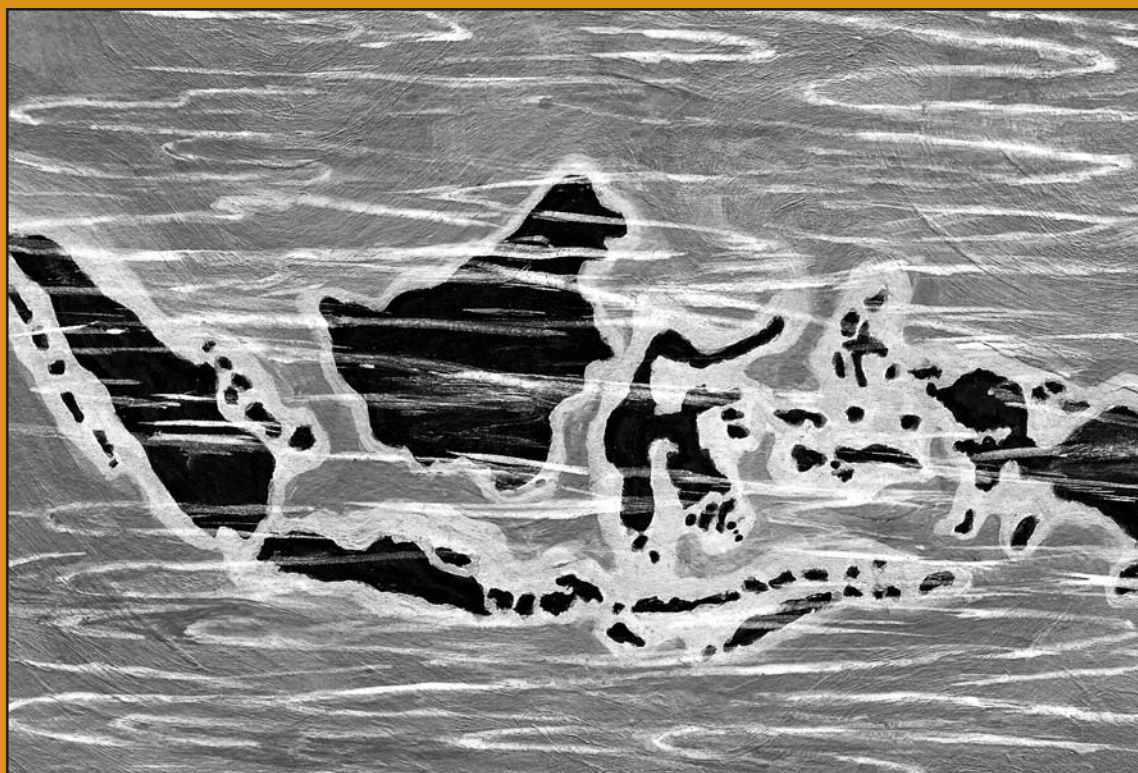


ASIAN
THOUGHT
AND
CULTURE

Women and Malay Voices

Undercurrent Murmurings
in Indonesia's Colonial Past



Tineke Hellwig

Women and Malay Voices examines Malay literature by Chinese *peranakan* authors in the Dutch East Indies between 1915 and 1940. The narratives, some of them based on sensational murder trials reported in the news, offer insights into women's lives and experiences and glimpses of female agency. With its primary focus on Malay texts and Asian women, this book offers a unique opportunity to hear subaltern voices and understand the lives of colonized women in new ways. Using feminist and post-colonial theories, this study juxtaposes the Malay texts with Dutch fiction and newspaper accounts to gain insight into how gender, race, and class are represented and what ideologies marked power relations in Dutch East Indies society.

