The struggle over identity and political destiny in the Indonesian archipelago in the first half of the twentieth century was not just between Dutch and Indonesian ideas of society and of the future. A third identity, which we can call Indisch, hovered in the background.

The meaning of Indisch lurks somewhere between ethnicity – mainly mixed race Indo-European/Eurasion – and culture, standing for the whole complex of cultural adjustments between East and West which took place in the Indonesian archipelago and which involved not only Europeans and indigenes but also Chinese and other Asians. Indisch culture was marked by distinctive uses of language, dress, cuisine, entertainment, recreation, housing, family structure and so on, all of them loosely speaking hybrid between Western and Asian cultures. The term ‘identity’, however, implicates both a collective identity and a sense of the political implications of that identity.

In these terms, it is very difficult to identify an Indisch identity either in the late colonial period or immediately afterwards. There was very little by way of a claim for political rights or political consideration on the basis of being Indisch. In fact, a conscious Indisch identity emerged first in the Netherlands and only from the late 1930s, following the mass expulsion of Dutch citizens from Indonesia in 1937.

It is intriguing to ask, however, just why an Indisch identity – and a corresponding political programme – did not emerge to dominate the political stage at end of the colonial era.

Many European colonists with a settler society followed a different trajectory. In virtually all regions of European settlement, the settler communities began rather quickly to differentiate themselves from the culture of the homeland. In this respect, the rich history of cultural hybridization in the Netherlands Indies, which Taylor, Gouda, and others have noted, is tautologically not the same as the nascent Indisch.

The second consequence is darker: because they were seen as unambiguously Indonesian, they were the target of a sweeping derogatory label that they could be intimidated into loyalty and should be punished for disloyalty.

The struggle for land also insulated the Indisch community from the single most difficult and controversial issue in Indonesian politics. The issue of land ownership and control lay at the heart of the confrontation between colonialism and nationalism. It was an issue which was to contribute substantially to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of people in parts of Indonesia in 1965-66 and it is a leading source of tension in contemporary Indonesia. Yet the Indisch community, like the Chinese, had no significant interest in this issue. The wonder is not that they seemed like bystanders in the struggle for independence.

The dilemma split the Indisch community. Some confirmed themselves as Dutch, becoming in time the ‘Indisch genschenk’ (Indies community) others chose to be Indonesians and became the suku Belanda-Indo (sometimes suku Indis). Despite their cultural similarities, each of these identities became lodged firmly within a broader national identity. Perhaps ‘firmly’ is the wrong word, for each community sits in a zone of uncertainty, not quite local, but not quite foreign. In neither case, however, do these identities become a significant challenge to the broader nationalist movement.

The Indisch and Belanda-Indo communities combine elements from both Western and Asian cultures. The Belanda-Indo community in Indonesia is identified with Christiani- ty in general, with entertainment, with the police and with penal institutions. The communities suffer formal discrimination – some of its members can be elected president – but faces few practical difficulties. Although members of the Indisch community faced significant problems of adjusting to life in the Netherlands and have significant grievances over their treatment especially by the authorities, they have suffered relatively little overt discrimination in Dutch society in comparison with other minorities in Europe. Most strikingly, there is almost complete lack of political engagement between the two communities, despite their common heritage.

The second consequence is darker: because they were seen as not having a natural commitment to either side, the Indisch community faced a deep distrust on the part of Indonesian nationalists, especially at the more militant end of the nationalist movement.

The violence they faced in the 1960s was, in fact, a blessing: the fact that they had been used as a symbol of the Dutch, reflected a feeling that they could be intimidated into loyalty and should be punished for disloyalty.

I wish to thank Remco Raben, Peter Post, and other colleagues in the Research Project ‘From the Indies to Indonesia’ for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.