Review Article

Colony, Metropole, and the Ocean in Between

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Abstract

Kris Alexanderson's *Subversive Seas* showcases the worth of combining thorough archival research with critical literary reading techniques. Her research brings new vigor to subfields of history with a penchant for antiquarianism, like Dutch maritime history, but it also prompts questions regarding the direction of *new imperial history*. Alexanderson's history of Dutch imperial shipping lines fits a number of historiographical trends, most importantly the 'archival turn' in histories of empire, but also reminds us of some of the limits of 'reading along the archival grain', as anticolonial voices are sometimes simply absent or muffled in colonial archives.

Keywords

colonial history – Dutch Empire – historiography – maritime history

Book Reviewed

Alexanderson, Kris. *Subversive Seas: Anticolonial Networks across the Twentieth-Century Dutch Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

A prominent characteristic shared by virtually all colonial societies is the gap between the imagery and ideology of empire on the one hand, and the 'reality on the ground' on the other. Historians and other scholars of empire know that the neat racialized divisions of colonial societies, as dreamed of by colonizing powers, had porous boundaries and were not as stable as the colonizers imagined; that the metropolitan grip on colonial affairs was never as thorough or all-encompassing as it was envisioned in the halls of the colonial office; and that the idea of benevolent colonial rule contrasted starkly with the suppression experienced by those subjected to that rule. Critical engagement with such binaries helps us understand the workings of colonial rule, but employing them in our service does not come without the risk of perpetuating colonial categories of thought. 'We need to think through not only a colonial history that appears as Manichean,' wrote Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler in the introduction to their influential volume *Tensions of Empire*, 'but a historiography that has invested in that myth as well.'¹

Historians of empire have, for the almost twenty-five years since the publication of Cooper and Stoler's programmatic *Tensions of Empire*, attempted to carry through the agenda laid out in that volume. They have been excavating the local tensions inherent in any colonial project, while at the same time practising reflexivity about their operations and the epistemological limits of colonial archives. Of course, they have not gone down the same road *en bloc*, and some fault lines and unresolved issues mark the field of imperial and colonial history. There are 'new imperial historians' on the one hand—those historians of empire who have embraced the methods from literary studies and generally operate within a Saïdian framework, but who still share the historian's occupation with source material—and scholars in postcolonial studies, on the other hand, who may be more on the theorizing end of the spectrum. Still, these differences are best qualified as a 'family quarrel,' writes Durba Ghosh in an overview of the field. 'These battles within the imperial turn,' she explains, 'are largely battles within a shared political project—anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism—with disagreements about the value of different disciplinary methodologies.'²

¹ Stoler and Cooper 1997, 9.

² Ghosh 2012, 774; The designation 'quarrelsome family' originally comes from Howe 2006. As Ghosh rightly points out, there are also those who obviously do not share the same project, and thus the 'family metaphor' only applies to a sub-set of historians of empire. Those taking part in a decidedly different project most prominently include Ferguson 2003 and Black 2019.

So where is this family heading? If there is any recent historiographical trend, Ghosh says it's a reconciliation of the empiricist and postcolonial 'family branches' of imperial history. The resulting 'archival turn' is a combination of thorough archival research with a 'postcolonial way of reading'.³ The turn to archives and meticulous source reading is, in other words, by no means a simple return to 'facts' of the sort that historians with a dislike for theory would like to see.⁴ That does not mean, however, that an 'end of historiography' has been reached, or even that the central problematic of postcolonial studies has been solved. Archives might be a terrific inroad to the 'pliable coordinates of what constituted colonial common sense', as Ann Stoler puts in *Along the Archival Grain* (2009), but subaltern voices are harder to discern than colonial common sense. Stoler concedes as much, by writing that 'subalterns "speak" throughout the European accounts only in muted reference, clipped words, distorted speech'.⁵ Such voices are hard to read, and the question is whether the 'archival turn' is not a setback in this regard. The recurrent complaint that the voices of the colonized are absent in colonial historiography seems to suggest so.⁶ Likewise, it might not be a coincidence that many studies that do have a clear anticolonial perspective tend to be studies that read not so much as close readings of the archive, but as intellectual histories of anticolonial resistance and leadership, of which Priyamvada Gopal's *Insurgent Empire* (2019) is a prime example.⁷

A second unresolved issue in the historiography of empire is the question of the often applied 'national' frameworks. Many authors have noted that 'imperialism', as a phenomenon and as an ideology, is anything but tied to particular nations, and that the colonial expansion of European powers and the formalization of their empires in the nineteenth century bear something distinctively European.⁸ Writing histories that focus on one empire or colonizing nation 'reinforces historiographic biases in national imperial histories,' is how Susan Legêne puts it in a critique of histories that still have a national focus.⁹

3 See for instance Schrikker 2019.

4 Ghosh 2012, 792–793.

5 Stoler 2009, 186.

6 Raben 2019, 225.

7 Gopal 2019; One book that has it both ways might be Sinha 2016, but here one could argue whether her approach would work on different subjects than the fight against slavery.

