

Arnout van der Meer, *Performing Power: Cultural Hegemony, Identity, and Resistance in Colonial Indonesia*. Southeast Asia Program Publications (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020, 280 pp., ISBN 9781501758577).

Arnout van der Meer's first monograph, *Performing Power*, is a sophisticated, nuanced and beautifully written contribution to the historical scholarship on colonialism in Indonesia, particularly Java, which is often the focus of the book. It builds substantially on a well-known scholarship examining the everyday contestation and negotiation of power between Europeans and Indonesians through language, manners, clothing, posture and material status symbols, from the establishment of the colonial state in the early nineteenth century to its demise after the 1930s.¹ Van der Meer applies the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony to his study of how colonial authorities laboured, against Indonesian negotiation and resistance, to maintain political legitimacy. Although he frequently uses 'the colonized' to designate the formal status of Indonesians under Dutch rule, in focusing on dynamic acts the author constructs no passive addressees of colonial authority, but rather, a cacophony of voices that disclose the relentless *action* of class formation, political consciousness and social mobility taking place 'from below' in early twentieth-century Indonesia.

Indeed, *Performing Power*'s major contribution is to demonstrate the richness and diversity among Indonesians debating competing notions of civil and human rights, morality, piety, modernity, agency, and an emerging national identity. These conflicts arose from 'everyday discursive challenges' (78) and were routinely covered in colonial newspapers, but have largely been overlooked by historians. Continuing a historical tradition of examining Indonesian print cultures for insights into social and political change², Van der Meer deftly analyses a wide variety of vernacular and Dutch-language newspapers and periodicals, as well as official archives and egodocuments, to canvas a broad range of ethnic, sectarian and class views on the politics of dress, language and comportment in colonial encounters. While the book focuses on textual debates, it also examines political cartoons and the visual and material culture of urban spaces.

Chapter 1 examines how, soon after the formation of the colonial state that followed the dissolution of the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Dutch East Indies Company), Dutch authorities on Java actively pursued a strategy of 'Javanisation', which entailed collaborating with local elites and co-opting indigenous deference etiquette. Among this chapter's contributions to the historiography of the nineteenth century is the argument that, in a period

marked by a serious challenge to Dutch authority (the Java War, 1825-1830) and a radical, plantation-based extraction program (the Cultivation System, 1830-1870), Javanisation was not 'simply the outcome of centuries of cultural and racial mixing', but a 'conscious policy of cultural appropriation to legitimize colonial rule' (3).

Chapters 2 and 3 investigate the contested implementation of the Ethical Policy from 1901 to 1913, when a new civilising mission overlaid the extractive aims of Dutch colonial rule. The 'Ethical Policy' refers to a period of liberal-imperial reforms (c.1901–early 1920s) when Dutch officials sought to 'uplift' welfare of Java and Madura through education and industry. The period coincided with an intensive bout of brutal military subjugation campaigns. Seeing little value in courtesies, perhaps, when military might had proven so effective, J. B. van Heutsz, the Lieutenant-Governor credited with winning the Aceh War (several times over) for the Netherlands, implemented the reformist *hormat* circulars of 1904, 1906 and 1909 that sought to wind back the Javanisation of the civil service. These circulars were instructions issued to Dutch as well as Indonesian civil servants that sought to regulate customary modes of showing respect, usually through gesture, speech and dress. It would have been interesting here to observe Van der Meer tackle more explicitly that drifting boundary between civility and open brutality that characterised Dutch rule throughout the careers of men like Van Heutsz. Nonetheless, these chapters read as an extraordinary exposé of the tensions between 'progressive theory and conservative reality' (63): the recalcitrance of officials wedded to their sumptuary privileges, the dismay of senior government advisors who advocated for reforms intended to align colonial ritual with policy, and the growing courage of Indonesians who demanded respect and dignity at work and in public, which they pursued with wit and vigour in the vernacular press.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Van der Meer posits that 1913 was the watershed year of a nascent 'national awakening' among Indonesians, a turning point following the release of a fourth *hormat* circular that spawned a sudden proliferation of Indonesian acts that '*performed* truth to power' (78). The 1913 circular sought to finally outlaw obeisance rituals, as well as the legal requirement that ethnicity be determined by dress. It prompted more conflict between the compliant and the resistant, and led to debates about a national,

1 Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: Europeans and Eurasians in Dutch Asia* (Madison 1983); Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900-1942* (Amsterdam 1995); Henk Schulte Nordholt (ed.), *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia* (Leiden 1997).

