

ENGINEERS OF HAPPY LAND

Technology and Nationalism in a Colony



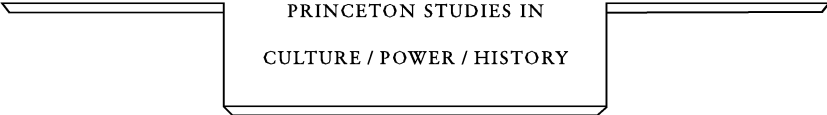
RUDOLF MAŘEK

ENGINEERS OF HAPPY LAND

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ENGINEERS --- OF --- HAPPY LAND

TECHNOLOGY AND NATIONALISM
IN A COLONY

Rudolf Mrázek

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PREFACE

And so it is with our own past. It is a labor in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die.

—Proust, *Swann's Way*¹

THIS BOOK suggests an alternative way to study twentieth-century culture, identity, and nation.

The *place* is the Indonesian archipelago, the home of multiple civilizations, and, through a greater part of the modern era, the principal colony of the Netherlands. The rich carpet of Indonesian ways of life, created by the incessant culture invasions and innumerable combinations of resistance, is one of my reasons for choosing this place for study. The complexity of the invasions of the Dutch way of life into the Indies is the other. In modern memory, there have been few events as momentous as the decline of the superpower Dutch culture of the seventeenth century to the small-country ways of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This decline included the clinging to the Indies possession as the last relic of the past. In the early twentieth century, this epic “loss of identity” inspired one of the boldest and most profound modernist movements in Europe, the Dutch art, literary, philosophical, architectural, and political avant-garde. Few places in the Netherlands were as receptive to it as the Dutch colony in Asia. The Netherlands East Indies is such an alluring place to study, because it appears to exist simultaneously at the farthest reaches of modernity and close to its most dynamic center.

The *time* is late-colonial: the last three-quarters of a century of Dutch rule. I prefer to think of the time period less as a chronology than as, let us say, shifting sands. Only the era’s end—the date the Dutch capitulated to the invading Japanese armies, March 8, 1942—is sharply inscribed in this book. The rest appears as an accumulation, shifting, and running out of culture, identity, and sense of nation. Once we loosen time, I believe, we can better feel and convey the surreal significance of late-colonial duration, and the time of the Indies as a premonition. Often, the sound of hands clapping in Europe—clapping for fascism, clapping for the avant-garde—was heard in the Indies before the hands actually clapped. In the sense of time as well as

place, the Netherlands East Indies was both at the periphery and next to the center of the empire and the world. When we loosen time just a bit, late-colonial culture, identity, and sense of nation emerge as the most revealing reflection of the global.

Technology in the book's title refers to a method more than to a topic. I have chosen technology to cast late-colonial culture, identity, and nation in an unusual light, and to agitate the picture in a less predictable way. People in the Indies, both the Indonesians and the Dutch, felt awkward about new technologies, as we all do, but in a specific late-colonial way. Encountering the "unseemly" technologies, people in the Indies often began to move, speak, and write in a way that broke through—or at least scratched—the otherwise smooth surface of their behavior and language. While the people handled, or were handled by, the new technologies, their time, space, culture, identity, and nation came to feel awry. These moments give us a chance to recognize the culture differently, more nakedly, and, hopefully, more deeply.

Indonesia is extraordinarily rich in extant sources. The archives and libraries in the Netherlands—Leiden, the Hague, or Amsterdam—are meticulously ordered and easy to use. The archives and libraries in Indonesia—Jakarta, Bogor, Bandung, or Medan—are rather messy, unwelcoming, and thus, even more exciting. I read the abundant sources with almost exclusive concern for small, even trivial, technological details, looking for a "material object," in Marcel Proust's words, "the sensation which that material object will give us." In there, Proust believed, and I now do as well, "the past is hidden." The texts of public and private statements of the period—political speeches, letters and diaries, essays on cultural themes, works of art, novels, poetry, photographs, paintings, song lyrics, daily newspaper reports—"giggled," and sometimes opened up, as I searched them for the unseemly technology trivia. In order to keep on "tickling the sources," and to maintain a symmetry, I next tested the contentedly dry technical texts of the period—demographic, communication, architectural, and urban-planning reports, drawings, maps, graphs, and statistics—for their poetry.

