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**Koloniale vertoningen : de verbeelding van Nederlands-Indië op de wereldtentoonstellingen (1880-1931)**

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## Summary

### Colonial Spectacles. Imagining the Netherlands-Indies at the World Exhibitions (1880-1931)

This study deals with the nature of Dutch colonial mentality and nationalism around 1900, and with one of their possible origins. The Dutch colonial presentations at the world exhibitions in the period 1880-1931 form the central topic and starting point of this thesis to obtain insight into prevailing ideas about Dutch identity and the colonial enterprise in the Netherlands. What was (and is) colonial consciousness in the Netherlands about? The main argument of this study is that these colonial exhibitions (or spectacles) and their reception tell more about a Dutch problem - the problem of being a small nation that is forced to be neutral - than about imperialistic hegemony. Another theme that is reflected by these exhibitions, and the main motif in this book, is 'the problem of civilisation', which is partly related to problems of colonial rule, and partly connected to changing visions on western culture.

Since the first world exhibition in London in 1851 colonies were represented as the deliverers of raw material and goods, anthropological laboratories, or imperialistic crown jewels. In the encompassing story of progress put forward by the world exhibitions, the colonial sections played a meaningful role. At the 1883 world exhibition held in Amsterdam, Dutch organisers installed a kampong, or 'Indies village', inhabited by authentic Javanese and Sumatrans who performed their daily life and practices. This image of the kampong presented to the western public the possibility of an 'anthropological experience', that is, an awareness of the differences between civilisations or 'races' (according to perceptions and terminology used at the time). From an evolutionary perspective, which prevailed in this period, this ethnographic exhibition provided evidence for the hierarchy of civilisations and the distance between modern western culture and the represented simple life of the indigenous inhabitants of the Netherlands-Indies. This study takes this presentation as a starting point to analyse how and why, after the 1880s, the image of the indigenous population of the Netherlands-Indies changed at world exhibitions, and what this changing image meant in relation to the colonial enterprise and contemporary views on the problem of civilisation.

The focus is on the Dutch colonial presentations - the image of the Netherlands-East-Indies in particular - at a selection of five world exhibitions. A study is made of the organisational and ideological foundation of the presentations, as well as their reception, mainly in the Netherlands, but also in the Netherlands-East-Indies and in France. These exhibitions define the central topic and chronological arrangement of the chapters. Starting point is the international colonial and trade exhibition held in Amsterdam in 1883, the one and only world exhibition ever held in the Netherlands, and not accidentally the first world exhibition dedicated to the colonial theme (chapter 2). The end of the following history of colonial exhibitions is marked by the Dutch presentation at the *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* in Paris in 1931, the last colonial world exhibition ever held in Europe (chapter 6 & 7). In between we visit the Dutch colonial sections at the world

exhibitions in Paris in 1889 and 1900, and in Brussels in 1910 (respectively in chapter 3, 4 & 5). These chapters on the making and meanings of colonial exhibitions are preceded by a contextual analysis of the Dutch colonial enterprise and ideas related to the problem of colonial rule and the problem of civilisation in the Netherlands in the 1880s (chapter 1).

It was no coincidence that the Dutch showed off with their colonies at world exhibitions in this period. As a colonial empire the small and industrially backward Dutch nation knew itself admired by foreign colonial experts from the great powers of Europe since the 1860s. From the standpoint of Dutch colonial rule a new 'liberal' era began in the 1870s. The opening of the Suez-canal in 1870 brought the Netherlands-Indies within suitable distance. The abolishment of the State-controlled cultivation system the year before had cleared the way for private entrepreneurship. Both events caused a growing flux of European travellers to the Netherlands-Indies. In this period the Dutch presence in the Indian archipelago expanded through violent military force, political administration and economic enterprise. It was only after the defeat of Lombok in 1894 that Dutch colonial expansion in the Netherlands-Indies really took off. This new 'liberal' colonial period marked the fact that the control over the Netherlands-Indies was not any longer only the business of the government, but also a matter of private interest, both with regard to the economic development, the colonial administration, and to regional expansion. Against this background the making of the Dutch colonial sections at the world exhibitions should be understood.

In the Netherlands the initiative for participating in a world exhibition was always taken by private trade and industrial organisations that negotiated for the financial support from the government. Governmental contributions grew, and even became structural over time, but the government always demanded a considerable input from private entrepreneurs. Neither of the two parties could or would take this risky enterprise alone. As this study shows the Dutch colonial exhibitions were also the product of a monstrous alliance on another level. The organisation always consisted of two executive committees, one in the Netherlands and one in the Netherlands-Indies, consisting of members of the (former) colonial political, financial and cultural elite, who had to work together in bounded concurrence. The Dutch commission always took the lead, but in the course of time the commissions in the Netherlands-Indies took up a more independent and stronger position, reflecting the growing political demands of the Dutch inhabitants of the colonies. Indonesian members took part in the organisation as well, but only at the occasion of the Dutch colonial presentations in Brussels (1910) and Paris (1931), and with a comparatively subordinate role – as a reflection of the racial administrative hierarchy in the colony. However, the Indonesian members, like the other members of the organisation, and the Indonesian contributors attached their own meaning to the role they played in the colonial representation at world exhibitions, as is illustrated in chapter 5, 7 and the epilogue.

