

# **The Dutch colonial burden: colonial collections in postcolonial times and the transfer of academic values**

**Freek Colombijn**  
**VU University Amsterdam**

## ***Introduction***

In this paper I will address the way Dutch Asianists transfer academic values to the next generation. The conclusion will be that they do so in a, perhaps surprisingly, unsystematic way, even to the point that there is little consensus about what constitute the major academic values. The paper consists of a preliminary analysis, based on interviews with four scholars (Jan Breman, Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, Henk Schulte Nordholt and Wim van den Doel) and a content analysis of a selection of PhD theses, inaugural lectures, valedictory lectures, and *Festschriften*. These four types of writing are, more than ordinary articles and monographs, texts in which people express normative ideas<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cees Fasseur, Heather Sutherland, Peter Boomgaard, and Mario Rutten were interviewed after this paper was completed; their answers will be used for a more extensive version of this paper. The idea was to interview three key professors -Breman of the University of Amsterdam, Fasseur of Leiden University, and Sutherland of VU University- and at least one of their respective former PhD students. I consider Elsbeth Locher-Scholten (Leiden, but with Ivo Schöffer as supervisor) as a more independent figure. The dissertations and inaugural lectures have been drawn from this group of scholars. I also dwell on my own experience (PhD Leiden University, supervisor anthropologist Reimar Schefold). The paper is a preliminary work not only in the sense that the necessary research is yet unfinished, but also in the sense that the paper was written without access to a dictionary and not corrected by a native speaker; I apologize for language flaws. I realize that by juxtaposing the comments of the interviewees, I may unintentionally criticize them (or rather, they criticize each other); therefore I would like to emphasize that I appreciate the work of all (albeit perhaps for different reasons) and greatly enjoyed interviewing them. The generous help of my interlocutors is gratefully acknowledged.

Although I started the interviews with a very broad question applicable to any discipline - what do you consider academic values? - the matter became very much entangled with a discussion of the relationship with Indonesia. Because of the former colonial relationship between Indonesia and the Netherlands, Dutch scholars inevitably have to position themselves vis-à-vis this relationship, at least to decide consciously it does not matter.<sup>2</sup> Indonesian studies occupy also a special place in the Netherlands because the National Archive of the Netherlands, the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) and other institutes form together a unique depository of source material on Indonesia. The presence of this source material has also influenced the academic values held by Dutch scholars.

### ***The embarrassment of richness***

The exemplary representative of scholars working in the archives is eminent Dutch historian Cees Fasseur. For several years he used his lunch break while at work in the Department of Justice to collect the necessary data for his PhD thesis (on the nineteenth century Cultivation System or *Cultuurstelsel*). This preference for archive work, preferably in the National Archive in The Hague, that is also obvious in the work of Fasseur's students, is in itself an academic value. The decision to undertake archive work was, for Fasseur and his students, not a matter of calculation driven by the nature of the topics they chose. Rather, the material available in the archives determined the range of topics available for investigation. Alternative methodologies (literature study, oral history, discourse analysis of photographs) do not seem to be considered very seriously. The physical proximity of this group of Leiden-based scholars to the

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<sup>2</sup> I focus on historians and anthropologists or sociologists with a historical inclination. I do not think Dutch anthropologists concentrating on contemporary issues or culture (vernacular architecture, *batik*), geographers, economists etcetera are tainted by the former colonial relationship, and for them Indonesia is just another country from the Global South. Dutch civil engineers, who are sometimes called upon to rehabilitate drainage systems in Indonesia, are strongly aware of the colonial heritage, but with a positive, unproblematic feeling.

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treasury of the National Archives in The Hague (10 minutes by train)  
may have influenced this preference.

At least three other academic values are linked with Leiden's inclination to work in the archives. The first value is that the most important works from this group of historians from Leiden University are written in Dutch. Language, by the way, was not mentioned once as an academic value in interviews, but I think it clearly is. When one writes in Dutch, it is not necessary to make the difficult, never fully satisfying, translation of good quotes into English. 'Why would I write in English?', Fasseur reportedly once said, everybody who wants to study Indonesian history must be able to read Dutch.' It required an outsider, Australian Professor Heather Sutherland (PhD Yale University) appointed at VU University Amsterdam in 1976, to open the windows and to force the Dutch Indonesianists to realize that science is an international activity. The days that Dutch scholars felt they could claim a self-evident authority to speak about Indonesia are gone. Western but non-Dutch Indonesianists outnumber Dutch scholars by far and Indonesian historians have developed their own narratives about the past. Non-Dutch historians still learn Dutch to have access to colonial archives, but they do so in such large numbers that also in Dutch archives and libraries Dutch researchers seem a minority.