The book is divided into six chapters, each dealing with a different type of technology. The introductory chapter looks at the late-colonial sense of touching the ground with one's feet or wheels on trains or cars, as well as roads, velocity, and the conceptualization of moving. The second chapter studies the technology of architecture and urban planning, and the sense of dwelling, sheltering, and hiding. The third inquires into optics and glass, and into looking, seeing, and watching. The fourth considers fashion and the body—machined, standing up, and posing. In the fifth chapter, I turn to telephone, radio, and other communication technologies, and to the culture of listening, making voice, and keeping silent. Finally, as a kind of epilogue, I make explicit the idea of continuity that pervades the whole book, the insistent sense of late-colonial culture overgrowing into the post-colonial period

and the present. It is a chapter on the technology of exile, and on the possibility—or impossibility—of disconnecting oneself.

Some words that appear often in the book need to be explained.

Engineers, to use Karl Marx's words, are "a superior class of workers."² They believe in their language as we all believe in ours. More than the rest of us, however, engineers believe that their language and everything else can be taken apart and reassembled (and taken apart again) for the language's and everything's benefit. Engineers dream and plan as often and intensely as the rest of us. More than the rest of us, however, they believe that there is a calculated sameness between the planning and the dreaming. Engineers, in their essence, remain unchanged when they carry their beliefs to the limits. They merely become more impressive to the rest of us, more tragic, or more dangerous. As they reach the edge, some of them, in the words of one of the most tragic among them, may even declare themselves "engineers of human souls." Of course, there is an engineer in each of us.

Kromoblanda, a more specifically Indies word, is a neologism invented by Hendrik Freerk Tillema—a Dutch pharmacist, wholesale dealer in pure water and whiskey, motor-car enthusiast, city councilor, film pioneer, and, without a formal degree, in his inner self, most of all an engineer—who lived in the colony between 1896 and 1914. *Kromo* was how the Dutch called the natives,³ mostly the Javanese. *Blanda* was how the Javanese and other Indonesians called the Dutch. *Kromoblanda*, as Tillema presented it in a six-volume opus published between 1915 and 1927,⁴ was a dream and a plan—in its sweep comparable to Le Corbusier's *Ville contemporaine*—of the *kromo* and the *blanda* living in a future, well-equipped, modern, happy, and efficient Indies, together.

Nationalism is a word that does not appear often in the book, but that expresses the book's undercurrent. In both its main variants—Dutch and Indonesian—nationalism is the missing hyphen in *Kromo(-)blanda*.

ENGINEERS OF HAPPY LAND



Ferry over the river Progo, Central Java, ca. 1900. On the ferry there are three Europeans with their automobile (KITLV)

ONE

LANGUAGE AS ASPHALT

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products
chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.

It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish
connections everywhere.

—Marx–Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*¹

Bare Feet

IT MAY help, just for a moment, to think, with Bergson, about a landscape in the beginning, as if it were “the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled.”²

On February 13, 1891, an expedition embarked on a route out of Padang Pandjang, a small town in West Sumatra, a point at the edge, a station in the late-colonial Netherlands East Indies beyond which trains could not go. The aim of the expedition was to survey the area yonder for a new railway to Siak, across the island, to its east coast. At the head of the Siak expedition was Dr. Jan Willem IJzerman, the main engineer of the Dutch state railways. He was forty at the time and a renaissance man of sorts. Besides being, possibly, the most influential technician behind building the new Indies railways, he was a well-known amateur archeologist and a member of the archeological society in the princely town of Yogyakarta.³ Toward the end of his life, in 1924, IJzerman, too, had been recognized as the initiator of the first and only technical college in the late-colonial Indies. His bronze bust had been placed in IJzerman Park, near the school campus in Bandung.⁴

On February 13, 1891, at six o'clock in the morning, the IJzerman Siak expedition started up “with a little word *madjoe*,” which meant “forward” in Malay, the lingua franca of the colony. The plan was to walk “from six till four,” every day, from sunrise to two hours before sunset.⁵ In addition to IJzerman and three other Dutchmen, there were about a dozen Javanese servants, twenty Javanese railway workers, and about 120 helpers recruited locally from among the Sumatrans. The expedition carried “trunks, field beds, chairs, imitation-leather sheets for shelters, mats, ammunition, wire, ropes, nails, paraffin, wicks, a photographic camera, and food.”⁶

