Nature conservation and cultural preservation in convergence: orang pendek and Papuans in colonial Indonesia

Robert Cribb, The Australian National University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/robert_cribb/41/
A Sea for Encounters
Essays Towards a Postcolonial Commonwealth

Edited by
Stella Borg Barthet

Amsterdam - New York, NY 2009
Nature Conservation and Cultural Preservation in Convergence
Orang Pendek and Papuans in Colonial Indonesia

ROBERT CRIBB

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Dutch colonial settlers in Indonesia grappled with the twin issues of nature conservation and cultural preservation. Although the management of natural resources and of cultural diversity had been key issues in colonial policy since the seventeenth century, the formulation of these issues as conservation/preservation was a feature of the twentieth century. This essay traces how these two formulations were recruited by the Dutch, and twined into each other, in an attempt to shape the political discourse in late-colonial Indonesia for the sake of sustaining colonial rule.

The modern trend in nature-conservation policy, which seeks to tie conservationist goals to private economic interests, is actually an old phenomenon. Since early times, one of the most powerful forces working in favour of the protection of vulnerable environments and at-risk species has been the power of political authorities to limit use of those environments and species to members of elites. This situation applied also in precolonial and early colonial Indonesia, where access to lucrative forest products—birds’ nests, deer, camphor and a host of other products of the tropical jungles and seas of the archipelago—was controlled either by royal edict or by powerful local communities, and later by the monopoly provisions of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC).

Cultural diversity in the early modern history of the archipelago was also a matter of instrumentalist public policy. Although the geographical extent of Javanese and Malay, the two main languages of the archipelago, reflects the political hegemony of a succession of Javanese and Malay states in Java and
the Melaka (Malacca) Straits regions respectively, there is no evidence that early rulers deliberately attempted to achieve cultural homogeneity in their domains. On the contrary, in fact, rulers typically preferred to work through community leaders who could then control their own small section of the population. Until VOC times, there was no such thing as a bureaucratic apparatus in the archipelago within which officials were transferred from one region to another and set to impose royal will on a succession of different peoples. Even the VOC, however, much preferred ethnic diversity, despite occasional hints at a mission civilisatrice. As a commercial power, the Company was not interested in administration or territorial control for its own sake. It sought hegemony over the archipelago for the sake of a relatively small number of products that it aimed to monopolize. For the rest, it was happy to leave the archipelago in the hands of traditional rulers as long as they did not offer support to other outside powers or attempt to infringe VOC monopolies themselves. Accordingly, the VOC made little effort to spread Christianity among its new subjects and little effort to teach them Dutch. Even in the nineteenth century, after the VOC had given way to formal colonial rule and when economic exploitation became more intense, the Dutch sought to maintain the traditional systems of authority of the archipelago, partly to mask the extent of their power, partly because they saw the authority of traditional rulers as the most effective tool for mobilizing labour to produce the crops they wanted for the European market.

Modernization began to come to the Indonesian archipelago early in the second half of the nineteenth century. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the rapid expansion of steam shipping drastically trimmed the time needed for communications with Europe and lowered the cost and other difficulties of carrying goods to and from the Indies. At the same time, in 1870, the Dutch government overturned the VOC monopoly system that had been inherited from the VOC and opened the colony to Western investment, especially in the plantation sector. The old Indies did not disappear, but the new policy, on the one hand, detached peasants from their former lords and took them into regimented plantation camps and, on the other, led to an unprecedented clearing of forest for the new enterprises. Growing commercial opportunities also contributed to population growth and to further clearing of land for new settlement. The old style of environmental protection and cultural conservatism began to erode.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, Dutch colonial practices became still more profoundly influenced by ideas of progress and development. The raft of policies which were adopted in this period are known collectively as the Ethical Policy, because they were inspired especially by a celebrated essay of the Dutch polemict W. van Deventer, who argued that the Netherlands had a "debt of honour" to the Indies for the vast wealth that had been extracted over the preceding centuries and that this debt ought to be repaid by investment in the welfare of the colony. The moral cast that Van Deventer's essay gave to this enterprise, which was endorsed by the Dutch queen in a symbolic speech at the beginning of the twentieth century, concealed the fact that the Ethical Policy was above all a highly planned programme of tropical development. Its central features were an expansion of education for the indigenous peoples of the colony, a programme of emigration from Java to other regions (both to relieve population pressure in Java and to insert Javanese as agents of development into other regions), and the application of new technology, initially and especially in agriculture and later on through industrialization. The Ethical Policy was accompanied by important political and social reforms, including a lifting of the comprehensive regulations that had restricted population movement and determined where people were permitted to live during the nineteenth century and a relaxation of the previously tight restrictions on political activity. At the same time, there was a major investment in public infrastructure, including roads and railways, town planning, and health care. It was also an era of vastly expanded scientific and social research intended to inform the colonial authorities better about the practicalities of tropical agriculture and about the daily life of the people they ruled. Typical for this era, the colonial capital, Batavia, finally shed its earlier reputation as the graveyard of Europeans and began to claim the title 'Queen of the East'.

