans and Babylonians of the time of Cyrus; with the Persians and Egyptians of the time of Alexander.⁶

The Western belief in progress, Enlightenment thinking and the scientific revolution were elements that enabled the Western economy to develop in the nineteenth century in a way that was fundamentally different from most of the economies in the rest of the world. Europeans had not been able to sell much to the Asians in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but after the Industrial Revolution the situation was completely different, and the European textile industry, for example, was easily able to sell its cheap products throughout Asia. Improved transport methods also meant that European products could reach the Asian market at a relatively low cost. From about 1800, what historians term ‘the great divergence’ took place, which was the separation of the economic development of the Western World, on the one hand, and of almost all of Asia and Africa on the other. Whereas there was to

6 James Mill, *The History of British India* (third edition, London 1826) volume II, 190.

be almost uninterrupted economic growth in the Western World after 1800, the economies of Asia and Africa would lag behind with almost no growth at all. Europe became not only the industrial heart, but also the financial centre, of the world. The result was a growing prosperity gap between the West and the rest of the world.

Against the backdrop of the political, cultural and economic revolutions the world experienced in the decades around 1880, as described above, there was also a geopolitical revolution that would make Great Britain the undisputed superpower of the world. This would both cause the Netherlands to lose its old position in Asia, while elsewhere giving it the opportunity to become a sovereign power in Southeast Asia. Incidentally, the decline of the Dutch East India Company [Dutch: *voc*] had begun earlier, partly owing to a number of structural changes in trade in Asia which had taken place in the course of the eighteenth century. The English East India Company, in particular, had been able to exploit this, particularly after it had become the master of the Bengalis and been able to throw itself into the textile, opium and tea trades. Private English traders accounted for a significant portion of intra-Asian trade. This allowed the East India Company to focus on trading between Asia and Europe, and to remain a relatively small and efficient company. The Dutch could only stand by and watch.⁷

The worldwide revolution signalled the decline of the Dutch East India Company's trade empire, and the British took control of the Dutch possessions in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. There were further consequences, however. The Dutch-Napoleonic regime of Marshal H.W. Daendels on Java (1808-1811) and the English governorship of Thomas Stamford Raffles (1811-1816) that followed, attempted to establish a modern state on the island and to break the power of the Javanese rulers. In June 1812, Raffles even plundered the Raton (the royal palace) of Yogyakarta and deposed the sultan, exiling him to Penang. As Peter Carey recently ascertained:

The tragedy for the Javanese was that just as all the signs seemed to be pointing in the direction of a Dutch collapse, half a world away in Europe events were taking place which would change the Javanese 'old order' forever. The twin political and industrial revolutions then tearing the ancien régimes of eighteenth-century Europe apart would hit Java with the force of an Asian tsunami.⁸

The Netherlands returned to the world stage after the Napoleonic period. Great Britain allowed the Dutch to resume their position in the Indian archipelago. On 19 August 1816, the British transferred formal command of

7 Ingrid G. Dillo, *De nadagen van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie 1783-1795* (Amsterdam 1992).

8 Peter Carey, *The Power of Prophecy: Prince Dipanagara and the End of an Old Order in Java, 1785-1855* (Leiden 2007) xiii.



Nicolaas Pieneman, The submission of Prince Diponegoro to Lieutenant-General Hendrik Merkus Baron de Kock, 28 March 1830, which ended the Java War (1825-1830), 1835. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Java and the other islands of the archipelago to the Dutch: this signified the birth of the colony of the Dutch East Indies. The colonial leaders hoped to be able to increase the prosperity of the Javanese population by offering a fair price for buying up such commodities as coffee and sugar. This was supposed to generate an increase in revenue from the so-called 'land rent' (a form of tax introduced by the British), but the drastic drop in the prices for these products on the world market threw a spanner in the works, causing the Dutch East Indies to become a loss-making colony.⁹

The situation became even more serious when the Javanese Prince Diponegoro instigated a massive uprising. The result was what is known as the Java War. This war would rage between 1825 and 1830, primarily in Central Java, and would cost the lives of about 15,000 Dutch soldiers and 200,000 Javanese. The war was a failed attempt by the traditional Javanese elite to regain its old position of power, stimulate Javanese culture and wipe out the Dutch colonial presence on Java. The eventual result was completely different: namely, the permanent establishment of the colonial authority on Java.

This allowed the Dutch colonial authority to bring about the end of the old, early-modern order on Java. New colonial governors such as Daendels and Raffles began with the replacement of the Dutch East India Company power structure by that of a colonial state, thereby encroaching on the authority of the Javanese leaders. These were permanently consigned to the background by the bloody Java War. This war was therefore part of the worldwide revolution, in which old regimes and early modern power structures fell. In other words, the action of the Dutch on Java meant that the *Birth of the Modern World*, to quote the title of Chris Bayly's famous book, also took place in Southeast Asia. What political and societal structure would suit this was still an open question around 1800.

2. The Dutch empire in the nineteenth century

The Birth of the Modern World on Java – by far the most important part of the Dutch East Indies – was accompanied by ambitious colonial governments whose ideals and ideas were from the Enlightenment, but whose means were limited. This meant that the Dutch East Indies was a loss-making overseas possession, even before the Java War broke out. This gave Johannes van den Bosch, who had taken office as Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies in 1830, the opportunity to harmonise the colonial government more with the traditional structure of indigenous society. He revived the Dutch East

9 Th. Stevens, *Van der Capellen's koloniale ambitie op Java. Economisch beleid in een stagnerende conjunctuur 1816-1826* (Amsterdam 1982).

10 C. Fasseur, *Kultuurstelsel en koloniale baten. De Nederlandse exploitatie van Java 1840-1860* (Leiden 1975).



Raden Sarief Bastaman Saleh, Johannes Graaf van den Bosch (1780-1844). Gouverneur-General (1830-1833), 1836. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

India Company system, by which Java was mainly governed with the help of indigenous leaders adhering to the system of the forced production of agricultural products, producing large stocks of goods for export at a low cost.

He also introduced what is known as the Cultivation System, in which he assumed the colonial government to be the owner of all the land on Java, allowing it to collect a certain amount of rent from those who farmed the land. However, he did not wish to collect this rent in cash, but in the form of agricultural products suitable for export. Therefore, each Javanese village was henceforth obliged to use one fifth of village land for the cultivation of products such as indigo, sugar and coffee. The colonial government also used the Javanese farmers for labour, although limits were set on the time they spent cultivating crops for export. The farmers also received a wage, known as the *plantloon* [crop wage], for the crops they produced, and in the event of a failed harvest they did not have to pay anything to the colonial government.

