

Matthijs Kuipers, *A Metropolitan History of the Dutch Empire: Popular Imperialism in The Netherlands, 1850-1940* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022, 232 pp., ISBN 9789463729918).

In 2021, the Netherlands appeared in international headlines when the Amsterdam Museum put on display the Golden Coach, a carriage used since the nineteenth century by the Dutch royal family and designed to glorify the wealth and power derived from colonial exploitation. As many racial justice activists averred, the rehabilitation of this colonial relic represented the long-deferred reckoning with the impact of colonialism on European hearts and minds. This recognition, that empire impacted not only colonies abroad but also sensibilities ‘at home’, lies at the heart of postcolonial studies and the ‘new imperial history,’ fields guided since the 1990s by the firm conviction that metropole and colony should be studied in a single analytic frame.

While scholars in these fields relocated the drama of colonial history away from battlefields and balance sheets and into decidedly cultural domains, investigations into the culture of empire in the metropole remain less numerous than their colonial counterparts. Matthijs Kuipers’ *A Metropolitan History of the Dutch Empire* is thus a useful intervention on this terrain. Nuancing the axiomatic claim that ‘indifference’ was the dominant attitude toward empire in the Netherlands, Kuipers reconstructs the uneven penetration of imperialism – overwhelmingly framed in relation to the Dutch East Indies – into metropolitan lifeways between 1850 and 1940. With Britain’s jingoistic celebration of empire serving as a key point of reference, Kuipers argues that the comparative absence of a single hegemonic culture of imperial pride in the Netherlands nevertheless had a productive effect. It served to create the very perception of a divide between metropole and colony against which postcolonial critics and historians would later write. In this sense, Kuipers’ achievement is to historicize the solidification of that paradigm.

The five chapters are organized around distinct cultural sites ostensibly ripe for demonstrations of imperial conceit. The first explores *rijsttafel* (‘rice table’), now a celebrated culinary tradition in the Netherlands but one met with greater ambivalence in the 1880s, when it gained popularity among a small cohort of European civil servants in The Hague. While these culinary activities might have been used for propagandistic ends, devotees often lamented the wider public’s lack of interest – despite the fact that foods, spices, cookbooks, and restaurants drawing inspiration from the Dutch East Indies appeared with greater frequency in the metropole after the turn of the century.

Not content to equate ‘the metropole’ merely with European perceptions of empire, Kuipers then tracks the sojourns of doctor Wim Tehupeiory (1883-1946), political dissident Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo (1886-1943), and cultural practitioner Raden Mas Jodjana (1896-1972) from the Dutch East Indies to the Netherlands to reveal how colonial subjects actively contributed to metropolitan cultures. Through brief biographies drawing upon letters, newspapers, and published sources, Kuipers spins a dense web of exchange, with figures like Tehupeiory – who studied medicine at the University of Amsterdam – embroiled in often paternalistic interactions with European Dutch people who lauded these accomplished individuals as proof of ‘native success’ (81). Political exiles such as Tjipto were outrightly critical of these objectifying attitudes, but also found in the metropole surprising solidarities and an opportunity for debate otherwise strictly prohibited in the colony (Dutch authorities feared Tjipto’s ability to mobilise anticolonial sentiment in the Dutch East Indies but were utterly unconcerned that Tjipto, who in exile addressed European Dutch audiences, would threaten colonial common sense). Though these actors confronted common attitudes of ignorance, racialized fetishization, and paternalism in the metropole, their ‘*Indisch* consciousness’ (115-116) was ultimately heterogeneous, with each actor representing a different stance toward imperial association, resistance, and assimilation.

The subsequent chapters explore areas of significant interest to colonial historians – schooling, scouting, and missionary work – to ask how imperialism featured in these cultural spheres. Relying on textbooks and pedagogical materials, Kuipers concludes that the Dutch empire received sporadic treatment in school curricula. While cursory lessons in colonial history and geography generated enough enthusiasm to spur a small percentage of graduates toward a career in civil service, imperial knowledge lay ‘dormant’ for the majority who did not (142, 120). Likewise, in contrast to the dubious celebration of colonial cultures in British scouting, in the Netherlands, a more ambiguous portrait emerged. While Dutch scouting rarely drew inspiration from subjugated populations to fashion European Dutch boys into ‘adventurous’ men, scouts from the Dutch East Indies were rendered conspicuously visible at the 1937 World Scout Jamboree and conscripted to perform an essentialized ethnicity *and* homage to the Dutch nation. Where appeals to empire appeared unevenly in schooling and scouting, popular events organized by Orthodox Protestant missionaries consistently mobilized representations of the Dutch East Indies as a site in need of Christian redemption. This portrayal of the colonies cast the Dutch Christian public as inspired emissaries of a revitalized Protestant nationalism at home and abroad.

Kuipers’ characterization of patchy imperial enthusiasm bears profoundly on questions of colonial memory today. In this respect, Kuipers’ study adds important historical pretext to a growing scholarly and popular

interest in the contemporary legacies of colonialism in the Netherlands. Contrary to frequent claims that the legacy of empire has been ‘forgotten’ in the erstwhile metropole, Kuipers proposes a novel rereading: that current controversies over colonial memory instead evince continuity with a ‘fragmented’ culture of popular imperialism handed down from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (213). Quite crucially, the seeming irrelevance of the empire to certain cultural spheres must not be conflated with insignificance. To the contrary, Kuipers argues that the absence of a single, hegemonic culture of popular imperialism advanced the imperial cause by making empire easily compatible with other divergent goals.

Probing apparent silences around imperial enthusiasm presents a number of methodological challenges for an historian, which Kuipers capably handles. Refuting the idea that absence is equivocal to disinterest, the author instead asks why some people came so loudly to proclaim that the Dutch public was indifferent – a passionate appeal that revealed, however paradoxically, precisely the opposite sentiment. And by including how subjects from the former Dutch East Indies themselves navigated and shaped the metropole, Kuipers destabilizes rather than reproduces the only ostensible divide between ‘metropole’ and ‘colony’. Indeed, highly impactful in the book’s fine-grained attention to issues such as the fledgling development of the Dutch education system, is the reminder that European metropolises rarely lived up to the image of self-assured power that they projected, if not consistently at home than certainly abroad.

A robust discussion on sources and method would have helped to underscore the author’s ingenuity in working with a scattered archive formed as much by what is present as what is not. With the most robust historiography on metropolitan cultures of empire, the British example looms large here. At times, however, the British comparison seems determining of the case studies selected, raising the question of whether other sites of cultural production could have been considered. A justification of the sources would also clarify the absence of the Caribbean colonies and its diaspora in this study – an occlusion explained as a limitation of the sources themselves. Yet in an effort to capture the breadth of cultural production, the author has drawn from an impressively heterogeneous source base that bears little self-evident unity. This suggests that other perspectives could have been fruitfully developed, such as the glancing mention of Surinamese anti-colonial critic Anton de Kom, who, like Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo, was exiled to the metropole. Nevertheless, by historicizing how notions of a strict metropole-colony divide emerged in the Netherlands, Kuipers’ study leaves us much better equipped to challenge other inherited paradigms that cleave the study of the Dutch empire.