The Ethical Policy was driven partly by an awareness in the Netherlands that there might be other ways of making a profit from the Indies than simply extracting agricultural produce at the lowest possible price; instead, a prosper-

2 Onderzoek naar de Mindere Welvaart der Inlandsche Bevolking van Java en Madura 12 vols (Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1905–49).
ous Indies might become a lucrative market for Dutch industrial products. The policy, however, also had a political dimension as the vehicle for an emerging meritocratic elite in the Netherlands. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Dutch society had begun the peaceful displacement of the old aristocracy that had dominated the country since the decline of the Dutch republic.

Until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, relatively few of those who made the long journey to the colony ever returned to Holland. The difficult journey, disease in the Indies, and the attraction of life as a colonial master combined to ensure that the Iedhvaar (voyage to the Indies) was mostly one-way. The Suez Canal and steam shipping abruptly transformed this situation. Not only, as has often been remarked before, did steamships bring increasing numbers of European women, whose presence profoundly changed the sexual dynamics of colonialism, but they carried back to Holland both a nouveau-riche class of trekkers (sojourners), whose colony-derived wealth bought them opulent houses on the best canals in Amsterdam and an aspiring class of technocrats, who sought to use their Indies experience to parlay positions in the emerging Dutch professional and administrative elite. Neither of these groups was revolutionary, but each of them was imbued with the idea of progress towards modernity. For the new bureaucratic-professional elite (the 'Ethici') in particular, a central issue was the place of the indigenous population in that modernity.

The plans of the Ethici offered little place to the traditional aristocracies that had been the central pillar of colonial rule in the nineteenth century. Rather than seeing those elites as the honoured bearers of traditional authority, the Ethici saw them as parasites, ignorant, corrupt, and exploitative. Instead, they looked forward to what they termed 'Association' (Associatie) or partnership with a new indigenous elite, which would be thoroughly Western in its command of technology and modern discourse but at the same time deeply familiar with colonial culture and realities. Without ever imagining that natives of the archipelago would play a significant role in metropolitan Dutch society, this new class was at least open to the possibility that some Indonesians would make that move. The consequence would be a new and integrated commonwealth of the Netherlands and the Indies, governed by a meritocracy that, although it might be recruited partly from the old elite in each region, would be defined primarily by its technical capacity and modern orientation.

This headlong rush into modernity generated a growing colonial anxiety, for two reasons. First, there was the simple nostalgia characteristic of early postmodernism, a feeling that the progressivism that had dominated the nineteenth century might actually be delivering humankind into a world of soulless, utilitarian uniformity. Fear of loss is a hallmark of late modernity. Whereas early modernity implies an enthusiastic discarding of the old — and this implication lives on in the frantic worlds of fashion and technical innovation — late modernity is marked by nostalgia and anticipated nostalgia, by a feeling that something valuable might have been lost, and that other valuable things are at risk, in a headlong rush towards the new, the improved and the latest. Late-modern nostalgia encompasses a vast range of social phenomena, from the aroma of home-baked bread and the taste of real ale to fine craftsmanship with words and the gentility of traditional courtship. It does not necessarily matter that the historicity of these perceptions of the past is often open to doubting the dissatisfaction of modernity seem to be dealt with most easily by reference to an idealized past.

