

'The Javanese is Soft and Docile.' Deconstructing Masculinities in Ethnography about the Netherlands Indies

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Aan Java's strand verdrongen zich de volken;
Steeds daagden nieuwe meesters over 't meer;
Zij volgden op elkaar, gelijk aan 't zwerk der wolken;
De telg des lands alleen was nooit zijn heer.¹

This quote served as the motto to the 1907 book *Java. Geographisch, Ethnologisch, Historisch, door Prof. P.J. Veth. Vierde Deel: Ethnographie*, and it is illustrative of the discourse about power, legitimacy and colonialism that is displayed throughout this work. However discordant a quote from the beginning of the twentieth century may come across in a journal dedicated to second-wave feminism, it is not out of place here. As will become evident from the next few pages, second-wave feminism was not only a social movement, but also an intellectual one that gave rise to academic developments that are still highly relevant today. As such, it provides historians of gender and colonialism with methodological tools. With the help of these approaches, I will turn to questions of gender in a specific Dutch ethnographic text about the Netherlands Indies, and take apart the notions of masculinity and colonial power relations that constitute it. As a case study I will use the aforementioned ethnographical work about the island of Java to demonstrate that the portrayal of native masculinity in this work can be interpreted as a legitimization of colonial power.

The quote above, provides us with a small glimpse into Dutch colonial culture around the turn of the twentieth century. Here, Java is

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¹ J.F. Snelleman and J.F. Niermeyer ed., *Java. Geographisch, Ethnologisch, Historisch, door Prof. P.J. Veth. Vierde Deel, Ethnographie* (Haarlem 1907) 1. Translation by the author: 'On Java's beach, the people's crowded / Time after time new masters turned up over the waters / They succeeded one another, like the clouds in the skies / Only the child of the land never was its lord.'

presented as an island that was never reigned by its native population. Texts like these may not seem highly relevant when it comes to analyzing colonial power. Cultural ideas are easily overseen in the greater colonial context of economic exploitation and military action. I, however, want to argue that exactly cultural notions like these are crucial if we want to arrive at a deeper understanding of Dutch colonialism in Southeast-Asia and the ideologies on which it was based. In this context, gender analysis can play a significant role.

Before I turn to my case study, it is useful to devote a few more words to second-wave feminism's influence on the way historians work. The poststructuralist method that is used for analyzing *Java* in this article is linked to social emancipation movements. After this method has been explained, a brief overview of the relevant historiography will be given, and this will be followed by a close reading of my main source. The final section of this paper can be read as an encouragement for further research, and as a critical caveat to scholars writing about gender and colonialism. It will become more than clear that gender and power are very slippery notions.

Feminism and postcolonialism

Thematically and methodologically, this article is inspired by feminist and postcolonial theory. The foundations for both fields were laid in the late nineteen-sixties and the nineteen-seventies, and not coincidentally, this coincided with the heyday of second-wave feminism. This movement urged a generation of people to think about what it meant to be a woman, and its spirit trickled down into the academic world. Until then, women were usually disregarded by scholars because historically, they had often been resigned to the private domain of the family and the home. As historical writings tended to focus on economic and political activities, women's experiences had often been erased, along with the experiences of other non-elite groups, such as workers and people of color. The feminist credo 'the personal is political' inspired historians to look into new sources, such as women's autobiographical writings, and to take up new themes that were previously considered irrelevant. In the first phase of feminist history writing, the focus was simply on adding women's voices to the existing historical work. Later on, as historians began to question if gender identities could even be taken for granted in historically and culturally diverse

contexts, they also turned to a more detailed analysis of the symbolic meanings of gender.