All in all, the Dutch colonial exhibitions had a twofold purpose. On the one hand they legitimised and gave shape to Dutch colonial rule in the Netherlands-Indies in a period of colonial expansion. On the other hand they were to enhance the Dutch national prestige. By showing to the Dutch and European public that this wonderful colony was Dutch, these exhibitions made sure that the Dutch nation still counted in the modern world.

However, the colonial exhibitions also conveyed a story that did not fit. This story reflected three "gnawingly irritating contemporary concerns" of the time<sup>1</sup>, related to the colonial enterprise, for which there was no clear, sounding and simple resolution. First, the problem of colonial rule. How could it be organised most effectively? Second, the problem of civilisation. Which attitude was to be assumed towards the culture of the indigenous population in the light of the prevailing belief in western progress? To what extent was its indigenous culture to be changed ('civilised') or preserved? Should assimilation or association be the leading principle of colonial rule? And last but not least, there was the problem of Dutch identity and the Dutch position in the world. How could the former great republic of the seventeenth century, the seaborne empire that had fallen to a small powerless rank in the nineteenth century, keep up with the flow of nations?

If we assume that the organisers of the Dutch colonial exhibitions planned to recommend the colonial enterprise, they could follow three motives: the economic argument, the political-cultural argument of civilisation and development (the *mission civilisatrice*), and the military motif of vigour and heroic martyrdom, or a combination of the three.

Economic interests were constantly present in the exhibitions analysed in this book. They can be deduced from the growing piles of colonial trade ware and sources. The *mission civilisatrice* appeared on the foreground from 1900 onwards. As the official and main motif, however, it was explicitly pronounced only at the exhibition in Brussels in 1910. This was typical for the period of the so-called *ethische politiek*, or ethical politics, the Dutch version of the *mission civilisatrice* that became official policy at the turn of the century. The motif of education and development was not only expressed by the rather modest exposure of modern schools and medical care, but, indirectly also by the exhibitions on the daily life and culture of the indigenous population of the Netherlands-Indies. Ideally, these cultural exhibitions should point to the superiority and necessity of modern Dutch development. But actually, they conveyed ambivalent messages regarding the nature of western progress, as can also be seen in their reception. Also, they changed importantly over time. In short, the one-sided and simple image of one 'primitive' ethnography (the kampong in the 1880s, chapter 2 and 3) in time was replaced by a more differentiated image concerning highly esteemed expressions of old Javanese Hindu and Buddhist civilisation (the reconstruction of Candi Sari, and plaster-samples of the Borobudur in 1900 (chapter 4)) and even present modes of (folk-)art (arts & crafts in Brussels in 1910 (chapter 5); Balinese architecture, dance and music in Paris in 1931 (chapter 6)).

Finally, where the French paraded with African colonial soldiers on their colonial exhibits, the Dutch only paid ostensibly tribute to their colonial army at the world exhibition in Amsterdam in 1883 with a monument for the war in Aceh and military trophies in the colonial palace. But when Dutch colonial expansion gained speed after the conquest of Lombok in 1894, the military motif disappeared from the stage of the Dutch colonial exhibitions. And this, while 'Lombok' caused a frenzy of jingoistic nationalism in the Netherlands. This remarkable element does not so much point to the nature of the Dutch colonial enterprise, as I argue in my conclusion, but to a Dutch problem: the weak position of a small nation that needed to keep its neutral position in Asia and Europe.

Besides the missing military motif there was a second element that seems remarkable in the Dutch colonial exhibitions: the story of the *mission civilisatrice* was not strong. In this regard the image chosen

as typical for the culture of the indigenous population was ambivalent and changing. This change in the cultural image is closely connected to the problem of civilisation, the main theme of this study. This involved three developments, that were more or less related to the colonial enterprise. First, the interaction between the expansion of colonial rule and colonial knowledge: the military expansion and the shift to direct or indirect rule in different parts of the Netherlands-Indies stimulated the scientific interest in the region, the culture and the social organisation of the inhabitants. Second, the awareness that colonial rule could be more effective by soliciting the co-operation of the indigenous elite. This awareness grew around 1900, due to authoritative intellectuals and government-advisors such as arabist C. Snouck Hurgronje. Snouck not only recommended western education for the Indonesian elite, to school them for the colonial bureaucracy; he also thought that knowledge of the elite's social and cultural institutions, and respect towards her culture was essential to good colonial rule. The involvement of the indigenous elite in colonial rule required her to play a role in the Dutch colonial representation at world exhibitions as well. This development was only very modestly visible in the colonial participation in Brussels (1910) and Paris (1931).