If a permanent success was to be made of the Cultivation System, the co-operation of the indigenous leaders on Java would be crucial. The key figures were the regents, who Van den Bosch bound to the colonial government by giving them a better position that they had ever known. This meant their salary was paid out partly in rice fields and uncultivated land, and that their office was made hereditary. The latter, in particular, was important. Whereas the regents were never certain of their position under the Javanese leaders, they and their descendents were now guaranteed an eminent, powerful position in indigenous society.

The Cultivation System enabled Van den Bosch to turn the Dutch East Indies into a profit-making asset. He was able to do this because he continued collecting land rent, which the farming community found easier to pay than before thanks to the wages it received. By 1831, a surplus of 200,000 guilders had already been generated; a marked result after years of great shortages. Although its knowledge of tropical agricultural methods and Javanese society was limited, by this year the Netherlands had made a profit of almost six million guilders from its control of the Dutch East Indies: a surplus that would increase to 45 million guilders by 1857. A total of 823 million guilders would pour into the Dutch treasury from the Dutch East Indies between 1831 and 1877. This meant that the amount the taxpayer in the Netherlands was required to pay could remain relatively low. It proved possible to postpone the introduction of a modern tax system, including income tax, until the end of the nineteenth century, whilst taxes on basic necessities could be dispensed with altogether. Before 1850, profits from the Dutch East Indies represented on average nineteen percent of the Dutch state's takings; in the 1850s it was thirty-one percent; in the 1860s twenty-four percent and between 1871 and 1877 thirteen percent. This money was not just used to reduce the tax burden in the Netherlands, but also to pay off its state debt and that of the Dutch East Indies, and to finance all kinds of public works, including the construction of the Dutch railway network.¹⁰

Much has been written about the question of the consequences of the Cultivation System for the normal population. In 1963, the famous American anthropologist Clifford Geertz claimed in his book *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* that the Dutch activities on Java, and the Cultivation System in particular, were responsible for the stagnation of the development of the Javanese countryside and caused the collective, shared poverty of the indigenous population. Geertz claimed that Dutch colonialism had introduced capital-intensive activities to a society whose economy was agricultural and labour-intensive, but in doing this it had excluded the indigenous population from the capital market. The indigenous population was thus involved in all kinds of economic activities, but was not modernised. The Javanese villages absorbed the enormous population growth that took place on Java in the nineteenth century – according to the, admittedly not always reliable, population figures of about 3.6 million people in 1802 growing to 9.3 million in 1850, 16.2 million in 1870 and 28.4 million in 1900 – and the pressure of Dutch demand for tropical products by cultivating more and more village ground, both jointly and intensively. The result of this was that poverty was equally distributed among all the villagers. This total levelling of social differences in Javanese society, with its strongly reciprocal system of duties, meant that there was no capital accumulation and its development came to a standstill. ‘Under the pressure of increasing numbers and limited resources, Javanese village society did not bifurcate, as so many other ‘underdeveloped’ nations did, into a group of large landlords and a group of oppressed near serfs’, says Geertz.

Rather it maintained a comparatively high degree of social and economic homogeneity by dividing the economic pie into a steadily increasing number of minute pieces, a process to which I have referred elsewhere as ‘shared poverty’.¹¹

Geertz’ theory of ‘agricultural involution’ signalled the start of a flood of academic works not just about the Cultivation System in the Dutch East Indies but also about questions related to colonialism and underdevelopment in other parts of the world.¹² Although extremely influential, the theory proved in the end to be incorrect. Although there was no system in the sense of a coherent whole of commonly shared rules, and regional differences were great on Java,

11 C. Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley 1963) 97.

12 For Java, see: F. Hüsken, ‘Regional Diversity in Javanese Agrarian Development: Variations in the Pattern of Involution’, in: O.D. van den Muijzenberg et al. (eds.), *Focus on the Region in Asia* (Rotterdam 1982) 167-191; B. White,

‘Agricultural Involution and Its Critics: Twenty Years After’, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 15 (1983) 18-31 and Th. Svensson, ‘Contractions and Expansions: Agrarian Change in Java since 1830’, in: M. Mörrner and Th. Svensson (eds.), *The Transformation of Rural Society in the Third World* (London 1991) 145-185.

historical research has shown that the Cultivation System primarily laid claim to the labour of the Javanese population, and not its land. If the area where coffee was grown is left aside (this was unsuitable for growing any other crops anyway), only 5.3 percent of the cultivated land was used in 1840, and in 1850 only 3.9 percent for the cultivation of sugar cane, indigo and some other crops; this percentage never exceeded 14.5 regionally. Labour, however, was in demand: in 1840, fifty-seven percent of the Javanese population worked on the Cultivation System compared with forty-six percent in 1850. However, the regional differences here were also great: whereas only sixteen percent of the population were involved in the Cultivation System in Bantam in 1850, in Preanger the figure was seventy-one percent and in Pasuruan sixty-one percent.

The Javanese farmers whose labour was used for the Cultivation System were relatively well paid for their work. The importance for Javanese society of the wages paid for this work should not be underestimated: large sums of money entered the local economy, stimulating the industriousness of the local population and making it easier for Javanese to become part of the modern economy. While the colonial government collected about seven million guilders in land rent in 1840, at the same time it paid out more than ten million guilders in wages. In 1860, these figures were 9.9 million and 14.5 million guilders respectively.

The development of the Javanese economy was further stimulated by the improvements made to the infrastructure, making it easier to transport the various products to the coast. For the first time in Javanese history, roads passable both in the dry and the wet monsoon seasons appeared over the whole island. Bridges put an end to the barriers sometimes formed by rivers on Java. The improved infrastructure made it easier for the indigenous population to bring its own products to local markets and caused a greater level of industry on Java, except in the area of the textile industry, which had to match its European competitors.

The whole Javanese population did not benefit, however, from the elements of the Cultivation System that increased prosperity. In contrast to Geertz' claims, this actually caused social differences in Javanese society to increase. Those who had large pieces of land could employ land labourers because of the *plantloon* they received and could then carry out other economic activities. Dessa [village] leaders also pocketed part of the *plantloon* they were supposed to share with their fellow villagers, enabling them to strengthen their position in society. This latter practice was so widespread that the colonial government decreed that the *plantloon* would henceforth only be paid out in the presence of an assistant-resident or controller, and in the presence of a regent and the district head. However, this hardly weakened the position of the Dessa head at all: he still determined what happened in his village.