In 1986 the American historian Joan Scott published an article that has become a classic of gender history. Even though this article was written some time after the second wave, it gives an excellent overview of the development of feminist writing in the humanities. The main point of the article is as thought-provoking today as it was almost thirty years ago. Scott calls for a historicization of the category of gender. This means that she urges historians to be sensitive to the ways in which its meaning has evolved through the ages. According to her, gender functions on two different levels. It is not only constitutive of social relationships, that are to a large extent based on perceived differences between the sexes, but it is also a 'primary way of signifying notions of power'. Cultural symbols, norms and identities are defined by gender. Historians need to disrupt the idea of a fixed gender order that always is, was and will be by paying attention to the ways in which these meanings were constituted.²

Gender, of course, is not the only category that produces notions of difference between people and regulates the distribution of power. Under the influence of Marxism, 'class' as a category has been a part of feminist gender analysis from the nineteen-seventies onwards, and 'race', too, came increasingly into scope of historians. This development was connected to anti-colonial struggles. Just as feminists, anti-colonial activists needed tools to challenge dominant ideas about history, culture and representation. And both groups needed to find new ways to look at the cultural effects of oppressing systems.³ Both postcolonial and feminist theory, then, are excellent examples of intellectual currents that cannot be seen in isolation from social movements.

My reading of *Java* is heavily influenced by the founding text of postcolonialism, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In this work, Said firmly established that racial and cultural stereotypes formed an underlying discourse that was essential for the justification of colonial power. His influence on the research about 'the systematic thinking about the differences between East and West or between white people and people of

² J. Scott, 'Gender, a Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review* 91.5 (1986) 1053-1075: 1067-1068.

³ A. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York, NY 2005) 26, 39-40.

color'⁴ can hardly be overestimated. Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci and Michael Foucault, Said famously coined the term 'orientalism' for the ways in which 'the West' produced an enormous amount of knowledge about 'the East' from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. According to Said, orientalist discourse fashioned European governments as civilized and rational, whereas the East was associated with repression and despotism. Eastern people were seen as irrational, sensual, child-like, weak, lazy and decadent.⁵

This article's method operates on the crossroads between feminism and postcolonialism. Joan Scott has called upon historians to deconstruct gender, 'displacing its hierarchical constructions, rather than accepting it as real or self-evident or in the nature of things'.⁶ These ideas about deconstruction find their origin in the work of Jacques Derrida, and my analysis of race and gender in Veth's *Java* will take on a Derridean post-structuralist approach. This method allows the historian to problematize the structures in a text. It developed from structuralism, a linguistic theory that holds that the underlying structure of language is based on binary oppositions in a hierarchical relationship. As a consequence, words are always ideologically charged.⁷ Especially since the linguistic turn of the nineteen-seventies, structuralism has had a large influence on the historical field, but its method is problematic for several reasons. The main objection to structuralism is that the meaning of signs is not fixed, but constantly moving.⁸ Derrida's post-structuralism does not deny that there are structures in a text, but calls for them to be critically examined.⁹ We should not see *Java* as a straightforward text, but zoom in on the complexity of the constituting concepts in order to discover unexpected aspects of colonial power relations. Of course, it is no coincidence that post-structuralism developed at a time when feminist and postcolonial theories were making headway. Post-structuralism provided postcolonial and feminist scholars with a method that shared their suspicion of established truths, and that

⁴ F. Gouda, 'Gender en etniciteit, gisteren en vandaag' in: E. Geudeker ed., *Jaarboek voor vrouwengeschiedenis. Gemengde gevoelens. Gender, etniciteit en (post)kolonialisme* (Amsterdam 2007) 7-32: 19.

⁵ E.W. Said, *Orientalism* (London 1978) 32-40.

⁶ Scott, 'Gender', 1066.

⁷ C.G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Harlow 2005) 36.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 94-95.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 80.

questioned the central place of the (usually white, male) human subject.¹⁰ Ethnographical writings such as *Java* represent a system of colonial knowledge production about ‘the Other’ that can easily be connected to postcolonial theory. Therefore, poststructuralist gender analysis is very apt for analyzing these texts.



Afb. 1: Pakoe Bowono X, soesoehoenan of Surakarta, and W. De Vogel, resident of Surakarta (1897) (KITLV Collection).

