New Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java *Children of the Colonial State and Ancestors of a Future Nation*

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Around 1900, several important processes were changing the structure of our world. Rapid economic and technological developments were taking place, hand in hand with population growth, urbanization, the globalization of capitalism, and increases in state capabilities and military power, as well as the expansion of colonial territories around the world. Facilitated by steamships, railways, and new communication technologies, the mobility of people, goods, and ideas accelerated worldwide. These changes were accompanied by the emergence of new time regimes that implied a global standardization of clock time. The Western world was in many respects—but not exclusively, as the case of Japan demonstrated—the driver of these developments. Influenced by new notions of equality, emancipation, and individual freedom, established hierarchies were challenged and new urban middle classes undermined traditional bonds while forging new social alignments (Osterhammel 2014:907–18). These new urban middle classes found employment in expanding state bureaucracies and capitalist enterprises, and inhabited new social spaces, such as offices, boulevards, cafés, and restaurants, where they participated in a new mass culture, characterized by trans-imperial consumption patterns and a desire to be modern. Shopping arcades, department stores, and advertisements celebrated a new consumer society, which offered a new uniformity in terms of dress, taste, habits, and leisure (Osterhammel 2014:230–34; 694–5; Van der Woud 2015).

Within this larger, global context indigenous urban middle classes emerged in colonial Java around the turn of the twentieth century and started to participate in this new mass culture as well. For a long time, these middle classes had been excluded from the historical record because they did not fit into dominant colonial categories like ‘peasants’, ‘aristocrats’, or ‘Chinese’, let alone ‘tribal natives’. As a result, scholars failed to see the crucial role of these middle classes, which formed a constituent element of the colonial system (Schulte Nordholt 2015). The following articles by Tom Hoogervorst and Henk Schulte Nordholt, Dafna Ruppin, and Arnout van der Meer explore the emergence of these new

middle classes and investigate how notions of modernity took root among, and gave shape to, new lifestyles. It is important to note that these middle classes did not simply follow and copy examples from the West. Rather, developments often took place simultaneously in Europe and the colonial metropolises.

Hoogervorst and Schulte Nordholt offer an estimate of the size of these middle classes in colonial Java between 1900 and 1940 and illustrate how advertisements helped to stimulate and shape new lifestyles. They emphasize the importance of visual sources in what was called 'the age of advertising' (see Van der Meer below) to understand the dynamics of a new urban mass culture. Finally, they explore aspects of vernacular Malay, the new urban language that enabled the indigenous middle classes to reflect on the new world they inhabited.

Dafna Ruppin examines the rise of a new mass audience for moving pictures in colonial Java at the beginning of the twentieth century. Spectators from all levels of urban colonial society swarmed into canvas and bamboo tents or cinema palaces built in bricks and stone, exposing them to modern things and desirable lifestyles on screen. Ruppin explores what caused these spectators to spend their leisure time at the cinema, the films they watched, and how their classed, racialized, and—at times—gendered seating influenced the shared viewing experience characteristic of movie-going.

Late-colonial Java witnessed the proliferation of fairs that drew hundreds of thousands of indigenous visitors from diverse ethnic backgrounds and all walks of life. Van der Meer argues that these fairs, which celebrated modernity, were particularly aimed at, and constitutive of, a nascent Indonesian middle class that became increasingly central to the maintenance of colonial rule. In this context, Van der Meer explores how these exhibitions complicated existing colonial hierarchies of race, class, and gender.

Taken together the articles argue that these middle classes were in a cultural sense children of the colonial state.¹ At the same time, they were in many respects also ancestors of the Indonesia of the future, because their cultural disposition facilitated their new role as citizens of this newly emerging nation-state.

1 I borrow this term from Boomgaard 1989.

References

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