Colonial conservation policies arose originally out of the same impulses that drove the Ethical Policy in general. That is to say, they represented a new application of modern science to the problems of sustainable development in the tropics. The earliest conservation measures protected birds and arose out of the growing realization that birds were an important means for the biological control of insect pests. In a move typical of this technocratic era, a Governor-General at one point asked a leading zoologist to determine the positive or negative economic value of all the bird species of the archipelago. By the 1920s, however, this instrumentalist approach had been supplemented by the nostalgic approach characteristic of late modernity. Colonial authorities and opinion leaders began to imagine regretfully the disappearance of what we opined leaders began to imagine regretfully the disappearance of what we opined leaders began to imagine regretfully the disappearance of what we once called signature or celebrity species from the flora and fauna, notably orangutans, rhinoceroses, elephants, Komodo dragons, and Rafflesia. By the end of the colonial era, even tigers and crocodiles, previously regarded as vermin on account of the danger they presented to human life, were given protection.

The anxiety that generated this anticipated nostalgia over the potential extinction of characteristic species of the archipelago had two important sources.
First, nature protection had become an element in the international claim of the Netherlands to authority over the Indonesian archipelago. Especially following the introduction of the League of Nations Mandate system for former German colonies after the First World War, there was a sense in international politics that colonial powers should be accountable for their performance in their colonies. The Westphalia system of national sovereignty was still virtually unchallenged in respect of the internal sovereignty of Western powers, but colonial policy was seen as having a somewhat broader context. One of the issues on which colonial powers were now judged was nature conservation. In fact, conservation had been an issue in international affairs since the late-nineteenth century, when concern over the hunting of herons for their feathers had prompted the first international conservationist campaign. The Netherlands felt unusually vulnerable to international norms in general because of the disparity between its own importance and the size of its colony. From the archipelago might be transferred to other colonial powers that might make the disparity between the Netherlands and the Netherlands Indies was no greater than the disparity between Britain and its empire, but Holland, as a minor European power, could be bullied in a way that Britain could not. From the late-nineteenth century, there had been speculation that various parts of the archipelago might be transferred to other colonial powers that might make better use of them. Maintaining a good record on nature conservation, therefore, was a matter of state importance. Second, as I have argued elsewhere, nature conservation provided a format with which the settler communities of the Indies – mainly Dutch and Dutch Eurasian but to some extent Chinese – could claim a superior attachment to and affection for the land over the claims of the indigenous people of the archipelago. Especially in the 1920s, there was a powerful discourse in which the natives were portrayed as callous and neglectful of the natural wealth of the archipelago, so that only the settlers could be relied upon to defend wild places from human beings.

Initially, the trajectory of cultural conservation in colonial Indonesia was somewhat different. As we have seen, the traditional colonial attitude to cultural diversity had been strictly instrumentalist: the different cultures of the archipelago were preserved because they were useful to the colonial state. Where they stood in the way of colonial interests – most famously in Banda in 1621, when the VOC exterminated the local population for standing in the way of a Dutch nutmeg monopoly – the colonial authorities were ruthless in doing away with local cultural forms. Nonetheless, the dominant Dutch view was that these forms were mostly very important, and virtually every discussion of colonial policy touched on the question of how policy changes might influence indigenous political, social, and cultural forms and about how those changes might be received.

The Association Idea that was linked with the Ethical Policy fundamentally rejected this approach to culture, arguing instead for the malleability of identity, so that the Dutch could come to "belong" in the Indies and natives could acquire the best of Western civilization and culture. During the 1920s, however, the Ethical Policy and the Association Idea began to erode. In the 1920s a nationalist movement suddenly emerged in the colony. Instead of aspiring to closer association with the Netherlands, the peoples of the archipelago began to talk of independence. This development was deeply disturbing to the Dutch. Despite the existence of mature, articulate nationalist movements in the Philippines, India, and China, hardly anyone in the colony had imagined the possibility of a similar development in the Indies. The authorities responded with restriction and repression, as one might expect – they jailed or exiled leaders whom they regarded as troublemakers, they promoted division within the movement, they established a secret police which both collected clandestine intelligence on nationalist activities as a way of forestalling action and ostentatiously intimidated nationalisits by monitoring meetings and occasionally breaking up demonstrations.

