

Fenneke Sysling

Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia. Singapore: NUS Press, 2016, vii + 305 pp. ISBN 9789814722070. Price: SGD 42.00 (paperback).

Within the history of the human sciences, a growing body of work has emerged on the various applications of racial science to inhabitants of Europe's colonial territories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Recent monographs in this vein include Sandra Khor Manickam's *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya* (2015), Ricardo Roque's *Headhunting and Colonialism: Anthropology and the Circulation of Human Skulls in the Portuguese Empire, 1870–1930* (2010), and Bernhard C. Schär's *Tropenliebe: Schweizer Naturforscher und niederländischer Imperialismus in Südostasien um 1900* (2015). These authors examine in detail the making and circulation of racial knowledge about colonized peoples within a specific territorial and language context, drawing on their findings to outline wider trends and transnational connections. Fenneke Sysling's study of racial science in the Netherlands Indies is a notable addition to this body of work.

Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia is divided into two main parts, each comprising three chapters. The first part examines various methods used by physical anthropologists to assemble supposedly 'objective' data for analysis. Chapter 1 focuses on the collection of human remains, Chapter 2 on anthropometrical measurements, and Chapter 3 on photography and plaster casting. In each case, Sysling considers related themes: the impacts of knowledge-making practices on the lives of the research subjects, the processes of negotiation and coercion involved, the nature of relationships between physical anthropologists and the colonial state, and the ways in which different research strategies 'were successful, thwarted or balanced with other methods' (p. 22).

In the second part, Sysling turns to the careers of individual anthropologists, using their experiences to shed light on broader questions. Chapter 4 deals with Herman ten Kate's attempts to identify a racial boundary line between Malays and Papuans in the Timor Archipelago. Chapter 5 analyses J.P. Kleweg de Zwaan's work on human diversity in the Dutch Indies. In Chapter 6, we are introduced to the 'pygmy question' through Hendrik Bijlmer's travels to New Guinea's central mountain range. Although these three anthropologists were preoccupied with quite different questions, Sysling's analysis of their work reveals important similarities, most notably concerning the disruptive impact of experiences in the field on their expectations and research plans.

Sysling's analysis of racial science as it was practiced in the Netherlands Indies reveals striking parallels with developments in other imperial contexts. For example, Ten Kate's argument that fieldwork findings were superior to the results of armchair or laboratory work chimes with my own knowledge of strategies used by German traveller-naturalists to assert their authority in anthropological debates. Bijlmer's attempt, in collaboration with Dutch environmentalists, to establish a reserve for the protection of 'native tribes and their primitive culture' in the New Guinea highlands recalls Schär's description of the Sarasin cousins' endeavors to preserve both nature and 'primitive' peoples in Switzerland from extinction (p. 169). However, Sysling also emphasizes important differences. Most notably, physical anthropology flourished considerably later in the Netherlands than in other European countries. Unlike in Britain and Belgium, where the same discipline had experienced its heyday in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and was beginning to decline after 1900, Dutch anthropology 'was only getting started at the turn of the century' and persisted into the 1960s (p. 134). The fact that a member of the last Dutch expedition to New Guinea was still alive to be interviewed in 2009 is a startling reminder of how small a distance there is between us and this aspect of the past.

A further reminder is Sysling's sobering statement that 'thousands of objects—human remains, photographs, plaster casts [...] remain as the heritage of science and colonialism' in 'institutes and collections that have outlived the colonial era', including the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Anatomical Museum in Leiden (p. 180). In the context of movements worldwide to repatriate indigenous ancestral remains, secret/sacred objects, and cultural property, Sysling's careful provenance work is of considerable importance. Her detailed tracing of the biographies of individual objects is valuable; so too is her explication of the webs of patronage and collegiality connecting Dutch collectors and institutions with their counterparts in other countries. As skulls, plaster casts and other items considered to be of scientific value often passed through multiple hands, in-depth knowledge of such connections is of crucial importance if repatriation efforts are to succeed. This aspect of Sysling's work is potentially relevant well beyond the Netherlands, and she is right to draw attention to the significance of these objects' histories, 'fraught as they are with violence and epistemological friction', in any future decisions about 'their place in museums or elsewhere' (p. 180).

Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia is a readable introduction to the practice of physical anthropology and related sciences in the Netherlands Indies, and achieves an effective balance between detailed studies of individual practitioners and consideration of broader themes. It will be

of particular interest to historians of science and technology, students of imperialism, provenance researchers, and all those in the Dutch and Indonesian communities who wish to know more about their shared past.

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