The Indies and the world
State building, promise, and decay at a transnational moment, 1910

Introduction

Scholars such as Ray Huang in his ground-breaking book *1587, a year of no significance* have shown how examining a single year in some detail can often say interesting and unexpected things about longer-term trends of a particular time and place.¹ Huang did this to look at the patterns of China in the late Ming period, and he presaged not only the extraordinary cultural florescence that was beginning at the time, but also the seeds of Ming decay which would give way (very violently, in fact) to the imposition of Qing rule a few decades later. A similar exercise might be profitably attempted for the Dutch East Indies, and to some extent the Malay world surrounding it, in the early part of the twentieth century. Soon after the turn of the century the Indies was a thriving place: the Dutch appeared to be at or near the height of their rule, and serious anti-colonial sentiment in the form of organized actions, movements or parties had yet to appear. Yet even at this apex of colonial power, seeds were being sewn just as in Ming China for cataclysms that were just over the horizon.² The Dutch East Indies state in 1910 was indeed flourishing in a number of ways, several of which I examine in this essay. The future looked favourable for continued conquest and control, and in the eyes of the Dutch themselves, this validated their authority and gave them the moral right to rule. Many of these same Dutchmen would have been aghast to see the changes that were to come a mere three decades later, when all that had been built by their forefathers in the preceding

¹ For the global history angle on this theme, see Huang 1982; Wills 2001.
² Cribb 1994; Locher-Scholten 1994; Shiraishi 1990. Cribb’s authors show the strength but also the fragility, in some areas, of advancing Dutch dominion. Locher-Scholten puts forth an argument of how and why the Dutch imperium expanded in the Indies. Shiraishi then shows how this imperium was eaten from within by the colony’s nascent independence movements.
three centuries came tumbling down in a matter of months.

The present essay tries to freeze-frame this moment around 1910 – with a few years’ leeway in either direction to accommodate extant sources – and ask how the Dutch colonial state looked at the pinnacle of its power. It was the moment just before the gangrene set in. Optimism was everywhere, Dutch technology and the theatre of rule were omnipresent and largely unchallenged, and the colony felt like a true ‘success’, except maybe to those who found themselves ruled in it. Critically, this was very much a transnational moment: though Dutch power was predicated on internal control of a variety of Indies populations, much of its legitimacy derived from the colony taking its place among other European colonies as an example of ‘just and effective rule’. I outline this process in its many administrative and organizational parts below, based mainly on archival material from The Hague (and also from London, which collected important data on the shared archipelagic world of Southeast Asia), but also from periodical literature of the time (tijdschriften), as well as modern, secondary literature. The essay follows the evolution of state knowledge projects in the first third, coercive projects in the second third, and maintenance efforts in the final third of the essay. In each part I show how the Dutch achieved things in the Indies that they had not achieved before, with regard to the image and actuality of rule. I also suggest throughout, however, the tenuous nature of this gathering dominion, even for those who saw the Indies as a ‘thousand-year project’ of the Dutch people – a beacon to white rule showing off the best that European civilization had to offer.

Carving state spaces

Building a strong colonial state with all of the accoutrements of modern rule meant that several projects had to be accomplished at the same time. One of the most important of these was exploration: actually knowing the extent of colonial territory. Dutch maps of Sumatra, for example, contained all of the major geographical landmarks by 1910, and had catalogued Sumatra’s peoples, as well as their physical environments. What remained were explorations of a different sort, which filled in gaps in existing knowledge, or took the process of discovery at a slower, more leisurely pace. The military apothecary W.G. Boorsma, for example, was given permission to set out on a chemical-pharmacological expedition, the aim being to collect new plants that might be useful in the fabrication of medicines. J.T. Cremer set out for the Batak highlands in 1907, this time not with a column of laden-down coolies, but in an automobile, which could barely traverse the recently cut roads.3 Not to be

---

3 Nationaal Archief, The Hague, (hereafter, NA), Ministerie van Koloniën, 1850-1900, 2.10.02, Mailrapport (hereafter, MR) 1897/611; Cremer 1907:245.
outdone, other explorers also ventured to the northern shores of Toba’s great lake, but did so by way of petrol-fuelled motorboats. Even the coasts of Sumatra, which had been circumnavigated for years by Dutch traders, adventurers, and military men on steamships, yielded small discoveries, such as a waterfall at Mansalar, which could now be used as a navigation aid (Meerwaldt 1911:63; Waterfall 1911). All of these voyages enhanced Dutch knowledge of the ‘periphery’, yet there was gradually a slowing of the gathering of data as Dutch explorers ran out of peoples and places left to ‘discover’.

Exploration of the South China Sea island groups had become part of a coherent programme of development in the Indies by 1910 as well. Mining interests took the lead in new surveying operations and expeditions, mapping Bangka (for example) in incredible detail, and starting work on Belitung, and even the tiny islands off Belitung’s coasts, after 1894.4 The island of Blakang Padang, facing Singapore in the Riau archipelago, was also extensively surveyed at this time. Though it had been seen formerly as a useless scrap of land with few natural resources, and only a marginal population, by the early twentieth century planners were envisioning the island as a complementary port near Singapore, with coal sheds, docking complexes, and a series of interconnected lighthouses. This sort of exploration, indeed, with concrete development purposes in mind, was among the last stages of discovery along the colony’s frontiers. Even many of the myriad reefs and atolls that made up the maritime boundary of the Netherlands Indies, from Aceh eastward to coastal New Guinea, were explored and chronicled by Dutch oceanographers at this time (Blakang Padang 1902; Niermeyer 1911:877). Some of this interest was purely scientific, or was fuelled by the emerging nationalist impulse to mark the boundaries of the archipelago with Dutch flags. Part of this may even be attributable to trying to ‘get there first’, before other European powers planted flags in these same landscapes. But a significant part of it was also economic and utilitarian, as exploration was bent to the service of the state to locate new resources and wealth.