It has become clear that the Cultivation System not only further opened up the Javanese economy to the world, but that it also stimulated local industry and increased the prosperity of certain groups in Javanese

society. This does not mean that ‘shared poverty’ did not also exist. True, the Cultivation System did mean that an investment was made in Javanese society – by paying, for example, wages to indigenous civil servants and *plantloon* to farmers, and by building roads and bridges – but this also resulted in a withdrawal of wealth from the Javanese economy. This caused prosperity on Java to increase only gradually, and led primarily to increased consumption, but not increased productivity. In addition, there was the rapid growth in the Javanese population in the nineteenth century; partly because prosperity caused the birth rate to increase, but more importantly because the mortality rate dropped. More Javanese than ever before therefore had to share their relative poverty; however, this did not mean that the development of the Javanese economy stagnated and that there were no dynamic forces at work within it that were further strengthened by the Cultivation System. The picture, therefore, is still mixed. In the words of R. E. Elson, the Australian historian who has studied all the ins and outs of the Cultivation System:

The enhanced prosperity which the Javanese came to enjoy was one of degree and not of kind. While the patterns of their lives became more elaborate, compressed and complicated, the structural essence of village Java remained substantially unchanged.¹³

In the meantime, the Cultivation System not only made it possible for the Dutch government to reduce taxes and improve the infrastructure, but the Dutch government also used the profits to abolish slavery in the Dutch colony of Dutch Guinea (modern-day Suriname). Without having to raise taxes in the Netherlands, slaveholders could be compensated for losing their property with the profits from the Cultivation System. The Dutch slave trade had already ended at the end of the eighteenth century. Only a few Dutch slavers crossed the Atlantic in the decade after 1780, while the volume of the British, French, Portuguese and even the Danish slave trade increased. This suggests that the Dutch could have abolished the trade with the lowest cost. However, it was British diplomatic pressure that forced the Dutch to abandon the trade. Similarly, the British tried to pressure Spain, Portugal, Brazil, France and the US to do the same, but in all these cases the slave trade continued, either openly or illicitly. In this respect, the Dutch were different in that they complied obediently with virtually every British measure to stop the slave

13 R.E. Elson, *Village Java under the Cultivation System, 1830-1870* (Sydney 1994) 322. See further: C. Fasseur, *The Politics of Colonial Exploitation: Java, the Dutch and the Cultivation System* (Ithaca 1992); R.E. Elson, ‘From “States” to State: The Changing Regime of Peasant Export Production in Mid-Nineteenth Century Java’, in: J.Th. Lindblad

et al. (eds.) *Historical Foundations of a National Economy in Indonesia, 1890s-1990s* (Amsterdam 1996) 123-136 and idem, ‘Peasant Poverty and Prosperity under the Cultivation System in Java’, in A. Booth et al. (eds.), *Indonesian Economic History in the Dutch Colonial Era* (New Haven 1990) 49-66.

trade. The Dutch slave traders had nothing to lose. The planters in the Dutch Caribbean, however, were keen on more slave imports, and consequently illegal slave imports to Suriname were substantial. Britain again brought pressure to bear on the Dutch government and in 1826 a slave register was set up, making it impossible to continue these illegal imports. It took many more years until the French, Portuguese, Spanish and Americans also ended slave imports to their plantation colonies, however.¹⁴

A particular feature of the Dutch Caribbean in the nineteenth century was the prolongation of the system of slavery. The prolonged ‘benefit’ of slavery in Suriname may not have led to an increase in the total output of cash crops, but it did prevent decline. The planters in Suriname paid for the continued existence of slavery: they were forced to give in to metropolitan pressures and increase food rations, improve slave housing and spend increasing amounts of money on health care for the slaves, particularly pregnant women. The longer slavery lasted, the more such amelioration policies were instituted. In the end, the slave system in Suriname may well have been unique. Minimum standards for the distribution of food, clothing and housing were set by law and these regulations were enforced together with new rules concerning the maximum number of working hours per week. Those planters who could not afford these changes went bankrupt. Slavery was finally abolished in 1863.¹⁵

After the abolition of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean, the relevance of the history of Suriname and the Dutch Antilles to global developments or developments in the Netherlands was, for the most part, minimal. This was not the case for the Dutch East Indies, however, where liberal critics of the Cultivation System succeeded in opening up the colony for private entrepreneurs. What is known as the Sugar Law of 1870 determined that the colonial government would gradually withdraw from the cultivation of sugar, whilst the Agricultural Law from the same year would provide private entrepreneurs with such possibilities as acquiring ‘wild land’ on a lease of seventy-five years, so they could establish plantations.¹⁶

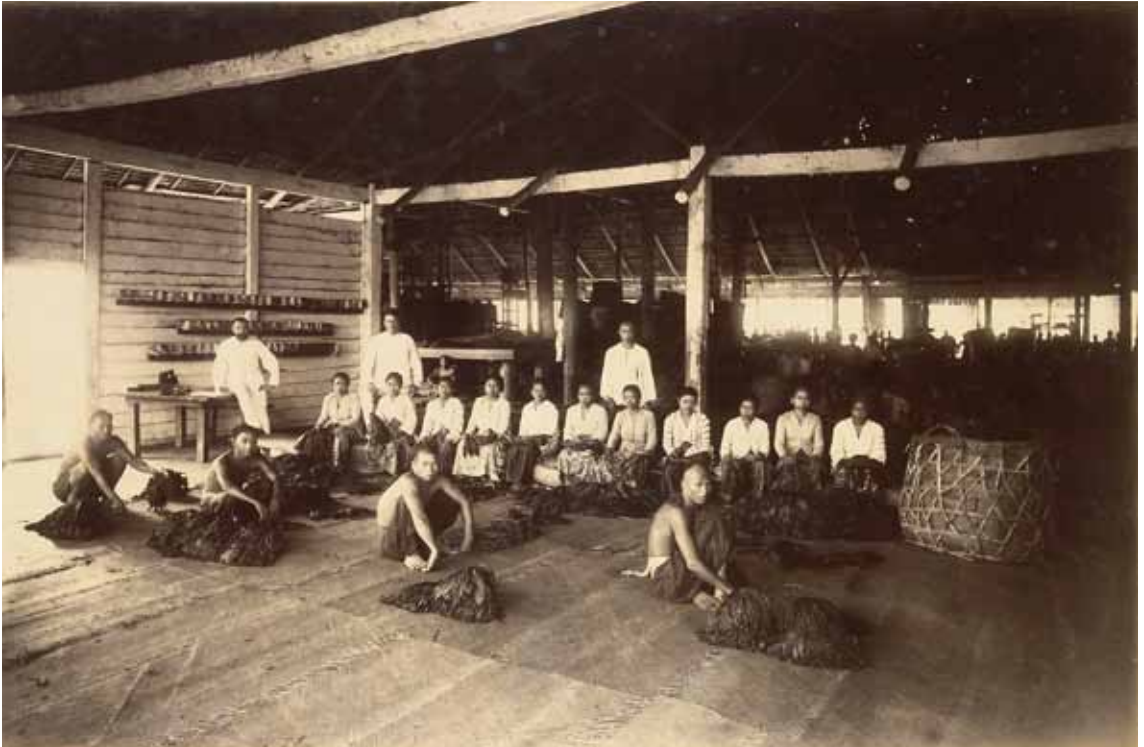
The area where the European plantations developed most was the east coast of Sumatra, and the Deli region in particular. From the end of the 1860s, extensive tobacco and rubber plantations were developed and contract

14 P.C. Emmer, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy* (Aldershot 1998) 111-126.

15 *Ibidem*, 167-202. See also: Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit* (Leiden 1995).