Dr. IJzerman, as they were on the way, never parted with his pocket re-

2 CHAPTER ONE

volver. He was as happy, or so it seems, as a man in his forties might be: "Here," he wrote, "the saying of Mr. Potter from his famous American novel rings true: '*What is a man without a revolver in Texas?*'"⁷ The men of the IJzerman expedition killed fish for dinner with dynamite cartridges.⁸ Their camp in the jungle was attacked by "bandits."⁹ The sense of the Wild West was heightened by an image of a pioneer's grave. This was, actually, how IJzerman opened his story in the expedition memorial book: "Since the discovery of the Oembilin coal fields by the genius of a mining engineer, W. H. de Greve, in 1868, people started to speak and to write about a desirability to reach the big rivers that flowed as far as into the Straits of Malacca."¹⁰ A large photograph of the engineer Greve's grave in the jungle, "merely a little pile of earth in the shade of a big *tjoebadak* tree," took up the entire title page of the memorial book.¹¹

IJzerman's men, as they walked, came repeatedly upon fresh *sporen*, "tracks" or "footprints," of "elephants, rhinoceros, tapirs, tigers, boars, deer." The footprints were "sharply engraved in the damp clay."¹² Most of the time, it was just footprints the men saw; rarely did they spot an animal itself.¹³ It was, largely, just sensing, prints of animal feet on the thoroughly calm and unruffled surface of earth. Yet in Dutch—the language of the expedition—*sporen* meant both the footprints of the jungle animals the men sensed and the railway tracks they came to build.

In their own account, the Dutchmen in the expedition appeared exposed and their senses seemed bared. The untamed nature through which they passed, too, appeared as if opening itself up, and—if a man could take it—in a sense, friendly:

In the forest, far from inhabited world, deep silence reigned most of the time. There were no monkey colonies to raise echoes with their merry shouting, no flock of songbirds to start their crystal melodies, all the large animals as if were extinct. . . . No mosquito disturbed our rest at night, we did not even have to unpack our mosquito nets. No poisonous snake, no centipede, and no scorpion made our sleeping in the open, under the trees, on the mounds of molding leaves dangerous, no rat gnawed at our rice reserves, cans with our food could be left around opened. . . . The plants were even more innocent, no leaf inflamed our skin, no thorn infected our blood. . . . We could even drink forest water safely.¹⁴

As the men moved, so the memorial book of the expedition describes it, they felt the landscape as kindred and moving with them. The memorial book conveys a sense of fluency between the people and nature. The expedition worked a river, for instance, and the river, thunderously and grandly, streamed past the people as they worked:

Gigantic tree trunks raced with great speed and broke on the rocks that filled the riverbed, in pieces, crushed in pieces the lumber moved on its way to the sea, or,

ebbed off the stream, gathered on the shallow sands . . . there was a majestic calmness further ahead; noiseless, dark-green woods gently blanketed the river banks.¹⁵

The men's language was lush with words, as their days were lush with actions and movements, and their senses lush with sounds, shapes, and scents. Or, to put it less innocently, this was a Baroque-like sameness of man and man's surroundings, in which dreams and man's labor as well as conquest might be supposed to come together. One of the Dutchmen on the expedition, Van Bemmelen, captured another moment in this particular sensing of colonial modernity. As they struggled along one of the untamed rivers, "In my elation, I shouted to [Ijzerman] and urged him to admire a newly appearing splendor on the right bank. 'I look only to the left side,' he shouted back, 'this is where the railway must go.'"¹⁶

They worked the river and the jungle so hard, moved with so much exertion, sensed everything so intensely, that there seemed to be little time and motivation left for landscape mapping, animal stuffing, or, for instance, butterfly pinning:

Initially, it was our intention to check the longitude and latitude of all important spots with the help of chronometer and by astronomical observation, for the remaining assessment patent *boussole* Smalcalder was to be used. But, very soon, it became clear that, given the limited time at our disposal and given our limited forces, we would have to be satisfied with just fleeting measurements made with a simple compass and a tape.

Besides, "The number of containers with alcohol for collecting natural samples, and the quantity of paper for drying and pressing the plant samples, had to be reduced; all other considerations had to be put aside in face of the necessity to carry an amount of rice large enough to feed 300 men for at least 14 days."¹⁷

All the work was done so that the (railway) wheels, in the future, might turn. Yet, for the expedition to move—and to move the landscape as they moved—meant leaving footprints in the damp clay, like a rhinoceros or a boar. To move on, a particular technology of movement was required: "clambering over fallen trees, balancing on their trunks, skidding down, and stumbling through the muddy holes in between."¹⁸

The exertion, the working the landscape and the walking, it seems, was powerful enough to create a credible illusion. It even appeared natural, after such a day of prospecting, when a photograph was taken, that it would take time and effort to distinguish Ijzerman and the other Dutchmen from the Javanese and Sumatran, as the memorial book formulated it, *reisgenooten*, "traveling companions," and *metgezellen*, "companions."¹⁹ A greater part of the illustrations in the memorial book of the expedition, as usual at the time,