Yet particularly after 1900, one concern drove exploration forward faster and with more energy than any other, and this was the search for natural resources. The case of Borneo can be taken again as an example, to show how much the creation of the frontier owed to state and private interests racing to find ores throughout the island. Applied geology drove empire forward in this sense; the geologist’s shovel and the explorer’s sextant were tools of equal importance in ‘opening up’ the frontier. On the British side of the Anglo/Dutch divide, this had happened very early: only a few years after the founding of British North Borneo, for example, the governor of that territory was calling weekly of the Gold Committee, which involved state officials and sev-

---

4 The extensive surveying of Bangka began even earlier, in the 1870s (NA, Koloniën 1850-1900, 2.10.02, MR 1894/535; Zondervan 1900:519).
eral Chinese prospectors. By the turn of the century in these same dominions, these informal meetings had given way to coded telegraph correspondences about potential diamond districts, as well as oil and mineral rights agreements being leased to various concerns. In Brunei, which became a British protectorate, such dealings were even earlier, as the Sultan there cut prospecting deals for antimony and tin with English speculators in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet it was in Sarawak where the greatest amounts of minerals and ores were being found, pulling English officials deeper and deeper into the forest in search of raw materials and profits (Hart Everett 1878:30). The Resident of Bintulu, Sarawak, a man named A. Hart Everett, gives an idea of the kinds of minerals being found in 1878: gold, iron, cobalt, and copper were all being discovered, as well as platinum, cat’s eyes, and spinel rubies. Diamonds were also turning up, such as one huge stone of 76 carats that was slipped into Sarawak from across the Dutch border (Hart Everett 1878:28).

Exploration was not the only tool at the disposal of these modernizing colonial states in 1910. Cartography in the Indies had become a much more sophisticated science than in previous decades, with its evolution being fuelled by a variety of important factors. Chief among them was popular interest and national pride. Dutch cartographers attended international congresses with their new data on the Indies, and the Dutch press back home picked up on their discoveries as well, fanning the new knowledge out to a wider reading public (Kan 1905:715; Oort 1909:363-5). Perhaps more important, however, was the role industry and production was beginning to play, as mining and agricultural concerns mapped out huge tracts of land with potentially colossal profits in mind. This is seen in the detailed maps produced of the mining concession Karang Ringin in Palembang, for example, as well as in the Kahayan mine plots leased out by Batavia deep in East Borneo’s interior. The contentious nature of the Anglo/Dutch border itself, however, was perhaps the main phenomenon advancing the mapping of the frontier, as the two European powers jockeyed over the laying of the boundary. As British knowledge of the region’s topography increased, their claims on territory became more specific, forcing the Dutch to catch up cartographically. This happened only slowly,
however. An incident in 1909, in which the Dutch envoy to London seemed himself not to know the details of Dutch claims in East Borneo, acted as an alarm for The Hague to acquaint all of her foreign service personnel with the Indies’ ‘true boundaries’. Around this time, therefore, maps started to be produced sketching the Dutch presence on the ground in great detail, such as one which combined roads, railroad lines, toll offices and garrisons (not to mention administrative divisions, mineral deposits, industrial centres, and lighthouses), all on one map (Kaart van Sumatra 1908:680).

This was all on land; however, Dutch knowledge of the intricacies of the frontier had also grown by leaps and bounds on the sea. The archives of the Hydrography Service show increasing numbers of maps being deposited into the central data-files: Riau and Lingga, the mouth of the Asahan River, and various parts of the East Borneo coast were all mapped, sometimes down to extraordinary detail. British maps of the maritime border region in Northeast Borneo, and Dutch maps completed on the reefs and tiny islands separating Borneo from Sulawesi, opened the colonial states’ eyes as to the kinds of locales where smugglers and pirates traditionally practised their activities. The older hydrographic schooners were retired, and were replaced with steamers that could undertake surveying under nearly any conditions. There were still complaints in the early twentieth century of some areas being under-surveyed, such as the border waters between North Sulawesi and the southern Philippines, and even certain channels south of Singapore, but these grumblings in the press of both the British and the Dutch colonies were now few and far between. Instead, a picture emerges of the

---

9 The Dutch ambassador in London, Baron Gericke, was confused as to the nature and extent of Dutch claims in East Borneo when an act of piracy there necessitated Anglo/Dutch cooperation in 1909. In private correspondence between the Dutch Ministers for the Colonies and Foreign Affairs after this, both stressed the importance of having Dutch envoys familiar with the outlines of Dutch territory in the Indies. Atlases and maps were sent shortly thereafter to Dutch representatives in Berlin, London, Tokyo, Peking, Paris, Constantinople, Stockholm, St Petersburg, Washington, and Bangkok. See NA, Ministerie van Koloniën to Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken (hereafter, MvBuZa), 15-7-1909; Minister van Koloniën, 26-11-1909, in: NA, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (hereafter, BuZa): A-dossiers 1871-1918, 2.05.03, inv.nr. 277, A.134.