"Tineke Hellwig has produced a tour de force. The prolific literature in 'lingua franca Malay' by Chinese authors, so long neglected by the mainstream, provides an important insight into Netherlands Indies society (especially women) in a crucial period, and Hellwig's rigorous research extends to finding contemporary Dutch reports of real events on which the texts were based, using interview material and comparisons with Dutch language texts. I hope this splendidly conceived and well-written book encourages others to use this literature to challenge the dominant colonial and nationalist historiographies."—*Charles A. Coppel, Author of Indonesian Chinese in Crisis (1983) and Studying Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia (2002)*

"Tineke Hellwig's *Women and Malay Voices: Undercurrent Murmurings in Indonesia's Colonial Past* uncovers the wealth of materials in 'lingua franca Malay' narratives from the period 1915–1938. It offers groundbreaking readings of long-neglected literary texts written by authors of Chinese descent. Exploring how gender, race, and class with all their ambiguities and contradictions intersect with power, Hellwig gives voice to marginalized women—Asian and Eurasian women accused of immoral conduct. Her method of reading Malay fiction against Dutch texts as they speak to one another within the cultural politics of the time is illuminating. This book is a must-read for students and scholars of Indonesian and postcolonial studies." —*Melani Budianta, University of Indonesia*



Tineke Hellwig is Associate Professor of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. She received her Ph.D. at Leiden University. Her research interests include Indonesian and Malay literature and culture, representation of women, and gender and sexuality studies. She is the author of *In the Shadow of Change: Images of Women in Indonesian Literature* and co-editor of *Asian Women: Interconnections* and *The Indonesia Reader: History, Culture, Politics*.

Women and Malay Voices

ASIAN
THOUGHT
AND
CULTURE

Sandra A. Wawrytko
General Editor

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Tineke Hellwig

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For Rafael, Leila, Chris and Soeliah

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Preface

I recall a story once told me about a boy who, when leaving his village, is escorted by his family to the village limits. From there he makes his own way to the city and to teachers' college. What he doesn't know is that his departure is not just a separation from friends and family but a leave-taking from familiar ways of thinking, customs, institutions, and traditions. Leaving the village means entering the modern world, a country whose residents are not permitted ever to return to their place of origin. (Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *The Mute's Soliloquy*, 172)

The excerpt above is taken from *The Mute's Soliloquy*, a memoir by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006). He remembers the moment in his life when he and his brother departed from Blora, the East Javanese town where they grew up, to move to Jakarta after their mother's death. It is a meaningful juncture as he realizes, with hindsight or maybe even at the time itself, that he will never return as the same person to his place of origin after having entered the world of the nation's capital. *The Mute's Soliloquy*, a collection of notes and reminiscences, was written when Pramoedya was a political prisoner in exile on Buru Island under the Suharto regime. For fifteen years he was incarcerated without knowing the charges against him, and ten of these years, from 1969 to 1979, he spent in a Buru penal camp. His memoir, which recounts his experiences on the island as one among many of the nation's outcasts, is a moving and shocking account of the unimaginable hardships that the prisoners had to endure.

I have chosen this excerpt because it illustrates a village boy stepping into the modern world. That village boy is like the Dutch East Indies in the first decades of the twentieth century when it entered the modern world. This study is about literary representations of Indies society in flux on its way to modernity. It is not, however, this excerpt from Pramoedya's memoir that lies at the roots of my study. Rather, I became inspired to examine Indies society through literature after reading Pramoedya's historical novel *Bumi manusia* (*This Earth of Mankind*). He created this work while in detention on Buru. Because at first he was not allowed to write, Pramoedya told his story orally to his fellow prisoners. Later he typed out this first volume and three additional ones of what became known as the Buru Quartet, and was able to get the manuscripts smuggled out of prison. After he was released, *Bumi manusia* came out in print in Jakarta in 1980. Pramoedya was still under house arrest, and publishing this book was a tour de force and a bold expression of courage for him and his publishers, Joesoef Isak and Hasyim Rachman, two fellow former political prisoners.