8 Legêne 2003, 560; Raben 2013, 23; Buettner 2016, 14.

9 Legêne 2017. Legêne's article is part of a forum issue following on a conference on the intellectual history of the Dutch Empire. The proceedings of that conference have been published in the Koekkoek, Richard, and Weststeijn 2019.

1 An Oceanic View

This essay examines the question above—‘where is this family heading?’—by assessing Kris Alexanderson’s *Subversive Seas: Anticolonial Networks across the Twentieth-Century Dutch Empire* (2019), a book that bursts with historiographical awareness, and which can therefore serve as a test case for directions at the historiographical crossroads we currently face. Alexanderson’s book is a study of the maritime world of the modern Dutch empire, and more specifically into the shipping lines that connected colonial Indonesia with the Middle East, the Netherlands, and East Asia. In six chapters, divided in a section ‘at sea’ and one ‘in port’, she sketches the diverse worlds of Dutch first-time travellers to the East, of Indonesian Hajji travelling to Mecca, of Indonesian students heading for Port Said and Cairo, and the diverse traffic between Japan, China and Indonesia. The steamers connecting all those places were floating microcosms of empire, Alexanderson claims. They provide a lens on the way Dutch colonial authorities, mostly in accordance with the shipping companies, attempted to have total control over maritime transport and, by extension, over the territory they governed. Crucially, they also provide a lens on the ways in which the authorities failed to do this, and on the ways colonial subjects subverted colonial interests.¹⁰

The oceanic perspective is a cure to many ills, Alexanderson claims in her book. ‘Approaching empire from a maritime viewpoint,’ she writes, ‘relegates the European metropole to one of many nodal points along global maritime networks, helping provincialize metropolitan power and highlight the “trans-colonial links” between peripheries.’¹¹ Ocean space, in other words, is the missing link between metropole and colony that renders them both as equally important. Whether there are indeed ‘fundamental differences between terrestrial and oceanic characteristics particular to the interwar Dutch empire’ remains to be seen—beyond the obvious differences in actual material substance, it might seem that Alexanderson overstates her case. Ultimately, it is the similarities, not the fundamental differences, between those spaces that make steam liners and their passengers of interest. They are a cross section—sometimes it seems hard to avoid the word microcosm—of empire.

Centre stage in Kris Alexanderson’s book are the Dutch shipping lines that traversed the seas between Europe, the Dutch East Indies and East Asia during modern colonial times. Building upon the work of scholars like Joep à Campo and Eric Tagliacozzo, she argues that these shipping lines were private

¹⁰ Alexanderson 2019, 20–28.

¹¹ Alexanderson 2019, 2.

companies, but in practice functioned as agents of empire.¹² This entanglement of interests becomes most obvious in the third chapter of her book, in which Alexanderson contends that the journey from Europe to the Dutch East Indies was a moment for freshly trained colonial civil servants to learn the more informal ways of empire. These ways included racial and class solidarity between Europeans, the Othering of non-Europeans, and the master-servant relationship that colonials were supposed to cultivate. 'Passengers could practice some Malay commands', Alexanderson writes, pointing out that the SMN (*Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland*) would even include a list of Malay commands in the booklets that were handed out to their passengers. The steamship companies prided themselves on employing 'courteous, efficient and unobtrusive' personnel of Javanese ethnicity, a practice that confirmed the ideal colonial picture of racialized hierarchies.¹³

In one section of *Subversive Seas*, Alexanderson vividly describes the scene of staged, 'authentic' displays of villager life in Bali, which was performed for an audience of tourists travelling the Dutch East Indies by ship. Tourists would see volcanos and waterfalls, visit markets where native craft work could be purchased, and be received with songs, dances and recitals by local townspeople. Such scenes presented a version of colonial life 'divorced from the realities of the colonial world'. In fact, when scenes struck the tourist audience as too civilized, instructions to collect more 'wild men' for the next stop were sent out.¹⁴ Such staged performance was as close as situations could get to enacting the fantasies of imperial ideology, perhaps matched by colonial expositions and museums in metropolitan Europe, and, indeed, by the heavily regulated life on board of the steamers that feature in *Subversive Seas*.