16 C. Fasseur, ‘Purse or Principle: Dutch Colonial Policy in the 1860s and the Decline of the

Cultivation System’, *Modern Asian Studies* 25 (1991) 33-52; J. de Jong, *Van batig slot naar ereschuld. De discussie over de financiële verhouding tussen Nederland en Indië en de hervorming van de Nederlandse koloniale politiek, 1860-1900* (The Hague 1989).



Heinrich Ernst, Coolies Sorting Tobacco at the Bekioen Company, Sumatra, around 1888-1892.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

labourers from Java and China were set to work on them. An extensive administrative apparatus would be lacking for a long time in Deli, so the area remained a kind of ‘Wild West’ of the Dutch East Indies into the twentieth century. It was not the colonial government, but rough European pioneers who were in charge. The manual labourers could be punished excessively without any questions being asked. It was only after an official survey, in 1904, of the many abuses in Deli that working conditions on the plantations improved.¹⁷

The development of the plantations on Sumatra in the last decades of the nineteenth century was accompanied by an increasing interest in the islands of the Indonesian archipelago outside Java, known as the ‘outlying districts’. The Netherlands had already tried to capture the Northern Sumatran sultanate of Atjeh in 1873. They did manage to occupy the main town, but a long guerrilla war followed: the Atjeh War, which could only be declared over at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The colonial government of the Dutch East Indies increasingly took it upon itself to meddle in the affairs of the outlying districts, but this was nearly always after problems had occurred on the periphery of the area controlled by the Dutch. The colonial government under Governor-General J. B. van Heutsz was most certainly driven by the urge to show who was the real sovereign power in the archipelago. In other words, he wanted to implement colonial authority everywhere and establish a colonial state. Just as in the Western World, where the state began to interfere more in the affairs of its subjects and consequently assumed increasing authority, so too did the colonial state strive to be more than just a theoretical concept, and thus to exercise real power. A process of state formation therefore also took place in the Dutch East Indies. This was supported towards the end of the nineteenth century by a strong national sentiment, better communication (partly thanks to the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij [Royal Packet Navigation Company] sailing in the archipelago), and greater military strength (better weapons and a number of breakthroughs in the fight against tropical diseases). Economic motives or the fear of foreign interference only played a subordinate role here.

The Netherlands held back from any involvement when Africa was partitioned. It was only during the Boer War that public opinion in the Netherlands focussed on events in Africa, as there was great sympathy for the fight the Boers were waging against the British. The Netherlands did not play

17 Jan Breman, *Koelies, planters en koloniale politiek. Het arbeidsregime op de grootlandbouw ondernemingen aan Sumatra's Oostkust in het begin van de twintigste eeuw* (third revised edition; Leiden 1992).

a real part in the conflict, however, although the war did serve to strengthen the Dutch national identity.¹⁸

As the Netherlands kept out of the partition of Africa, the Dutch example has hardly figured in the historical discussion of the causes and consequences of ‘modern imperialism’. Leiden historian H.L. Wesseling even claimed that by not taking part in the scramble for Africa, and by not extending Dutch power beyond the official borders of the Dutch empire, the Netherlands was not an imperialistic nation at all around 1900.¹⁹ This was, incidentally, in reaction to Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, who in his publication *Nederland en het moderne imperialisme* had actually tried to connect the history of the Netherlands in Southeast Asia with that of modern imperialism. In his opinion, there was ‘imperialisme van een kleine mogendheid’ [‘imperialism by a small power’], since the Dutch did fight wars and undertake expeditions in the Indonesian archipelago in order to extend their influence and authority in the region, even although within the official borders of the Dutch East Indies. This was not comparable with the policies of the great powers (such as Great Britain, France and Germany) in Africa, but it nonetheless relied on comparable processes.²⁰ At any rate, even though the expansion of Dutch power took place within the boundaries of the Dutch East Indies, events in the archipelago can serve as examples of phenomena that have been exposed during the historiographical debate about modern imperialism.

Despite this, the activities of the Dutch in Southeast Asia can best be described as colonial state formation or, in other words, ‘het vestigen en versterken van feitelijke soevereiniteit en daadwerkelijk bestuur over een duidelijk omgrensd grondgebied door een uitheemse mogendheid’ [‘the establishment and reinforcement of actual sovereignty and administration by a foreign power of a territory with clearly defined borders’].²¹ In their meddling in the outlying districts, which was becoming increasingly extreme, Dutch colonial politicians, public servants, governors and soldiers were mainly driven by the compulsion to let everyone see where the real sovereign power in the archipelago lay. In other words, they wanted to effect colonial rule and establish a colonial state – nothing more and nothing less. This process went hand-in-hand with violence and cost many human lives on both sides, but many more on the indigenous side. The colonial army caused great devastation, destroyed indigenous realms, disturbed traditional societal

18 Martin Bossenbroek, *Holland op zijn breedst. Indië en Zuid-Afrika in de Nederlandse cultuur omstreeks 1900* (Amsterdam 1996).

19 H.L. Wesseling, *Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren* (Amsterdam 1988) 192.

20 M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst van het moderne imperialisme. Koloniën en buitenlandse*

politiek, 1870-1902 (Amsterdam [etc.] 1985) 8-9 and 204-205.