Bumi manusia depicts Indies society of East Java starting in 1898 with the coronation of the Dutch queen Wilhelmina. Throughout the four volumes of the narrative the reader follows the trials and tribulations of the protagonist Minke, who is modeled after the historical figure of Tirta Adhisoerjo, a Javanese writer, journalist and nationalist. When I read *Bumi manusia* for the first time, I was captivated by the figure of Nyai Ontosoroh, the Javanese *nyai* (housekeeper/concubine) of the Dutch plantation manager and later dairy farmer Herman Mellema. The novel presents Nyai Ontosoroh as a strong, resilient and powerful woman, and the book was an eye-opener for me, a woman of Indonesian-Dutch descent, who had grown up with fiction of the Dutch literary canon. Pramoedya's portrayal of Nyai Ontosoroh deconstructed the image of *nyais* that had lodged itself in my mind, unconsciously but firmly. Dutch fiction describing the Indies with a male European bias had accustomed me to seeing *nyais* as immoral and inferior figures. Authors such as P.A. Daum, Thérèse Hoven and Annie Foore characterize *nyais* as jealous, resentful and destructive. In their prose a *nyai* has no qualms about resorting to black magic (*guna-guna*) to murder her master and his European bride, and her Eurasian children born out of wedlock (*voorkinderen*) are always depicted as a source of trouble. In contrast, *Bumi manusia* exposed me to a *nyai* with individual agency, an autonomous and empowered woman. This novel speaks out against the privileged European colonizers in favor of subalterns—a Javanese woman and man—and it exposes their negative encounters with Dutch imperial power. Written in Indonesian, *Bumi manusia* directed my attention to representations of Indonesian and Asian women in the colonial Indies. I began to search for subaltern perspectives on *nyais* and Asian women, and found them primarily in works of literature written in a lingua franca form of Malay.

I was first introduced to Indonesian and Malay literature while attending Professor A. (Hans) Teeuw's undergraduate courses at Leiden University. I will always be grateful to him for sparking my interest in the field. This particular book would not have been possible without the tremendous support and encouragement of Myra Sidharta in Jakarta. For years she allowed me to use her private library collection and enjoy the hospitality in her home. She shared her rich knowledge with me and pointed me in the right direction. I am much indebted to her.

The Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia supported the research for this book by providing me travel grants and study leave. I want to thank my colleagues in the department and also those in the

Women's Studies Program for their friendship and collegiality. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and a Killam Faculty Research Fellowship provided financial funding, and the Centre for Research in Women's Studies and Gender Relations at the University of British Columbia funded research leave for one term. For six months, colleagues at the Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies accepted me in their midst and gave me the opportunity to engage in fruitful discussions and exchange ideas. The staff of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden was very helpful with locating source material and photos.

Earlier versions of the chapters were presented as talks and conference papers. Some chapters are revised versions of previously published articles and chapters, and I thank the following publishers for granting me permission to reprint them in this book:

"A Double Murder in Batavia: Representations of Gender and Race in the Indies." *RIMA, Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 35.2 (2001): 1–32.

"Scandals, Homicide in Batavia and *Indo* Identity: Literary Representations of Indies Society." *Archipel* 63 (2002): 153–172.

"Asian Women in the Lives of Dutch Tea Planters: Two Narratives from West Java." *Indonesia and the Malay World* 29.85 (2001): 161–179.

"The Lives of Queeny Chang and Hermine Tan: Peranakan Women in the Dutch East Indies." in *The World My Mother Gave Me*, edited by Mandakranta Bose (1998), 45–64. Vancouver: Institute of Asian Research.

I am indebted to a variety of friends, colleagues and others who shared their insights with me, including Koos Arens, Joop Van Den Berg, Michael Bodden, Margot Bond-Verduyn Lunel, Melani Budianta, Manneke Budiman, Julie Van Buren-Verduyn Lunel, *Ibu* Cicah, Charles Coppel, Goh Beng Lan, Sneja Gunew, Karel Van Der Hucht, Marcel Huguenin, Hans Kerkhoven, Peter Kerkhoven, Vincent Kerkhoven, Gaik Cheng Khoo, Korrie Korevaart, Willem Van Der Molen, Suzanne Van Norden, *Ibu* Norma, Katrien Polman, E. Post-Morren, Maria Ranadipura-Boreel, Valerie Raoul, Nancy Roberts, Claudine Salmon, Shi Siang Lan, Kees Snoek, Veronica Strong-Boag, Eduard Sukarma, Mimi Sukarsih, Maya Sutedja-Liem, F.H. Van Rees Vellinga, Maud Tan, Jean Taylor, Marius Verduyn Lunel, C.W. Watson. I especially want to thank Hubert Vrolyk, who never fails to inspire me with his unwavering love and his enthusiasm for life.

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Finally, I dedicate this book to my late parents' grandchildren, Rafael, Leila, Chris and Soeliah, who never had a chance to know their Dutch grandfather and Indonesian grandmother, Johan Hellwig and R.R. Soeliah Tjokrosoedjono.