Colonial masculinities

Even though Said does not explicitly link orientalist knowledge production to gender, there is a fruitful body of literature that does. One of the first works to consider the meaning of masculinity in this context was Mrinalini Sinha’s *Colonial Masculinity*. Sinha shows that stereotypical ideas about the ‘effeminacy’ of Bengali men and the ‘manliness’ of Englishmen were crucial factors in the political culture of the British Raj.¹¹ Masculinity served as a touchstone for the distribution of colonial power. Since the publication of

¹⁰ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 39-40.

¹¹ M. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity. The ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali’ in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester 1995) 33-99.

Colonial Masculinity, masculinity studies have found a place in the historiography about the British Empire. For the Netherlands Indies, however, there has not been a lot of follow-up, with the exception of the work of Frances Gouda. She has shown that Dutch colonizers, too, used notions of their superior Western masculinity to naturalize their domination over so-called 'weaker' Asian peoples. The 'symbolic effeminacy' of Indonesian men was invoked, for example, in the relationship between native rulers and Dutch officials. Gouda refers to pictures in which Dutchmen posed next to traditionally dressed sultans and residents, and that symbolized an alliance of dependence. She even suggests that these photographs invoke the image of a marriage, depicting the Indonesian rulers as effeminate partners of the Dutch.¹² But this was not the only way in which the rhetoric of masculinity formed a central building block of colonial discourse. Just as in India, the colonizers fashioned other groups as extremely and even dangerously masculine. Moluccan men, for example, were seen as reliable fighters, and Dutch opinion makers sometimes unwillingly admired the masculinity of Acehnese men that resisted Dutch domination.¹³

The important point here is that colonial masculinity and effeminacy must not all too easily be regarded as univocal categories. It is certainly true that a binary gender order was deeply rooted in Western culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this scheme, men and women were seen as complementary to one another. This meant, for example, that men were seen as active and rational, whereas femininity was associated with passivity and emotionality.¹⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, the increasing distinction between the 'male' public space and 'female' private sphere added up to this.¹⁵ But even though certain forms of masculinity were certainly higher valued than others, ideas about what made a man or a woman were not completely static. Emotionality and altruism, for example, were usually seen as female characteristics, but in some cases, they could also be deemed desirable for men.¹⁶ Therefore, it is better to speak of

¹² F. Gouda, 'Beelden van (on)mannelijkheid in de koloniale cultuur van Nederlands-Indië, 1900-1949', *Sociologie* 3.1 (2007) 64-80: 67.

¹³ Ibidem, 70-71.

¹⁴ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Oxford 1995) 186-191.

¹⁵ Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, 35.

¹⁶ H. te Velde, 'Viriliteit en opoffering. "Mannelijkheid" in het publieke debat van het *fin-de-siècle*', *Groniek* (1996) 279-291: 285-287.

‘masculinities’ in the plural when analyzing ideals of manhood. By doing so, it is also possible to be more attentive to different notions of regionality, class and ethnicity that are invoked in *Java*.

Veth’s *Java*: a critical analysis

The 1907 edition of P.J. Veth’s *Java* was written at a time and a place that highly valued ethnographical knowledge about colonized peoples. The Dutch certainly weren’t unique in their description of native colonized peoples, but Netherlands Indies ethnology had a distinctively practical character. Knowledge of *adat* – the customs and habits – of the many different Indonesian ethnical groups was not only seen as a prerequisite for the continuation of colonial power, but as a good alternative to the use of military force, as well.¹⁷ From 1842 onwards, when the first initiatives for colonial officials’ schooling were taken, a certain knowledge of *adat* and cultural institutions became of major importance. It is for good reason that Fasseur calls this education ‘the mirror, in which the Dutch colonial mentality of the time was reflected’.¹⁸ Ethnography developed so strongly that the Leiden-based indologist J.C. Van Eerde boasted in 1927 that no other group of ‘less civilized peoples’ was as intensively studied as the population of the Netherlands-Indies archipelago.¹⁹

One of the most important writers on Java was Pieter Johannes Veth (1814-1895), who Fasseur describes as ‘the famous Indies all-knower’.²⁰ Veth was a typical armchair traveler: he never visited the Netherlands Indies and wrote all his works about the area in Leiden. He acquired his fame mostly as a professor of Indies languages and ethnography at Leiden University.²¹ In the colonial debates of the time, he firmly positioned himself as an adversary of the colonial culture system.²² Veth’s method has

¹⁷ F. Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas. Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies 1900-1942* (Amsterdam 1995) 43-46.