The second value tied to archive work is that historians should write for a larger audience than just professional historians.<sup>3</sup> There exists a large potential readership of people with a personal relationship to colonial Indonesia: by ancestry, or place of birth, work, military service, or the place of one's childhood. To reach this readership, books are a more appropriate medium than articles in journals. Texts should be easy to read (but easy reading is damned hard writing, Ernest Hemingway has reminded us). In order to achieve this aim,

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<sup>3</sup> This view is not exclusively held by Leiden based scholars. The importance of serving a lay audience, for instance in reviews of books in newspapers, was also mentioned to me by Elsbeth Locher-Scholten (PhD Leiden University, but just retired from Utrecht University); Henk Schulte Nordholt (PhD VU University and for the larger part of his career attached to the University of Amsterdam) has recently published a book in Dutch on contemporary Indonesia, *Indonesië na Soeharto*.

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Cees Fasseur and his students are fond of anecdotes and playful (but often incomprehensible) titles of books and chapters. A nice example is formed by the thesis of Wim van den Doel (1994), *De stille macht* (The silent force), a variation on Couperus' famous novel *De stille kracht*, and even better the thesis of Hans van Miert (1995), *Een koel hoofd en een warm hart* (literally: A cool head and a warm hart) with the chapter 'Petruk met sportmuts' (Petruk with a sports cap). As Wim van den Doel explained, tongue in cheek, 'we do not need to take everything seriously'.

As a corollary of the richness of the archives and the desire to serve a large readership, the Dutch academic world values thick books. Fasseur's best known student, Wim van den Doel, explained this to me. When he was writing his PhD thesis on the colonial civil service, Fasseur was writing a monograph on the School for Colonial Administration. They vied for who would write the most voluminous work, so that in hindsight, Van den Doel admits, his thesis (581 pages) carries superfluous ballast.

The third value that comes along with archival work and the use of printed works from colonial times is the respect for the sources, or more precisely respect for the integrity of the people who produced those sources. Elsbeth Locher-Scholten had learnt in Leiden to take the people seriously, 'even nazis'. According to Wim van den Doel, one cannot judge the past by contemporary measures. So, for instance, it is easy in hindsight to disparage the eurocentrism of colonial civil servants, but at the time they considered themselves enlighteners (*opheffers*). This respect for the sources, to tell the story as it just was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), is characteristic for the liberal environment of Leiden University. Wim van den Doel stresses he had acquired this attitude as an undergraduate student (*doctoraalstudent*) before he got to know his supervisor, Fasseur, well. The respect for the sources brings us to a moot point: the importance of objectivity.

### *Subjective notions of objectivity*

When asked what constitute academic values, three out of four respondents mentioned objectivity, which is interpreted as not being allowed to draw any conclusion that is contradicted by empirical facts. To draw a conclusion that is not supported by empirical fact, or worse contradicted by the facts, is not only bad scholarship, but also morally wrong. Hence a value. If we accept the moral primacy of objectivity, immediately the paradoxical question emerges why then scholars at the University of Leiden and the University of Amsterdam have repeatedly clashed over colonial issues, while basing their positions on more or less the same colonial archival and printed sources.<sup>4</sup> The paradox is solved by the meaning given to the word objectivity.

The most outspoken in this respect was Jan Breman. Objectivity - he used the more active form objectifying (*objectivering*) - is important in his view, precisely because scholars are influenced by their personal preferences and social background. Objectifying then is the process of being on guard against one's own presuppositions and constantly trying to falsify them. Coming from, in his own words, a lower class milieu and writing about labour relations in India and Indonesia, Breman had always tried to falsify his own supposition that the labourers were exploited by the landowners. Yet, at the end of the analysis, the labourers are exploited. The closing sentences of his dissertation are: 'Like their comrades elsewhere, the Dubla [the lowest caste in his research site in Gujarat, India] daily labourers are paralysed by apathy and suspicion. They lead a life without prospects and demonstrate a lack of interest for the future. It can never become better than what life of today offers. And that is too little.'<sup>5</sup> The impressive closing sentence, which Breman must have considered

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Breman and Vincent Houben on coolies (indentured labour) in nineteenth century Sumatra, Henk Schulte Nordholt and Wim van de Doel on the Ciomas Affair (the shooting of unarmed Indonesians yelling at a distance), Cees Fasseur and Jan Breman on the cultivation system.

<sup>5</sup> *Zoals hun lotgenoten elders zijn de Dubla landarbeiders verstarde in apathie en achterdocht. Zij leiden een uitzichtloos bestaan en tonen zich onverschillig voor wat de toekomst brengt. Het kan nooit beter worden dan wat de dag van vandaag bidet. En dat is te weinig.* (Breman 1970: 257).

over and over again, is clearly a moral judgement. Life brings too little to the Dubla according to whose standard?

