

Dutch Colonial Film on our Laptops

A Hundred-Year Journey

Sandeep Ray

In 1999, while employed at a documentary company in Boston, I first watched Vincent Monnikendam's *Mother Dao*,¹ a film assembled from Dutch footage shot in colonial Indonesia. I knew something about early cinema by then, having worked on ethnographic film archives in the Smithsonian, but this material – seamy, gorgeous, and disturbing all at once – was unlike anything I had seen. That initial shock never left me.

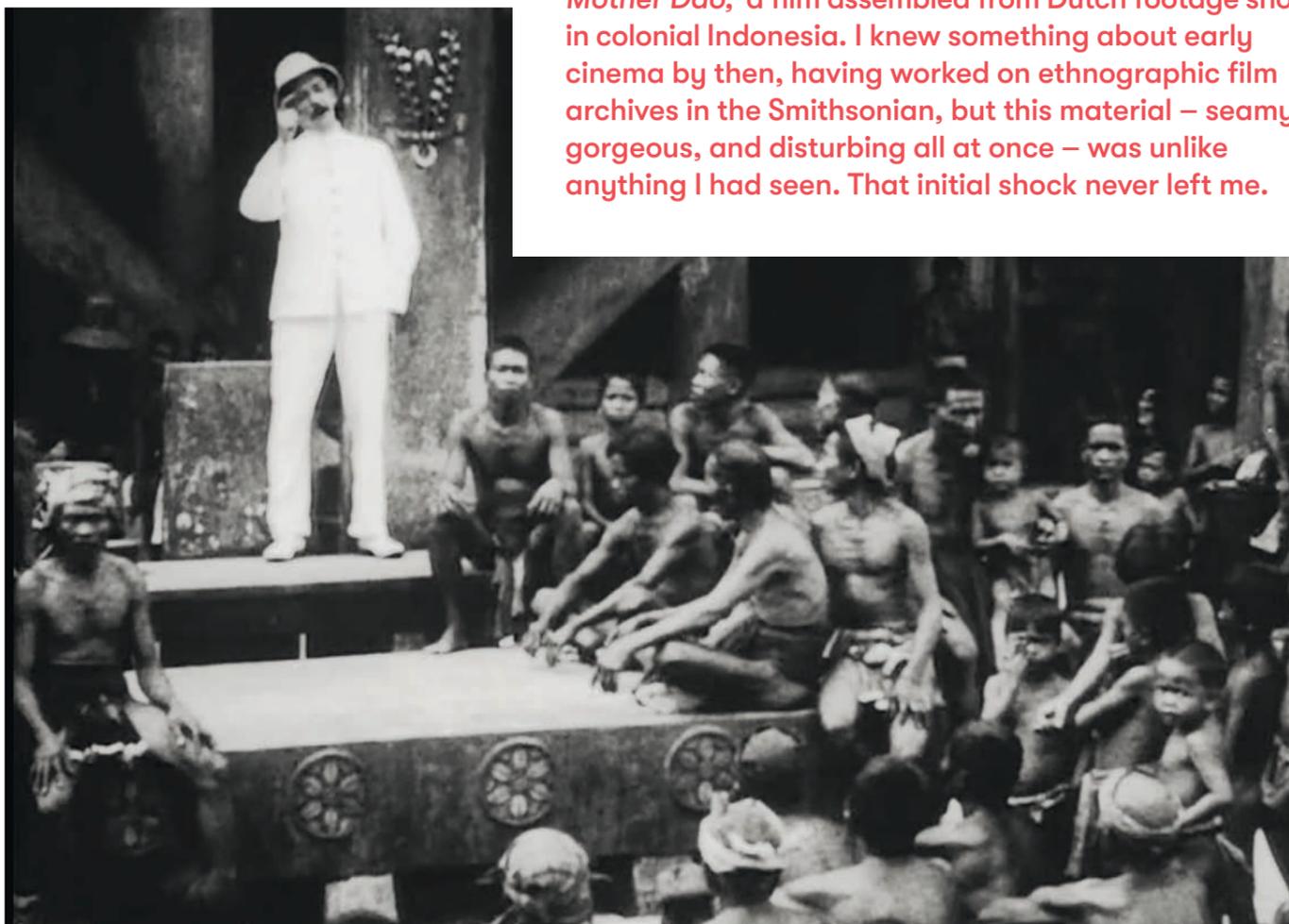


Fig. 2: Scene from the film *Mother Dao*.

Today, students of Asian Studies, even those with a passing interest in colonial cinema, would know that the Dutch produced a staggering number of films in the Netherlands East Indies. Much of that frenetic filmmaking took place during the second and third decades of the 20th century. It was meant for their public, far away, often unaware of ground realities, viewing the films in lecture halls and theatres in Amsterdam, Leiden, and Rotterdam. They received their government's version of conditions and events in the colony. The issues covered in these short films ranged widely: agriculture, healthcare, urban planning, infrastructure, arts and crafts, transmigration, and religion, among others. The contents and depictions are often problematic, especially if we apply a contemporary lens. I use the term *staggering* without exaggeration. A rough tally will indicate that the several hundred films produced during this period is comparable to the number of productions by British colonial authorities in all of their colonies. We know much about those British colonial films, of course, thanks to colonialfilm.org.uk, that wonderful website established in 2010 that links films, archives, academic papers, and other useful information in an open, easy-to-use platform. In contrast, our knowledge of the Dutch films has been limited, though this has gradually changed. Recent online access granted by archives in the Netherlands has brought much of their collections to our fingertips. These "dark treasures," as archivist Nico de Klerk once called the short films, are finally seeing blue light.