The Dutch, however, were acutely aware of the need to develop a discourse to resist the nationalist claims. Especially in the aftermath of the US President Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points," which promised self-determination for subject peoples, and in the face of accusations such as Soewardi Soerjangnrat's powerful essay "If I were a Dutchman," the Dutch needed a set of arguments to resist the nationalist claim. Unwilling to contemplate giving up the Indies, the Dutch turned to a discourse containing two key elements: first, that indigenous culture made Indonesians unsuited to modernity, so that the Dutch would need to be in the archipelago forever in order to ensure the welfare of its people; and second, that the all-encompassing Indo-

9 See Archief Ministerie van Kolonien, verbaal 1.9.1908 no.62, Nederlandsche Vereeniging tot Bescherhing van Dienen to Minister of Colonies 31 Dec. 1906 and 30 May 1908; AMK verbaal 22.5.1909 no.51, A3 (Eerste bureau): "Internationale regeling tot voorkoming van de uitroeving van siervogels, met name van paradisvogels," n.d.

12 Soewardi, like many Indonesians, was deeply offended in 1945 when the Dutch organized festivities in the colony to celebrate the centenary of Holland's liberation from Napoleonic rule. "If I were a Dutchman," he wrote, "I would not organize an independence celebration in a country where the independence of the people has been stolen."
nesian identity which nationalists had asserted at a national youth congress in Batavia in 1928 was a fraud and that the cultural diversity of the archipelago meant that only the Dutch could rule impartially and fairly.

The most powerful intellectual form of the culture-against-modernity argument was the doctrine of the dual economy, formulated by J.H. Boeke, according to which Indonesians were not motivated by the classic Western intention to maximize advantage but instead were simply content with 'enough'. As Boeke wrote,

On Java the irrigation has however reached its limits and the results have dis­appointed the expectations of those who saw in this a means of increasing the prosperity of the farmers. The agrarian population merely reacted to this soil improvement by an increase which at best left every one’s share in the augment­ed product what it had been before.

Enquiries by Huender and Mejier Rannefi in the early 1920s reflected and supported growing opinion that little sign of change was to be seen in the eco­nomic activities of the Javanese peasantry. Towards the end of the colonial era a long-standing advocate of the welfare services was reported to have exclaimed in despair: “As soon as we withdraw our hands, everything sinks back into the marsh.”

Boeke’s reinstatement of culture as a key element in understanding how to govern the Indies was a desperate resort, but it was reinforced in a somewhat more enthusiastic manner by the development of culture-based tourism in Indonesia in the 1920s. Modern tourism had begun in the Netherlands Indies in the first decade of the century and grew rapidly after the authorities granted foreigners freedom to travel anywhere on Java and Madura in 1911, and in the Outer Islands in 1916. Initially, however, sites of natural beauty and natural-history interest dominated the tourist itinerary, incidentally providing a further materialist incentive to introduce nature-conservation measures in the

---

14 Willem Huender, Overzicht van den Economischen Toestand der Indone­sische Bevolking van Java en Madura (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1922), and J.W. Mejier Rannefi & W. Huender, Onderzoek naar den Belastingdrank op de Inlandsche Bevolking (Welt­evreden: Landsdrukkerij, 1926).
16 See Broeks, Het Recht tot Wonen en tot Reizen in Nederlandsch-Indië, 184–204.