¹⁸ C. Fasseur, *De indologen. Ambtenaren voor de Oost 1825-1950* (Amsterdam 1993) 13-14.

¹⁹ Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas*, 45.

²⁰ Fasseur, *De indologen*, 157.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 201.

²² P. van der Velde, *Een Indische liefde. P.J. Veth (1814-1895) en de inburgering van Nederlands-Indië* (Amsterdam 2000) 146.

been characterized as encyclopedic,²³ and this strongly shows in his magnum opus *Java. Geographisch, Ethnologisch, Historisch*. It was published in three volumes, of which Veth finished the first one in 1875, and the third part seven years later.²⁴ This article examines the second printing that was published in Haarlem in 1907 and edited by J. F. Snelleman and J.F. Niermeyer. In collaboration with a group of experts, the entire text of Veth's *Java* was edited and adapted to more recent findings about the island. Eventually, it was divided into five volumes, of which *Etnographie* is the fourth.

Ethnic groups on the stages of civilization

In my reading of *Java*, I will pay special attention to invocations of gendered characteristics where questions of power are discussed. My main point is that, even though this is not always at the surface of the text, the legitimization of Dutch colonial power in this work depends largely on a disqualification of native masculinity. Javanese men, it is argued, are unfit for self-rule for a number of reasons that are grounded in ideas about race, ethnicity, class and gender. I will illustrate my point with the most poignant examples from the original text. Interestingly, the motto of the book, which was quoted at the beginning of this article, already gives an indication that colonial domination is naturalized in this text. It will become clear that the rest of the text defends the colonial status quo in a similar way, making use of arguments that cleverly strengthen each other to arrive at a closed argumentation.

The first argument against Javanese self-rule that is presented in *Java* is grounded in a racialized depiction of the island population. Throughout the book, the authors continuously compare three ethnic groups: 'actual' (*eigenlijke*) Javanese, Sundanese and Madurese. *Java* mostly focuses on the 'actual Javanese', because, as the writer states, this group is not only the biggest, but the most civilized as well: 'In that curious half-civilization that characterizes Java, they have reached the highest stage.' This level of civilization is read from the quality of their cultural products: 'Their language is the most developed and the most refined. It is with them that

²³ Van der Velde, *Een Indische liefde*, 324.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 224-230.

one practically exclusively finds the remarkable products of literature and arts that Java has to offer.²⁵

Veth and his editors differentiate between various groups of people. They place them on the ‘stages of civilization’, all while defining their own culture as the most developed and advanced. This *Stufentheorie* is a well-known concept from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropology that has its origins in historical writings. The theory implies that every ethnic group goes through a linear development on its way to the highest stage of civilization. The western world was considered to have reached this phase already, whereas other peoples were still in the middle of the lengthy process. This view found a lot of resonance among scientists who were involved with the Netherlands Indies at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it often served as an explanation for the differences between Dutch and indigenous culture.²⁶ For the authors of *Java*, civilization is thus not a given, but something that can develop in the course of time under the influence of various factors.