Objectifying, then, seems less a matter of writing, than of doing fieldwork, during which Breman made an effort to hear both sides, also the landowning caste.<sup>6</sup> When asked in the field, he never made a secret of his own sympathies for the labourers; '[p]recisely for that reason I have always striven to act as objectively as possible when collecting information'.<sup>7</sup> Breman had learned this key value of objectifying from his PhD supervisor, Wim Wertheim, but he did not have full confidence in his master in this respect. When Breman was visited by Wertheim in the field, a feat highly appreciated by Breman, he kept him out of his research village, for fear that Wertheim would try to convince the Brahman landowners they were treating their labourers in an unjust, inhumane way. Instead, Breman showed him around, without notifying his supervisor, in another village in the neighbourhood.

Elsbeth Locher-Scholten has observed that knowing one's background, in order to understand one's biases, is not only a matter of social class. Depending on the subject under study gender and ethnicity (being 'white' in the case of Dutch scholars) can be just as important. To Breman, however, class is most important, and he could mention the class background of (scientific) friend and foe.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In an interesting section, Breman (1970: 95-98) describes how he tried to speak both landowners and landless labourers up to a certain point. Faced with the choice that the landowners were not or no longer willing to receive him if he continued to meet the low Dubla caste, Breman unequivocally chose the side of the landless. He defends his choice by pointing at the fact it took more time to gain the confidence of the labourers. During his interview, Breman remarked that objectifying is not only important during fieldwork, but also before and after data collection.

<sup>7</sup> *Juist ook daarom heb ik ernaar gestreefd bij het verzamelen van informatie zo objectief mogelijk te werk te gaan* (Breman 1970: 98).

<sup>8</sup> Actually, I believe the relationship between personal characteristics and one's work is weaker, or at least more subtle, than Breman suggests. Other Dutch scholars who have written critically about the colonial state and suppression of labourers come from a middle-class or elite background (e.g. Schulte Nordholt 2000 on violence and Locher-Scholten 1998 on servants).

Paradoxically, Breman blames Fasseur for acting like a historical judge, handing out a sentence, whereas judging is precisely the thing one should not do according to Fasseur's student, Van den Doel. After all, one should respect the integrity of the historical sources. If I had interviewed Van den Doel and Breman in one focus group, the latter would have answered that one can take this respect for the sources too far. Breman states that Fasseur takes an '*étatist*' perspective, seeing through the eyes of the state (or the state-produced documents), and that he does not pay attention to what is left out of the documents. Most Dutch scholars will nowadays subscribe to this critical approach to documents (historical or contemporary for that matter). Locher-Scholten, for instance, remembers how at a later stage in her career Heather Sutherland advised her to read Edward Said's *Orientalism* and recalls how much she was inspired by this book. In short then, the argument between Leiden and Amsterdam is not about the ideal of objectivity, but an epistemological issue how to treat the sources. Respect for the sources in Leiden has resulted in a more positive appreciation of the colonial state. When (not if) there were abuses, these were described as excesses (hence exceptions) and not a structural pattern. However, precisely because of this respect for sources, the best Leiden scholars will not let the colonial state off the hook when facts are clear. Fasseur (in the *Excessennota*) speaks unequivocally of Dutch war crimes during the Indonesian Revolution.

As several of my interlocutors remarked, both sides have profited from the Leiden-Amsterdam controversies to increase their profile. Perhaps it was fun to pull each other's leg as well. It was somewhat problematic, though, for PhD students in Leiden with a supervisor other than Fasseur who were against their will associated with the Leiden camp. When I gave a presentation at the University of Amsterdam in the early 1990s, my peers there received my talk with amazement: 'we never thought it was worth listening to somebody from Leiden, but you are an interesting (therefore nice?) chap'. Remco Raben (PhD Leiden University 1996) tried to distance himself from the debate. In one of the formal propositions (*stellingen*) that belong to his thesis, he says: "The representation of an alleged Leiden and Amsterdam school of non-western history testifies of a childish

denial the world consists of more than two parts'.<sup>9</sup> At the defence of this thesis, Leiden professor Henk Wesseling was not amused. He rebuked Raben by asking him first to read out this statement, and then icily ignored it, passing on to another matter without deeming the proposition worth a comment.