4 CHAPTER ONE

were either watercolors or drawings made from photographs. In *An Evening Deliberation*, for instance, a group of men is seen, huddled together. Even the artist who made the drawing did not apparently think it particularly important to retouch the photograph. It is not easy, at all, to tell who is IJzerman, where the other Dutchmen are, and which ones are the Asians.²⁰

Softly, even, they seemed to work together. As the work was accomplished, on the first morning after the expedition reached Siak, the final station of the future railway (before they set on their way back onboard a Chinese steamer), Van Bemmelen, as he wrote in the memorial book, woke up, and his thoughts went back over the past weeks. He thought of the days as “days of freedom, camp life without borders,” and “adventure.” However, it is clear that the Dutchman most eagerly wanted to tell it as a tale of walking. What would stay in his memory most powerfully, he wrote, was “dampness in my half-torn *laarzen* boots, and the gaiters that almost turned brown by the exposure to campfires and mud.”²¹

Hard and Clean Roads

In 1840, a new and eager Dutch minister of colonies, Jean Chrétien Baud, ordered forty camels to be shipped to the Dutch Indies. As an afterthought, two hundred donkeys were also to go. A year later, people in the colony were not allowed to slaughter buffaloes, which might be used for work in ports and on roads.²² This kind of eagerness lasted. As late as 1862, a deputy in the Dutch parliament suggested that a number of llamas and elephants should be sent to the Indies to work as draught animals, especially on the “sugar road” between Semarang and Salatiga in Central Java.²³ However, this deputy already appeared to be behind the times.

Since the early nineteenth century, the Great Daendels Mail Road had been in use in the Indies, cutting through the main island of Java from west to east. It was built, between 1808 and 1811, as a part of the defense against an expected British invasion, and it was “a gigantic road-building project that, with justification, was called ‘Napoleonic.’”²⁴ The Daendels road was a pre-twentieth-century wonder of speed (18 to 20 kilometers per hour in the best places),²⁵ and, equally so, of order. As native children learned in 1886 from their primary school textbooks, “Along the road, each 16 1/3 minutes, there is one stake [*paal*] to indicate a distance. At each fifth stake, there is a post [*bangsal*] for the government mail to change horses.”²⁶

For most of the Indies, even most of Java, at the time, the road of course was not very relevant. As late as the mid-nineteenth century, it took as long as three, even five, months for a load of coffee from the interior of Java off the Daendels road to reach the sea port of Semarang.²⁷ As the traffic got heavier, the highway itself, even for the areas that had access to it, became

insufficient for anyone wishing to travel modern: “a European coach, usually overloaded with passengers and their belongings is, frequently too heavy to manage for the little Javanese horses.”²⁸

In 1842, a year after the Dutch colonial minister Baud suggested the camels, the first ever magazine published in the Dutch Indies, *Kopiist*, “Copyist,” launched a series on inventions, and, as invention no. 11, presented “steamways and steam carriages”:

If we are not mistaken, Asia, until today, does not have a single railway. The invention, in the East, did not extend beyond the northern shores of Egypt. . . . It is a widely known fact that the population of Java, as far as its numbers and potential are concerned, is not evenly distributed. In a country like this, introduction of even a single steam machine, certainly, would free a vast number of hands so urgently needed by our agriculture in other locations. The steam means of transport, generally, has a power to release the population from the unproductive drudgery in which it is bound today.²⁹

According to the *Kopiist*, Asia, and namely, the Dutch Indies, was at least as fit for the wonderful new invention as Europe. The terrain of the Indies, the *Kopiist* wrote, did not pose any serious obstacle; it laid, waiting for the trains:

From Soerabaia, to the north of the river Kedirie, towards *dessa* [Malay for village] Menoeng . . . the turf is flat. . . . From Tjirebon to the river of Madioen, there are no great hurdles. . . . Over the river of Madioen, a wooden bridge could easily be built . . . the rugged ground there could easily be leveled and the ravines filled.³⁰

Reading the *Kopiist*, one just could feel how agreeable it would be to build the tracks through Java, from the port city of Surabaya in the east, hundreds of miles to the west, to Batavia, the metropolis of the colony. As the *Kopiist* saw it, there appeared nothing prohibitive in the costs of the project either:

the population can do the earth-moving and stone-crushing work for the railway free of charge or, at worst, it can be paid in rice and salt, as this can be made a part of a usual *corvée* service for the government . . . it is evident that the costs will be even more affordable than those in either Europe or America.³¹