---

18 Locations expressing colonial modernity, such as the garden city of Bandung, were also very much on the itinerary.
20 The Romance of the East, the Comfort of the West in Java (Batavia: Travelers Official Information Bureau, c.1931).
21 Ironically, outside observers of Indonesia have persistently questioned the reality of an Indonesian identity ever since independence. This questioning has involved significant historical distortion (notably portraying a series of rebellions in the 1950s as secessionist, when in fact they aimed to capture and change the central government) as well as a weakly grounded argument that Indonesia is a Javanese empire. I have argued that this scepticism about the reality of Indonesia (in contrast to China or India) arises partly from a curiously powerful but irrational belief that islands do not belong together naturally. See Robert Cribb, ‘Not the Next Yugoslavia: Prospects for the Disintegration of Indonesia,’ Australian Jour­nal of International Affairs 53:2 (1999): 169–76.
pelago for three centuries. The first unambiguously nationalist organization, the Indische Partij (Indies Party), was a coalition of radical Indonesians hostile to the feudal elements in their own culture and educated Indo-Europeans who resisted their exclusion from political authority by the Netherlands-born elite. Sociologically, the Eurasians closely resembled the ‘Filipinos’, the mestizo elite of the Spanish colony who had felt a deep antagonism to the dominant peninsulares from Iberia and who had made common cause with the indigenous people against colonialism. The Indische elite in colonial Indonesia probably never had the same potential to spearhead an anticolonial revolution as had the Filipino elite, because the mainly Christian Indische elite was separated by religion from predominantly Muslim mass of the population. Nonetheless, the Dutch authorities were deeply conscious of the parallel with the Philippines. They rapidly and ruthlessly destroyed the Indische Partij as a radical organization and, more important, portrayed the Indo-Europeans as dangerous exploiters of the indigenous population. This same rhetoric was deployed also against the Chinese of the Indies and against the small Western-educated indigenous elite.

This strategy also involved identifying communities in the Indies who needed more than the usual degree of protection. The two most important communities in this category were the Balinese and the Papuans. The Hindu culture of the Balinese was a reminder of earlier times when large parts of the western archipelago had adopted aspects of Indian culture, but to the Dutch Bali was not so much a relic of the past as a symbol of cultural otherness, a place in which life was infused with artistry and ritual in a way that was now entirely lost in the West. Despite the island's history of slavery, sharp caste differences, and destructive warfare, for most of the Dutch it was paradise on earth and they had no doubt that protecting it forever from the intrusion of modernity would be a service to the Balinese. The position of the Papuans was somewhat different. 'Papuans' (papoeas) was a term, always verging on the derogatory, for the indigenous Melanesian inhabitants of the western half of the island of New Guinea. Although the coastal regions of New Guinea had been involved in the complex world of commerce linking the Indonesian archipelago to the rest of Asia and to Europe and Africa, a Dutch colonial presence had begun to impinge on the island only towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the inland mountainous regions of the island had remained largely isolated from the outside world. In both the Dutch and Australian parts of the island, Westerners were still making first contact with isolated communities well into the 1930s. The issue of special protection for Papuans arose first in the context of the hunting of birds-of-paradise, which reached boom proportions early in the twentieth century because of a fashion for using their pelts to decorate ladies’ hats. As Indonesian hunters pushed deeper into the jungle in search of the birds, local Dutch officials reported that they brought with them firearms, alcohol, and sexually transmitted diseases, all of which led to serious social disruption in hitherto isolated societies. "The fact that there are any people left in New Guinea is certainly no thanks to the bird trade," commented an assistant resident as early as 1906. Indonesia’s resource economy had experienced other booms – trepang (bèche-de-mer in the fifteenth-sixteenth century, pepper in the eighteenth) – and on each occasion the lure of quick profits from a commodity suddenly grown valuable led both to significant environmental damage and to extensive social disruption. The bird of paradise boom was unprecedented, however, in prompting government intervention for the sake of both environmental protection and social stability.

Initially, protection of the Papuans took the form of simply restricting hunting. Gradually, however, the idea developed of creating special reserves within which the Papuans, especially the so-called Bergpapoeas (mountain Papuans) could preserve their existence unspoilt by the outside world. In 1937, the Netherlands Commission for International Nature Protection (Nederlands Commissie voor Internationale Natuurbescherming) commissioned a "Report of the investigation into the possibility of protecting primitive inhabitants, specifically the Mountain Papuans of Netherlands New Guinea." The report opened with the following observation:

Appreciation of unspoilt nature is steadily growing in modern society, as is the desire to maintain and protect it, where possible. Alongside the protection of fauna and flora in an original landscape, in more times, primitive humans have also attracted more attention than before. [...] Those who aim here and there to preserve unspoilt nature, value the original population as an intrinsic part of the landscape. Colonial governments now ask sooner and more often what the fate of these inhabitants is to be, if they are brought suddenly and without transition or guidance into contact with the modern world.