What we know from studies of colonial expositions—perhaps the most-studied microcosm of empire—is that cracks in the display of imperial fantasies easily showed. The 'illusion of veracity' was often hard to sustain, and something close to it was only ever achieved for a small minority of honoured guests of presidential rank.¹⁵ This is no different for the 'colonial classrooms' that the steam liners purportedly were, as Alexanderson demonstrates when she discusses what must be one of the best sources to reconstruct everyday annoyances, namely the official complaints the shipping companies received from their guests. Some complaints pertained to crossing the imagined colour line, such as the passenger who lamented that 'half castes swarmed over every

12 Campo 2002, Tagliacozzo 2005 and Tagliacozzo 2009.

13 Alexanderson 2019, 108–109.

14 Alexanderson 2019, 129.

15 Fletcher 1999, 143; For other studies on imperial expositions, see Bloembergen 2006, Geppert 2010 and Deyasi 2005.

promenade deck and in every saloon'.¹⁶ Others addressed the perceived transgressions of Javanese crewmembers, which ranged from 'refusal to remove a tea tray' to 'fooling an elderly lady who spoke poor Malay' by calling her fried eggs (*mata sapi*) and dead cow (*sapi mati*) instead.¹⁷ Both instances were seen as disturbances of the carefully crafted image of colonial society that the decks and promenades of the steam liners had to convey, with a neat colour line and attentive but docile indigenous servants.

Bursts in the colonizer's worldview appeared even more readily in other places. Chinese agency, even in instances where it was hardly anticolonial and merely guided by commercial interests, was met with indignation from the shipping companies. The Chinese 'middlemen' that booked passengers on the *Java China Japan Lijn*, and which gave them some leverage over the shipping companies, were perceived as annoying meddlers. To Chinese passengers they were the opposite of annoying, as they guaranteed some protection against indifferent if not hostile colonial authorities, for instance when it came to successfully navigating immigration regulations. The obstinacy on the part of the shipping companies to see that these booking agents provided their customers with a form of protection against an indifferent and hostile colonial government reveals a colonial mentality of the sort that was nurtured in the 'colonial classroom' on deck we saw above, but which was hard to sustain in port or elsewhere ashore.¹⁸ Similarly, Japanese shipping competition in the 1930s was portrayed as 'Japanese infiltration', and Japanese nationals residing in the Dutch East Indies were suspected of 'impudent efforts to estrange local subjects from their government.' Here, the Dutch estimation that Japan would see 'the loyalty of the native population' as the Dutch colonizer's primary weak-spot at least betrayed some sense of realism.¹⁹

2 The Archival Grain

While these examples from *Subversive Seas* predominantly centred around the preoccupations of the shipping companies, and by extension of the colonial regime, there is a second and more ambitious subject in Alexanderson's book, namely that of 'anticolonial networks'. In the first chapter, on the shipping lines that transported pilgrims from colonial Indonesia to Jeddah (after which,

¹⁶ Alexanderson 2019, 108.

¹⁷ Alexanderson 2019, 112.

¹⁸ Alexanderson 2019, 87–97.

¹⁹ Alexanderson 2019, 243–244.

of course, Mecca would be the destination), we find only a limited number of such anticolonial voices. The hajj pilgrims come to the fore as a destitute mass, whose frequent inability to finance their return fares worked to the increasing exasperation of the shipping companies, who, under pressure from the authorities, were to transport Indonesian pilgrims home against reduced fares.

The portrayal of pilgrims as a destitute mass is, of course, an image conveyed by archival sources from the shipping lines. It is a classic problem of how to read the archival grain when only a decidedly colonial perspective is offered by the archive in question. Equally classic solutions to that problem—for instance by including hajji memoirs, as Eric Tagliacozzo does in *The Longest Journey* (2013)—are not sought in *Subversive Seas*.²⁰ The absence of such voices becomes more of a challenge when the focus shifts from the mass of hajj travellers to the anticolonial, pan-Islamic and communist movements that held sway in the Middle East, and whose influence on Indonesian hajji the Dutch colonial authorities feared. The 1922 Pilgrims Ordinance was meant to guarantee health and safety during travels to the Middle East, but, more importantly, aimed to assuage the colonial authorities' anxieties about 'the Arab threat' in the form of 'arrogant and insolent behaviour' of Arab middlemen.²¹

Due to her source base, Alexanderson only succeeds in animating anticolonial resistance in a limited way, namely at the rare occasions when collective organization transformed a mass of colonial subjects into one, powerful antagonist. In the first chapter on hajj shipping, this happens when Kongsí Tiga, the joint venture of Dutch shipping lines that monopolized the fares from the Dutch East Indies to Jeddah, was challenged by a Muslim initiative. The Islamic organization Muhammadiyah started organizing hajj transport in 1930 under the name *Penoeloeng Hadji* (Hajji Helper). The promise of decreasing ticket prices and increasing comfort on board might have been good selling points already, but what really struck a nerve was the anticolonial fervour that self-organized shipping inspired. It was, in Alexanderson's words, 'an act of nationalist autonomy'.²² That *Penoeloeng Hadji* did not succeed has to be ascribed, in its entirety, to the joint efforts of Kongsí Tiga and the colonial authorities against it, who 'obstructed *Penoeloeng Hadji* in order to safeguard the Dutch shipping monopoly and, more broadly, to preserve the Dutch empire's omnipotence.'²³

