Mijn aardse leven vol moeite en strijd : Raden Mas Noto Soeroto, Javaan, dichter, politicus, 1888-1951
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Citation for published version (APA):

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SUMMARY

A Javanese who did not live in Java for 26 years of his life. A man who was active in politics and claims not to be a politician. A publisher-bookseller who is not a business man and a poet-essayist who is not read anymore.

His name, Noto Soeroto, fills papers and magazines at regular intervals between 1909 and 1932 with reviews of his seven books of poetry and with the discussions about his ideas on the relationship between The Netherlands and the colony in the East. He gives numerous interviews and lectures for various organisations in The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France and Czechoslovakia. Noto Soeroto is an inspired man and he attracts a great deal of attention. His cradle stood in Djokjakarta in 1888. To be more precise, in the principality of Pakoe Alam, the smallest principedom of Central Java. The Pakoe Alam House is by this time already known for its aspirations towards Western schooling. Noto Soeroto's father, Noto Dirodjo, attends the Dutch High School and for his children he strives for an academic education in The Netherlands. During Noto Soeroto's primary school years and his Dutch High School period he is taught Javanese Culture and History at home. After High School in Semarang Noto Soeroto sets off for The Netherlands in 1906 to be a law student at the University of Leyden, where his brother, Noto Kworo, is already studying medicine. Another brother, Gondowinoto, follows in Noto Soeroto's footsteps as a law student and finally, Noto Diningrat enrols as a student of Engineering in Delft.

The boys' father has to make great financial sacrifices in order for them to study. The only one who will not successfully complete his study is Noto Soeroto. He does not get any further than his first university degree in 1911. After that he attends some lectures, but without much result. Despite his good intentions he does not succeed in getting his Masters' degree. He is too occupied with other matters. He lives in The Hague and combines his study with his work as a journalist which enables him to air a great many of his ideas on the relationship between The Netherlands and the colony. In short, these ideas boil down to the notion that the Dutch have an important role to play in the East Indies. The Indies can profit from Western knowledge in the fields of agriculture, engineering, trade, shipping and industry. According to him, the West has the mind and the East has the heart. In his opinion this is an ideal combination. This philosophy is the basis of his so-called 'association idea'. The aspiration should be: the construction of Java managed by The Netherlands under the House of Orange. According to Noto Soeroto, independence of the colony is not yet on the agenda. During the first years of the past century this way of thinking completely fitted in with the ethical politics also advocated by The Netherlands. Noto Soeroto writes for, amongst others in the NRC (New Rotterdam Journal) and is an editor of the Orangist magazine Bandera Wolanda (Dutch Flag) and Het Nederlandsch Indische huis Oud en Nieuw (The Dutch Indies House Old and New).

The group of Indonesian students in The Netherlands is still small in these years before the Great War. Around 1908 their number is about twenty. Stimulated by the 'ethicist' Jacques Abendanon, former director of the Department of Education, Religion and Industry in the colony, they found in that year the 'Indische Vereeniging', a society of Indonesian students in The Netherlands. An important incentive for the foundation of this society is the establishment in Java of Boedi Oetomo (Noble Ambition) in 1908, with the aim of undertaking the development of Java. Boedi Oetomo can be seen as the first nationalistic society in the colony. It is led by Pryayi, the elite of colonial governors. Noto Dirodjo is the chairman of this moderate Javanese organization for some years.

In 1911 Noto Soeroto becomes chairman of the Indische Vereeniging. There is consensus about the policy to be followed: ethical politics and association are the main concepts. The
Regent's daughter Kartini (1879–1904) provides the society with a woman who with her ideas about 'the elevation of the Javanese', as expounded in her book of letters Door duisternis tot licht (Through Darkness to Light). In this collection of letters, her ideas seamlessly, but posthumously fit in with the perception of the Indonesian students in The Netherlands. The society chooses her line of policy as a guidance: development of Java by Western knowledge with which, just like the starting points of Boedi Oetomo, an important role is reserved for the Pryayi. The elite should take the lead. They are held responsible for the development of the Javanese. It is a model that would nowadays be called 'top-down'.