Third, in the same period, an influential cultural elite in the Netherlands and the Netherlands-Indies opened her eyes to the beauty of eastern art- and cultural expressions, in reaction to the decay and levelling they observed in modern western civilisation. This growing interest was also reflected in the organisation of the Dutch colonial exhibitions. Underneath all these motives the question played if indigenous culture ought to be changed according to western standards, or respected and even preserved. All these factors complicated the imagining of the indigenous population. This was especially so at world exhibitions, the localities of the propagation of progress and modernity. How was indigenous culture to be exposed, given the growing awareness that progress actually was not a one-sided success-story?

The comments on the Dutch colonial exhibitions in the Dutch newspapers, and popular magazines indicate that the Dutch colonial sections contributed to the spread of a proud national colonial consciousness in the Netherlands. On the other hand, they also provoked individual anti-imperialist protests, which became loud and very visible at the occasion of the exhibition in 1931.

Besides, the content of colonial consciousness was not clear at all, both with regard to the colonial enterprise, and to the image of the indigenous culture. Apparently, the direct confrontation with the culture of the colonised other, and the possibility to compare between 'them' and 'us', did not prove the hierarchy of civilisations. Already in the 1880s attentive and art-loving visitors of the primitive villages expressed their admiration for the artistic woodcarvings in the ornamentation of the dwellings. For some individuals the presentation of the village, as well as the simple life performed by its inhabitants, caused nostalgia to a romanticised and lost past, in which man was not alienated from nature. Thus, the idea of being advanced in time was not necessarily linked to being superior. The 'anthropological experience' in an important sense was also a lesson on the state of western civilisation, or a mirror.

The popularity of *le village javanais* at the world exhibition in Paris in 1889 exceeded the one in Amsterdam. Day after day it was crowded with interested visitors. It was frequented by the Parisian

*Beau monde*, famous artists, physical anthropologists, ethnographers, and the man in the street. They were all tempted by the bare-feet female Javanese dancers, of whom it was known that they possessed blue blood, and who came from the court of Prince Mangkunegara in Java. They provoked sensual reactions and stories of mutual decay in many reports on visits to the Javanese village. These reactions all seem to point to the fact that the western visitors that entered the village with or without an anthropological framework and feelings of colonial superiority, could not make sense of what they saw, and did not know how to place this *tableau vivant*: a coloured, but definitely refined and delicate people or (race), which was aristocratic - a sign of civilisation. The relations and barriers between civilisations appeared to be not at all clear, and perhaps it was better to keep these relations vague. This is perhaps the reason for the popularity of these live shows: by escaping in exotic amusement, the western visitor was discharged from the obligation to be seriously interested in this other culture.

The same story could be told with regard to the popularity of the Balinese dances in Paris in 1931. However, the fascination provoked by the old Hindu-Javanese civilisation presented at the Dutch colonial section at the world exhibition in Paris in 1900 in some ways seemed to be different. Here deep admiration was expressed for both its works of art, and the religious world-view of this civilisation. However, this high esteem stood on its own and perhaps led to self-reflection, but not to clear thoughts on the nature and meaning of the colonial enterprise. The admiration, moreover, was exclusive, reserved for a small and educated elite group. Its initial effect was less direct and visible than the *succes fou* of the villages, but of greater importance on the long run. The 'anthropological experience' made an important shift. It developed from a superficial exotic curiosity, to a more serious and profound, and possibly sincere and scientific interest.

The immense popularity of the Balinese show in 1931 meant a huge step back for the 'anthropological experience'. The fact that the Balinese show was supposed to represent Balinese culture could not explain its popularity. With the economic depression at the background, and unsavoury memories of a devastating war, it was the dream of Bali - the-paradise-on-earth - that drew the western public to the Balinese pavilion. As the announcer of this image to a larger western public the colonial presentation in Paris was the harbinger of the growing stream of tourists, for whom Bali has remained an exotic paradise until the present. As the epilogue of this study illustrates, the Balinese success in Paris has its own history in Bali, a different one from the colonial success-story central to this study. This Balinese history only illustrates why and in what sense the Dutch colonial spectacles reflected the colonial enterprise. The history of this colonial enterprise and its related images were embedded in mutual misunderstandings, prejudice and incomprehension.

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<sup>1</sup> Stocking (1987) 188.