Having considered the possibility of permanently confining the Mountain Papians to their traditional existence in what they described as "a kind of open-air museum for primitive people," the report went on to set out its preferred position:

Another opinion rejects in principle the right of the government to deny any population group its right to progress and to doom them to remain "wild," as museum objects. Such a separation could only be maintained by force. Humans, even the most primitive, are not animals with no aspirations. These primitives are people, who want to advance, for whom every higher culture is strongly attractive, as experience has shown; they seek such cultures by every means possible, not always the wisest. No Papuan will be happy with a stone tool once he has discovered iron ones and can obtain them. From there the path leads steadily upwards to sewing machines, gramophones, and radios, not to mention alcohol and firearms.

With this basic principle set out, however, the report went on to recommend a strict control on immigration into Dutch New Guinea, restrictions on economic development and on the outer manifestations of civilization such as the wearing of clothes, and the establishment of a population reserve (bevolkingsreservaat) for the most primitive peoples of the mountainous interior. The only proviso which softened these proposed measures was the argument that they should not be intended as permanent.

This discussion contains hints of the modern discourse which identifies indigenous peoples as having special rights in their own territories, but the central elements of the argument were that these humans were an integral part of an unspoilt ecosystem which should be preserved, and that the main risk to the conservation of individual species was to prevent them from being hunted, for hunting had been the proximate cause of the best-known extinctions and near-extinctions which had occurred in the course of nature conservation. This shift took place in the context of the emergence of ecology as a discipline. Whereas once it had seemed that the only measure needed to protect a species from extinction was to prevent it from being hunted, for hunting had been the proximate cause of the best-known extinctions and near-extinctions which had drawn international attention—quaggas, blue antelopes, great auk, passenger pigeons, and American bison. The failure of late attempts to preserve the passenger pigeon, however, led to an appreciation of the interdependence of species within an ecosystem and of the consequent need to preserve whole habitats. The report of the NCIN foreshadowed the much later dramatic abandonment of classical German exclusionist conservation in favour of strategies recognizing local peoples as being an integral part of the environment. The motive force in this case, however, was not scientific advance or nature conservation but, rather, the counter-nationalist discourse that different groups of people in the Netherlands Indies had to be kept apart to avoid undesirable social consequences. The discourse of colonial conservation—that local human beings were the problem and that they needed to be kept away from endangered wildlife—was extended almost effortlessly to keep other people away from the Papians.

The ecological argument was also important because it enabled the Dutch to avoid compromising their own claim of attachment to the land by adopting a discourse that tied Papians to the land ecologically rather than spiritually. There was no hint in the NCIN report of a Papuan spirituality associated with the land; rather, the language was reminiscent of the exuberant talk about flora and fauna observers about spectacular animal species. Indeed, the terms of the report reinforced the Dutch claim to be the only people in the Indies with a true appreciation of the natural environment.

In singling out the Papians for protection in this manner, however, the Dutch realized that they were on shaky ground in terms of racism. Race had played an ambiguous part in the history of the Netherlands Indies. Formal racism reached its peak in the early-twentieth century with the introduction of a classification system in which the inhabitants of the Indies were determined to be "European," "Native" (Inlander) or "Foreign Oriental" (Vreemde Oosterling). This classification determined, above all, one's rights and duties in personal law (marriage, inheritance etc.). It also provided a basis for discrimination in salaries (natives could be paid less than Europeans because it was cheaper to maintain a native lifestyle than a European one) and it underpinned the pivotal place of indigenous aristocracies in the colonial order. The central administrative corps of the Netherlands Indies, the Binnenlandsch Bestuur (Interior Administration), was segregated into an Inlandsch Bestuur (Native Administration) staffed entirely by indigenous aristocracies encouraged by the Dutch to play the part of petty kings and sultans as a basic tool of Dutch hegemony, and a European Administration, to which no native could ever be admitted, because that would eventually entail native commoners standing hierarchically over indigenous aristocrats.