In 1913 Noto Soeroto meets Soeparto. Soeparto is a descendant of the Mangkoenegaran House of Solo, who has also come to The Netherlands to study. In The Hague they share a house in the Weimarstraat and they get along quite well. They share a common interest in literature, the development of Java, Javanese Culture and not in the least in The Hague girls. They discover the Tagore translations by the Dutch writer-psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932) and they are very impressed.1 Tagore's poems have such an influence on Noto Soeroto that he starts to write poetry in Tagore's style. In 1914 Noto Soeroto's first 'poems in prose' are published in De Tijdspiegel (The Time Mirror). In 1915 they are published in a volume entitled Melatiknoppen (Melatibuds). Five more volumes will follow before 1925.

The titles are special: De geur van moeders haarwron (The Scent of Mother's Hairknot), Fluisteringen in de avondwind (Whisperings in the Evening Wind), Nieuwe Fluisteringen (New Whisperings), Lotos en morgendauw (Lotus and Morning Dew) and Bloeme-ketenen (Flower Chains). In 1931 the volume Wayang-liederen (Wayang Songs) is published, which is more original than the former volumes inspired by Tagore. In general, reviews on Noto Soeroto's poetry are sympathetically received.

In the meantime Soeparto and Noto Soeroto become good friends. They both volunteer to join the Dutch army. Soeparto as a grenadier, Noto Soeroto as a cavalryman with the 'Red Cavalry'. It is an act of loyalty towards The Netherlands, although they are also of the opinion that a military education can be very helpful later on in Java, because of the much feared expansion of Japan. In 1914 they are both called up for general mobilisation as a result of the mobilisation. Soeparto is recalled to Java in May 1915 and in March 1916 he succeeds his uncle as monarch of the Mangkoenegaran House. Subsequently both friends correspond extensively after that.

During the mobilisation Noto Soeroto is billeted with the Meijer family in Eindhoven. He starts a relationship with the daughter Jo. In June 1918 they get married and in October Rawindro (Rawi) is born. The family settles in The Hague. Despite his good intentions, he does not manage to study. He is completely absorbed with other matters such as writing articles, being an editor, military service, writing poems, marrying and being a father. Moreover, there is a chronic lack of money. His father had died in 1917 and the governmental scholarship is used for other matters than his study. His request to Soeparto, in the meantime Mangkoenegoro VII, to support him financially is complied with. Jo's parents support the family as well.

In 1920 Noto Soeroto starts a bookselling and publishing firm called Hadi Poestaka (Beautiful Writings). The publisher's list mainly consists of books about Indonesia in the field of culture, ethnology and economy. The bookshop is focussed on text books for Indonesian students and publications in the same style he publishes himself. At first business seems to prosper.

In 1923 his greatest wish is fulfilled. He starts a magazine named Oedaya (Raise). It contains articles in Dutch and Malayan. The contents are diverse with strong cultural components: Dutch and Indonesian painting, Dutch and Indonesian sculpture, Dutch and

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1 Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Indian writer and philosopher.
Indonesian dancing etcetera. But the magazine also pays attention to nursing and outpatient's clinics in Java, wireless and aviation. The character of Oedaya completely fits in with the association idea.

Noto Soeroto in the meantime has established himself in the cultural life of The Hague. He is a friend of the journalist Ben van Eysselsteijn, the poet-woodcutter-architect Hein von Essen, the sculptor Johan Altorf, the painter Isaac Israëls and dozens of others. He is a member of the Haagse Kunstkring (The Hague Art Society) and the 'Wigwam' club, another society where artists meet each other. In Oedaya the artists scratch each others' backs in the column 'Of art and artists'. They discuss each others' work, thus promoting each other. Gradually a powerful clique of artists is arising: poets, painters, sculptors, woodcutters and actors. Noto Soeroto feels at home, but apart from the pure cultural aim, there is of course the Indonesian cause. This is not a thorny issue in The Hague. Many of his artistic friends have a bond with the colony. They were born there or they have travelled the Archipelago. Moreover, The Hague is the city from which the colony is governed, the residence of enterprises active in Indonesia and the city of people on leave. Noto Soeroto considers his group of artists to be the designated group to enhance the spiritual meeting between East and West. He is of the opinion that the cultural encounter between The Netherlands and Indonesia is an important pillar on which the colonial relation should be supported.