Note on Foreign Words and Spelling

For the sake of readability I use the term Indies (as a noun and as an adjective) to indicate the Dutch East Indies. The term Indonesia (and the adjective Indonesian) is used to refer to the geographical region that is present-day Indonesia, even though during the period under discussion Indonesia as a political entity did not yet exist.

Peranakan is defined as mixed-blood Chinese, in most cases meaning descendants of a Chinese male immigrant and an indigenous woman. At times *peranakan* also refers to full-blood Chinese who were born and raised in the Indies and therefore acculturated to Indies society and customs. *Peranakan* are considered to be a different group from *totok* (full-blood) Chinese born in China, as well as from indigenous Indonesians.

Indo is defined as mixed-blood Eurasian, in most cases referring to the descendants of a European (Dutch) male colonizer and an indigenous woman. At times *Indo* also refers to a full-blood European who was born and raised in the Indies and therefore acculturated to Indies society and customs. *Indos* are considered distinctly different from *totok* (full-blood) Europeans as well as from indigenous Indonesians.

Dutch and Malay terms are translated into English when they appear in the text for the first time. Terms that are used more than once are listed in the glossary.

For the spelling of Malay words and names I applied the following principles. Malay words and place names follow the spelling as it appears in the edition of the text I used. The spelling of personal names is left unchanged. For other Malay/Indonesian words I use the standard 1972 Indonesian spelling. This may lead to inconsistent spellings, for example *Bandoeng/Bandung*, *hikajat/hikayat* and *njai/nyai*.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This book discusses Malay works of literature published in the Dutch East Indies between 1915 and 1940. The texts were intended for popular reading, and written in non-standard Malay by authors of Chinese descent, most of them *peranakan* (mixed-blood Chinese).¹ This genre formed an “undercurrent” in literary production and, until the 1980s, was marginalized and ignored. These stories deserve serious attention as cultural products of the late colonial period, a time when Indies society was going through a transition from more traditional values to early modernity. The Malay literary texts reflect and represent this period’s processes of societal change. The present study recovers some of the stories from obscurity and demonstrates that these understudied texts are worth examining through close reading.

I soon discovered that the textual and discursive boundaries of these Malay works are porous, and blurred with other texts and discourses, many of them in Dutch. Therefore, I decided to explore intertextual and interdiscursive connections by juxtaposing Malay discourses with discourses in Dutch, be they literary, journalistic, historical or oral accounts. Since Dutch was the hegemonic language in the Indies, Dutch discourses in most cases present the colonizer’s authoritative and masculine points of view. I start here from the premise that the Malay works speak the language of the subaltern and give the perspective of the colonized, of Asians, and of the feminine. “Writing in Indonesian [Malay] as a kind of literary *lingua franca*...allowed colonized or postcolonial subjects to evade, rather than compel them to confront, the forms of cultural and political authority and conflict” (Day and Foulcher 2002, 6–7). Yet we must be mindful that Malay writing does not always give voice to the subaltern Asian, but sometimes reflects views of the European colonizer that the author or characters have internalized. The juxtaposition of Malay and Dutch versions of a particular story offers a new dimension to the understanding of Malay/Indonesian literary history because it gives evidence of how Malay storytelling emerged as a form of retelling or translation of existing narratives. The juxtaposition also helps us to gain insight into Indies society, as the Malay literary texts often refer to historical events and are closely intertwined with other discourses. The Malay versions present non-European points of view and make readers aware of the multiple ways in which social issues and circumstances, particularly in a period of transition, can be represented.

When I realized that the Malay stories time and again intersect with historical accounts and journalistic reporting, I set out to explore how the stories present identity formation through their characters, and what views they reflect on gender, race and class differences. In my analyses I took critical feminist and postcolonial theories as a point of departure and deliberately searched the stories for women, specifically Asian women, who were portrayed as subjects that were able to speak, to see and to act (Bal 1989, 17). I aimed at recovering “‘women’s experience’ to challenge the universality of the ‘grand narratives’ of western history” (Roach Pierson 1991, 80). Not only in mainstream colonial historiography are women rendered invisible, in literature, too, they are shadowy figures or second-class citizens, depicted with male biases in works authored by men. Asian women are triply displaced—being colonized, non-European and non-male—and their voices are even more “‘muffled’ or, still worse, irrecoverable, lost forever” (1991, 81). It was my hope to find experiences of women and glimpses of female agency, and then link the gender and race ideologies presented in the stories to the cultural and social context of Indies society that produced and received them. The Malay narratives shed light on women who were erased from historical and cultural discourses, and provide an opportunity to view vilified and ostracized women from a new angle.