Despite these features of the colonial system, rigid racialism was subdued. Classification was a matter of paternity, not appearance, so that the European
category included mixed-race Indo-Europeans (Eurasians), who were not formally distinguished from other Europeans. Legal assimilation (gelijkstellung) was possible for those who changed their culture or who had some commercial reason to need a different race. And there were few public signs of race-based apartheid. As soon as the system was in place, moreover, it came under pressure: the Japanese became 'Europeans' in 1899, the Turks and Siamese in the 1920s. The main obstacle to doing away with the system was its intimate link with the role of the indigenous aristocracies and the law, in force since 1870, that natives could not dispose of land to non-natives, which grew in the late-colonial period to symbolize the determination of the Dutch authorities to prevent simple natives from being deceived out of their lands by clever Indo-Europeans, Chinese, and native intellectuals.

Because of the stubborn persistence of racism throughout the twentieth century, we tend to forget that institutional racism was increasingly unacceptable in global affairs even in the first half of the twentieth century. Just as the Dutch felt pressure to conform to global norms in conservation, they also felt pressure to do away with formal racial classification and to replace it with its durable modern successor, discrimination on the basis of nationality.

In 1932, in the context of this colonial counter-nationalist discourse, the metropolitan and colonial Dutch press published a flurry of articles about what they called an 'orang pendek', reported from the upland jungles of Kerinci in south central Sumatra.26 The name 'orang pendek' is Malay and means 'short' (pendek) person (orang).27 "Orang" is the standard neutral Malay word for 'person' and was a component in the common Sumatran aristocratic title orang kaya ('rich person'). Although the word also appeared in the name of the great ape, the orangutan ('person of the forest'), the local Malays also commonly used the term 'mias' or 'mawas' for that animal. The use of 'orang' in this context therefore suggested something that might very possibly be human. And indeed, the residents of the Indies were accustomed to the existence of reclusive forest communities who shunned all contact with the outside world. The Badui in West Java were well known by reputation for keeping the outside world at a distance, while even closer to the reported homeland of the orang pendek were the Kubu, a community known especially for their practice of 'silent barter': they would leave forest products for trade essentials such as salt next to the forest products before withdrawing in turn. Traders would then arrive and in turn leave offerings as salt next to the forest products before withdrawing in turn.

The Kubu would then return and, if they found the traders' offers acceptable, would take the offered goods and return to their jungle fastnesses.

Despite these examples and the use of the word orang, however, what was described seemed to be something fundamentally different from human beings. The reports described a reclusive stocky creature with tawny hair that walked on its hind legs on the jungle floor. It did not appear to have clothing or tools, though according to some reports it constructed temporary shelters from branches and leaves in much the same way as the orangutan and it spoke an unknown language. It fed on small animals of the jungle floor. Most of all, beneath a mass of hair, its face was almost hairless, facial features seemed to be less than human: a low forehead, a depressed nose and a prominent eye mask beneath a mane of hair, its face was almost hairless, facial features seemed to be less than human: a low forehead, a depressed nose and a prominent eye mask beneath a mane of hair.

The 1932 reports were not the first account of a mysterious man-like creature in the region. William Marsden had reported such stories in the early nineteenth century and there have been many reports in more recent times.28 It has been said that the orang pendek is one of the cryptids (animal species whose existence has been reported but never verified) most likely to exist.29 The plausibility of claims that the orang pendek exists has been boosted recently by the discovery of remarkably recent (18,000 years old) remains of a previously unknown hominin, Homo floresiensis (sometimes flippantly referred to as the 'Hobbit'), on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores and by the revelation that local people tell stories which seem to recount the extermination of these people at some stage within the last five thousand years.

The idea that scientists might discover a living 'missing link' between humans and apes was a perennially intriguing source of popular scientific speculation in the first half of the twentieth century. The possibility spoke with particular force in the Netherlands Indies because, in the era before the great discoveries of early humans in Africa, the island of Java was considered one of the most likely sites for the origin of human kind. Eugene Dubois' discovery of Java Man, a million years old, at Sangiran in Central Java seemed


27 Other names for the creature were orang lejo or leco, and orang gugu.

28 For the classic study of evidence concerning the orang pendek, see Bernard Heuvelman, On the Track of Unknown Animals (original French edition 1955; London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962); recent popular accounts of efforts to trace it include Sam Powell, 'Primate Suspect,' The Australian Magazine (28 February–1 March 1998): 17–24.