10 NA, Archief Hydrografie, 1874-1980, 2.12.20, inv.nr. 9, Brievenboek 9, 1891-1895, pp. 35, 245, 285. See the English map of Northeast Borneo, completed in the early twentieth century, which can be found in: NALo, CO 531/20. Also see the Dutch map ‘Straat Makassar’, reproduced in ‘Noordoostkust Borneo’ (1907) 1 May, #6. The penetration of state information gathering into the maritime periphery becomes more and more apparent in these maps over time.

11 See the photos in Hydrographische opname 1907:756-7. The surveying sailing craft Bloemendaal is in the foreground of a photograph in this article, beached and now removed from service. The surveying steam vessel Van Gogh, meanwhile, continues to ply the seas in the background. The symbols the photographer is playing with are obvious: progress steams on, while the old science is left on the beach.

12 See NALo, Public Records Office (hereafter, PRO)/Ministry of Trade 10/Harbour Department/#1031/File H/12434 ‘Alleged uncharted reef in the Middle Channel of the Singapore Straits’, 1906; Hickson 1889:188-9; Coops 1904:129.
waters of the Anglo/Dutch frontier being almost entirely charted by 1910, when a useful map was published showing the dates of area surveys in the Tijdschrift van het Aardrijkskundig Genootschap. The enormous length and porosity of the frontier, which in the mid-nineteenth century seemed endless and unmappable, had become a fairly known quantity by the early twentieth century. Batavia and Singapore had committed these spaces to the archives now, where they could be studied and preserved to support the state’s aims.

In terms of relations with indigenous rulers in the archipelago, European relations with local lords in the periphery had turned into more of an exact science by 1910 as well. Formal contracts, known in Dutch as the korte verklaringen and the lange politieke contract (short declaration and long political contract), were standardized to regulate Batavia’s pull on states along the frontier. The system of reportage between Singapore and Batavia began to function on more regular lines as well, with the two colonial powers sharing news of their relations with local states in a more timely and precise fashion. Advances in mapping and exploration helped this process along, as there were fewer unknown areas by the turn of the century, and contracts were spelled out in considerably more detail. Nevertheless, complications remained with the semi-independent local lords of the periphery, even after 1900. Compensation payments to rulers were repeatedly withheld in an attempt to influence their behaviour, while in some locales the colonial government reserved the right to appoint its own civil functionaries, including port authorities and police in Riau. In one revealing incident in 1907, the Sultan of Sambas (in West Borneo) was admonished by Batavia for offering to the King of England edible birds’ nests as a gift. The action and the Dutch response to it show how sensitive relations with these polities still were: a gift along these lines could be construed as a form of vassalage, something Batavia would do anything to avoid. Yet it also shows how short a leash was kept on these states as European power grew in the periphery. Local lords were expected to adhere to a rigid code of conduct, the outlines of which had been drawn by Batavia in painstaking detail.

14 The shaded areas are those that have already been surveyed by the time of publication. The dates indicate the precise years the area was mapped. See Craandijk 1910.
15 See NA Lo, PRO, Dutch Consul, London, to Foreign Office (hereafter, FO), 20-8-1909, and FO to British Consul, The Hague, 26-8-1909, both in FO/Netherlands Files, ‘Treaties concluded between Holland and native princes of the eastern archipelago’. This was true not only between the British and Dutch in Southeast Asia, but also between British Malaya and Siam, for example. For the case of Perak and the Siamese dependencies of Kedah, Kelantan, and Trengganu, see Perak Government Gazette, 1900: ‘Agreements between Her Britannic Majesty and His Siamese Majesty’, 29-11-1899, p. 350.
17 Soelтан van Sambas 1907/2. It may also have been the case that the Dutch feared advancing British influence here, or a compact between London and Sambas.
How to build an empire

An empire that was becoming ‘known’ also needed to be controlled, however. For much of the nineteenth century the Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger (KNIL, Dutch colonial military) was not always up to the military adventurism required by an aggressive colonial regime. After 1900, however, the KNIL gradually became a more effective organization, both in Java and in the Outer Islands along the Anglo/Dutch frontier. Elsbeth Locher-Scholten has shown how relationships based on trade between the Dutch and indigenous polities eventually could become based on coercion as well. This was often a decades-long process, and one that took Byzantine twists and turns as each side tried to outmanoeuvre the other in the realm of politics. Locher-Scholten’s window (2003) in examining these processes is a Sumatran one, and particularly one based on Jambi, in the southern part of that huge island. Yet with the Dutch in the Indies over the course of the nineteenth century, politics often gave way to force, and not just in the westernmost stretches of their burgeoning island empire.