21 J.N.F.M. à Campo, *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij. Stoomvaart en staatsvorming in de Indonesische archipel 1888-1914* (Hilversum 1992) 27.

structures and committed all manner of atrocities, sometimes systematically. However, the expansion of colonial authority did put an end to wars between indigenous realms, piracy, widow-burning, slavery, head-hunting, cannibalism and feudal oppression.²²

3. The modern Dutch colonial state

The formation of a modern colonial state in the Dutch East Indies was, of course, a process that also took place elsewhere; not just in the other small Dutch colonies in the Caribbean, but worldwide, although developments in Asia were significantly faster and more radical than in Africa. The advent of the modern colonial state at the beginning of the twentieth century was a dramatic process. It included a formidable strengthening of the colonial bureaucracy. Colonial states quickly modified the more or less indirect system of rule exercised by traditional indigenous elites and supervised by European colonial civil servants. At the end of the nineteenth century, a growing number of technical tasks were delegated to specialist services and government departments. Although this change engendered a far more complex bureaucratic structure, it also simplified the administration. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the colonial powers could claim a general sphere of influence in Asia. The formal constitutional relationship between the colonial state and the various indigenous societies and political leaders varied enormously. The empires had very divergent local foundations. The creation of a modern colonial state meant sweeping away this institutional and political diversity. Indigenous states were reduced to administrative regions with a defined place in the larger bureaucratic hierarchy. Indigenous local rulers were brought under effective colonial control.²³

A striking feature of the development of the colonial state in the Dutch East Indies was the influence of the ideal of developing the indigenous population. This ideal was powerfully expressed in one of the most important historical colonial novels, *Max Havelaar*, written in 1860 by the former colonial government official Eduard Douwes Dekker. The book describes the conflict between a Dutch government official on Java and the Regent of Lebak, an indigenous leader who, in the eyes of the Dutchman, was corrupt and

22 Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Sumatraans sultanaat en koloniale staat. De relatie Djambi-Batavia (1830-1907) en het Nederlandse imperialisme* (Leiden 1994).

23 R. Cribb (ed.), *The Late Colonial State in Asia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies, 1880-1942* (Leiden 1994); and J. Darwin, 'What was the Late Colonial State?', *Itinerario* 23 (1999) 73-82.



César Mitkiewicz, Portret of the Writer Multatuli
(pseudonym of Eduard Douwes Dekker).
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

oppressed his people. The book made a deep impression in the Netherlands. It suddenly became clear that the colonial government in the Dutch East Indies was an accomplice in the oppression of the Javanese population by its regents and leaders. *Max Havelaar* was, however, in no way an anti-colonial book; nor was it a book that opposed the Cultivation System. It was mainly the indigenous leaders who revealed themselves as unreliable, corrupt potentates in the book, the aim of which was to prove that only Dutch civil servants could govern the Dutch East Indies both well and fairly. This was all outlined in Max Havelaar's famous speech to the leaders of Lebak. 'Wy hebben iets schoons te doen' ['We have a noble work before us'], as the ambitious assistant-resident said to the collected indigenous leaders when he asked them to view him 'als een vriend die u helpen zal waar hy kan, vooral waar onrecht moet worden te keer gegaan' ['I beg you to regard me as a friend who will help you where he can, above all where injustice must be prevented'].²⁴

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Dutch civil servants inspired by *Max Havelaar* began working in the colony, as development workers *avant la lettre*. This attitude, known as the 'ethical policy', was elevated to official governmental policy in 1901 and supported by the liberal, social-democratic and Christian parties – although each political movement understood something different by the term 'ethical policy'.²⁵

Incidentally, the 'ethical policy' was not just adopted by colonial civil servants. Between 1904 and 1914, the colonial government's expenditure on the development of the colony increased dramatically. Its expenditure on public works increased from more than 11.5 million guilders in 1904 to 26 million guilders in 1914. In the same period, its expenditure on agriculture, cattle-breeding and fisheries increased from 807,000 guilders to more than two million guilders; on education from almost five million guilders to more than thirteen million guilders, and on the civil medical service from more than three million guilders to more than 7.5 million guilders.²⁶ All of this money was quickly spent by an increasingly large group of specialized civil servants: engineers, doctors and agricultural experts, who thus increasingly took over the work of the Dutch civil servants.

In the end, half of the engineers who had trained in the Netherlands worked in the Dutch East Indies. It was under their leadership that, alongside ports and railways, above all irrigation works were built in every village. They made a start on improving local irrigation, which had existed from time immemorial, and building dams at the upper reaches of small and medium-

24 Multatuli, *Max Havelaar or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* (Edinburgh 1868) 141-142.

25 Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten. Vijf studies over koloniaal denken en doen van*

Nederlanders in de Indonesische archipel 1877-1942 (Utrecht 1981).

26 *Overzicht der geldmiddelen van Nederlandsch-Indië van 1867 af* (The Hague 1916) 36-37.

sized rivers. Dams were later also built at the lower reaches of the larger rivers. These rivers were infamous for the bandjirs (sudden floods) that occurred during the wet monsoons. Moveable dams therefore had to be built to protect large areas from flooding. The dam in the Tjimanoeck in western Java, for example, made possible the irrigation of an area of 80,000 ha. The area taken up by sawahs on Java would finally increase from 2,700,000 to 3,350,000 ha. between 1900 and 1940, of which 1,300,000 ha. was irrigated in a fully technical manner in 1940.

Another important public body was the Agricultural Information Service [Dutch: Landbouwvoorlichtingsdienst, LVD], which managed to put an end to the regular famines on Java. In 1939, the most densely inhabited island even exported food. This was also a result of the depression that, among other things, had caused a crisis in the sugar industry and led to more land becoming available for rice cultivation. However, severe famines now in any event belonged to the past.

The welfare care provided by the colonial government primarily focused on Java, where poverty appeared to be greatest. However, government services such as the Popular Credit System [Dutch: Volkscredietwezen] and the Agricultural Information Service would also have been as active in the outlying districts, as would the Civil Medical Service, which later became the Public Health Service [Dutch: Dienst voor de Volksgezondheid]. The Civil Medical Service was set up in 1911 and would endeavour to improve health care in the whole of the Dutch East Indies. It took up the fight against various tropical diseases, using measures and education relating to hygiene. A large section of the population was still suspicious of Western medicine and had more faith in local witch doctors, although the successful treatment of *Framboesia Tropica* and hookworm and an effective vaccination against the pox and plague brought about some change. The means available for public health would remain low, however: in 1930 there were, for example, only 1,030 doctors to more than sixty million inhabitants in the Dutch East Indies, and these were mainly in the towns and primarily for the Europeans in the colony.

The ethical policy did not just aim to fight poverty. A central theme was the development of the country in the direction of self-government under Dutch leadership and according to a Western model. Modern education would play a key role here. This is why special schools were set up for indigenous civil servants and doctors. A diploma from the School for the Training of Native Physicians [Dutch: School tot Opleiding van Inlandsche Artsen, STOVIA] provided direct access to the theoretical physician's exam in the Netherlands.

