

Magazine

Best Story; The Book That Killed Colonialism

By PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER APRIL 18, 1999

About 50 years ago, at a diplomatic reception in London, one man stood out: he was short by European standards, and thin, and he wore a black fezlike hat over his white hair. From his mouth came an unending cloud of aromatic smoke that permeated the reception hall. This man was Agus Salim, the Republic of Indonesia's first Ambassador to Great Britain. Referred to in his country as the Grand Old Man, Salim was among the first generation of Indonesians to have received a Western education. In this regard, he was a rare species, for at the end of Dutch hegemony over Indonesia in 1943, no more than 3.5 percent of the country's population could read or write.

Not surprisingly, Salim's appearance and demeanor -- not to mention the strange smell of his cigarettes -- quickly turned him into the center of attention. One gentleman put into words the question that was on everyone's lips: "What is that thing you're smoking, sir?"

"That, your excellency," Agus Salim is reported to have said, "is the reason for which the West conquered the world!" In fact he was smoking a kretek, an Indonesian cigarette spiced with clove, which for centuries was one of the world's most sought-after spices.

Is my tale about an Indonesian at the court of King James the greatest story of the millennium? Certainly not, though I must smile at the irreverence shown by my countryman. I include it here because it touches on what I would argue are the two most important "processes" of this millennium: the search for spices by Western countries, which brought alien nations and cultures into contact with one another for the first time; and the expansion of educational opportunities,

which returned to the colonized peoples of the world a right they had been forced to forfeit under Western colonization -- the right to determine their own futures.

The latter process is exemplified by what is now an almost unknown literary work: "Max Havelaar, or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company," a novel by Eduard Douwes Dekker, a Dutchman, which he published in 1859 under the pseudonym Multatuli (Latin for "I have suffered greatly"). The book recounts the experiences of one Max Havelaar, an idealistic Dutch colonial official in Java. In the story, Havelaar encounters -- and then rebels against -- the system of forced cultivation imposed on Indonesia's peasants by the Dutch Government.

D. H. Lawrence, in his introduction to the 1927 English translation of the novel, called it a most "irritating" work. "On the surface, 'Max Havelaar' is a tract or a pamphlet very much in the same line as 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" Lawrence wrote. "Instead of 'pity the poor Negro slave' we have 'pity the poor oppressed Javanese'; with the same urgent appeal for legislation, for the Government to do something about it. Well, the [American] Government did do something about Negro slaves, and 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' fell out of date. The Netherlands Government is also said to have done something in Java for the poor, on the strength of Multatuli's book. So that 'Max Havelaar' became a back number."

Before telling you more about "Max Havelaar" and its author, I would like to go back in time, even before the start of the present millennium, to tell you about the search for spices. The key word to remember here is "religion."

For hundreds of years, spices -- clove, nutmeg and pepper -- were the primary cause of religious conflict. Their value was inestimable: as food preservative (essential in the age before refrigeration), as medicine and, at a time when the variety of food was almost unfathomably limited, for taste.

In A.D. 711, Moorish forces conquered Cordoba in southern Spain. By 756, the Muslim ruler Abdar Rahman proclaimed that he had achieved his goal of spreading Islamic culture and trade throughout Spain. That country became the world's center for the study of science and the guardian of Greek and Roman learning that had been banned by the Roman Catholic Church. By controlling the land on both sides of the entrance to the Mediterranean, the Moors were also able to maintain control over trade with the East, source of spices and other important goods. Christian ships were not allowed to pass.

For several centuries, the development of the Christian countries of Europe came to a virtual standstill; all available human and economic resources were being poured into the Crusades. The Holy Wars were waged not just to reclaim Jerusalem but also to expel the Moors from Spain and, in so doing, gain control over the spice trade.

In 1236, the Catholic forces of Europe finally succeeded. Islam was pushed from Europe. To their credit, the victors refrained from vandalizing symbols of Moorish heritage. Nonetheless, revenge toward Islam continued to burn -- as did the passion to drive Muslim forces from any country they reached.

The first place to fall was Ceuta in Morocco, on Africa's north coast, which, together with Gibraltar, has always served as the gateway to the Mediterranean. With this, the Europeans had established an important toehold in wresting control of the spice trade. The problem was, they had little idea where spices actually came from.

Spain and Portugal, Europe's two great seafaring nations of the time, set out to find the answer. To preserve order among Catholic countries, a line of demarcation was drawn (later made official by Pope Alexander VI in 1493), giving Spain the right to conquer all non-Christian lands to the west of the Cape Verde Islands, and Portugal the authority to take pagan countries to the east of the islands and as far as the 125th meridian (which falls near the Philippines). It was for this reason that Columbus, helmsman for the Spanish fleet, sailed west and found a continent instead of the source of spices. Portugal, on the other hand, sent its ships eastward to Africa, from which they returned laden with gold, ostrich eggs and slaves -- but no spices.