An improvement in the management of soldiers’ health was one very important reason why this happened. The Dutch military avidly read English and French medical journals, keeping up with the latest advances in tropical knowledge from places as far away as Madagascar and French Guiana. The Dutch had also started to build up a reservoir of practical knowledge themselves, having to do with clothing, food supplies, drinking water, and seasonal precautions. It was around this time that water-resistant clothing began to be studied in field tests in the Indies, as well as other kinds of fabrics that would be suitable for long expeditions in the border residencies. Studies on boots were commissioned, to find the right kind of shoe for traction and insulation during monsoon campaigns. Funds were set up to promote exercise and gymnastics among the troops, while detailed instructions were handed out on how to keep water fresh during prolonged periods in the bush. By 1896 a whole range of preserved foods were available to sustain government troops far from any supply lines: Australian meats that had been cooked over 100 degrees Centigrade in chloro-calcium baths, dried fish, dried vegetables, and sardines were among these foods (Levensmiddelen 1896:482). Even drunkenness and beri-beri were down, rendering the KNIL a more fit policing force by 1910.

There were also other reasons why Europeans were better able to expand

---

18 Van Haeften 1895; Vink 1899:676; Kleedingstukken 1897:224; Van de Water 1902:230, 212.
19 Practijk 1906. For an account of the rigours of guerrilla warfare in the border residencies, see Gayo 1983:217-35.
their armed presence into the broad spaces of the frontier after 1900. Some of these were organizational. In Sarawak, the Brookes built a network of forts up-country in order to establish a permanent presence in rural areas; these forts could be found at Bentong, Kabong, Muka, Bintulu, and up the Baram and Trusan Rivers (Harfield 1984:346). For the Dutch, a complex, accordion-like system whereby the military and civil governments of the Outer Islands cooperated in ‘trouble’ districts allowed for flexibility in watching over potentially rebellious populations. When circumstances were peaceful, many of the army units in these far-flung residencies were reduced in size and reassigned to other areas. This happened in parts of Aceh and Southeast Borneo, two notorious flashpoints, right at the turn of the century. In other districts, however, such as the Upper Dusun and Upper Kapuas regions of West Borneo, authority was maintained under a military umbrella at the expense of the civil administration. This often caused problems between the two branches of Dutch authority, as the civil administrators saw their jurisdiction disappearing into the coercive powers of the military. From the standpoint of Batavia, however, concessions of this nature were almost always preferable to the danger of lack of control over local populations, especially in the border residencies. Batavia was only too happy, most of the time, to skimp on local administrative efficiency (having civil servants in charge who knew the local customs, and had long-standing ties with local peoples) in these newly conquered places if only the military could ensure order.

If these developments occurred on land, they are also evident in the sources chronicling changes on the sea. Technological advances in naval capabilities were the spark that lit the fire in Dutch policy circles around this time. Just before 1900, urgent circulars were being sent out to Dutch envoys in major capitals to find out how much the various powers were spending on their respective naval forces. These instructions went out to Dutch plenipotentiaries in London, Paris, Berlin, and Washington, but they were also sent to less exalted powers (such as Sweden, Norway, and especially the minor colonial nations such as Portugal and Spain), to see how other small states were integrating the new changes into their navies. From the Dutch envoy in Paris, Batavia learned that expansion of the French fleet was imminent, with improvement of colonial ports (such as Saigon), funds for colonial cable laying, and a colonial defence fund all on the table. From the Dutch representative in

22 NA, Koloniën 1850-1900, 2.10.02, MR 1899/706; Commander NEI Army to Governor General, 10-11-1888, in: NA, Koloniën1850-1900, 2.10.02, MR 1899/94; NA, Koloniën1850-1900, 2.10.02, MR 1899/709.


24 MvBuZa to Dutch Envoys in London, Paris, Berlin, and Washington, 1-2-1895; MvBuZa to Dutch Envoys in Austro-Hungary, Sweden, Norway, and Russia, 2-11-1896; Dutch Consul, Lisbon, to MvBuZa, 18-4-1895; Dutch Consul, Madrid, to MvBuZa, 1-2-1901, in: NA, BuZa, 2.05.03, inv.nr. 421, A.182.
Berlin, further information was received about German naval capabilities in the Pacific, which was important to Batavia because of Berlin’s interests in telegraph lines and shipping in the area, not to mention its territorial expansion in certain island chains in this vast ocean. Yet it was the obvious obsolescence of the Indies’ marine in comparison to British naval strength in the Straits that really gave Batavia cause for alarm. Clippings from *The Times* (of London) showed that English armour-plate experiments, steam trials, and shallow-draught construction were making Dutch ships obsolete in the archipelago, a situation that was tolerable while amity existed between the two powers, but was deemed undesirable for the long term. The news in 1910 that Japan was planning to build ships even more technologically advanced than Britain’s deepened this anxiety, as the Dutch realized that their naval presence in the region was inadequate compared with its neighbours.

For domestic interests, however, such as the surveillance and interdiction of smugglers, the Indies’ marine in 1910 was now a much more effective force than it had been in the nineteenth century. The evidence of this improvement is nearly everywhere apparent. In Sumatra, more and more steamers were now assigned specifically to upriver patrols, travelling to formerly unreachable places where political resistance and ‘illegal’ commerce had functioned almost at will. Off the coast of East Borneo, a long stretch of shoreline that had been seen as troublesome for decades (housing pirates, smugglers, and other people antithetical to Batavia’s state-making project), improvements were also made, as ships were slotted into grids to patrol the entire shoreline. Centralized control over many areas of the Outer Islands had improved so much that certain patrolling stations were actually relieved of ships. This is not to say that the Indies’ marine was now unassailable, or that it did not continue to have major problems, which certainly affected the ability to patrol effectively against smugglers along the borders. Sanitation on board these ships, for instance, continued to be dismal, spawning disease and sickness among crews that often limited these vessels’ practical effectiveness. Yet the tide had turned against many structural problems that had curtailed Batavia’s state-making abilities in the periphery. By 1910, smugglers entering the Indies by sea, for example, had to use considerably more ingenuity than at any time in the previous several decades.