This book examines literary activities in the Indies that took shape in the late 1800s. For centuries Malay had been widely used in the archipelago for trade and interethnic contact. Indonesians of diverse ethnic backgrounds, Chinese, Arabs, Indians and Europeans all communicated with each other in Malay, with the result that this language lost some of its significance as an identity marker. James Siegel observes that as a lingua franca, Malay was multifunctional and, therefore, full of ambiguities. Focusing on the early 1900s, when journalism and the impact of the media as part of the new print culture were on the rise, he argues that “the lingua franca is not felt to be a particular language, but somehow language itself, able to open a path to anything said anywhere. It is precisely the ambiguity of the lingua franca in its capacity to be the vehicle for political and social authority and on the contrary to be the instrument of communication that overrides social and political definition that is the starting point of our study” (Siegel 1997, 26). This form of Malay was, indeed, everyone’s language, while belonging to no one.

Print capitalism reached the Indies in the second half of the nineteenth century. The presses produced newspapers, magazines, as well as fictional works in Malay and Dutch. As Benedict Anderson argues, novels and newspapers were “forms [that] provided the technical means for ‘re-

presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (1991, 25, italics in original). Their consumption and dissemination lie at the roots of nationalism. Publishing houses worked to meet an increasing demand for reading material among the growing numbers of literate and educated colonized subjects. Colonial authorities considered this the right time to start regulating the Malay language. Van Ophuijsen (1901) set the standard for a uniform orthography and formalized Malay that came to be known as *Hoog Maleis* (High Malay). Colloquial or vernacular Malay, pejoratively called *Laag Maleis* (Low Malay or *bahasa Melayu rendah*) or *Pasar Maleis* (Bazaar Malay or *bahasa Melayu pasar*) was the spoken language, considered to be "gibberish Malay...a hybrid, impure variety beyond control" (Maier 1993, 139). In its written form, colloquial Malay up until this time had not followed a regular spelling or syntax. It was inconsistent and a "free for all."

The governmental publishing house *Balai Pustaka*, founded in 1908, was an ideological state apparatus with the mandate to supply the market with official literature and books (especially textbooks) in Malay and later in Indonesian. *Balai Pustaka* embodied a hegemonic direction in Dutch cultural and language policy and set the norm for the formation of a literary canon. Meanwhile, private publishers produced "other" materials in Malay, whose authors were to a large extent ethnic Chinese, *peranakan* or Eurasian (*Indo*).² Therefore Chinese Malay (*bahasa Melayu Tionghoa*), determined by the race of its speakers, and *Betawi* Malay (*bahasa Betawi*), named after the locality of Batavia, came to be common designations for the written versions of colloquial or lingua franca Malay (Salmon 1981, 115–122). In the following I prefer to use "Malay" or "lingua franca Malay" and intentionally choose not to use "Low Malay" or "Bazaar Malay" because these terms imply a condescending judgment. I also avoid the term "Chinese Malay language," even when the authors are Chinese or *peranakan*, because it brands the language with a racial profile and limits its scope.

Stories in lingua franca Malay represent a transition in genres and literary styles, and can be regarded as an integral part of the manifold societal changes that took place at the turn of the twentieth century. Dutch colonizers showed absolutely no interest in these writings, and were not even sufficiently proficient in Malay to appreciate them (Maier 2007, 11). In the colonial school system, lingua franca Malay texts were never taught. In terms of literary history, school programs in postcolonial Indonesia followed the Dutch colonial curriculum and continued to emphasize what had been established as the canon, that is the *Balai Pustaka* publications.

In 1981 Claudine Salmon made a major contribution to the field of Malay literature with the publication of her *Literature in Malay by the Chinese of Indonesia*. This “provisional and annotated bibliography,” as the subtitle reads, is an invaluable mine of information on Indies printed materials from the 1870s to 1942. Salmon lists 3,005 titles, including re-issues, by 806 authors and translators and includes 248 anonymous works (1981, 10). *Literature in Malay by the Chinese of Indonesia* is the end product of years of painstaking digging to search for Chinese Malay texts and locate them in public libraries and private collections.³ Salmon mapped out where one can find this wealth of literature written by Chinese and *peranakan* authors. Her meticulously documented contribution to Malay/Indonesian literary studies forms a foundation for a variety of publications which will lead to a better understanding and appreciation not only of the Malay texts as literary products, but of the Indies society where they originated and were first consumed.