2 For example: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983); Henk Schulte Nordholt, 'Modernity and cultural citizenship in the Netherlands Indies: An illustrated hypothesis', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42:3 (2011) 435-457. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002246341100035X>.

Indonesian sartorial style. In response, Europeans took to ‘putting down and dressing up’ (132): ridiculing Javanese ‘attempts to appear modern’ (113) even while Europeans did the same. In 1913, the colonial government openly collaborated with the Sarekat Islam, Indonesia’s first mass political organisation, to publicise its policy reforms at mass rallies and in the Malay-language print media. Colonial society became increasingly polarised, with some Dutch conservatives parading their impunity by publicly defying the circular. These chapters chart how the appeasement of European conservatives under Governor-General Johan Paul van Limburg Stirum went hand-in-glove with the Ethical Policy’s declared failure in the early 1920s. What followed was a Dutch shift to coercion: a new reliance on policing, surveillance, and press censorship.

At the same time, Van der Meer reveals, with great sensitivity to regional, political, sectarian and class variations in debates among Indonesians about the utility of deference codes, how the individual and collective initiatives of Indonesians and some of their Dutch allies led to the practical elimination of *hormat* by the 1930s. He also demonstrates how ‘dressing up’ was contested among Indonesians, who were inspired by local Chinese men cutting their queues, Hadrami Arabs adopting elements of Turkish attire, and *hajjis* (men who had completed the pilgrimage to Mecca) wearing Arab costume. Indonesian nationalists feared a loss of tradition and identity with the abandonment of ‘Javanese’ dress, while Sarekat Islam sought a *fatwa* (religious ruling) on the morality of trousers for men. Van der Meer attends carefully to gender throughout, substantiating anew how the egalitarian promise of western suits for Indonesian men found no female equivalent, with women being designated the bearers of sartorial tradition.

Chapter 5 follows moral debates about intimate and social encounters: interracial marriages, dance halls in which the sexes mixed, and the material culture of consumerism. It reviews the scholarship on race, climate and acculturation in the context of the Ethical shift away from Javanisation and the emergence of a new Dutch emphasis on rule by difference. Much of the argument here – which is about the scientific and popular consensus that held too much European adaptation to the tropics and local customs led to racial degeneration – is well established.³ Van der Meer’s main contribution in this chapter is to canvas Indonesian critiques of European vices (the ‘seven Ms’, *mim pitu*), which included gambling, womanising, alcoholism and greed, among others, and Indonesian perspectives on concubinage and mixed marriages, which followed a similar racial logic to Dutch thinking on the topic.

3 Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley 2002).

Chapter 6 examines the peculiarly colonial institution of the annual *pasar malam* (night fair). A twentieth-century fixture of every major Indonesian town or city, and a truly mass event attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors in the big cities of Java, the fairground brought together visitors of all ethnicities and classes, but Van der Meer argues the rising Indonesian middle class was its real audience. Colonial authorities intended these fairs as civilising instruments and a means of fostering prosperity through stimulating economic aspiration among Indonesians. However, critics saw through the confected contrast between the modernity of European society with Indonesians' backwardness, and worried about the moral effects of consumerism. The clearest expression of the 'counter-hegemonic performance and discourse' (202) to emerge in response was the May 1930 debut of the *Pasar Malam Nasional*, an alternative, more affordable mass event that donated earnings to the Indonesian organisers' charities. The Epilogue aptly summarises the main arguments of the book through the prism of a final case study, a 1922 strike at government pawn shops.

Van der Meer's striking achievement in *Performing Power* is his relentless unveiling of Dutch elites' conscious ruminations on the best tactics for manufacturing consent as the preferable alternative to violence and coercion. As one newspaper editor put it in 1904, 'Payungs [ceremonial parasols] are cheaper than bayonets and less cruel' (63). The author also successfully challenges the orthodoxy that the demographic and cultural 'Europeanisation' of colonial society in the early twentieth century was caused by technological improvements to transport and communications that brought more white women to the Indies and connected colony with metropole. Van der Meer argues these were the symptoms and not the cause of the shift towards colonial rule by difference. Instead, the rising assertiveness of Indonesians in articulating their own desires and identities, often in opposition to colonial attempts to maintain the veneer of politeness in the gaining of consent, prompted major change. Europeanisation was thus a *reactionary* movement driven by anxiety over an increasingly querulous (and always more numerous) Indonesian population that demanded, in everyday discursive acts, that the state's legitimacy be based on racial equality and mutual respect between rulers and subjects. *Performing Power* thereby posits a fresh historical overview of colonialism and its contestation in Indonesia before independence.