25 Dutch Consul, Paris, to MvBuZa, 14-2-1900; Dutch Consul, Berlin, to MvBuZa, 3-8-1904, 22-5-1903, 5-4-1902, 6-7-1899, 17-6-1898, 13-7-1897, 30-11-1896, in: NA, BuZa, 2.05.03, inv.nr. 421, A.182.
26 ‘The Navy Estimates’ in *The Times* (of London), 3-3-1897, enclosed in Dutch Consul, London, to MvBuZa, 5-3-1897, in: NA, BuZa, 2.05.03, inv.nr. 421, A.182.
27 ‘The Destroyer Yamakaze’ in *The Japan Times*, 4-6-1910, enclosed under Dutch Consul, Tokyo, to MvBuZa, 13-6-1910, in: NA, BuZa, 2.05.03, inv.nr. 421, A.182.
28 NA, Koloniën 1901-1952, 2.10.36.02, MR 1902/25, 48, 92, 132.
29 NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 270, p. 24.
30 NA, Koloniën 1850-1900, 2.10.02, MR 1899/36.
31 Van Rossum 1907, 2, p. 274; 3, p. 287; *Schroefstoomschepen* 1880.
Unloading Dutch military supplies, Aceh (KITLV, 19239)
Policing was also crucial to the erection of modern colonial states in the region. Yet even by 1910, several aspects of policing along the lands and seas of this frontier still allowed for a porous distribution of goods, away from the eyes of the state and against its explicit instructions. Policemen were regularly censured for graft and illegal practices, such as one member of the force in Singapore who was jailed for freeing an incarcerated suspect without any instructions to do so. The police forces of large, difficult-to-govern residencies, such as Dutch West Borneo, may have increased in size, but not necessarily in professionalism, if the reports of border administrators are to be believed. When military units were withdrawn from the Outer Islands upon pacification, these units were often replaced by an exactly corresponding number of police officers, showing that a similar level of coercion was perceived to be needed in the area, even if its composition or tactics had changed. Such signals reveal that pacification and policing along the frontier was still highly problematic, even into the early twentieth century. A total of 1,535 Indies policemen for all of the Outer Islands in 1896 was still a very small number; the extra 700 men who had joined this force by 1905 made hardly a dent in the problem. By 1912 instructions were being promulgated to police about what commands they should shout in Malay to quell riots. With a huge mobile and multi-racial population straddling both sides of the frontier, the police of both colonial powers were not at any time in a position to fully command the border.

Legal advances tried to cement these evolutions in state policing. A formal agreement on extradition between British North Borneo and the Netherlands Indies did not take shape until 1910. The establishment of coalmines on the frontier, with the attending problems of runaway coolie labour, finally helped this ‘gentleman’s agreement’ into law. Yet the informal channels that often characterized diplomacy in the region functioned well enough, for long enough, to convince many administrators on both sides of the frontier that existing agreements were sufficient. The time of ‘gentlemen’s agreements’ was fast drawing to a close, however. The rise of industry and capital-intensive enterprises in Borneo forced new legal structures into existence, especially as they related to movement across the frontier. British North Borneo eventually put into effect extradition ordinances for Labuan (1890), Sarawak (1891), and Hong Kong (1896), all at least partially as a result of these processes.

33 NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 260, pp. 43-4.
34 Siebelhoff 1907:864-5; NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 250, p. 32.
35 Police Commissioner’s Instructions, enclosure in Assistant Resident Batavia to Resident Batavia, 26-2-1912, in: NA, BuZa, 2.05.03, inv.nr. 40, A.29bis OK.
agreement with Hong Kong, in fact, was predicated on the establishment of direct steam service between the two colonies. Labourers presently had an easy escape hatch, if they could get on returning ships, to leave their contracts and try to get back to villages in South China with their cash advances in hand.38 Discussions on extradition with the Sultanate of Brunei also were eventually ratified into law, as Brunei had become a favourite place for counterfeiters (as well as traffickers in slaves and coolies) to flee to, away from British North Borneo.39 Legal structures and the laying of legal connections between governments in the region were therefore two more ways to enforce the modernizing colonial regime’s control in Southeast Asia, though these mechanisms were imperfect even around 1910.

Maintaining a (shifting) status quo

What was being explored, mapped, categorized and surveyed also needed to be maintained, and by the early twentieth century, technology was going hand-in-hand with state building more clearly than had ever before been the case. Railroads are a good example here to compare with statecraft: rail construction was going on all along local frontiers, in different guises but with unifying effect. In Johor the number of people using the expanding British railway jumped from 159,317 in 1912 to 418,047 just four years later, with net revenues for the Federated Malay States railroads over a million dollars just after 1900.40 In Aceh, the Dutch military built the first stages of a steam-tram in 1876, one that eventually was expanded and taken over by the state in 1916. The goal of this line was to help with the pacification process, an aim that was met, but only after several decades of trying.41 In South Sumatra, rail construction was tied to the idea of opening these fertile lands to Javanese transmigrants, who would come from overpopulated Java and make new lives there. This project was only partially successful, expanding the state’s presence in Lampung and elsewhere, but never helping as many settlers as had been hoped.42 In Borneo, some of the most dramatic expansion plans were anticipated, with one expert drawing up schemes for Borneo to be criss-crossed with rail lines in the space of only six