About a decade after my initial exposure to the material, I looked for the original footage from which *Mother Dao* had been edited, but I hit a dead end. The material was hard to come by. Facebook groups like *Indonesia Tempo Doeloe* ("Indonesia's Olden Days") posted low-quality clips from time to time, often with a soundtrack dubbed over; the driving emotion seemed to be nostalgia, not colonial critique. If one bought the 2010 biography on J.C. Lamster – a dyed-in-the-wool colonialist army man turned pioneering filmmaker – one would get a DVD of several of his restored films with bonus narration tracks. But that was the extent of access from Singapore, where I was studying. To see more films, I had to travel to the archive, to two of them actually: the Eye Filmmuseum's rustic research office in Vondelpark, Amsterdam and the newer gleaming Beeld en Geluid tower in Hilversum. Upon arriving, I had expected to get my hands dirty, rifle through dusty cans of old films and embark on an original, hitherto under-explored project of cataloguing the material I knew must exist somewhere. I could not have been more wrong. Every film was available on their intranet systems. Grateful, I wrote the following in the Beeld en Geluid public blog: "Before I could harbor any illusions of pioneering work, I realized that I had already been preceded by an army of film restorers, archivists and annotators who had meticulously created this astounding digital repository."

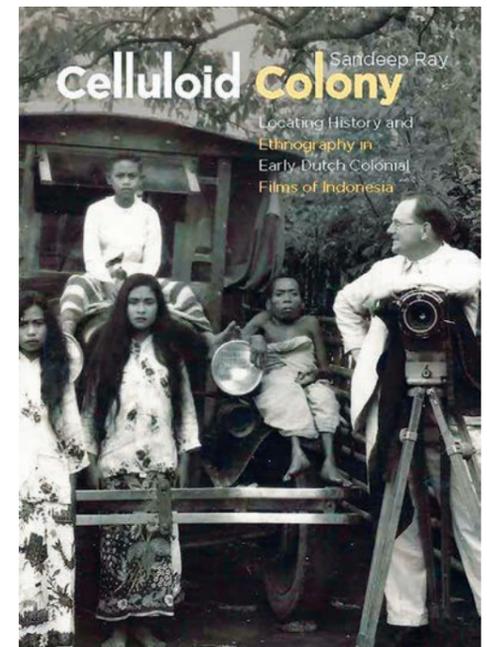
My task suddenly easier, I began a long sabbatical of watching films and taking notes, trying to unpack their historical and ethnographic significance. I spent a good part of 2012 and 2013 in those repositories.

It was a solitary, cavernous existence, sitting in rooms with monitors, viewing silent black and white footage produced by various agencies with different agendas. But the footage was mesmerizing. If Monnikendam had given us a sampler, I now saw that there were hundreds of titles covering a vast area – Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and several outer islands of eastern Indonesia. I learned that it was through a preservation and digitization program launched in 2007 called "Images for the



Fig. 3: Booklet for the film *Bali-Floti* (Archived in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam).

Fig. 1: Cover of *Celluloid Colony: Locating History and Ethnography in Early Dutch Colonial Films of Indonesia* (Image courtesy of the author and NUS Press).



Future" that a vast amount of footage from the original inflammable nitrate film was being made more widely accessible. But they still had to be viewed on the premises.

Scrupulous documentation notwithstanding, scholarship on this specific collection was limited. I looked elsewhere, reading up on the broader discourse on non-fiction film from the colonial era. The historiography of colonial propaganda cinema, a substantial global undertaking in the early 20th century, has come to be recognized as an area of study only in recent decades. Most film scholars, it turns out, were simply not interested in early non-fiction film – colonial or otherwise. Deploring this state of affairs, a new, exciting body of work emerged from academics who criss-crossed the disciplines of film studies, history, and anthropology. Books on British, French, and German colonial cinematic efforts were published. Yet these particular Dutch colonial films remained under the radar. Even the arresting comment by Susan Sontag after watching *Mother Dao* – "Who would have thought that out of anonymous documentary footage from Indonesia in the first decades of this century, taken by the Dutch authorities, a contemporary Dutch filmmaker could make a film that is both a searing reflection on the ravages of colonialism and a noble work of art?" – did not send researchers rushing to the Netherlands. Sontag was incorrect in calling the footage anonymous. After all, it had mostly been accounted for. But she was right in the sense that even though we could locate the makers, nobody really knew about them. My university professors in Michigan, and then in Singapore, doyens of Indonesian Studies, had not heard of these films. Why had they never sparked a wider interest outside of a handful of dedicated Dutch scholars? This begs the question: were they perhaps similar to other films of the same genre and not worth studying? While a touch pessimistic, it is not unreasonable to ask. Having looked at them closely, I would like to explain why I think they are in fact worth studying.

