Travelling through the Emerald Belt: A Plea for a Post-Colonial Double Perspective

by Rick Honings
When you land in Indonesia for the first time after having seen the green archipelago from the airplane, you will not only be overwhelmed by the sweltering heat. You will also immediately smell you have arrived in the East, as the exotic scents already waft towards you while you are still in the terminal. Times may have changed since Indonesia’s independence, but the sensation of the tropics remains the same.

An avalanche of travel literature has survived testifying to the Dutch presence in the former Dutch East Indies. Partly thanks to the holdings of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), the Asian Library now owns a large collection of travel literature from the colonial era.

Figure 1: Batavia, by Jacob Keyser 1730.
written by well-known and lesser known authors, men, women and children, dating from the 19th and 20th centuries. They all have one thing in common: they document the journey towards and residency in the country which Multatuli referred to as the ‘Gordel van Smaragd’ ('Emerald Belt') in his Max Havelaar (1860).

Many of these texts are by now familiar to us and modern editions have been prepared of some of the manuscripts. Although they have been gratefully used as a source of historical information, the study of this specific genre – travel literature of the former Dutch East Indies – is still in its infancy, at a time when travel writing is attracting considerable international scholarly attention.

**TRAVELLING TO THE DUTCH EAST INDIES**

After the Dutch first set foot on Javanese soil towards the end of the 16th century – the Dutch East India Company was founded in 1602 – two centuries of travel ensued to bring back spices and other commodities from the fertile archipelago. We are relatively well informed about these travels as a great deal of archival material has been preserved. Surprisingly this is less so for those travels that were undertaken from the time the former Dutch East Indies were turned into a real colony, in 1816.

From that moment the volume of travel, at first obviously by sailing vessels, increased. Initially the voyage took about eight months, which was gradually reduced to some five weeks. From 1835 experiments were made with overland mail via Egypt, so that ships no longer had to sail around the Cape of Good Hope. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 further cut travelling time. Sailing vessels disappeared, to be replaced by steam ships of the Stoomvaart-Maatschappij 'Nederland' (Netherlands Steamship Company) and the Koninklijke Rotterdamsche Lloyd (Royal Rotterdam Lloyd). In the 1930s a regular flight service to the former Dutch East Indies was put into operation, until World War II and the Japanese occupation temporarily put a stop to all traffic between the Netherlands and its colony.

In the period 1816-1945 numerous travels were also undertaken within the Dutch East Indies. This was less so during the rule of the Dutch East India Company, as this multinational largely operated from trading posts on the coasts of Asia. The hinterland was hardly explored in those days, the main focus being on what the archipelago might yield commercially. There was less interest in indigenous nature and culture. This situation would only change in the 19th century.

The year 1830 saw the introduction of the Cultuurstelsel (Cultivation System), which required Javanese farmers to reserve a fifth of their land to produce crops for the European market. After 1870 a number of changes were introduced. The abolition of the Cultivation System and the opening of the Suez Canal led to some degree of Europeanisation. More and more Dutch citizens tried their fortunes in the East, while the number of women travelling with them from Europe rose slowly as well. Tourist trips through the Dutch East Indies were also organised more often. From 1900 the Netherlands pursued an Ethical Policy, based on the awareness that a colony was not only there to profit from: something had to be done in return. Thus the Dutch authorities began investing in education, health care and infrastructure.
These developments, however, also contributed to the rise of Indonesian nationalism in the 1930s, and when the Japanese occupation ended, Dutch colonial presence was no longer tolerated. On 17 August 1945 Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Indonesia. That day is still an official holiday in Indonesia, but the Dutch would only acknowledge Indonesian sovereignty in 1949, after much bloodshed. The saying ‘Indië verloren, rampspoed geboren’ (Indies lost, disaster born) did not come true, but the Netherlands has still not come to terms with its colonial past. The Dutch East Indies are woven into the DNA of Dutch society, and the question is whether they will ever entirely disappear from it.

DUTCH EURASIAN LITERATURE

Hundreds of Dutch travellers in the period 1816-1945 have left documents recording their journeys to and in the ‘Empire of Insulindia’, whether fiction or non-fiction. All writers marvelled at the country’s luscious but perilous natural beauty, where tigers and snakes were lurking dangers, at the exotic dishes and at its rich culture, including the practice of guna guna (black magic), which was experienced as both fascinating and mysterious.

