

# **DECOLONIZING DUTCH RESEARCH**

## **A Critical Consideration of the Indonesia 1945-50 Project**

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Opening Address

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm Ethan Mark. I teach modern Japanese and Asian history in the Japanese and Asian Studies programs here in Leiden, and I'm also the chair of the MA program in Asian Studies. I'm honored to welcome you all to this gathering, in which we mean to have a critical consideration of the 1945-1950 project on the Indonesian Independence War.

What brings me here? Personally and professionally I've had a long experience of interaction with Indonesia. For pretty much all of my career as a scholar, the primary focus of my research has been the Japanese Occupation of Indonesia during World War Two viewed transnationally, that is, from both Japanese and Indonesian perspectives in particular. I also have a family connection to Indonesia through my wife, whose father fought against the Dutch in the revolution and who came to the Netherlands afterwards to study engineering at Delft University on a fellowship from the newly independent Indonesian government. As it turned out, somewhere around 1953, the Netherlands was also where my father-in-law met my mother-in-law. As an American, this family connection is what brought me to the Netherlands twenty years ago, and these were my motivations for learning the Indonesian language and combining my study of Japan's history with that of Indonesia.

When I heard for the first time about Marjolein van Pagee's Histori Bersama initiative, I was very excited and impressed. This project to make Dutch voices heard in Indonesia and above all to make Indonesian voices heard in the Netherlands is to my knowledge quite novel and truly a breath of fresh air, and I am eager to encourage and support its activities. I have been studying colonial history and its legacies for a long time, but as a foreigner in the Netherlands it has taken me a long time to understand the situation of how colonial history is viewed and dealt with here, and to get a sense of the different and diverse groups in Dutch society that are interested and invested in this history. To put it simply, it seems to me that at least as much as in

many other postcolonial societies, colonial history and colonial ways of thinking are still very much present in Dutch culture and daily life. Indeed omnipresent. But more than in most postcolonial societies, that presence is something that most Dutch people are little conscious of. They learn little about it in school, and they generally accept the postwar understanding of the Netherlands as a small, peaceful country in the northwest of Europe that stands for many positive European values such as democracy, freedom of speech and thinking, dedication to science and progress, and an inquisitive and enterprising spirit. The history of the Netherlands as an empire, if it is included in this self-image at all, is that of something that ended long ago. It might have included some bad things but also some good things, and in any case would seem to have little connection to the way things are now.

I could go on for a long time about this and I'm sure many of us here will be eager to do so this evening. There are many facets to it. But what strikes me in particular about the Netherlands today, when compared to other postcolonial societies, is the virtual absence of the voices of the former colonized, the virtual lack of representation or understanding of Indonesian views, Indonesian thinking, or Indonesian history. This is hardly to say that few people in the Netherlands have an "Indonesia connection." This is in fact another very striking and distinctive aspect of the Netherlands—so many people, so many families, do have a historical connection. But not to Indonesia. For the vast majority of them, the connection is to a political and social entity that disappeared in 1949: the colonial Netherlands Indies. In the wake of the demise of that entity, hundreds of thousands of tropical Dutch citizens, or Indisch Nederlanders, made their way back to the Netherlands. For most of them, this was not a move made by choice but rather compelled by circumstances. Both in terms of how they left Indonesia and the sort of welcome that they received in the Netherlands when they arrived here, these circumstances were often not very positive, to say the least. For many of them, theirs is a story with its own tragedies and suffering, made worse by what many of them feel is a lack of recognition of this suffering and their equal rights and status as citizens of the Netherlands and its former empire.