20 Tagliacozzo 2013, 251–270.

21 Alexanderson 2019, 43.

22 Alexanderson 2019, 62–70.

23 Alexanderson 2019, 70.

3 Omnipotent Empire

The Dutch empire was not, in fact, omnipotent. While colonial authorities might have tried to uphold that image, and, as we saw in the case of Penoe-loeng Hadji, might have backed that claim up with demonstrations of hard-hitting imperial power, there were always limits and challenges to that power. The fantasy of complete imperial omnipotence was therefore easy to puncture, and particularly at sea, as many trans imperial travellers have noted. 'A remarkable feeling creeps up to you when entering one of these ships', mused the early Indonesian nationalist Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo, for instance, about his exile voyage to the Netherlands, 'why was it them that achieved this, and not us?' His voyage over the oceans proved to be his moment of epiphany, a *demasqué* for the civilization of his colonial overlords. In the smoking salon, Tjipto noted printed warning signs for cheating during card games (notably in German, against *falschspielen*), which led him to mock that 'this is the West, which in our land prides itself for its civilization, but here exposes itself in *profond négligé*.'²⁴

It is important to keep in mind that voices like Tjipto's were in fact not as isolated as the setting of a lone ship on the ocean would suggest. 'Asian, African and American men and women have travelled to the Netherlands,' Remco Raben reminds us, 'and have taken part in the intellectual formation of empire and the resistance to it.'²⁵ It is therefore unfortunate that Alexanderson bases herself primarily on sources from colonial authorities, and that voices of dissent only make it to the pages when they have happened to end up in the archives of the shipping lines or the Dutch consulate in Jeddah, like the anonymous Indonesian journalist who saw the Muslim-organized Hajj shipping as a way out of perennial debt to foreigners.²⁶

In her aforementioned historiographical overview, Durba Ghosh made a distinction between current forms of imperial history. On the one hand, there are global histories of the modern world that have tried to 'decentre empire' in their grand narratives. On the other hand, there are transnational and trans-imperial histories that may have a distinctively microhistorical approach, but somehow 're-centre empire' by demonstrating how empire was a distinctive force (though not the only one) in the lives and events they choose to bring to

²⁴ Tjipto 1913.

²⁵ Raben 2019, 225.

²⁶ Alexanderson 2019, 64.

the fore.²⁷ Interestingly, Alexanderson doesn't easily fit either category. Ostensibly, she has much more in common with other historians who offer trans-imperial crosscuts, and *Subversive Seas* decidedly does not have the pretence of offering a grand narrative of the modern world and the role of imperialism in it.

The modernizing pretensions of colonial authorities are, in the end, more important to Alexanderson's book than the anticolonial networks from the subtitle of her book. While she pays attention to the anticolonial voices in the Middle East, most notably in Cairo, we only occasionally get a glimpse of who the Indonesians in these circles were—only the later nationalist Sutomo receives a brief mention. Instead, the narrative is that of Dutch officials and their attempts to stop the 'influx of inflammatory magazines' and dissuade Indonesian students from travelling to Cairo.²⁸ Ultimately, this reveals the limits to the possibility of reconstructing anticolonial voices and practices with colonial source material.

While this focus on colonial authorities does not fit easily with one side of Ghosh's historiographical divide, it does something else. The modernist narrative is deconstructed from within, as Alexanderson convincingly shows how the modern bureaucracy of empire was, in fact, concerned with what we could name 'petty hegemony': equally concerned with the trappings of power as with actually exercising it. Moreover, she demonstrates that colonial bureaucracy was fundamentally unable to grapple with perspectives other than its own. The most important accomplishment of *Subversive Seas* is that it shows how frictions between an obstinate colonial worldview and anticolonial resistance looked like in the practice of everyday life. The maritime world is a convenient crosscut of the imperial world at large—perhaps not one with unique 'transformative possibilities', as Alexanderson claims, but surely one that shows the impotence of empire.

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27 Ghosh 2012, 782. The prime examples of global histories that 'decenter empire' are Bayly 2004 and Burbank and Cooper 2011. 'Re-centering' empire are Bose 2009 and Anderson 2004.

28 Alexanderson 2019, 138–149.

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