The first and most important one of the influences that are presented in the book is foreign domination. This was already highlighted in the motto. The difference between Sundanese and Javanese is primarily caused by the ‘elements of Hindu civilization’ that have been of a large influence on the Javanese, but have not affected Sundanese culture at all. The Hindus, who are described as ‘Aryan headmen’,²⁷ apparently brought a higher level of civilization to Java. In the context of nineteenth-century philology, this remark can be easily understood. Hindi was seen as an Indo-European language, and therefore related to European civilization.²⁸ Even though they never exactly specify which group they mean when they refer to ‘Hindus’, it makes sense for Veth and his editors to place these people higher on the stages of civilization. Secondly, the writers focus on livelihood as a defining factor. The Madurese have long lived on a remote island, where they have developed into a people of fishermen and traders, whereas the Javanese ‘worked their fields in peace’.²⁹ We can now sketch the relationship between the constitutive textual elements as follows:

²⁵ Snelleman and Niermeyer, *Java*, 7.

²⁶ Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas*, 118-138.

²⁷ Ibidem, 35.

²⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 99.

²⁹ Snelleman and Niermeyer ed., *Java*, 2.

Half-civilized	Civilized	Civilized
Java		Europe
Javanese	Hindus	Europeans/Dutchmen

Javanese	Madurese	Sundanese
Influenced by Hindus	?	Not influenced by Hindus
Agriculture	Fishing and trade	?
Half-civilized	Uncivilized	Uncivilized

The fact that there is attention for the livelihoods of Javanese and Madurese is of major importance here. In general, agricultural peoples were placed on a higher level of civilization than fishermen or hunters. But earlier in the text, the agricultural qualities of the Javanese are sharply criticized: ‘The Javanese is a farmer, but a poor one (...) who doesn’t make a lot of even his beloved rice culture.’ It is the task of the Dutch to raise up this poorly educated farmer, ‘to teach him his trade in a better way’.³⁰ Again, we see a pattern that occurs throughout the text. Javanese men are quite civilized when it comes to language, culture and art, but this is not their own accomplishment, as foreign invaders imposed this civilization upon them. Their civilization is expressed in their agricultural lifestyle, but they lack the knowledge and skills to make the most of their trade. Every time when proof of Javanese ability is found, this is immediately refuted.

This pattern of disqualification returns whenever the differences between Javanese, Madurese and Sundanese are at play. Later on in the text, this distinction is based on corporal traits. On the one hand, Europeans and ‘[the] population of Java in general’ are compared. The latter group is characterized by ‘(...) a gracious bodily built, that appears from the fine bone structure as well; the limbs are usually lean, the hands and feet small, the limbs exceptionally limber. On the lightness and the fineness of the bones, especially of the Javanese female pelvis, we have already (...) focused, and the rest of the bones are slender and less rough on the surface than is found in strong Europeans’.³¹ Equally relevant is a remark on body hair: ‘The chest and limbs are hardly covered with hair or not hairy at all, just as the genitalia, especially in women; usually, the face is beardless’.

³⁰ Snelleman and Niermeyer ed., *Java*, 28-29.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 34.

Furthermore, the text reads: ‘In general, the people of the Malayan race are short, and their average length is far beneath that of Europeans’.³² So, the relationship between the Javanese and the European can be sketched as follows:

Javanese in the broadest sense	European
Gracious	Strong
Fine	Rough
Short	
Limber	
Slender	
Hardly/not hairy	

Here, we find an indication that the description of Javanese and European men relies heavily on a binary gender order. The terms in which the two groups are described form each other’s opposites: the words that are linked to Javanese can be linked to western female beauty standards. In the description of the Javanese man, it is not about his laboring talents or another aspect that has to do with physical force: rather, this is an aesthetical judgment that places him on the feminine side of the gender spectrum. Terms such as ‘gracious’ and ‘fine’ immediately call to mind associations with femininity and therefore with dependence. The advantage of a relatively high level of civilization is neutralized by this negative judgement.

At this stage in the argumentation, the triple division between the Javanese groups reoccurs:

Javanese	Sundanese	Madurese
Short	Shorter than the Javanese	Just as tall as the Javanese
More slender	Stocky	?
Slim	Muscular	Muscular
More refined	More heavily-built	More heavily-built

Once again, it is interesting to see that the terms in which ‘actual Javanese’ are described seem to be connected with feminine aesthetics. Words like ‘stocky’ and ‘muscler’ have more to do with the assessment of the

³² Snelleman and Niermeyer ed., *Java*, 36.