Noto Soeroto's family is extending. In 1922 his daughter Dewatya (Dewi) is born and his son Harindro Dirodjo (Indro) in 1928.

Meanwhile nationalism has organized itself in Indonesia. It is true that societies of a political nature were forbidden until 1915, but the aspiration for independence, equal rights and development had begun. A colourful mixture of parties, societies, unions and other groups is developing, varying from great to small, from moderate to militant, from secular to religious, from racial-ethnic to general, from regional to national and from socialist to communist. Boedi Oetomo in 1908 is followed by the Sarekat Islam in 1911, the Indische Partij in 1912, the PKI in 1920 and in 1928 the PNI of Soekarno follow, to mention a number of important organizations. Nationalism increases. The growing of the nationalistic movement does not pass unnoticed by the Indonesians living in The Netherlands. In 1924 the already formed board of the society of Indonesian students claims the liberation of Indonesia to be its aim. The realization of self-confident and self supporting nationalistic mass action should be supported. In December 1924 Noto Soeroto is expelled as a member of the society, because in the opinion of the administration he damages the Indonesian cause. It was to have been expected. The controversies between his persistent ethic, associative ideas and the changed line of policy of the society were at complete odds with each other.

Oedaya changes after the expulsion. Besides articles of a cultural and social nature, Noto Soeroto now writes personally signed contributions in order to spread his political convictions. Another platform for airing his ideas is found in the Nederlandsch-Indonesisch Verbond (Dutch-Indonesian League), in which moderate Dutch and Indonesians are organized. His friends Hein von Essen and the business man Louis Petit amongst others are on the board. The league is founded in 1924 and Noto Soeroto is chairman of honour. In Oedaya the league gets the opportunity to place league information and reports. In the course of 1927 and 1928 it develops into an organization of 700 members and 19 affiliated societies. Study groups, discussion groups and gala nights with Javanese dance and gamelan are organized. It seems to be going well.
Noto Soeroto compiles his articles from *Oedaya* in a booklet he published separately, *Kleurschakeeringen uit Oedaya* (Range of colouring from Oedaya). A few quotations illustrate his line of policy and that of the Nederlandsch-Indonesisch Verbond.

'We have to produce from our midst the pillars of our nation: our scholars, our merchants and our industrialists, not by a few but by hundreds and all of them inspired by the same zeal, aided by the Dutch, who have become fellow citizens in our country, to accomplish our task which is to serve the development of Indonesia and to go from tyranny to real government.'

'But if we ourselves try to cultivate nationalism in our country, which we shall also have to suffer, then we actually aim at the repetition of a barbarian era in the West or in other words a step back in the development of mankind. Can this truly be our intention?'

From all his articles in *Kleurschakeeringen* a nationalist sentiment appears which is based on what Noto Soeroto considers to be values of his Javanese culture: poetical, looking for higher things, self realization, giving trust, cheerful, righteous, sympathizing and altruistic. The independence of Indonesia should be based on Indonesian individuality. East and West can find one another, if their own culture is free of violence, imperialism, racism and pure economic motives. Only mutual love can unite the nations. The nationalists are reproached for losing sight of their individuality by wanting to apply the values of the West for the achievement of the independence of Indonesia. Noto Soeroto's mission not only sounds bombastic, but it actually is.

In 1930 the Nederlandsch-Indonesisch Verbond is dwindling away. The number of Dutch people is too dominant. For the Indonesians the Javanese contribution is too strong and others hesitate in making a political choice. Moreover, the dance and gamelan formula is somewhat one-sided. The financial situation is critical. New committee members cannot be found anymore. A meeting is arranged by the board in order to see if a continuation is still possible. Noto Soeroto seizes his opportunity. He asks the members for a mandate to reorganize the league with him as chairman and comes up with a plan both ambitious and impossible. According to his idea the league should strive towards the realization of the so-called 'rijksheidsgedachte' (state unity thought) in the sense of duality Holland-Indonesia with which Holland should execute a policy aspiring to the political, economical and spiritual development of both parts. It goes without saying that Holland takes the lead, and the head of state of both parts is provided by the Dutch Royal House. A 'Group of Holland' and a 'Group of Indonesia' will have to be formed that will elaborate the state unity thought.