This is another subject that many of those present surely know a lot more about—and

could surely talk a lot more about—than me. But in direct connection with the research project on 1945-50, what I rather want to briefly focus on here is this problem of *Indonesian* representation in Dutch society, or rather the lack thereof. In many parts of the postcolonial world including the former colonial mother countries, over the decades since former colonialism ended, the voices and experiences of the former colonized have made their way into politics, public discourse, and, among other things, scholarship. This combination of a political movement and trend in scholarship, which has various names including “postcolonialism” and “decolonization,” has brought about great changes in both scholarly and general consciousness regarding what colonialism was and what colonialism is. Three of the essential things that postcolonial studies emphasize are:

Firstly, *the centrality and tenaciousness of colonialism as a cultural phenomenon then and now*: The awareness that modern colonialism consisted of much more than a set of official policies and practices. Rather, more profoundly and persuasively, colonialism built and sustained itself through structures of thinking, of language, and of knowledge that functioned to make its domination natural. Developed, reproduced and reinforced over a century and half beginning around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern colonial thinking and discourses created a deep and vast repertoire of ways of categorizing, referring to and dealing with the colonized that all shared one thing in common: they consistently placed the colonizer in a position of superiority over the colonized. These frames of thinking, which one scholar some forty years ago famously identified as “Orientalism,” became basic building blocks of the way we still think today. One specific example of this, also essential to understanding colonialism in the Netherlands and its legacies, is race-thinking and racism.

A second central issue highlighted in postcolonial movements and scholarship is *the problem of representation*: The question of who is to represent and speak for the colonized, the former colonized, and their experiences? For the period of colonialism itself, the answer to this question was clear enough: the colonizer. After formal colonialism ended, officially speaking at least, the former colonized could speak for themselves. But if we look at who was writing the

histories of their experiences, how these histories were written, and which histories retained the most global authority and influence, we must acknowledge that long after colonialism ended, the balance of power over the study of the history of the colonized remained in the hands—and therefore also in the minds—of the former colonizer.

A third and related central issue raised in postcolonial scholarship in particular is *the problem of the archive*: the question of sources. When writing histories of colonized societies and peoples, what sorts of sources are available, and how should we use them? Here again, the hegemony of the colonizer naturally resulted in a profound over-representation of *their* views, narratives, and interpretations in the colonial archives. Condemned to a low social status, low levels of education, and low amounts of opportunity to write things down even if they could, the great majority of the “natives” left few written records, and fewer still in official settings. Yet for conventional historians, this was long seen as the only sort of documentation considered “reliable.” An essential question of postcolonial studies has therefore been how to creatively use the sources available to address this problem of the over-representation of the colonizer and his standpoints. Given the stakes involved, this is not only a scholarly question but inevitably also a political and even a moral one.

While scholarship that puts a priority on such issues has certainly made inroads in *some* quarters in the Netherlands, it is remarkable to me how much resistance to it still remains. Indeed in the conclusion to his recent book *Postcolonial Netherlands*, Gert Oostindie, a prominent scholar who also happens to figure very prominently in the project that we’re discussing here, rightly observes that in the Netherlands, “There is no widespread tradition of reflecting on the colonial past, even less so of an explicitly postcolonial paradigm. . . . Recent studies have remarked upon the fact that even once a debate on colonialism and its legacies had developed, this school found few supporters in the Netherlands.” Oostindie, however, finds this remarkably *untroubling*. “The question is not only whether this observation is correct and what the explanation might be,” he writes, “*but if so, whether much has been missed.*” The Netherlands may indeed be different from many other postcolonial societies in this regard, but

the implication here is that this is a good thing, a reflection of the continued dedication of Dutch scholars, and Dutch society, to a rational, critical and balanced view of their own history, despite whatever subjective and political biases might plague scholarship in other places. Indeed in the same passage, the same author draws precisely such a contrast with Indonesian scholarship. Indonesian historiography after World War Two, he writes, was “marked by a mixture of antagonism towards colonialism and a downplaying of the significance of the Netherlands in the history of the archipelago, *but also by scant interest in theoretical reflection and debate.*” Rather curious words coming from a scholar who reads no Indonesian. But who needs the voices of the former colonized when Western scholars are already the most advanced in the world? In fact the same scholar has also written that not just the Netherlands but “the West” more generally has a special talent for coming to terms with its own colonial history, in this case in comparison with the former empires to the east: “What emerges is that Europe and the United States are far more open to these issues than the former colonial powers of Japan and Russia,” he writes. “Evidently, something like a ‘Western’ norm for historical accountability emerged after the Second World War.”