Sundanese and Madurese in terms of physical strength, instead of beauty. Here, we can see how native masculinities can be subject to multiple, highly varying interpretations, and how a description in terms of virile masculinity can be turned around into a disqualification. Even though Sundanese and Madurese are relatively ‘manly’ compared to the actual Javanese, they still remain less civilized. Their masculine physique is compromised by their uncivilized nature. In the end, all Javanese turn out to be inferior to European men, who are both civilized and built like ‘real men.’

Cruel noblemen and slavish peasants

On pages 39 to 70 of *Java*, the ‘moral and mental qualities’ of the Javanese people are judged, and here as well, Javanese men are excluded from the realm of power on the base of gendered arguments. The long fragment starts with the warning that opinions on the Javanese character vary greatly. This divergence is caused by ‘a sharp battle about the way in which Java should be ruled for its own good and for the good of the mother country (...)’.³³ Without doubt, this refers to the discussion about the culture system and the ethical policy. However, now that the battle has been settled in favor of the ethical policy, more coherence in the judgments has occurred.³⁴

The older texts that are cited in this fragment are almost all very negative about the Javanese and their character. The long quotation of the Dutchman Ryckloff Groens (1656) brims with terms like ‘unbelievably hypocritical’, ‘very volatile’, ‘thief-like’, ‘lazy’ and ‘murderous’; and Valentijn (1726) describes the Javanese as ‘murderous’, ‘faithless’ and ‘cruel’.³⁵ In this fragment two things in particular catch the attention of the reader. In the first place, we are presented with a difference between upper-class and lower-class Javanese, and especially the elite is portrayed negatively. The pattern that we identified earlier in the text returns again: even though the elite is more civilized due to a bigger Hindu influence, they are of terrible character. Even before the authors cite others, they warn the reader for an all too negative outlook on the Javanese population in general: ‘(...) one must remember that (...) many of [the authors cited here] only had the opportunity to get to know the vices of the Courts and the Notables, not

³³ Snelleman and Niermeyer, *Java*, 39.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 41-44.

the good qualities and silent virtues of the simple farmer'.³⁶ The submissiveness of this 'simple man' is repeatedly stressed. He approaches his leaders with 'fear and the deepest humility, that is one of the most eye-catching traits of the Javanese character.'³⁷ The textual elements are presented as follows:

Lower-class Javanese	Upper-class Javanese
Fearful	Cruel
Submissive	
Slavish	
Humble	

It is very important to mention that according to Veth and his editors, these vices do not root in the bad character of the Javanese. Instead, the corrupting rule to which they were subject is pointed out. For centuries, the Javanese have suffered under what is called 'despotism (...) under which the [East Indian] Company had left them' and because of this, the Javanese lost 'the will to work'.³⁸ Of course, the contemporary Dutch rule compares favorably with this. The ordinary Javanese are repeatedly portrayed as dependent and subjugated. A certain professor Poensen, for example, calls the dependence of the Javanese 'a characteristic trait'. Another is 'an awe, bordering on slavishness, for the superior'.³⁹ This 'slavish submission' is primarily caused by 'the immeasurable distance between the aristocracy and the petty man.'⁴⁰ Of all the characteristics that are mentioned, this dependent nature is most heavily emphasized. Javanese are unable to take care of themselves, and they need guidance. Once again, these are characteristics that were usually seen as defining for western women and incompatible with masculinity.

³⁶ Snelleman and Niermeyer, *Java*, 40.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 41.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 45.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 58-59.



Afb. 2: Prof P.J. Veth, portrayed in 1891 or 1892 (KITLV Collection).