38 CO Jacket, 8-12-1894, in: NALo, CO 144/69.
39 ‘Draft agreement between Brunei and North Borneo for the surrender of fugitive criminals’, 19-3-1908, in: NALo, CO 531/1.
42 NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 206, p. 4; Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv. nr. 216, p. 110; NA, Koloniën 1901-1952, 2.10.36.02, MR 1902/153; Van der Waerden 1904:175.
years (Eekhout 1891:955). On the Dutch side of the Borneo border, this never really happened. Yet the British did indeed expand their rail net in Borneo (mostly on the coasts), though this met almost everywhere with huge problems, such as floods, construction-site collapses, and massive landslides. Empire building via railroad technology, even around 1910, was still a very uncertain process in this part of the world. This did not stop either colonial state from setting down the groundwork for later decades, however, when such resources could be exploited more fully as tools for expanding the state’s reach.

What was true on land for railroads was also true for steamships on the sea. By 1910, the maritime expansion of the state in local waters had evolved into a broad, inter-connected grid. Although steam shipping outweighed sail in Singapore statistics shortly after the Suez Canal opened in 1869, it would not be until around 1900 that steam lines connected the vast breadth of the archipelago (Bogaars 1955:104, 117). In Palembang, steam-shipping figures were up, as well as Batavia’s abilities to keep track of such movements; in Jambi this was also true, especially with clearance work (on sandbars, projecting jungle, and shifting shoals) proceeding on heavily trafficked rivers. Makassar was budgeted huge new sums of money to make port improvements for steam facilities, and services in Borneo were expanded as well, both in the West and Southeast residencies of the island. As perhaps the main indication of the expansion of these facilities, aims, and resources, however, part of Aceh was turned into a giant refuelling station, based on the offshore island of Weh. By 1900 an immense dry dock had been installed on the island, complete with coal sheds, wharving facilities, and a Chinese work camp for repairs. In this place, formerly the wildest of the ‘Wild West’ corners of the archipelago, a kind of maritime infrastructure and control had been established that formerly would have been impossible. Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM) stations now stretched from Sabang (the name of the Weh docking station) to Merauke in New Guinea, on the opposite side of the Indies. Batavia and Singapore were teaching themselves how to master the sea as part of their programmes of colonial state-making.

These patterns extended to economic policies as well. Export duties were levied on a wide range of forest products which easily exited the Indies’

---

43 British Consul, Borneo, to FO, 5-3-1904, in: NALo, CO 144/78; British North Borneo Co. HQ to CO, 19-10-1910 Confidential, in: NALo, CO 531/2.
44 NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 206, p. 4; NA, Koloniën 1901-1952, 2.10.36.02, MR 1902/93; NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 216, p. 47.
45 Directeur Burgerlijke Openbare Werken to Governor General, 31-5-1902, in: NA, Koloniën 1901-1952, 2.10.36.02, MR 1902/542.
46 Sabang Baai 1903:237-8; Heldring 1900:630. For a useful analysis of the expansion of harbours generally in North Sumatra during this time, see Airriess 1995.
Outer Islands, including beeswax, benzoin, damar, rhino horn, and certain kinds of wood (Review tariff law 1921). Tax revenues on trade items such as these brought in larger and larger sums every year to Batavia.\(^{48}\) When there were problems, such as downturns in the market for the above-mentioned products, Dutch civil servants wrote voluminously on how revenues might be raised, showing how important these taxation schemes had become to the central government.\(^{49}\) Yet other actors also sought to make money from the taxation of such goods. Local chiefs, such as several in Riau in 1897, also tried to take advantage of the upturn in export trade, taxing the transit of forest products from their own dominions, only without the permission of the state. The state did not allow this, and such entrepreneurs were swiftly punished.\(^{50}\)

The important thing for Batavia was that greater peace in the Outer Islands brought greater means for enforcing taxation, as fewer regions still held the ability to evade state designs. Only a few places, like Makassar, were periodically made into tax-free ports like Singapore. By 1910, therefore, duties were levied on an entire range of new items: radium bromide and menthol eucalyptus throat drops, as well as steel shipping-masts, playing cards, and heavy gravel-breaking equipment.\(^{51}\) The state could push taxation of commodities crossing the frontier much further than had ever been possible before.

Import and export taxes were not the only economic means of border formation available to the colonial state, however. Blockades and shipping regulations (scheepvaartregelingen) were also tools used to strengthen colonial borders, and make money for the state at the same time. Since the early nineteenth century, Batavia had been imposing rules on who could, and who could not, trade between ports in the extensive waters of the Indies archipelago. Foreign ships had been forbidden since 1825 to participate in the ‘coastal trade’, or internal commerce between ports in the Indies. This in itself was a form of border strengthening, as it gave Dutch vessels a huge advantage in local trade.\(^{52}\) A phalanx of interests eventually came together to dispute this privilege, however, including Straits Settlements traders who were shut out from the coastal trade, and large Dutch agricultural concerns wanting free competition to lower transport costs (A.H.K. 1887:938-9). Only in 1912 was this form of boundary construction abandoned in Indies waters, and foreign competition let into the Indies for domestic port-to-port trade.