The genre of fiction has already received ample attention, leading to numerous publications. Rob Nieuwenhuys’ Oost-Indische spiegel (1972) is still important in spite of its shortcomings. An improved edition appeared

The second genre, non-fiction, which also comprises Dutch Eurasian travel texts, has been explored much less. The only study in this field is Een tint van het Indische Oosten: Reizen in Insulinde 1800-1950 (2015), edited by Rick Honings and Peter van Zonneveld. Compared to the interest existing abroad – especially in the anglophone world – the colonial travel story has evoked little scholarly attention in the Netherlands. If the genre was examined at all in the past, it was almost exclusively viewed from a traditional literary and historical angle. Barring a few exceptions, the post-colonial perspective, which subjects the colonial discourse of these texts to critical analysis, has so far not been applied to this body of literature. Which literary strategies were used to legitimise Dutch colonial presence in travel texts from the period 1816-1945? And how
was the colonial ideology communicated in such texts? In order to answer these questions it is essential to start from a post-colonial point of view.

**TRAVELLING WITH ‘IMPERIAL EYES’**

Following the literary scholar Edward Said, there has been a lot of attention internationally in the past few decades for the colonial ideology that is expressed in colonial literature. Travel literature, too, has been a focus of interest, as these texts helped shape ideas about the colonies. A seminal study in this field is *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* by Mary Louise Pratt (1992, revised edition 2008). Pratt studied the ways in which the white man took visual possession of the land, and especially how it came to be expressed in travel stories of the 19th century. To this end she discussed the strategies that were used to lend political legitimacy to the colonial (in this case British) presence. These strategies can be equally applied to the Dutch body of colonial literature.

Pratt views the colonial situation as a contact zone in which several cultures clash, leading to ‘radical inequality’. In the travel texts this inequality constantly manifests itself in so-called binary oppositions, with the culture of the colonial ruling class persistently presented as superior and that of ‘the Other’ as inferior.

There are plenty of instances to be found in the writings left by men, women, and even children. Ten-year-old Anna Abrahamsz, a niece of Multatuli, went to the Dutch East Indies in 1847 and kept a travel log. The diary reveals how she saw everything in terms of the opposition between civilised and uncivilised: European music and dance are fine, the native tandak dance and gamelan music are awful. Even a celebrated author like Louis Couperus looked at the Dutch East Indies through imperial eyes. Anyone reading his travel book *Oostwaarts* (1924),

Figure 4: Louis Couperus with his wife and a few native children on Lake Toba.
buildings and offices in Medan as ‘white edifices bespeaking prosperity, successful labour, an admirable European effort’, which far excelled native culture. The white Dutchman acted from an inherently superior position; the inlander was according to Couperus ‘a born servant’.

In the texts of other travellers, too, the indigenous population is presented as inferior, and naïve compared to the Dutch. Often the comparisons used involve children and animals. Thus the cigar manufacturer Justus van Maurik described forced labourers in his Indrukken van een Totok (1897) as cheerful creatures, because, like children, they lacked the mature ability to reflect: ‘They certainly do not look downcast or gloomy. Quite the opposite!’

Female travellers, too, were no exception to the rule and saw through imperial eyes. When the Austrian Ida Pfeiffer came across a group of men she described as follows: ‘Their features were gripped by some passion or other, which made them even uglier; and their large mouths with protruding teeth resembled more the jaws of a wild animal that the mouth of a human.’ Even a radical feminist like Aletta Jacobs, the champion of women’s liberation and equal rights, was not exempt from the racism of colonial discourse when she travelled in the East in 1912. In her travel account, she compared the ‘uncivilised’ population with monkeys grooming each other. Such animalisations are plentiful. And like so many others, Jacobs viewed ‘becoming like an Indo’ as a threat to the purity of the white race. The effect of such representations was that it legitimised the colonisation of the land, as the population was clearly underdeveloped, unable to look after itself and in need of help.

Another strategy mentioned by Pratt is that of the ‘Victorian discovery rhetoric’: the journey through the colony is presented as a tour of discovery. The implication is that the land has not yet been properly charted, that it has not yet been in contact with civilisation. For that reason it was often referred to as ‘empty’. By extension, nature was often aestheticised. Travellers portrayed the land as an unexplored paradise, so fertile that spices, tea, tobacco and rice grew by themselves in large quantities. At the same time it was, like all uncharted territory, a dangerous country, demanding the European’s constant vigilance. By representing the land in this way, Dutch colonial presence was once again legitimised: a fertile paradise simply asks to be appropriated, and untamed nature must be controlled.

There are also plenty of instances of this strategy to be found in Dutch travel literature. Nicolette Peronneau van Leyden was a young girl when she lived in the East between 1817 and 1820. She presented nature as extremely dangerous: several times she barely escaped death, having found bloodthirsty crocodiles, poisonous snakes and savage tigers in her way. The Romantic author Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn, who was born in Germany, travelled in Java between 1835 and 1848 and recorded his experiences in several books. During his travels he climbed mountains, surveyed lakes, took measurements of craters and analysed volcanos. As such he presented himself as an explorer who had bravely many dangers and had found a paradise nobody had yet set foot in. He gave Latin names to several of the natural phenomena he ‘discovered’ – which is also a colonial strategy. The beauty of ‘bounteous nature'
overwhelmed him, prompting him to write lyrical, aestheticising passages in which he painted with words. Sunsets, rainbows, vistas: they were all extolled by Junghuhn using an array of adjectives to present an unspoilt and ‘empty’ paradise, with the indigenous population merely serving as a backdrop.