The contemporary writers that are cited in the next fragment give a very different image of the Javanese population. The nineteenth-century commentator Van Hoogendorp, for example, describes the Javanese as ‘soft and docile by nature’ and potentially ‘calm and order-loving’ if only they would be ruled by a ‘reasonable government’. He states that there are murders and crimes, but that these, just like the ‘slowness and indifference’ that characterize the Javanese, are caused by a ‘poor political system’. The authors of *Java* remark that most Dutchmen who know the island well, agree with this: ‘It would not cost a lot of trouble to multiply the testimonies in favor of the Javanese manifold. In later times, with the changing political systems, their number has become very large’.⁴¹ All in all, these quotations can be read as a plea for or support of Dutch domination. Only under ‘just’ government, the good qualities of the Javanese can come to the fore; and this government has appeared in the form of Dutch rule. Before, under the ‘despotism’ of their own cruel, unfit leaders – even though the word ‘own’ is hardly appropriate for people that have always lived under foreign domination – the Javanese were badly off.

⁴¹ Snelleman and Niermeyer ed., *Java*, 47-49.

Men in women's skirts

So far, the lower-class Javanese turned out to be judged rather positively, especially since their character has improved greatly since the advent of Dutch colonial rule. But at this point, the authors need one last argument to make colonial domination count as necessary. The Javanese unfitness for self-rule needs to be proven once and for all, by firmly locating native men on the feminine side of the gender divide.

The chapter 'Life in the home and society' goes into the dressing habits of the island population. One of the first things that Veth says about this, is that there is almost no difference between the clothes of the two sexes 'because the men, too, wear women's skirts'.⁴² Even though the native names for this piece of clothing (*sarong*, *kain panjang*) are given later on in the text, Javanese clothing for men and women alike is immediately connected to women's wear. The lack of a sex difference returns several times: it is stated that men and women alike treat their hair with fragrant oils,⁴³ and in a passage about jewelry it is highlighted that men as well as women 'adorn their fingers' with rings.⁴⁴ It is explicitly stressed that on Java, in terms of dress, there is less difference between men and women than is considered normal. These are telling remarks that hark back to the aesthetic judging of the Javanese racialized male body and the feminine traits that were attributed to it. With this last argument, Javanese culture is definitively fashioned as inferior: the Javanese stand outside the natural gender order because the men, with their gracious built, women's skirts and exaggerated care for their appearance, are effeminate. As a consequence, these men could never be fit for self-rule. This last, gendered argument serves to complete the writers' argument. However relatively civilized and potentially virtuous the ordinary Javanese may be, the lack of a sex difference makes Dutch rule indispensable.

An effeminate Javanese?

In the Netherlands Indies, colonial power was not only legitimized with reference to the thundering of canons or the clinking of guilders earned on

⁴² Snelleman and Niermeyer, Java, 348.

⁴³ Ibidem, 358.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 360.

sugar plantations. Ethnographic writings, too, served as the handmaiden of power. This close reading of an authoritative ethnographic work has presented us with a multitude of textual fragments that work together to 'prove' the naturalness of Dutch rule over Java, an island populated with men that were not only used to foreign domination, but also lacked crucial masculine traits such as independence and physical force. The text repeatedly disqualifies Javanese native men of different ethnicities. In this process, European masculinity is put forward as the only civilized, forceful form of manhood that is embodied by the just, rational colonial government. This strategic use of notions of masculinity and effeminacy is illustrative of the way in which gendered arguments were used to back up colonial regimes. In this way, textual events had very real, material consequences for the lives of people living under colonial rule.

Of course, this short analysis of one ethnographic text is not nearly enough to say anything definitive about the place of masculinity in Dutch colonial discourse. But the indications in *Java* certainly call for further investigation of a topic that is, understudied in a field that tends to overlook cultural constructions of power. It should also be noted that in recent years, the Saidian method has been sharply criticized for presenting colonialism as a monolithic discourse that reigns supreme and does not leave room for other interpretations and agency.⁴⁵ The main point of this article, however, has been to demonstrate how historians can still fruitfully employ themes and methods that are connected to second-wave feminism. Without them, the interconnectedness of gender, race and power might forever have lingered in the archives, invisible to the historians' gender-blind eye.

⁴⁵ A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton 2010), passim.