Earlier on, a few scholars such as Nio Joe Lan (1962), Watson (1971, 1974), Kwee (1977), Ding Choo Ming (1978) and Sykorsky (1980) had acknowledged the importance of this Malay undercurrent in literature. They did not limit themselves to the Orientalist preference for classical court manuscripts and *Balai Pustaka* novels. In 1982 Pramoedya Ananta Toer launched a term for this non-canonical genre of Malay texts: *sastra pra-Indonesia* (pre-Indonesian literature). He researched the antecedents of Indonesian literature in the early 1960s and would, no doubt, have made lingua franca Malay stories available to Indonesian readers at the time, had he not been imprisoned for fifteen years.

In the late 1980s scholarly interest in these long-forgotten Malay “treasures” increased as part of a postcolonial exercise of decentering the canon and deconstructing established notions of the origins of modern Indonesian literature.⁴ If postcolonialism is “a reading strategy, bringing to bear questions that can help identify the traces of colonialism in critical as well as literary texts” (Day and Foulcher 2002, 2), then we must recognize that a true debate about postcolonial Indonesia has not yet gotten off the ground.⁵ The reason for this delay may be found in Malay itself, in 1928 renamed Indonesian, the choice of national language of the independent nation-state. Indonesian made further use of the Dutch language unnecessary, and since decolonization in 1945 postcolonial Indonesians have proudly used their own language, one that most of their former colonizers do not understand. In other previously colonized parts of the world, particularly those that are anglophone or francophone, we see postcolonial authors “writing back” to their former imperial masters using English or French. In

the case of Indonesia, however, we find that Dutch people have no access to what Indonesians write and have to say, nor do today's Indonesians read and understand Dutch. As Henk Maier observes, already in the Indies colonizers and colonized communicated at cross-purposes, they "preferred to live without any real contact...it is much too late for a collective memory."⁶ It is therefore not surprising that it was a French scholar, Salmon, who initiated scholarly interest in lingua franca Malay writings and that it is Indonesians who have since raised further awareness about their importance.⁷

It takes time to overhaul a canon, with its long-established ideas of what makes literature interesting or, for that matter, of "good quality." Orientalism and the fallacy of aestheticism condemned the Malay works as popular and trashy literature and the texts sank into oblivion. Even a scholar with a sympathetic attitude asserts that "most Malay publications after 1880 read like stammers and stutters" (Maier 2002, 65, also 2007, 12), reflecting the low value they were generally accorded. In this study it is not my aim to judge the stories on principles of aesthetics nor do I provide a formal literary analysis. Rather, I approach them as interesting repositories of ideas. As my research progressed, I realized that a comparative approach juxtaposing the Malay materials with other discourses would point up striking discrepancies between subaltern Asian and dominant European points of view.

Women, Modernization and Modernity

It was Pramoedya's 1980 historical novel *Bumi manusia* that initially drew my attention to representations of *nyais* (housekeeper/concubine)⁸ and Asian women in the early twentieth century. The *nyai* phenomenon itself had certainly not escaped scholarly attention: many historians and critics of Dutch literature in the Indies have published their views on concubinage (Taylor, Stoler, Müller, Termorshuizen, Sutedja-Liem, Baay). After all, ever since the first ships of the United East Indies Company (VOC, *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) arrived on the shores of the Indonesian islands, Dutchmen cohabited with local women. The Asian woman would take care of the man's household, teach him the local language and local customs, and also accommodate his sexual needs. Inevitably children were born out of these liaisons. While in the Netherlands Christian morals of sexual abstention outside marriage prevailed, the ideology in the colony was one that allowed men to find an outlet for their carnal cravings. Among Europeans it was generally held that the tropical climate and the spicy food stimulated the male libido and that abstention would lead to lechery, sodomy and hysteria (Hesselink 1987, 208; Lucas 1986, 84). Encouraging extramarital unions between European males and Asian females was part of the VOC's policy to