29 Marsden was secretary at the Residence at Berkoelen in Sumatra, and the author of an edition of Marco Polo's travels (1818) in which he notes the existence of the hairless orang kubu. See also Richard Freeman, 'In Search of Orang-pendek,' Fortean Times http://www.forteanitimes.com/articles/682_orang-pendek.html
to mark the island as the home of humanity. Why, therefore, could neighboring Sumatra not be the home of the missing link?

The great apes, particularly the orangutan, have been repeatedly used as a mirror to humankind in a variety of ways, to emphasize both our animal and our human natures, and it is hardly surprising that reports of the orang pendek gave rise to public reflection on these issues. How much more fascinating than a great ape was the possibility of a living creature which might prove to be even closer to humanity, if it could be shown not to be a bear, a gibbon, an orangutan or a hoax.

Although Frances Gouda, in her study of Dutch colonial culture in the first half of the twentieth century, believes she has found signs of some willingness among Dutch commentators to see the orang pendek as proof that the native population of the archipelago was derived from a more primitive stem of human development whose defective evolutionary achievement justified colonial rule, the more striking and far more common response to the orang pendek reports was to affirm the humanity of the native population. That is to say, the orang pendek remained a beast. A Dutch planter who reported encountering the orang pendek while out hunting in 1923 commented that he could not bring himself to shoot the creature because it looked so human. "I suddenly felt that I was going to commit murder," he reported. Like a human being, but not actually human. The discourse was repeated in most descriptions of the orang pendek, with two strong implications. First, the Dutchman who failed to shoot thereby demonstrated his own higher human qualities. Shooting the orang pendek would not have been a crime -- everyone knew that -- and this was a man who hunted for sport. Yet his own sensitivity held their lives intertwine in any way, positive or negative, with those of the orang.

The Dutch neatly reinforced the culturalist arguments that ethnic groups of the western part of the archipelago and clearly vulnerable to the sudden intrusion of the modern world, provided an ideal case. Arguments closely analogous to those in favour of nature conservation were then marshalled to turn this discourse into a concrete policy proposal. The apparent discovery of a new species of human in the Sumatran jungles, the orang pendek, would seem at first to have lent itself to a racist colonial discourse in which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. Therefore, the Dutch neatly reinforced the culturalist arguments that ethnic groups of the western part of the archipelago and clearly vulnerable to the sudden intrusion of the modern world, provided an ideal case. Arguments closely analogous to those in favour of nature conservation were then marshalled to turn this discourse into a concrete policy proposal. The apparent discovery of a new species of human in the Sumatran jungles, the orang pendek, would seem at first to have lent itself to a racist colonial discourse in which the species boundary between orangutan, orang pendek, and real orang (people) would be blurred. The reports of the orang pendek, however, had the reverse effect: so similar were the orang pendek to humans that the distinction which could be allowed to blur between tigers, rhinoceros, and even orangutan and human beings could not be permitted in this new case. Instead, the descriptions of the orang pendek which were offered to the public emphasized the difference and detachment of Indonesians from their environment.

WORKS CITED

Archief Ministerie van Koloniën, verbaal 3.9.1908 no.62, Nederlandsche Vereeniging tot Bescherming van Dieren to Minister of Colonies 31 Dec. 1906 and 30 May 1908; AMK verbaal 22.5.1909 no.51, A3 (Erstdere buren): "Internationale regeling tot voor­

koming van de uitoering van siervogels, met name van paradisavogels," nd.


92.


De "Orang Lejo" en de "Orang Pendek." Kolonial Weekblad 52.19 (12 May 1932): 219, 221.

Doorn, Jacques van. The Engineers and the Colonial System: Technocratic Tendencies in the Dutch East Indies (Rotterdam: CASP, 1982).


Plaatfföer [J.M. Plaete Fëbury], Java: Guide Book for Batavia and the Vicinity (Welt­kroniek: Vereniging Toeristenverkeer [c.1910]).


The Romance of the East, the Comfort of the West in Java Sumatra Bali (Batavia: Travellers Official Information Bureau, [c.1931]).


