

*The second Indonesian-Dutch Historical Conference
June 26-July 1, 1978*

When former Dutch prime minister Beel came for the first time to Indonesia in 1947 to make his contributions to resolving the Dutch-Indonesian problem, he reportedly wanted to announce that he was but a '*totok*' (greenhorn), and fittingly proved it by using the word '*tokek*' (gecko) for '*totok*'. Nothing that telling happened when a group of mainly young Dutch historians, many of them attending for the first time, came down on Ujung Pandang for the second biannual Indonesian-Dutch historical conference, which was held from June 26 till July 1 in the appropriate setting of the beautifully restored old VOC fortress '*Rotterdam*'. Nevertheless, the Dutch historians who set out to make their contribution to Indonesian history often seemed to experience some of the same difficulties in eliciting a response - not counting the unintended ones - from their Indonesian counterparts as their prime minister did more than thirty years ago. Fortunately the matter at hand was of far less consequence than the one thirty years ago, and if one thing can be said about the Dutch-Indonesian historical conferences, it is that the atmosphere is always excellent.

However, in spite of the good atmosphere characteristic of these meetings, it is generally felt that the dialogue could be made more effective. One method frequently suggested to achieve that end is that controversies or sensitive issues should be discussed. After all, a meeting limited to Indonesian and Dutch participants seems to be cut out for just that. The clash of opposing views should produce a dialogue. The Dutch, from whose side proposals in this vein usually come, forget, however, that what they regard as a sensitive issue might for the Indonesians not constitute an issue at all, let alone a sensitive one.

Ask a Dutch historian to name off the top of his head a sensitive issue. He will probably come up with the period 1945-50, the colonial past, and the Indonesian efforts to write a national history. But to what degree are these sensitive issues?

The problem of Dutch-Indonesian relations after 1945 - in some circles in the Netherlands still a hotly debated issue - was in fact proposed as a topic for the next conference. It was, however, rejected. Not because it would have been too sensitive, but because Dr. Taufik Abdullah remarked, Indonesian historians working in this period are mainly interested in the relations among the Indonesians themselves, while the relations with the Dutch remain a matter of secondary interest somewhere in the background. And in that respect they are apparently not unparal-

lelled, for most Dutch treatises on the subject read like exercises in Dutch party politics.

What about the colonial past? The main theme of the conference 'Myth and Reality in Indonesian History' should have provided a golden opportunity to do some debunking - but in that respect failed to spark off any controversies. Moreover, the moral issue of the true nature of Dutch colonial rule has already become history, and one cannot expect much when the Dutch are only too eager to debunk that past, to which Indonesians happily refer as 'normal times' (*zaman normal*). This is done so, I suppose, less to honor the Dutch colonial rule than to indicate that since then their society has gone through such tremendous changes that it is rather difficult to keep one's bearings. Of course, the police commander of Yogyakarta may, as he did during the recent fasting-month, ascribe the use of firecrackers to the pernicious influence of the Dutch (who probably deliberately introduced them to disturb the Muslim fasting), but one can hardly expect serious historians to argue on this level.

Is national history an issue? Indeed, some years ago Indonesian historians went through a deep, soul-searching period in which this was a hotly debated issue. I suspect, however, that most Dutch scholars never really followed that discussion, but rather, upon seeing the words 'national history' had visions of the worst kind of what in Holland would be 'God, the Netherlands, and the House of Orange' type of history. It cannot be denied that in Indonesia, as in the Netherlands or indeed anywhere else, a lot of bad history is being written, but this is not necessarily a result of the national history issue. If history is, in the words of E. H. Carr, a dialogue with the past, it is not more than natural that Indonesians would want to talk to their forebears rather than to some Dutch trader, colonial administrator, or planter - and all the more so since these forebears are often still shrouded in the clouds of history. That such a dialogue can have dangerous implications, no Indonesian historian needs to be told. Most of them are painfully aware of that. Certainly no Indonesian historian is forced to divine from history some inexorable process which would establish, say, Indonesian Unity, no more than, for example, an Indonesian linguist is asked to prove that the people in the archipelago have been speaking Bahasa Indonesia all along, but simply did not realize it. The fact remains, however, that it is rather difficult for the outside world to know what is going on in the world of Indonesian historians, and the Indonesians could have redressed that somewhat by, for instance, supplying their Dutch counterparts with the booklet *Sejarawan Indonesia dan Karya Tulisnya* (1978), compiled by the Masyarakat Sejarawan Indonesia Jakarta.

The Dutch on their part seem to have completely recovered from

the attacks on colonial history, the Europa-centric history; however, they did not do so by replacing it with some Indonesia-centric approach, or more ideally with a well-balanced polycentric approach, but rather by realizing that colonial history, or more grandly the history of European expansion, is, at least scientifically, a respectable field in itself. Thus absolved, they can ask a long list of interesting and legitimate questions before they ever need to go native. The opposite is equally true for Indonesian historians. Both groups become more and more specialized in their respective areas. They may pay lip service to the fact that 'colonial' history and 'Indonesian' history are in many ways complementary and in need of each other, but they rarely venture into each others' fields. The number of scholars who can comfortably straddle the cultural fence is frighteningly small. It does seem significant that the number of Indonesian historians who can read, let alone understand, Dutch sources is getting smaller and smaller, and that of the Dutch historians present in Ujung Pandang almost none spoke Bahasa Indonesia, let alone one of the regional languages. In such a situation the quality of the research runs the danger of eventually approaching that of the English in which it is written. The smells of durian and cheese may be no olfactory delights, but they could certainly stand a more even distribution.

The problem of broadening the dialogue between Indonesian and Dutch historians seems to me in the first place a problem of finding topics that have the interest of both sides, and which each side will find relevant to its work. Topics geared to assume controversies or sensitive subjects should be avoided, for as I have tried to show, one usually ends up with a non-issue. Concrete topics will be more productive to generate a dialogue. The two sub-themes of Ujung Pandang 'The structure and growth of colonial towns' and 'Aspects of the history of South Sulawesi' provided, to my mind, examples of just that. The biennial Indonesian-Dutch historical conferences can be a very useful forum. So far they have certainly fulfilled their promise, if only by showing that thanks to, and in spite of a contact spanning more than three centuries, the Dutch and Indonesians still have a lot to learn from each other.

The papers of the conference will, like the papers of the previous one in Noordwijkerhout, be published in due course, so I will limit myself to these very general observations, and leave the judgement on the papers to the interested reader.

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