

Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, ***Women, Work and Colonialism in the Netherlands and Java: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections, 1830-1940***. Palgrave Studies in Economic History (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 283 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-10528-0).

Recent studies about colonialism tend to focus on processes of knowledge production, racism, identity formation, and violence. These themes are to a large extent informed and defined by anxieties which emerged in post-colonial metropolises. At the same time, they are only loosely connected with debates in former colonies. This book brings us back to the basics of colonialism: economic exploitation. *Women, Work and Colonialism in the Netherlands and Java: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections, 1830-1940* is a milestone in the field of comparative social economic history. Supported by two prestigious advanced research grants from NWO and the European Research Council, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk organised an ambitious and complex research project in order to investigate the role of women and work in colonial Java and the Netherlands. Her book is remarkable in several respects. Her aim was not only to trace and compare historical trajectories of women's work in Java and the Netherlands from 1830 till 1940, but also to analyse their interconnectedness within the framework of the Dutch imperial economy. Neither this comparative angle nor the entangled perspective has been practiced so far. Her question is why the position of women in the labour markets in Java and the Netherlands changed over time and, more in particular, to what extent these changes can be explained by the fact that these markets were part of the same empire.

The way Van Nederveen Meerkerk unfolds her argument is exemplary. Based on a wealth of statistical data and a rich set of detailed household studies in both parts of the Dutch empire, her study starts by demonstrating that living conditions in rural Java and the agrarian economy of the Netherlands were rather similar at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, she accords particular attention to the fact that female economic participation in both regions was high. In both the colony and the 'motherland' the dominant ideology among policy makers proclaimed that economic growth should be stimulated by making the poor more industrious. This could be achieved by imposing taxes which would force the poor to seek (cheap) wage labour.

By 1940 the similarity between Java and the Netherlands in terms of female labour participation had disappeared. Due to rising levels of welfare in the Netherlands, more and more women tended to abandon wage labour

and became full-time housewives. In colonial Java, however, rural households were, out of sheer necessity, still dependent on the participation of women and children in the labour market. What caused this divergence? Due to the success of the Cultivation System (1830-1870) – an iconic example of effective socio-economic engineering – the flow of revenues from Java enabled the Dutch government to ease the burden of direct taxation of the poor and to increase the real wages of male workers in the Netherlands. Van Nederveen Meerkerk shows that this facilitated in the Netherlands – but not in Java – the rise of the male breadwinner, a process which was embedded in a discourse that confined women to the restrictive role of housewife. To explain the difference between Java and the Dutch metropole a new discourse was required, which was framed in terms of cultural differences between ‘East’ and ‘West’, in order to justify the continuation of female labour in ‘the East’.

Van Nederveen Meerkerk illustrates the interconnectedness of female participation in the labour market in colonial Java and the Netherlands by focusing on shifts in textile production. Due to increasing pressure on Javanese households to pay taxes and provide labour, time-consuming traditional weaving by women declined. Contrary to a persistent idea among scholars that local textile production disappeared altogether due to the import of cheap textiles from Europe, Van Nederveen Meerkerk shows a more complex picture. The profits from Java financed the rise of a textile industry in the Netherlands, which in turn exported semi-finished products (yarns) to Java. These then facilitated the production by Javanese women of woven and printed textiles for local markets.

The sketchy summary provided here does hardly any justice to the carefully constructed and nuanced chain of arguments which makes this book an instant classic in the field of comparative economic history. I have only one critical remark. Although the author is very careful in defining concepts such as work, and paid and unpaid labour, I miss a focus on the changing nature of households over time in Java. In the historical literature on nineteenth century rural Java the so-called *cacah* or *tjatjah*, or extended households including several kitchens and unmarried male workers (*num pang*), featured prominently, but not so in this book. Robert Elson and others have argued that the Cultivation System caused a sort of social levelling which must have had an impact on (the size of) households as reservoirs of labour.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps at first sight not central to the key questions regarding female labour participation which are central to this book, but the *contextual* changes in the composition of households must have had an impact on the position of women and therefore deserve more attention. This is, however,

1 Robert Edward Elson, *The End of the Peasantry in Southeast Asia. A Social and Economic History of*

*Peasant Livelihood, 1800-1990s* (London 1997).  
doi: <http://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25457-6>.

only a minor point. I want to congratulate the author for writing this book which deserves to be nominated for a prize and should, as Van Nederveen Meerkerk writes in the final paragraph, lead to a broader comparison of the interconnected histories of other European colonial empires.

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