Such statements reveal assumptions about Western superiority towards the rest of the world not only in areas such as scholarship but also in political, moral, and civilizational terms—the same sorts of assumptions that were once central to colonial thinking, and remain so today. With reference to the experience of the Netherlands, I also find them remarkable with specific reference to Japan as a negative counter-example. The conventional view of postwar Japan, particularly in the West, is indeed as a nation that has had particular difficulty coming to terms with its colonial and wartime past. There is certainly a lot to be said for this. Nevertheless it is also clear that the international playing field for such pressure to “come to terms” is heavily skewed in favor of the powerful. Under pressure for decades from its former Western enemies and more recently from increasingly powerful Asian neighbors, in *relative* international terms at least, the Japanese state has in fact gone much further than the Netherlands in supporting critical investigations into its own colonial and wartime past, if not necessarily eagerly embracing all the

resulting findings. These include historical research projects combining Chinese, Korean, and Japanese scholars and institutions in equal measure, as well as generous grants to scholars and scholarly institutions in countries whose citizens suffered under Japanese rule, including the Netherlands. This has happened in the face of pressure from nationalist interest groups such as former army veterans and their families, who have long been an important constituent of Japan's leading conservative party. The nature of the political decision-making process of the 1945-50 research project we're discussing here—and the fact that the VVD party in particular only agreed to approve funding for the project when certain conditions deemed acceptable to Dutch veterans and their families were met—shows that Japan is hardly alone in having to contend with such powerful “veteran's lobbies.”

While not necessarily very influential in the wider society, Japanese scholars themselves have meanwhile produced an impressive body of scholarship profoundly and unflinchingly critical of past crimes committed in the name of the Japanese imperial state. As a Japan scholar in the Netherlands, I myself was one of several local scholars who enjoyed a generous Japanese-government-funded grant from the Netherlands Institute of War Documentation and Genocide Studies (NIOD) to pursue precisely such a project in the early 2000s, with absolutely no strings attached. The result was my production of the English translation of Yoshimi Yoshiaki's *Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People* in 2015. *Grassroots Fascism* is a classic example of critical Japanese scholarship on World War Two, written by a prominent progressive scholar who is vilified on the Japanese right, above all for his pioneering and devastatingly critical research on the “Comfort Women.”

So the central question that arises for me here is not, as Gert Oostindie puts it, “whether much has been missed” in the Netherlands' failure to absorb or reflect upon the lessons of recent global developments in scholarship on the colonial past and its legacies. It is rather the question: *what is specific about the Netherlands that makes it possible for him to ask such a question*, and to receive relatively little in the way of a critical response to it? First and foremost I think the answer to this must be found in the relative lack of representation and influence of the voices of

the former colonized in today's Netherlands compared with those in many other postcolonial societies. Sociologically, as shown for example in the extraordinary work of Lizzie van Leeuwen, I think the reason for this is straightforward—while there are many Indische Nederlanders, there are very few Indonesians in the Netherlands, and fewer still bold enough to make their critical voices heard; conversely in Indonesia itself, there are few people left who still speak or read Dutch, and fewer still who take an active critical interest in what is said and done in the Netherlands with regard to their country. To the naïve observer, Indonesia might therefore appear to have moved on.

But the wounds of the past are still present. And in any case, a lack of general Indonesian concern with what we say and do in the Netherlands is no excuse for avoiding the lessons of postcolonial studies in our own work. Most importantly because the greatest lesson of some forty years of postcolonial studies around the world is that studying colonial history is not only about studying “*them*.” It is also about studying “*us*.” The question of the degree and nature of Indonesian participation and representation in a research project such as this one, and the degree to which the scholars involved take account of the experiences and standpoints of the colonized, are not simply questions for Indonesians. More fundamentally, they are questions for the Netherlands. This is why I strongly support this initiative, and I hope that tonight's proceedings will give us a rare opportunity to share constructive critical thoughts on these issues.