However, the number of places in Western schools for the indigenous population remained very limited. For example, around 1930 only 84,609 children with an indigenous background enjoyed a Western education: in other words, only 0.14 percent of the total population. An even smaller group – consisting almost exclusively of children from the Javanese elite – went to secondary school in Batavia, Bandoeng, Semarang or Surabaya; for example,

Hoesein Djajadiningrat, was the first Indonesian to gain a PhD from the University of Leiden, in 1913, for his dissertation on a critical observation of the Sadjarah Banten.

The opportunity to study at a university finally arrived in the Dutch East Indies, but much later than in the British Raj, for example. An initiative by traders from the Dutch East Indies led to the foundation of a University of Technology [Dutch: Technische Hoogeschool] in Bandoeng in 1920. Aspiring jurists could attend the University for Law [Dutch: Rechtshoogeschool] in Batavia, whilst the School for the Training of Native Physicians was reorganised in 1927 and became the University of Medicine [Dutch: Geneeskundige Hoogeschool]. At the last minute, a Faculty of Literature and Philosophy was founded in 1940 in Batavia and a Faculty of Agriculture in Buitenzorg in 1941. These were small, but important, steps towards an Indonesian system of higher education.²⁷

The growth of a strong, modern bureaucracy in the colonial state inevitably had political implications. Like other colonial powers in Asia, the Netherlands had to respond to the rise of a nationalist movement that demanded democracy, and eventually independence. The nationalist movement was inspired by a mixture of ideas derived from Islam and Western political ideologies. The first nationalist mass movement, the *Sarekat Islam*, was founded in 1911 by Hadji Omar Said Tjokroaminoto. Although its ideology was firmly based on the teachings of Islam in the Modernist tradition, its leadership tried to combine Islamic belief with European ideologies such as liberalism, and later socialism. During the First World War, the nationalist movement radicalized and started to openly criticize the colonial government. The Dutch responded by establishing a semi-parliament [Dutch: De Volksraad] and the introduction of typically Dutch institutions, such as municipalities and provinces at local and regional level. A very limited number of inhabitants of the colony were given the right to vote.²⁸

The political culture that emerged was a peculiar mixture of the culture the Dutch brought to the Dutch East Indies and the indigenous political culture that had existed before the emergence of the late colonial state. In any event, the political and administrative consequences of the emergence of a modern colonial state were enormous. However, the Dutch proved reluctant to recognize the political implications resulting from this shift. When the doors were opened to political involvement at local level, the colonial administration – fearing a vast nationalist groundswell – installed

27 H.W. van den Doel, *De stille macht. Het Europese binnenlands bestuur op Java en Madura 1808-1942* (Amsterdam 1994); J.A.A. van Doorn, *De laatste eeuw van Indië. Ontwikkeling en ondergang van een koloniaal project* (Amsterdam 1994); R.

Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton 2002).

28 Kees van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Leiden 2007) 453-485 and 543-630.

a political police force and introduced repressive laws. A failed communist uprising in 1926/1927 signalled the definitive end of the period in which nationalism was viewed with any sympathy. In the 1930s, the most important nationalistic leaders, such as Sutan Sjahrir, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta, would spend shorter or longer spells in prison or be exiled to a small place in the outlying provinces. This did not prevent the growth of nationalism and national consciousness in Indonesia, however, as described by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). The Netherlands would be confronted with the strength of Indonesian nationalism, particularly after the World War II.²⁹

4. War and revolution

World War II was not just an ideological battle in which the hard-pressed Western, democratic world, together with the Communist Soviet Union, finally fought National-Socialist Germany under the leadership of the United States; it was also a war between new and old empires fighting for power in important parts of the world. In Asia, the British Empire and the United States fought for domination of the area of the Indian and Pacific Ocean against a new empire: Japan. It was a battle fought in large sections of Asia and the Pacific, which had huge consequences for the people who lived there. It was an exceptionally bloody battle, which began before the war in Europe. This war already announced its approach in 1931, when Japan took possession of Manchuria, and then broke out with great intensity in 1937 with the Japanese invasion of China.

The number of European and American victims claimed by the war in Asia was relatively small, despite prisoners of war being used to lay train tracks through the jungles of Southeast Asia and in spite of the bad conditions in which European citizens were interned in camps. It was the populations of Asia who were hardest hit by the war, with the number of casualties comparable with the casualties of the war in Europe. In the war that Japan fought against China, for example, some twenty million Chinese people died: only slightly less than the number of inhabitants of the Soviet Union that would not survive the war. More than 2.5 million Japanese people would die as a result of the war, together with 1.5 million inhabitants of the British Raj. However, one of the worst affected areas was the Dutch East Indies. Although reliable figures do not exist, we can estimate that around four million people died as a direct result of the Japanese occupation, mainly of hunger and

29 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983).

exhaustion.³⁰ The population of the Dutch East Indies therefore suffered the most war casualties in absolute figures after the Soviet Union, China, Germany and Poland, and many more than the Netherlands, for example, where some 200,000 people died.

On the eve of the war, far fewer people were living in the Netherlands than in the Dutch East Indies, of course; nevertheless, if the number of casualties is expressed as a percentage of the population, the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies caused more deaths than the German occupation of the Netherlands. Whereas about 2.3 percent of the total Dutch population did not survive the war, this percentage was almost 5.8 percent for the Dutch East Indies, indicating that the colony suffered above average losses.

For many Asians, the official end of World War II in 1945 did not mean a general end to the violence of war. Whilst societies were gradually being rebuilt in Europe (together with an iron curtain), the weapons in Asia were silenced only for a short time – or they were not silenced at all. Civil wars, nationalist revolutions and communist uprisings led to a power struggle in Southeast Asia in particular, with all the attendant consequences. This part of the world quickly became the stage for the Cold War, which meant that local conflicts attracted worldwide interest. This again led to new acts of war. When France gave up its colonial possessions in Southeast Asia in the middle of the 1950s, the war in Vietnam, for example, carried on unabated, but now with the United States in the role of the power fighting against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

It is perhaps a good idea to follow the example of Chris Bayly and Tim Harper, among others, and to talk henceforth about the Great Asian War of the middle of the twentieth century.³¹ It was a war of many dimensions, innumerable cruelties and millions of casualties, and was certainly not a ‘side show’ to the battles being fought in Europe. It was a battle for power between great powers and empires in an important part of the world, and it was primarily the populations of China and Southeast Asia that were its victims. It was a war in which Japan’s imperial ambitions were halted, but it was also a war that would cause the collapse of the European colonial empires in the area. The importance of all of this should not be underestimated; neither should its significance for the Dutch colonial empire and the position of the Netherlands in the world. Whereas the Netherlands itself and the Caribbean parts of the Dutch empire could more or less pick up the threads of the pre-war situation, this was not the case for the Dutch East Indies, where a colonial order and a colonial society had been destroyed and the world in 1945 looked very different from three years before.