**A PLEA FOR A DOUBLE PERSPECTIVE**

To counterbalance this dominant imagery it is crucial to tie it to another, as yet hardly explored perspective: the native one. It is fascinating to study travel texts by Indonesians as well. How did they perceive their country, where a small Dutch elite controlled several million inhabitants? To what extent do their narratives deviate from those of the Dutch?

The research into such travel texts is hampered by a linguistic barrier, because in contrast to the British situation, the indigenous people of the former Dutch East Indies did not or hardly ever use the language of their colonial rulers. A few exceptions notwithstanding, there are hardly any instances of "writing back" to be found in the Dutch context. For this reason it is often claimed that research into the native perspective is impossible in the Netherlands. To give a voice to the muted population, Dutch and Indonesian literary scholars therefore need to join forces.

What might be the benefit of reading such native texts from a post-colonial perspective? It requires research by an expert in both the Javanese and Malay languages to answer that question. We do, however, have some indication thanks to two such texts that have already been published in a Dutch translation. The first one, *Op reis met een Javaans edelman* (Travels with a Javanese Nobleman) appeared in 2013, being the account of Raden Mas Arjo Adipati Tjondronegoro, who travelled in Java between 1860 and 1875. This work is an instance of ‘autoethnography’, to speak with Pratt, it is a text of one of the ‘colonized subjects to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s terms’.

On the face of it, the Javanese nobleman Tjondronegoro would appear to judge his country from the same colonial perspective as the Dutch traveller: he, too, looks down on and regards himself as far elevated above the common people. Being a noble prince, he is in a similar position as the Dutch. He is a great admirer of European culture: he appreciates its technological progress, the splendour of its colonial architecture, the orderliness of the road system set up by the Dutch.

There are, however, strategies in evidence in this travel text that are not to be
found in the Dutch counterparts. By means of post-colonial analysis it can be established that Op reis met een Javaans edelman contains subtle criticism of the colonial ruler. Thus the Javanese nobleman is certainly responsive to the ordinary Javanese. They are obviously lower in social hierarchy than he is, but they are definitely not presented as invisible. The Dutch, moreover, are implicitly portrayed by him as an occupying power. On several occasions during his travels he stresses the presence of Dutch military forces and army barracks. In addition, the Javanese nobleman expresses a special interest in his own native culture, especially ancient culture, which fills him with pride. On his travels he inspects ancient Javanese funeral inscriptions and studies time-honoured native traditions and stories. It might be said that in this way, prompted by a nationalist consciousness, he reclaimed his own culture which had been marginalised by Dutch colonial presence.

There is no outspoken criticism of the colonial situation to be found in Tjondronegoro's work, though it does occur a few decades later in a travel account by the Javanese prince Radèn Mas Haryo Soerjosoearto. His account was written in Javanese and published by the Commissie voor Volkslectuur (Committee for Popular Literature) in 1916. A modern Dutch translation appeared in 2014. Soerjosoearto went to the Netherlands by ship in 1913 to study in Leiden. He, too, was impressed by Dutch culture and technology and the polished refinement experienced on board. However, like Tjondronegoro, he also reclaimed his own culture, for instance by calling Bogor, a place that had
been taken over by the Dutch and renamed Buitenzorg, by its Indonesian name. The Javanese he describes are people of flesh and blood. And like Tjondronegoro he was focused on and longed for the grandeur of Java in past times. Unlike Tjondronegoro, however, Soerjosoeparto connected this longing with a political ethics: “The time that one people will rule another people is past.” This cannot be interpreted in any other sense than containing subtle criticism of colonial rule.

I recommend that we build a bridge between two separate worlds: that of Dutch and Indonesian literature. The Asian Library is the ideal place to start from. The library preserves not only Dutch travel texts, but also dozens of Indonesian texts from the 19th and hundreds from the 20th century, in print and in manuscript, in Javanese and in Malay. A post-colonial analysis of these texts will give a voice to the muted majority and will add a valuable counter-perspective to the history of colonial thought in the Emerald Belt.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Maurik, Justus van, Indrukken van een ‘Dikke’ Indische typen en schetsen (Amsterdam, 1897).
Naber, Johanna W.A. Naber, Ontbetreden paden van ons koloniaal verleden 1826-1873 (Amsterdam, 1918).
Pratt, Mary Louise, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation. 2nd ed. (London, 2008).
Wever, Darya de & Andrea Kieskamp, Het is geen kolonie, het is een wereld. Vrouwen bereizen en beschrijven Indië 1850-1922 (Amsterdam, 2001).