During the final debate at the conference ‘Free Access to the Past’ a comparison question arose about national historiography. Could parallels be drawn between the nineteenth-century debate on national culture and history in the then new nations of Europe, on the one hand, and the twentieth century discussions on this same topic in the new post-colonial states of the South, on the other? While introducing the forum discussion on the subject I argued that maybe we should not even wish to make such comparisons. Looking for parallels between nineteenth century debates on the history of the national states in the ‘old’ Europe and current discussions on that topic in the ‘young’ nation states of the South, implies an equation of developments ‘in the past, in Europe’ with ‘now, elsewhere’. Parallels such as these have a colonial connotation; in the past they were often drawn against a colonial backdrop. Besides, we cannot ask for such a comparison in the present-day context, if only because of the deep penetration of colonial processes of citizenship and nation building into the relations that exist in the young post-colonial nation states relative to their national past. Colonial history is present in many respects, and it has a major impact on the historical understanding of national communities. V.S. Naipaul, descendent of indentured labourers recruited in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the British-Indian colonial era, described his own feelings about this in the national context of Trinidad as ‘…the feeling of having entered the cinema long after the film had started’.1

Of course making international comparisons is indeed important, but then the ‘time frames’ within which the comparison is being made should match. This is why I will be making a dual comparison here, aimed at topical discussions on present-day citizenship and the significance of colonial history, and at the impact on these contemporary discussions, of early twentieth century conceptualisation processes

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concerning the nation as an imagined community. My two examples have to do with the Netherlands/Indonesia and with France/West-Africa. The first example (the ‘Impressed Images’ from the title of this piece) is about the literal impression of the colonial drive as a national drive with which people could identify from the standpoint of the Netherlands coloniser; the second (the ‘Expressed Experiences’ from the title) is about the symbolic expression of the actual participation of African colonial subjects in current French historical discourse.

Just like England, for instance, the Netherlands and France were European nations whose imperialistic political practices overseas were part of the process of shaping the state and building the nation, even though they would sooner or later lose these colonies. As a result, in the development of these European nations ‘Empire’ was not just about ‘the West and the Rest’, about relations and conceptualisation processes between the West and societies elsewhere in the world. It was, perhaps first and foremost, about the relations that the Europeans developed with their ‘own’ imagined communities overseas. If we were to project Peter Fritzsche’s concept of time-zones (elsewhere in this publication) somewhat wider on the map of the world, we would then see—in the context of the imperialistic nation building of the nineteenth and early twentieth century—the emergence of imagined communities of transnational citizens with a variety of ties between the West and its ‘own Westerners, elsewhere’. Consider the relationships of people from within Europe with ‘their’ settlers in the settler colonies where indigenous people became marginalized; the increasing reciprocity and gradually changing balance of power in the relationships between Europe and the United States; or the completely different relationships with those colonial societies where the colonising Europeans were a minority who based their rule on coercion and

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2 This contribution is a thoroughly revised version of my inaugural lecture on 30 January 2009 as Professor of Political History at the VU University, Amsterdam. (Legêne 2009) I thank Ninette de Zylva for translation and editing.