Noto Soeroto has also given thought to the administrative structure of the independent Indonesia to come. In a number of articles in *Oedaya* he describes this model. In 1931 these articles are published in a compilation entitled *Van overheersching naar zelfregeering* (From Dominance to Self Government). In short he makes a plea to have the best, the aristocrats in society elected as governors. He makes the distinction of down to top a number of administrative levels: the desa council, the regency council, the government council, the governor-general. The desa elects a desa council. The desa council nominates a head of the desa with the regent. The regent appoints the head of the desa. This is how this system works at all levels. He calls his invention the 'aristo-democratic' model, because it is a mix of election and being appointed. In his idea this administrative structure serves Java in the best way. With the state unity thought and the aristo-democratic model he goes on tour. Together with the Timorese C. Frans he travels throughout the country in order to sell the new league starting point. There is a lot of criticism from Indonesia, but in Holland he is given a fair hearing. As from 1931 *Oedaya* becomes the official organ of the league.
The inevitable happens. The high idealism, wrapped in purely theoretical models, flying in the face of historical and actual reality loses support. Noto Soeroto becomes isolated with only a handful of followers. And *Oedaya* too loses subscribers. The magazine ceases to exist at the end of 1931. Tired, depressed and without any financial means he takes stock of his situation and decides to go back to Indonesia. The small group of remaining 'Oedayists' pays for his return. After a visit to Gandhi in London he departs to Java in February 1932. It is his intention to have his family follow him. For this voyage it is necessary to have a regular source of income. He accepts a job as an insurance agent, but this does not supply enough financial security. The results of the crisis in the meantime are being felt too in Indonesia.

For a number of years he combines the selling of insurance policies with the performing of secretarial activities for his old friend, Prince Mangkoenegoro VII on whom he has set all his hopes for the future. Eventually he becomes the private secretary to the Prince, who supports his family financially. He himself can also transfer some money to Jo and the children in The Hague. Noto Soeroto feels very much at home in the Mangkoenegaran court, a centre of Javanese culture.

On the occasion of the marriage of Princes Juliana of The Netherlands and the German Prince Bernhard zur Lippe Biesterfeld in 1937 Noto Soeroto travels to The Netherlands in the retinue of Prince Mangkoenegoro. Eventually he will return without his family. This is better for the school careers of the children. It is the last time he sees his family. The Second World War will change everything forever.

Due to his European sympathies Noto Soeroto is imprisoned and tortured by the notorious Japanese state and military police, the Kempeitai. In The Netherlands his eldest son is arrested and transported to a German concentration camp because of his resistance activities. He survives the war, but he dies at the end of 1945 as a result of his imprisonment. Jo is arrested for the distribution of illegal newspapers. She is transported to the infamous camp Ravensbrück and barely survives the horrors.

In 1944 Mangkoenegoro VII, Noto Soeroto's prop and stay, dies. He tries to support himself by again starting a publishing firm and reviving *Udaya* in Indonesia, which of course fails. He does succeed in writing articles for Dutch newspapers in Indonesia. Medio 1951 he gets ill and he dies in November 1951. His youngest son Indro arrives in Solo one day before his father's death.

In 1958 the journalist-novelist Johan Fabricius publishes his novel *Schimmenspel* (Play of Shadows). The main character seems to be modelled on Noto Soeroto. There are similarities, but there are differences.

Considering all this, it can be said that Noto Soeroto did not play a dominant role in the process of the independence of Indonesia. In the thirties, however, he regularly furnished the discussion with his points of view. Therefore this hardworking, sympathetic, but politically naïve fighter and thinker deserves a place in the progress of independence of the colony.