There are two key differences between the Dutch East Indies films and films produced by other colonial systems. Although colonial production in the East Indies began in 1912, well after filming had already started in Africa by German and French operators, and in the Philippines by American cameramen, the scale and scope of the Dutch production was colossal – significantly higher than from any other colony. The Dutch colonial government and its corporate affiliates continued the funding of informational films about the colony for almost two full decades. It is noteworthy that even though the makers of these films came from different backgrounds – government workers, private production companies, independents, and evangelists – there was a general uniformity in their styles over the two decades (1920s-1930s). This was

a strength. The films in this collection are typically slow and deliberate. They often hover over close details of technical processes, cultural performances, and depictions of nature. There is an unhurried, observant, and stately feeling. There are title cards that explain the scenes, but they tend not to be interruptive or word-heavy, as was often the case in British Empire newsreels. It is this generally less subjective approach and quotidian aesthetic that makes the collection stand out.

But why were the Dutch films stylistically different? An important factor contributing to this unhurried, less 'pushy' approach of societal depiction might be that the Netherlands had remained neutral during World War I. Scholars have pointed out that in the United States and many European nations, it was the heightened cinematic push during World War I – to create compelling narratives conducive to effective propaganda – that gave rise to the structure of post-war documentary films. My conjecture is that the aim to make documentaries in order to create

a more dramatized narrative that would have wider appeal, is precisely what took away from the ethnographic strength of American-influenced documentaries in the 1920s. Staying outside this narrative propaganda 'loop,' the Dutch became better ethnographers.

This austerity with the Dutch Colonial Institute's (*Vereeniging Koloniaal Instituut*)² simple instructions to not make "popular" films produced an untampered authenticity. Even though Dutch cameramen did not capture a comprehensive image of their colony, and there were huge omissions in their depictions of society, class, and politics, the films were rarely

embellished or sensationalized. They tended to be slower and had non-complicated or absent plots – perhaps too dull for the excitement that was sought from documentaries. This might explain the early disinterest in studying this material. The films were less scintillating, lacked strong central characters, and so film historians ignored them. And yet, in their ordinariness, they often managed to capture

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Fig. 4: Still from whale hunting filmed by Willy Rach in 1923.

moments and sequences that were perhaps richer in cultural texture.

Additionally, some of the Dutch colonial filmmakers may arguably have been somewhat anti-propagandistic in their filming, uncovering aspects of colonial rule that did not flatter

the Dutch government. This makes for unique archival documentation in the context of the colonial encounter. The Ethical Policy of 1901 set into motion programs to document the efforts towards "the elevation of the people." The Colonial Institute in Amsterdam saw film as a useful way of providing both evidence of the state of the colony, as well as a means to persuade civilians in the Netherlands to take pride in developing the East Indies. While this is not unlike the contents of the several propagandistic films European filmmakers made in response to their "civilizing mission," considering the level of detail in the Dutch material, one is clearly exposed to a far more descriptive, intimate, and seamier side of colonialism. The Dutch cinematic simulacrum of the colony, often motivated by either a liberal-political or a paternal-evangelistic outlook, resulted in the need to be somewhat introspective and expository. The scenes are often meant to generate sympathy as much as they are meant to show progress. We are exposed to a more detailed impression of native life. While some have value in what they preserve of lost ways, much of it helps us glimpse into the hardships created by colonial systems. While I argue for their value in helping us to reimagine and better understand the colonial encounter, I warn viewers that there are no smoking gun scenes, no unusual indictment of colonial rule. One must consider, however, that much of the colonial oppression was systemic and widespread and not limited to acute violence. This material reveals that.

Thus two broad factors, the sheer abundance and diversity, along with a markedly different approach to filmmaking, make this footage worth the deep dive. I can only assume that it was the prior lack of access to this material that had prevented scholars from researching them. This archive, which we can view on our smartphones today, has survived almost a century of atmospheric exposure, remained undamaged through two world wars, and been relocated several times. Most are from completed works, some from outtakes preserved in different archives over the decades. Starting around 2016, the films have been made available online. Logging onto the Eye Museum's website can take viewers to a very troubling, subjective, yet rich viewing of Indonesia's colonial past. There is something there for everyone – nostalgists, art historians, anthropologists, and dyed-in-the-wool anti-colonialists.

Sandeep Ray is the author of *Celluloid Colony: Locating History and Ethnography in Early Dutch Colonial Films of Indonesia* (NUS Press, 2021). He is Senior Lecturer in Southeast Asian history at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, where he also heads the Non-Fiction Film Lab. Email: Sandeep_ray@sutd.edu.sg

Notes

- 1 *Mother Dao*, Dir: Vincent Monnikendam, Nederlandse Programma Stichting, 1995.
- 2 This institute is known today as the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (KIT), or Royal Tropical Institute.

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Fig. 5: Poster for *Ria Rago*, "a film of actuality" (Courtesy of University of Westminster Archives).