### *Inward or outward looking*

Regardless of the degree one takes colonial sources at face value or sees through the pages, almost all Dutch Indonesianists have a strong inclination to write empirical studies (and this paper is no exception). I believe the presence of the very rich depositories has exerted a very powerful influence on the Dutch scholars. Studies are started with empirical curiosity about particular phenomena as the driving force. Theories are called upon at a second stage to analyse data and frame writings, but research projects very rarely start from a theoretically deduced problem. The strategy of starting with an empirical question (with the ultimate goal to understand empirical matters and not to build theory) extends to studies of today's Indonesia.<sup>10</sup> Usually the outcome is a 'thick description' (Geertz) of the phenomena; at best the theoretical consequences of the study concerned are analysed, at worst there is only description.

There is a mutual influence between the inclination to write empirical studies and a rather widespread dislike of postmodern studies. Postmodernism has been accepted insofar scholars reflect on how their own position is influencing their research, but studies in which the researcher or the interaction between researcher and his interlocutors takes central stage are usually received with mockery.

The flipside of the empirical studies is that many Dutch Indonesianists demonstrate, in the words of Henk Schulte Nordholt, a 'shyness' (*bedeesdheid*) to take part in broader discussions. As a

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<sup>9</sup> *De voorstelling van zaken als zouden er een Leidse en Amsterdamse school bestaan in de buiten-Europese geschiedschrijving getuigt van een kinderlijke ontkenning dat de wereld uit meer dan twee delen bestaat* (Raben 1996: stelling 14).

<sup>10</sup> We should not forget in this respect that the KITLV collection on contemporary Indonesia is as outstanding as its historical collection.



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result of this shyness, others, basing themselves on the work of Dutch authors (and sometimes not even that), take the limelight. For instance, it is easy to demonstrate that Ann Stoler makes serious empirical flaws (Beaulieu-Boon 2009; Colombijn 2010), but she definitely makes her points and is much wider read than her critics.

The focus on empirical studies, ignoring the broader picture is found not only among Dutch Indonesianists, but is perhaps characteristic of Dutch social science at large. To nuance this position somewhat, I can refer to comments made by two interviewees. One said that a narrow scope is a problem of *all* social science, and the other remarked that the focus on only Indonesia is also characteristic of Australian historians.

To counter this inward-looking attitude, according to my interlocutors, Dutch Indonesianists should add a comparative dimension to their work. A lot is to be learnt from, for instance, work on India or China. This can be done either by reading case studies about those countries, or by using more theoretical insights. The need to write comparative studies and use social theory has particularly been promoted by Wim Wertheim and Heather Sutherland, but the principle is now widely accepted. Comparative work does not only need to be between societies, but it is also common to compare contemporary and historical situations. In other words, sociologists and anthropologists historicize their work.

Societal changes push Dutch scholarship in the same direction of a broader view. At home, the natural readership of Dutchmen who have known colonial Indonesia from personal experience is dying out. University courses on Indonesia draw a diminishing number of students and in response have broadened the subject. Indonesianists have nowadays to explain to other Dutch area specialists why Indonesia is interesting, instead of - as used to be the case - the other way around. In this uncertain landscape, Dutch Indonesianists have to reassess their position, also in a moral sense.

This new outward looking attitude can also be translated into normative terms in another way. When asked what constituted academic values, Henk Schulte Nordholt mentioned foremost a way

of interacting with other academics in an open way and a willingness to take each other seriously and listen to each other. Secondly, one should be wary of like-minded scholars and look for people who are different. In addition, curiosity to learn new things is important. In short, academic values are less about how one deals with one's research topic and sources, than about how to interact with fellow scholars.

### ***Master-pupil***

A final question is how these academic values are transferred to the next generation, and why they are sometimes so different to different people. Only in the oldest thesis I have consulted (Bremas 1970) is the supervisor explicitly acknowledged as a master (*leermeester*) in the preface.<sup>11</sup> A recurrent theme in the interviews has been that the scholars were normatively moulded during their undergraduate studies. Normative socialization was often begun when the students became assistant of a professor (not necessarily their future supervisor). Values were often acquired not by learning from one person, but from several lecturers. Lessons do not come in an explicit form, but by giving the right example.

I can confirm this picture from own experience. Basic values I have learnt from various persons, sometimes by casual and incidental remarks. For instance, from an anecdote told by Professor Speckmann, I learnt that anything goes methodologically speaking, as long as one can motivate one's decisions.

The presence of the extensive depositories of Indonesian society and history in the Netherlands puts a special obligation on Dutch shoulders. Given the still unsatisfying state of Indonesian scholarship, according to my interlocutors, it is important that the Netherlands will give generous support to young Indonesian scholars and help them to develop their own, independent careers.

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<sup>11</sup> A peculiar Leiden custom prohibits PhD candidates from thanking the supervisor in the preface to PhD theses, so we should not make too much of the absence of references to a master.

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