To build the main track, the *Kopiist* calculated, would cost merely 8,704,080 guilders, and the side tracks 3,215,520 guilders, for a total 11,919,600 guilders, 2,000,000 guilders would pay for vehicles and warehouses, 1,000,000 guilders would take care of interest. The grand total might be “21,000,000 guilders only.”³²

In 1842, the same year the *Kopiist* article was published, in the same vein of engineering optimism, the king of the Netherlands, Willem I, issued the first railway decree for the Indies: “In order to promote the transport of



Opening of a new tramway line in the Indies, 1904 or 1905.
Foto Suit Kan. (KITLV)

products and other goods from Semarang to Kedoe, the Princely Lands in Java, and vice versa, an iron railway will be laid.”³³

It took twenty-five years, in fact, after the first Indies royal railway decree to build the first 25 kilometers of the iron rails in the colony, and it took another decade to build the next 300 kilometers—all of them on Java.³⁴ By heavy and slow steps, rather than daintily as the *Kopiist* suggested, the Indies trains came into existence. By 1882, in the words of a special commission of the learned *Indisch Genootschap*, “Indies Society,” railways and “the little railways,” the tramways, also in the Dutch colony, proved themselves to be “the most useful of the present discoveries, the most admirable victory of man over time and distance, the most powerful incentive to labor, exchange in values, and civilization.”³⁵

By 1888, eight main railway lines were in operation, all in Java, and the fifteen largest cities of the island had a railway connection.³⁶ In April 1899, an electric tram was installed in Batavia,³⁷ and, in 1909, the tramway lines in the city were already 14 kilometers long. That whole year only one fatal accident was reported on the Batavia tramway lines.³⁸

Raden Ajeng Kartini—a teenager when Dr. IJzerman went on his expedition, twenty years old when the electric tram started in Batavia—was the daughter of a high-ranking Javanese official in the colonial government, a *boepati*, “regent,” of Japara. Japara, where Kartini spent most of her life, was a small place on the north coast of Java. Kartini’s friends, mentors, and protectors, almost all Dutch, in the hype of their time, called her a Javanese princess. In post-colonial Indonesia, and until today, almost a century after her death, she has been called the mother of Indonesian nationalism.

“If I were a boy,” Kartini wrote in 1900, from Japara to a Dutch friend, “I should not think twice, but would become a sailor at once.”³⁹ Kartini thought of ships often: “We do not want any more to sail on a sinking ship,” she also wrote, meaning Javanese society;⁴⁰ “courage of the hand at the rudder, and pumping at the leak, could have saved us from destruction.”⁴¹

Japara, where Kartini lived, was very much off all the new and newly emerging modern Indies roads. From Japara, one had to travel on horse or in a horse-driven cart, on a dirt, and often muddy, road to Majong. There, one might board a steam tram to Djoewana or Semarang. Only there was there a “real train.”⁴² Kartini often warned potential visitors of “the tiring trip.”⁴³ Yet, whenever an opportunity arose, or in her dreams, she quickly got onboard: “we were on the track with the first morning tram . . . long before the tram station of Pemalang appeared, as we steamed on, we were looking out for our darling.”⁴⁴

When guests were to come to Japara, Kartini traveled with her aristocratic father to meet them at the station: “how afraid we were that we miss the tram.”⁴⁵ She was allowed to travel very little, as she was an unmarried Muslim woman. Yet, the moments on the train, carefully counted, were the most

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intense for her, and, so it sometimes seemed, the only real moments of life.⁴⁶ Kartini met people, was touched, received news, and heard rumors on the train or at a railway station: "In the train . . . I pressed my hand on my heart . . . I heard much in the tram."⁴⁷ The dreams were most frequent and drew the clearest image: "Now, we fly with a storm over the iron road":⁴⁸ "Would I ever be able to forget that divine ride with her to the station? . . . Do not fly so fast on the smooth iron tracks, you sniffling, steaming monster, do not let this beautiful meeting end so quickly. . . . I prayed that the ride would never end. . . . But, alas! the stoker did not hear me."⁴⁹

It was beyond any doubt to the excited Kartini that the modern roads in the Indies had to be made all anew, and hard. The newness, the hardness and cleanness—it was the roads' modernity. Cleanness of the roads, in this logic, was purity of times, democracy even, we might say. There were some people in the Indies, Kartini wrote, who demanded that they be addressed by aristocratic titles; often, these titles did not even belong to them. On the whole, Kartini wrote, "it is a matter of indifference": "but when overseers, railroad engineers (and perhaps tomorrow station masters too), allow themselves to be thus addressed by their servants, it is absurdly funny."⁵⁰