---

\(^{48}\) Directeur van Financiën to Governor General, 5-1-1894, in: NA, Koloniën 1850-1900, 2.10.02, MR 1894/32; NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 270, p. 14.

\(^{49}\) NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 216, p. 46.

\(^{50}\) NA, Koloniën 1850-1900, 2.10.02, MR 1897/281, MR 1897/527.

\(^{51}\) Of course, this opened up smuggling opportunities on a whole range of new items as well.

\(^{52}\) Tractaat van Londen 1824; Tractaat van Sumatra 1872; Bepalingen inzake kustvaart Doorstoten, met aantekeningen in Handschrift, from Indisch Staatsblad 1912: no. 477, no. 479; Handel en scheepvaart 1918:22.
The colonial state also made use of human agents, not just policies, to work their will. By 1910 ethnographers were spending more and more time on the Indies’ frontiers, and on learning local circumstances and customs – including local laws, the start of the ‘adat studies’ movement – far better than previously. This was also state building of a kind. Vague, generalized accounts of large culture areas started to be replaced with much more in-depth studies, chronicling local life to a degree never seen before. The details of real cultural values in various local communities began to be explored much more seriously. Instead of thumbnail sketches of local groups, such as ‘The Punan’, ‘The Melanau’, ‘The Kelabit’, or ‘The Batak’, articles appeared now on ‘The tobacco pipes of the Boven Musi Kubu’, ‘Indigenous pharmacoepia of the Padang lowlands’, and ‘Treatment of the sick among the Central Bornean Dayaks’.  

Certainly there was a high degree of scholarly autonomy in these studies. Yet ethnography, self-consciously or not, was being used more and more by the state to identify aspects of material culture important to local peoples. Especially in the border residencies, such commodities might also be important enough to be traded across political boundaries. The Dutch collected the ethnographers’ articles and indexed them in a central filing system called the Zakelijke aantekeningen, located in The Hague. The Zakelijke aantekeningen became a kind of centralized database for knowledge collection in the Indies, an archive of periodical literature numbering in the thousands of entries. When observers in the field noted that Dayaks in Central Borneo, for example (straddling the Anglo/Dutch frontier), would ‘do anything for glazed corals’, Batavia noted this in their files. Bugis, Chinese, and Malay traders (not to mention Europeans) made upriver journeys to trade in these items, selling them as ornaments. If such things were so valuable to interior populations, what might they give up for them? Birds’ nests? Camphor crystals? Sheets of gutta percha? Such forest products were supposed to be taxed, all the more so since they were so valuable.

Colonial civil servants were now available in larger and larger numbers in the periphery to enforce the dictates of the modernizing colonial state. Old problems, such as dismal chances for promotion and even more dismal pay-schemes for Outer Islands administrators, were being revamped. Batavia was trying to remove two of the primary causes of complaint that often led to bad government in the periphery, including graft and smuggling. There were also attempts made to redraw the political contracts with self-governing polities in the border residencies, to give local rulers a little more room to earn a decent salary, rather than having to resort to smuggling and other

53 Snelleman 1906; Kreemer 1908:438; Ziekenbehandeling 1908:99.
illegal activities to maintain their status. Yet problems persisted, problems often serious enough to impair government functioning in the outstretched borderlands where the state needed this presence most. Controleurs were still badly overworked and responsible for a huge range of tasks: education, infrastructure, harbour control, and governance were among their duties. These burdens often overtaxed their effectiveness (Controleur 1910:2). Authority in the self-governing areas remained broken and diffuse, with a variety of interests – sultans, their children, strongmen, and orang kaya (or rich merchants) – all holding sway over different territories. Some of Batavia’s Dutch civil servants, such as one notorious womanizer in Manado, also exercised their authority in ways objectionable to the local populace, lowering the government’s prestige in local eyes. All of these phenomena happened at once, and along the length of colonial boundaries. Their simultaneity shows perhaps better than any other indicator the somewhat broken nature of European authority in this part of the world in the years on either side of 1910.

Conclusion

In and around 1910, the Dutch East Indies had something of a fairy-tale quality to it. The wars of conquest in various parts of the archipelago were now nearly over: Dutch hegemony and control was largely unchallenged, and Dutch flags flew from Aceh in the west to parts of Papua New Guinea in the east. The technologies of Dutch rule were virtually omnipresent as well, as railroads, steamships and telegraph lines were visible signs that ‘progress’ was being enacted upon the landscape, at least in the eyes of many (both Dutch and indigenous) who judged such things from a materialist vantage point (Mrázek 2002). If the Dutch were almost done fighting wars, and were spending more of their time building, then both activities were signs to the international community that the Indies was an indivisible and productive part of Dutch culture overseas, a place firmly under the Netherlands’ rule and part of the evolving global order of things. In Marieke Bloembergen’s elegant phrase (2006), the ‘colonial spectacles’ seem to have been both actual and metaphorical: the theatre of state was enacted on a daily basis by the ruling regime in many powerful ways, but these same ‘spectacles’ may have been cloudy in the sense that real trouble was on the horizon, though the Dutch did not appear to see the dangers very well.