30 John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York 1986) 296.

31 Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain’s Asian Empire* (London 2007) 7.



President Sukarno, alongside him Premier Hatta,
handing over the red & white 'proclamation flag' to the
guard of honour in Yogyakarta.
Associated Press/Reporters.

It was in this changed world that Sukarno and Hatta declared the independence of the Republic of Indonesia on 17 August 1945. This, however, was not accepted by the Netherlands. The Dutch first tried to bring the Republic of Indonesia back into line with negotiations, then war followed in 1947, costing the lives of thousands of Dutch people and many tens of thousands of Indonesians. The Dutch authorities were primarily driven by the idea that they could not give up their responsibility for the Indonesian population and that it was their duty to develop the country further.

Even the Dutch would finally see reason in the spring of 1949, but only after the Dutch policy had failed on all fronts. The Netherlands had suffered heavy defeats both militarily and politically, and there was no alternative but to negotiate with Sukarno and his people. It was good for both the Netherlands and Indonesia that the United States was able to act as an ‘honest broker’ in the conflict, and they were lucky when an American was chosen as the representative on the Committee of Good Offices and the United Nations Commission for Indonesia. Incidentally, the American government had become convinced of the viability of the Republic of Indonesia and the anti-communist stance of Prime Minister Hatta – at least, after the Republic of Indonesia crushed the communist Madioen uprising. From that moment, they did not see any other future for the Indonesian archipelago except as an independent nation, and therefore exerted great pressure on the Netherlands to cooperate. All of which finally resulted in the Roem-Van Roijen Agreement, the Round Table Conference in The Hague and an organised transfer of sovereignty on 27 December 1949.³²

The similarity to the course of events in French Indochina is immediately striking if we compare the developments in the Dutch East Indies with the decolonisation processes elsewhere in Asia. Here too, we have a colonial administration that had treated the nationalist movement unimaginatively and harshly, and that had also chosen the traditional elite as its administrative partner. After the war, the French were also confronted with a declaration of independence, and their subsequent policy was in many ways similar to that of the Dutch in Indonesia. This was, of course, no coincidence, because the Dutch authorities had based their attempts to disarm the Indonesian Republic on the French attempts to create a *Fédération indochinoise* within the *Union française*. Like the Dutch, the French wished to hang on to their colonial possessions after World War II, whatever the cost. Like the Dutch, they felt it was their vocation in the world to carry out a ‘mission civilisatrice’.

32 R. Cribb, *Gangsters and Revolutionaries: The Jakarta People's Militia and the Indonesian Revolution, 1945-1949* (North Sydney 1991); H.W. van den Doel, *Afscheid van Indië. De val van het Nederlandse imperium in Azië* (Amsterdam 2000).

The position the Netherlands occupied in the world after the decolonisation of Indonesia was, of course, different from that during the preceding period. From a neutral country that expected much of its colonial possessions and of the maintenance of the international legal order, it became a faithful partner of the United States and an active participant in the economic, and later the political, unification of Europe. The influence of the decolonisation of Indonesia on all of this, however, should not be overestimated. The political situation in Europe – the threat of the Soviet Union and the need to solve the ‘German question’ – were of much greater importance. That the Netherlands would focus henceforth on its Atlantic partner, and that it participated in European unification – the French-German solution to the German question – had a lot more to do with the Cold War than with the loss of Indonesia.

In the modern Netherlands, incidentally, the legacy of the Dutch colonial administration of Suriname and the Dutch Antilles is more visible than that of the Dutch East Indies. In the 1970s, the Dutch government attempted to sever its links definitively with the Caribbean overseas territories. The reason for this was the riots that broke out in Curacao in 1969, which were crushed with the help of Dutch troops. This was a traumatic experience that evoked memories of colonial actions: something many Dutch people did not want to be reminded of. After this, first Suriname was pushed in great haste to independence in 1964-1975, under pressure from social-democratic Prime Minister J.M. den Uyl and his ideologically inspired minister of development cooperation, Jan Pronk. A veritable exodus of Surinamese people to the Netherlands was the result, and 250,000 Surinamese people (half of the total population) would finally come and live in the Netherlands. In the meantime, the Dutch Antilles managed to avoid independence.

The arrival of Surinamese migrants in the Netherlands invoked renewed interest in the role of the Netherlands in Atlantic history in general, and the Netherlands’ slave trading past in particular. A sad page in history seemed to have been saved from obscurity. The Dutch government reacted by building a National Monument to the History of Slavery, which was unveiled under chaotic circumstances in Amsterdam on 1 July 2002, 139 years after the abolition of slavery.

5. Current debates: the nature of the late colonial state

Historians who deal with the history of the worldwide revolutions of the period around 1800, the history of colonial exploitation, modern imperialism, nationalism and the Great Asian War cannot avoid the history of the Netherlands on the world stage.

This is also true when historians are trying to understand the establishment of modern bureaucratic states around the world. Benedict Anderson was the first historian to indicate this continuity between the late colonial state and the independent nation states. In his *Imagined Communities*, he pointed out the isomorphisms between each nationalism's territorial stretch and that of the previous imperial administrative unit, which bequeathed the new national states the shape of the former colonial empires. It is possible to see a 'subtle, half-concealed transformation made possible not only by a solid continuity of personnel, but by the established skein of journeys through which each state was experienced by its functionaries'.³³ Many structures in the newly independent states in Asia bear a strong resemblance to the institutions that took shape in the final decades of colonial rule. The written laws of the newly independent states, the structure of the bureaucracy and even the political systems spring to mind.³⁴ We still know surprisingly little about the 'late' or 'modern' colonial states that have left such an important legacy in present-day Asia. This is partly because, in nationalist ideology, the colonial state is represented as a historical dead-end. Until recently, this period in Asian (and likewise in African and Latin American) history was viewed only in the context of nation building, emphasising the achievements of the nationalists, who were later to become the leaders of the new independent states.

However, since, among others, Theda Skocpol launched the movement to bring 'the state back in', the nation state and the modern colonial state have increasingly become the focus of social scientists and historians.³⁵ In African historiography, the colonial state has even become one of the most important explanatory factors for today's problems.

33 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983).

