



Edited by Susie Protschky

Photography, Modernity and the Governed in Late-colonial Indonesia

Amsterdam
University
Press

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Leiden, August 2014

Part I

Governing Lenses on Ethical Policy and Practice

1 Camera Ethica

Photography, modernity and the governed in late-colonial Indonesia

Susie Protschky

Camera Ethica: Re-envisioning a period of “ethical” colonial reform

“Ethical Policy” (*Ethische Politiek*) is the term frequently used by historians to indicate the suite of liberal-developmental reforms debated and implemented by Dutch colonial elites in early-twentieth-century Indonesia (c. 1901–42), then the Netherlands East Indies. The reforms have a well-established intellectual history in the Dutch-language literature, where their social and cultural trajectory has conventionally been traced through the words and texts of (mainly Dutch) elites.¹ Yet despite the Ethical Policy’s ideological resonance and temporal coincidence with other forms of European liberal imperialism – notably the “white man’s burden” of the Anglophone world and the French *mission civilisatrice* – the Dutch program in the Indies is little known outside a narrow specialist field.² This volume aims to revise current understandings of the Indies reforms by re-examining them through

1 Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten: Vijf studies over koloniaal denken en doen van Nederlanders in de Indonesische Archipel 1877–1942* (Utrecht: HES Publishers, 1981); Janny de Jong, *Van batig slot naar ereschuld: De discussie over de financiële verhouding tussen Nederland en Indië en de hervorming van de Nederlandse koloniale politiek 1860–1900* (The Hague: SDU, 1989); Marieke Bloembergen and Remco Raben, eds., *Het koloniale beschavingsoffensief: Wegen naar het nieuwe Indië, 1890–1950* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2009); Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, “Imperialism after the great wave: The Dutch case in the Netherlands Indies 1860–1914,” in *Liberal Imperialism in Europe*, ed. Matthew P. Fitzpatrick (Palgrave: New York, 2012), 25–46.

2 Scholars of the Ethical Policy have long noted a similarity between the Dutch reforms and other contemporary liberal imperialisms: Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten*, 183; De Jong, *Van batig slot naar ereschuld*, 290; Marieke Bloembergen and Remco Raben, “Wegen naar het nieuwe Indië, 1890–1950,” in *Het koloniale beschavingsoffensief: Wegen naar het nieuwe Indië, 1890–1950*, ed. Marieke Bloembergen and Remco Raben (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2009), 7–24 at 7. On the role of liberal political philosophies in furthering European expansion, see: Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005); David Long, “Liberalism, imperialism and empire,” *Studies in Political Economy* 78 (2006): 201–23; Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, “Particular or universal? Historicising liberal approaches to

a significant yet neglected photographic source base, and in the process to introduce the Ethical Policy to a wider community of scholars on European colonialism.

Specifically, the essays in this volume focus on the photographic works of the lower officials who implemented the policy “on the ground” and, importantly, the Indies people over whom colonial elites presumed to govern. In doing so, the contributors argue that the articulation, relevance and, ultimately, success or failure of the Ethical Policy was contingent on more than the moral, intellectual and political concerns of the Dutch elite who conceived and debated the reforms. Contests over the aims, nature and extent of the Ethical Policy, and competing visions of the kind of future it might bring, were formulated in the social and cultural realms of a larger, more diverse Indies population than extant studies have accounted for.

In two regards, photographs provide unique historical access to the various “life worlds” of Indies peoples from different classes, ethnicities, religions, genders and language backgrounds.³ First, the Ethical Policy commenced when photography began to circulate in the media and among amateur practitioners in the Netherlands Indies at an historically unprecedented range and volume following advancements to the camera, the image development process, and printing and reproduction technologies. Second, the key promises of the Ethical Policy to Indies people resonated uniquely with the qualities then associated with photography. Both suggested modernity, progress and civilisation, concepts that exasperate historians today for much the same reasons they have galvanised people in the past: because they evoke more than they define, and their meanings alter according to the claims that are made with them.

In a pattern that closely followed developments in Europe, the birthplace of the daguerreotype process in 1839, photography in the Netherlands Indies was initially accessible mainly to wealthy elites. When cameras were first used in the Indies in the early 1840s, Europeans working at the behest of colonial authorities were almost entirely responsible for the dissemination of photography in the archipelago.⁴ Photographers were craftsmen skilled

empire in Europe”, in *Liberal Imperialism in Europe*, ed. Matthew P. Fitzpatrick (Palgrave: New York, 2012), 1-24; Locher-Scholten, “Imperialism after the great wave”.

3 The term is taken from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 72.

4 Anneke Groeneveld, “Photography in aid of science: Making an inventory of the country and its population 1839-1920,” in *Toekang Potret: 100 Years of Photography in the Dutch Indies 1839-1939* (Amsterdam and Rotterdam: Fragment Uitgeverij/Museum voor Volkenkunde, 1989), 16-20; Paul Bijl, “Old, eternal, and future light in the Dutch East Indies: Colonial photographs