The Indonesian Reader introduces an introduction to the world’s largest archipelago. The fourth most populous country in the world, encompassing nearly 18,000 islands, Indonesia has a larger Muslim population than any other nation. This title, aimed at the traveller, student, and expert alike, includes journalists’ articles, explorers’ chronicles, photographs, poetry, stories, cartoons, drawings, letters, speeches, and more, conveying a sense of the history, culture and diversity of this extraordinary land.

Laure Noszlopy

Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense

Along the Archival Grain attempts to illuminate both the processes of colonial administration in the Dutch East Indies through their archival records and the processes of historical research in untangling these narratives. Stoler goes through the personal letters, as well as the official reports of particular civil servants, painting a broader picture of their world-view and life in the Indies. She traces the evolving attempts to classify and control the different groups in the Dutch colonies, which was particularly marked by ambivalence towards Indies-born Dutch, and concern about those raised in the Indies.

Katrina Gulliver


The plastic term indische kinderen was applied variously to those of mixed ancestry, those of Dutch parentage born in the Indies and those whites (wherever they were born) living in poverty in the Indies. Beliefs about the type of people these Inlandsche kinderen were, their predilections and limitations (a continual tension, given that no firm definition to the term was ever made, let alone a category to allow such essentialism) shaped official efforts to regulate society.

The European Pauperism Commission of 1901 sought to establish precisely who these liminal figures were, and codify clearly who was European-born, Indies-born, Europeans, and the mixed race who were “European only in name” (p. 158). This involved intrusive questioning of those who fell below a specific household income. They were asked about things like alcohol and opium use, gambling, and prostitution. More broadly, their lifestyle was assessed to see if it conformed to European standards. Their children’s Dutch fluency was included in this assessment. Understandably evasive The attempt to carry out this survey revealed that there were far more ‘Europeans’ living at this income level than had been previously assumed. Given the nature of some of the questions (“Was your mother a prostitute?” “How many illegitimate children do you have?”) it is not hard to imagine some savagery on the part of the subjects, as well as reluctance on the part of the questioner. The assumption of moral decline in tandem with fiscal limitation was particularly insulting, and racially coded. As Stoler points out, a major shortcoming with the scheme was the reluctance of the official view to understand the need on the part of those who lived in a local style also demonstrated the reluctance of the official view to understand those who may have chosen such an affinity. The persistence of despising such people could not completely hide the concern and even fear that the existence of those who had ‘gone native’ elicited among administrators.

Sending sons to Europe The issue of the Radfølde (the qualification required for a career in the colonial service, which was only offered by the academy in Delft) brought to a head the tensions between the Indies-resident Dutch and the colonial administration. The costs (both financial and personal) of sending sons to Europe for a decade or more of schooling caused strains for families in the Indies, which were met with condescension from the authorities in the Netherlands. Most poignant of all are the disjunctions between what was seen, and known, by administrators in the Indies, and what refused to be seen or accepted by their bosses.

Attempts were also made with new schools in the colonies to improve (particularly race) children, to raise them as an ideal artisanal class in the Indies. These schools included agricultural colonies, designed both to improve, and limit the aspirations of those enrolled. These agricultural colonies, based on French models, were of limited success. However, they demonstrate a growing anxiety about the role of the Eurasian community and how these people should be classified in colonial society.

Through these studies of individual instances, which demonstrate different facets to the administrative challenge of the Indies, Stoler also demonstrates the challenge of the historian to read through the “partial understandings, epistemic confusion” (p. 185) of the records left by various civil servants. This is a densely written and researched account, which illuminates Stoler’s long research in Dutch archives. It is certainly a useful addition to the historiography of Dutch rule in the Indies, but more broadly for those studying colonial administration anywhere.

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