34 R. Baibanti (ed.), *Asian Bureaucratic Systems Emergent from the British Imperial Tradition* (Durham 1966); J.M. Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (Delhi 1984); T.N. Harper, *The End of the Empire and the Making*

of Malaya (Cambridge 1999); M. Frey, Ronald W. Pruessen and Tan Tai Yong (eds.), *The Transformation of Southeast Asia: International Perspectives on Decolonization* (Armonk 2003).

35 T. Skocpol, 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research', in: P.B. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge 1985) 3-43.

Stripped to its essentials, the heart of the African state crisis ... lies in this lethal combination of the colonial state heritage, the failed vision of the integral state and the prebendal realities of political management,

Crawford Young concluded in his influential *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*.³⁶ A more extreme view of the detrimental influence of the colonial and other states was offered by James C. Scott in his *Seeing Like a State*, in which he pointed out the striking 'degree to which the assumptions of the colonial regime matched those of the independent, and far more legitimate, socialist state of Tanzania'.³⁷ So while state failure can be seen as largely man-made (President Robert Mugabe personally led Zimbabwe from strength to failure, by pocketing the state's resources), some historians blame the nature of the colonial state for the non-development of Africa in particular.³⁸

In the 1990s, John Darwin of Oxford University reinvigorated interest in the late colonial state with his influential article 'What was the Late Colonial State?' Contrary to the ideas of Young and Scott, he indicates the weaknesses of the late colonial states. His comparative methodology distinguishes some six characteristics found in various proportions and mixtures in a number of these states. What these features have in common, Darwin writes, was their outcome: 'The erosion of the authority, ability or will of the nominal rulers to protect the autonomy of the colonial government against domestic interference or local opposition'. He considers the late colonial state a valuable concept; one by which to identify 'The circumstances in which colonial rule became unsustainable'. In his vision, the late colonial state was characterised by increased intervention by the metropolis, which led to complex bureaucracies, a growing set of fixed rules and regulations and increasing military involvement. Because of the rigid enforcement of policies imposed from above, the late colonial state lost its flexibility in responding to changing local and regional circumstances.³⁹

Also in the 1990s, Robert Cribb edited a publication on a range of subjects connected with the late colonial state in the Netherlands East Indies, ranging from the 'Ethical Policy' and foreign trade to forestry and political intelligence. This book shows how the foundations of the modern Indonesian state were laid in this late colonial era. Cribb highlights three changes: 1. constitutional separation from the Netherlands; 2. growing administrative

36 C. Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven 1994) 292.

37 J.C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (London 1998) 226.

38 See also: Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York, London 1992).

39 Darwin, 'What was the Late Colonial State?', 73-82.

sophistication in the form of a complex bureaucracy; and 3. the ‘development of a political format based notionally on the responsibility to the people’. These three changes lay at the root of the revolutionary transformation of the Netherlands East Indies. This transformation was not completed by the time of the Japanese invasion in 1942. This explains the many weaknesses of the state that the nationalist government inherited after the war.⁴⁰

Cribb and Darwin do not concur in their vision of the late colonial state. They each emphasise very different aspects in explanation of its weaknesses. Cribb considers the late colonial state an expression of modernity, which was still weak because it was not yet fully enforced. Darwin considers the late colonial state rigid despite – or even because of – its modern characteristics, and therefore essentially weak.

One of the main questions now is whether – and how – these two differing perspectives can be connected. The two different approaches to the late colonial state are replete with implications for understanding the formation of the independent states in the post-World War II era. Therefore, they certainly require further elaboration. As yet, this has not stimulated historians to focus in greater depth on the actual links between the late colonial state and the Asian nation states. The only important exception is the ‘Indonesia across borders’ project under the aegis of NIOD [Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie], as this concentrates on this transitional period. Historians from the Netherlands, Australia and Indonesia have innovated in relation to the research agenda by looking at daily life, changes in the cities, businesses, the position of workers, the running of financial companies, crime and security. They are in agreement that decolonisation was not only a departure, but also a gradual reorientation of Indonesian society: *indonesianisasi*.⁴¹

Meaningful syntheses of the whole period are still very much required, building on the results of the NIOD programme. A comparative approach focusing on Southeast Asia and grounded in the work of Cribb, Darwin and the Dutch-Indonesian NIOD team will give greater insight into the rise and development of nation states in this region. Moreover, such an approach will clarify how the different political cultures emerged and developed. British-Malaya, French-Indochina, the U.S.-ruled Philippines and the Netherlands East Indies all passed through the same fundamental process of regime

40 Cribb, *The Late Colonial State in Asia*.

41 ‘Indonesianisasi and Nationalization: The Emancipation and Reorientation of the Economy and the World of Industry and Commerce in Indonesia, 1930-1960’ is part of the ‘Indonesia across borders’ project by the NIOD.

change in which formal decolonisation is only part of the story. We need to know much more about the late colonial states the imperial powers built in Asia in order to understand the legacy the nationalists inherited from the structures they opposed. To what extent did colonial rule make Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia? How then could they be shaped into viable nation-states? ◀

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Civil Society or Democracy?

A Dutch Paradox

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209

BMGN | LCHR | VOLUME 125 - 2-3 | 209 - 236

Since the 1990s, research has been carried out worldwide into the relationship between 'civil society' (an organised, self-aware society) and the formation of democracy. Dutch historians have to date shown little interest in this field of research, although the case of the Netherlands is an interesting one, both historically and in terms of current affairs. This article makes a case for the relevance of Dutch history to the debate on civil society in relation to three points. Firstly, where civil society is a phenomenon of the eighteenth and above all the nineteenth centuries, the society of the Republic demonstrates that a corporatist order can show characteristics of a civil society. Secondly, the factor of religion can be an important element in the promotion of social commitment. Thirdly, Dutch history flags up a paradox: it seems that a highly developed, civil society can rather limit than promote the need for political democracy and the recognition of an independent political sphere.

Civil society as a research theme

'Civil society' has proven one of the most successful concepts, both in the social sciences and in public debate, as is evident from the profusion of publications on the subject that have appeared in the past two decades. Although it harks back to republican discourse and political philosophy of the early modern age, the concept made a comeback in the 1980s in circles of East European dissident intellectuals. Faced with an overwhelming and repressive state, they entertained the ideal of a distinct social realm leaving space for free social organization and development.¹ The notion of 'civil society' has referred to the recognition and the quality of society, and to the spread of civic attitudes. The concept has posited, firstly, a social and public sphere distinct from the market, the state and the private domain of family and clan relations. Secondly, it has referred to the degree of self-organization, civic commitment and voluntary association a society demonstrates. Thirdly, and more normatively, it has assumed that citizens can cope with plurality and differences, and have a sense of common interest.