New roads through Java and in the whole colony, to Kartini, were to be fully made of progress, and, as long as they were made of that hard and clean stuff, nothing could stop the wheels. A Javanese girl was run over by a tram not far from Japara, and Kartini reported the accident in a letter. This event proved, Kartini wrote, how a modern system of "the first medical aid" became very important.⁵¹

Kartini died a year after she was married, at the age of twenty-five, a few days after she gave birth to her first child. She may be written about, perhaps, the way a Viennese author, Robert Musil, at about the same time, wrote about one of his Austrian contemporaries: "She was one of those charmingly purposeful young women of our time who would instantly become bus drivers if some higher purpose called for it."⁵²

There were no buses in Japara, and in the entire Netherlands Indies colony, in 1900, however. And also, Kartini, in her liking for newness, cleanness, and hardness, would dream of planes instead of buses. This was, at least, what she wrote, three years before her death, in 1901, to one of her and her father's friends, physician Dr. Anton, in Jena, Germany: "flying machine will have come into use, and on some golden day you will see one of them flutter over Jena's blue horizon bringing a guest from afar. I should indeed have been born a boy."⁵³

Struggle for the Roads

Modern roads in the Indies, besides the many wonderful things they did, became from the moment of their inception a battlefield and a space where the Dutch in the colony were clearly uncertain of themselves.

Professor Stokvis, a Dutch liberal and respected colonial expert, in a lecture in 1894, “Man in Tropics in Connection with Colonization,” declared that “not a single example is known to me of a European family that has been able to reproduce itself in this tropical land for as much as three generations without regularly traveling to Europe, or without being blood-mixed with one of the local races.”⁵⁴ This vulnerability to mixing, another respectful Dutch expert wrote at the time, should serve as a warning against “too rosy” an expectation about the future of the Dutch in the Indies.⁵⁵

Many of the honored voices in the colony warned that the Dutch might sink in the Indies. An eminent Dutch engineer and best-selling author, van Sandick, wrote in 1891:

against every one who might accomplish it, there stand hundreds who will get stuck in the Indies, without a chance to see Europe again. Holland will be reached again only by those who are truly loved by fate; the aggregation of those who, year after year, depart to the tropics will also die there, forgotten by their motherland.⁵⁶

According to official statistics widely publicized at the time, 80 percent of the Dutch population of the colony, by the early twentieth century, had been born in the tropics. An unspecified but large majority of them, according to the same source, had in their veins, indeed, “a drop of native blood or more.”⁵⁷ In 1900, according to another very seriously heeded estimate, among all the legally Dutch children born in the Indies (i.e., including those with “a drop of native blood or more”), as many as 40 percent could not speak Dutch at all, and 30 percent of them spoke their “native language” with difficulty.⁵⁸

In 1900, about 60,000 Europeans, mostly Dutch, lived in the Indies.⁵⁹ In 1930—when the last ever census was taken in the colony—the number had grown to 208,000. Still, it was merely 0.34 percent of the 60 million total population.⁶⁰ As one Dutch journalist, Willem Walraven, put it in the 1930s the Dutch lived in and moved over the Indies “like flies upon milk.”⁶¹

Through this landscape of milk the modern roads of the Indies were to push. In 1880, in the most prestigious and scholarly journal of the colony, *Indische Gids*, “Indies Guide,” J.F.F. Moet, again, as many before him, argued in favor of trains in the Indies. He emphasized one point in particular. He wrote about how wonderful his experience was in Europe—Kassel, Germany, for instance, or on the steam tramway between the Hague and Scheveningen, in the Netherlands:

In spite of the fact that the train passes through the busiest roads and streets, it does not cause any difficulty. Horses are not frightened, even in the evenings, as the locomotives move amidst the houses of the towns with their large red lights in front and large white lights on the sides. I saw a machine with two carriages, at [the main square of Kassel], in fact, on the market day; it puffed through the

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very middle of the crowd, and the women kept sitting behind their stalls and selling their fruits and vegetables as if nothing at all was happening.⁶²

This was, and increasingly so, the late-colonial plan and dream. Horses and crowds would not be frightened in the Indies. It would be, in this aspect, quite like Europe. The time schedule, and the list of stops, depots, and terminals of the new electric tramway in Batavia, in 1910, for instance, read exactly in that programmed and dreamy way. New modern roads would be kept clean and hard, running upon the landscape of milk, calm and orderly, between one and the next point of an undoubted modernity:

Telephone Office, Photographic Association, Batavia Sporting Club, Military Engineers Workshops, Railway Station Weltevreden, Protestant Church, High School, Racetrack, English Sporting Club, Telephone Office, Officers Barracks, Concordia Club, Waterloo-Square Concert Terrain and Soccer Fields (also for natives) . . .⁶³

As late as the mid-1920s, even the rails for the Indies railways were imported from Europe.⁶⁴ As late as in the early 1940s, to the very end of the Dutch colonial era, virtually all technical equipment came from the West. Only a few body parts of carriages, and the sleepers, were made of teak and other Asian wood.⁶⁵

Many, and in some parts most, of the skilled railway and road-building workers were Indies Chinese, or natives imported from other islands or other parts of Java.⁶⁶ In 1918, the Indies state railways employed 179 Dutch officials born in Europe and 564 Dutch officials born in the Indies.⁶⁷ Not a single clerk, station master, or machinist was a non-European. In 1917, a few dozen natives, in the colony of 60 million, had been admitted to a new state-railways training course for the bottom-level clerical positions.⁶⁸ The milk should not be stirred. The idea was to install a tradition of just another vocation, inherited, gradually and orderly, from father to son, exactly as in Europe, without frightening the crowds.

Trains in the Indies, however, as everywhere in the world, possessed an amazing power of attraction. Horses, perhaps, might be made not to panic. But, as soon as rails were laid and the first train appeared, people, the whole landscape, turned around and moved to the train.

In 1883, a Dutch official publication about the contemporary colonial Indies noted: "Particularly the native population makes a great use of the existing railways."⁶⁹ This became an inevitable appendix of the road optimism. Most often, it was just an awkwardly placed emphasis.

In 1904, a special government investigating committee reported that the number of passengers in the first ("European") class of the Indies trains rose by 4,000 during the previous 3 years; in the second (lower-income "European" and top-level "native") class the number of passengers rose by 33,000. Not very much, in fact. In the third ("native") class, however (or *kambing*,

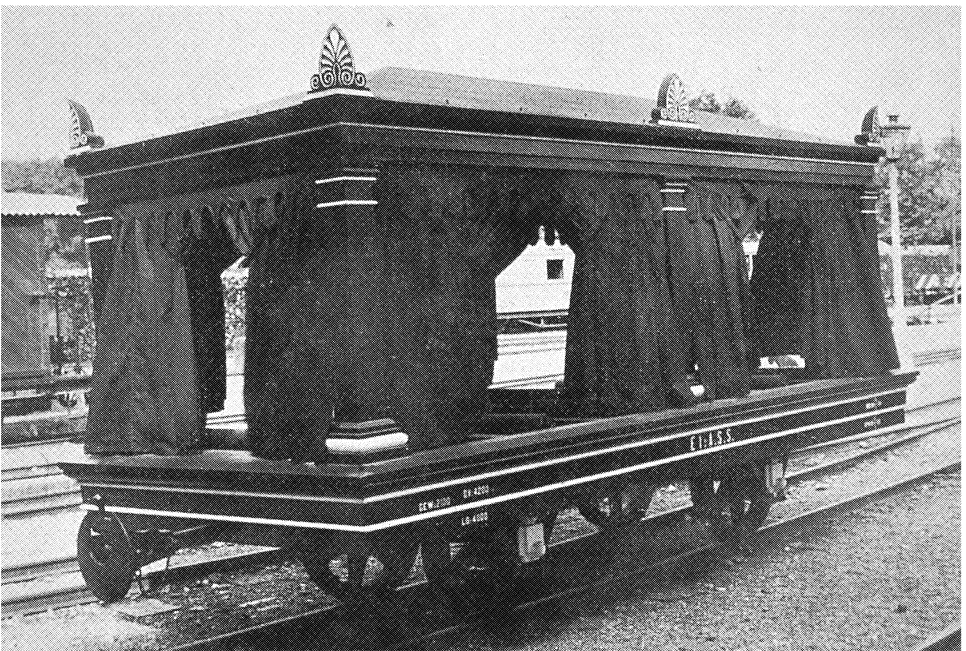
“goat” class, as it was commonly called), the increase was 550,000!⁷⁰ The committee did not hide its surprise: “The use of trains and trams by *kleine man* [Dutch for “little man,” man in the street, native] is rising faster than initially expected.”⁷¹

The same committee hired a group of “four deft native conductors” and sent it to the trains on various lines to engage the passengers in “little kind talks.” The data thus collected were also unexpected. The little” men, women, and children, as a railway touched upon their habitat, did not appear to panic, but neither were they in any perceptible awe over the modern technology. In fact, they did not appear to change their traditional ways very much. They just appeared to add a little to the tradition. Pragmatically, en masse, and with an efficient use of the trains, logically, they appeared on the move:

A. Reasons to travel of economic nature; market, search for work:	69.5%
B. Reasons to travel of personal nature:	30.5% . . .
f. visits to other family members	20.8%
g. law and order; summons to government office or court of justice	3.6%
h. faith and tradition; visits to graves and other holy places	3.0%
i. pleasure travel	3.1% ⁷²

The natives, as the four conductors found out, were choosing the trains, best of all, that allowed them to carry free baggage of 50 kilograms or more.⁷³ The little people of the Indies traveled as they always did, with their goats and their hens sometimes, and with bags of clothes and food. The Madurese (of the island off the northern coast of Java), the report noted, had always been known as *echte zwervers*, “real wanderers or drifters.” By now, however, as the report put it, “all natives appear eager to use trains and trams for their own goals.”⁷⁴ The commission discovered, also, that the natives of lower standing, the “simple men,” the real masses, traveled more eagerly and often than their higher-ups, native aristocrats, native colonial officials, the Dutch-supported elite, who, in the ideal plan of the empire, should have been transmitting the modern manners in an orderly way to the plebeians of the colony: “the native notables [were found] much more *hokvaster* [home-loving, literally: fond of one’s fireside] than the little man. . . . The little man . . . changes his places of sojourn much more frequently than one usually thinks.”⁷⁵ *Santri*, the Indies Muslim scholars and students—for a long time suspected by the colonial government as a subversive element of the native society, potential leaders of unrest—were, indeed, found by the conductors’ report to be one segment of the Indies native population that used trains and trams radically more than the rest.

This was an alarming vision of a breaking down of the ideal plan of empire through an invasion of physicality, crowding, and, most gravely, touching. In Batavia, in 1909, on the electric tram lines, in a single month, 10,404



Funeral hearse of the Aceh tram constructed by the Netherlands
Indies Army Engineers, ca. 1890. (*Gedenkboek van het Korps,
Marechaussee van Atjeh*)

passengers traveled in first class, 72,623 in second class, and 255,197 in third class.⁷⁶ True, there had been, most of the time, a special carriage in every train for each class. But the rhythm of the train, the shaking, and the machine were the same. All the passengers were (traveling) humans, and their uncomfortable sameness could nowhere be seen, felt, and smelled as strongly as in the train.

About the time of the glorious invention of the electric tram in Batavia, Louis Couperus, a famous Dutch writer, published a novel about the Indies, *De Stille Kracht*, "The Hidden Force." It became one of the most widely read books in the colony. Couperus wrote about an undercurrent that he, sooner than most of the others, felt in the colony, gathering against the Dutch colonial presence. As the Couperus story comes to its end, the Dutch woman protagonist of the novel wanders through modern Batavia, and she watches, in particular, the first European class of the new electric tram:

in the mornings—when she did her errands in the shops on Rijswijk and Molenvliet, which, with a few French names, tried to give the impression of a southern shopping center of European luxury—did Eva see the exodus to the Old Town of the white men. . . . The exodus filled the trams with the white burden of mortality. Many, already well off, but not yet rich enough for their purposes, drove in their mylords and buggies to the Harmonie Club, where they took the tram to spare their horses.⁷⁷

It took a whole third of a century from the opening of the first railway line in the Indies for the colonial government, in 1908, to decree a single time for its railway, post, and telegraph service throughout the island of Java.⁷⁸ Even after this, and until the 1920s, in fact, "Java time remained inconvenient . . . local time was maintained for all other purposes, though there was some tendency for this so-called *midden Javatijd* [Central Java Time] to be used more widely. Local times continued to be calculated for places outside Java and Madura."⁷⁹ The modern Indies roads, until the end of the colonial rule, were strips, largely, with a special time. An economic nightmare, certainly, but also a comforting exclusivity against the vision of panicking horses and people.

Special time, indeed, went hand in hand with special security. As Henri Van Kol, well-known Dutch engineer and socialist expert on colonial issues (also Kartini's mentor at one time), rode on the Atjeh tram in North Sumatra in 1903—passing through the region only a few months before the scene of the fighting between natives and the Dutch, the most bloody colonial Aceh war (1874–1903)—Van Kol was thrilled, excited, and truly a pure-idea model colonial passenger: "Such a short time ago, so many fallen. . . . [And now, there] by tram, from Lho Seumawé to. . . . Maneh . . . All through, and safely."⁸⁰

Mas Marco Kartodikromo was a contemporary of all of them—IJzerman,