56 NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 182, pp. 7, 24.
57 NA, Memories van Overgave, 2.10.39, inv.nr. 236, pp. 1-2, 8. For a good overview, see Van den Doel 1994a.
58 ‘Proces verbaal’, 4-4-1893, in: NA, Koloniën 1850-1900 2.10.02, MR 1893/608.
The lack of such vision and preparation came at a huge cost a few decades later in the twentieth century when the Netherlands’ rule over the islands was swept away first by the Japanese, and then by a combination of indigenous resistance and international sanction in the age of decolonization. Others have and will explore those processes, but here I hope to have simply suggested how the situation may have looked before any of these things happened – in an epoch of colonial optimism, not in the nadir of despair and defeat. In 1910 the aura resonating in the Indies was very different to the chaos and anomie that was a standard part of life in the middle decades of a turbulent century. This period of construction over destruction may have felt like it would last an eternity – there are few signs that the majority of actors at this time, whether European or autochthonous, saw any reason to doubt the strength of Dutch rule. The Malay-language press was for the most part fairly docile, Boedi Oetomo – the first ‘nationalist’ party of the Indies – had only just been founded in 1908, and the birth of the Indonesian Communist party was still a full decade away. The Dutch colonial apparatus seemed to rule supreme. Yet the Netherlands’ advances across a number of state-making projects, very much typified by the transnational dimension of much of this system, proved to be paper achievements. So strong and impressive when viewed from without, the architecture of rule was slowly rotting from within. The regime collapsed soon after the height of its grandeur, but this is a story told by others outside of this particular essay.

References

Unpublished sources

_Nationaal Archief, The Hague_
Archief Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, A-dossiers 1871-1918, nummer toegang 2.05.03
Archief Hydrografie, 1874-1980, nummer toegang 2.12.20
Archief Ministerie van Koloniën, 1850-1900, nummer toegang 2.10.02
Archief Ministerie van Koloniën, 1901-1952, nummer toegang 2.10.36.02
Memories van Overgave, 1852-1962, nummer toegang 2.10.39

_National Archives, London_
Colonial Office
Public Records Office

Published sources

A.H.K.
1887 ‘Voorstel tot opheffing van het verbod dat de vreemde vlag uitsluit van de kustvaart in Nederlandsch-Indië’, _Indische Gids_ 9, I:938-42.
Airriess, Christopher

Blakang Padang
1902 ‘Blakang Padang; Een concurrent van Singapore’, Indische Gids 24, II: 1295.

Bloemenberg, Marieke

Bogaars, G.

Campo, J.N.F.M à

Cayaux, H.B.

Controleur

Coops, P.C.

Craandijk, C.

Cremer, J.T.

Cribb, Robert (ed.)
1994 The late colonial state in Indonesia; Political and economic foundations of the Netherlands Indies, 1880-1942. Leiden: KITLV Press. [Verhandelingen 163.]

Doel, H.W. van den
1994a De stille macht; Het Europese binnenlands bestuur op Java en Madoera, 1808-1942. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.

Eekhout, R.A.

Haeften, J. van 1895 ‘Voorkomen van darmziekten bij het leger te velde’, *Indisch Militair Tijdschrift* 26, II:80.


Hickson, Sydney J. 1889 *A naturalist in North Celebes; A narrative of travels in Minahassa, the Sangir and Talaut Islands, with notices of the fauna, flora and ethnology of the districts visited*. London: Murray.


*Konterloeurs buiten Java* 1884 ‘Konterloeurs op de bezittingen buiten Java en Madura’, *Indische Gids* 6, I:14-20.


Levensmiddelen

Locher-Scholten, Elsbeth

2003  *Sumatran sultanate and colonial state; Jambi and the rise of Dutch imperialism, 1830-1907*. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University. [Studies on Southeast Asia 37.]

Meerwaldt, J.H.

Mrázek, Rudolf

Niermeyer, J.F.


Oort, W.B.

Practijk
1906  ‘Voor de practijk’, *Indisch Militair Tijdschrift* 37, II:669.

Review tariff law
1921  *Review of the Netherlands Indian tariff law; Tariffs of import and export duties up to 1 July 1921*. The Hague: Official Printing Office.

Rossum, J.P. van

Ruilhandel Bahau’s

Ruitenbach, D.J.

Sabang Baai

Schroefstoomschepen

Shiraishi, Takashi

Siebelhoff, M.W.
Snelleman, J.F.
1906  Tabakspijpen van de Koeboe’s aan de Boven-Moesi-Rivier (Sumatra),
*Aarde en Haar Volken* 42(12 May).

Soeltan van Sambas
1907  ‘Antwoord namens de Soeltan van Sambas aan den Heer J.L. Swart’,

Spoor- en tramwegen

Spoorwegaanleg
1899  ‘Spoorwegaanleg op Noord-Sumatra’, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indië*,
Tweede nieuwe serie, 3:817-20.

Vink, J.A.
1899  ‘Sprokkelingen uit den vreemde op het gebied der hygiène voor een leger in de tropen’, *Indisch Militair Tijdschrift* 30, II:676-86.

Waerden, J. van der
1904  ‘Spoorwegaanleg in Zuid-Sumatra’, *Indisch Bouwkundig Tijdschrift* 7-9:
173-82.

Water, J. van de

Waterval

Wills, John

Ziekenhuisbehandeling
1908  ‘Ziekenbehandeling onder de Dayaks (Midden Borneo); Door een missionaris Capucijn’, *Katholieke Missiën* 33:99-101.

Zondervan, H.