In early 1498, Vasco da Gama reached the island of Madagascar, off the coast of east Africa. There he found a guide to lead him across the Indian Ocean to the port of Calicut in southwestern India. Arriving on May 20, da Gama "discovered" India. Unfortunately for the weary sailor, he also found that of the spices he sought, only cinnamon was in abundance. To reach the true source of spices, he would have to sail thousands of miles southeast to what is now known as Indonesia and then on to the Moluccas (located, incidentally, in Spain's half of the world). Over the next century, the Portuguese forged their way southeast, consolidating Muslim-held trade routes and converting souls along the way. By the time da Gama's ships made it to the Moluccas in the middle of the 16th

century, Africa, the Indian subcontinent and Malaya had all been subjugated in the name of both trade and Christ.

Other travelers had visited the region before -- including Marco Polo -- but it was the Portuguese who established the first permanent foreign presence. With the help of handheld firearms, Portugal quickly spread its power across the archipelago. In no time, the country controlled the spice route from beginning to end.

There was a problem, though. Portugal lacked the population required to support a maritime force capable of controlling half the non-Catholic world. As a result, it was forced to hire sailors from Germany, France and especially the Netherlands. This weakness would eventually spell the downfall of its monopoly in the spice trade.

One Dutch sailor in the Portuguese fleet, Jan Huygen van Linschoten, made extensive notes during his six years of travel throughout the archipelago. He paid particular attention to the weaknesses of his employers. Portugal, not surprisingly, had done its best to mask its vulnerabilities, but all these were exposed in 1596, when van Linschoten returned home and published a book, "A Journey, or Sailing to Portugal India or East India." The book -- a virtual travel guide to the region -- was quickly translated into French, English, German and Latin.

Two years after van Linschoten's work was published, the Netherlands, through a consortium of Dutch companies, sent its own fleet to Indonesia. The Dutch fleet's first attempt failed, but gradually, wave after wave of Dutch ships reached the islands, driving out the Portuguese and bringing untold wealth to the Netherlands. Lacking not only manpower but also the diplomatic stature to protect its interests, the Portuguese were unable even to put up a fight.

In part, the success of the Dutch can be attributed to their good working relationship with Java's powerful feudal lords and to their professionalism. Initially at least, they had come to trade, not to conquer / and on that basis created what was then the largest maritime emporium in the world at its seat in Batavia (now Jakarta).

Over time, however, the Dutch shippers needed military force to safeguard their monopoly. To keep international market prices high, they also limited spice

production. For this reason, almost the entire populace of the Banda Islands, source of nutmeg, was exterminated in the early 17th century. The island was then stocked with European employees of the company. For field workers they brought in slaves and prisoners of war.

Also for the purpose of controlling spice production, people from the Moluccas were forcibly conscripted, placed in an armada of traditional Moluccan boats and sent off to destroy competitors' nutmeg and clove estates. Buru Island, where I was a political prisoner from 1969 to 1979, was turned from an island of agricultural estates into a vast savanna.

Let us now fast forward to the mid-19th century. As a result of the Napoleonic and Java wars, the Netherlands and the East Indies had entered an economic downturn. Sugar, coffee, tea and indigo had replaced spices as the archipelago's cash crops, but with increased domestic production and limited purchasing power abroad, they were becoming increasingly unprofitable for the Dutch consortium. To replenish profits, the Governor General, J. van den Bosch, decided that the Government must be able to guarantee long-term property rights for investors and that a fixed supply of crops should be exported every year.

To that end, van den Bosch put into effect on Java a system of forced cultivation, known as *cultuurstelsel*, in which farmers were obliged to surrender a portion of production from their land to the colonial Government. Through this plan, the Government was able to reverse the Netherlands' economic decline in just three years. Java, however, was turned into an agricultural sweatshop. In addition to surrendering land for Government-designated production, paying high taxes to the Dutch and "tithes" to local overlords, peasants were forbidden by law to move away from their hometowns. When famine hit or crops failed, there was literally no way out. As a result, tens of thousands of peasants died of hunger. Meanwhile, Dutch authorities and feudal lords grew richer by the day.

On Oct. 13, 1859, in Brussels, Eduard Douwes Dekker, a former employee of the Dutch Indies Government, finished "Max Havelaar." Concern for the impact of the colonial policies on the Indonesian people had marked the career of Dekker, who originally studied to be a minister. When he was posted in North Sumatra, he defended a village chief who had been tortured, and unwittingly found himself on the opposite side of a courtroom from his superior. As a result, he was transferred to West Sumatra, where he protested the Government's efforts

to incite ethnic rivalry. Before long, he was called back to Batavia. Only his writing skills saved him from getting the sack entirely. After a few more bumpy stops, Dekker wound up in West Java. It was there, when Dekker was 29, that his disillusionment came to a head and he resigned. Judging from his autobiographical novel, we can assume he wrote the Governor General something like this: "Your Excellency has sanctioned: The system of abuse of authority, of robbery and murder, under which the humble Javanese groans, and it is that I complain about. Your Excellency, there is blood on the pieces of silver you have saved from salary you have earned thus!" He returned to Europe -- not to the Netherlands, but to Belgium, where he poured his experiences into "Max Havelaar."

Dekker's style is far from refined. In depicting the *cultuurstelsel* he writes: "The Government compels the worker to grow on his land what pleases it; it punishes him when he sells the crop so produced to anyone else but it; and it fixes the price it pays him. The cost of transport to Europe, via a privileged trading company, is high. The money given to the Chiefs to encourage them swells the purchase price further, and . . . since, after all, the entire business must yield a profit, this profit can be made in no other way than by paying the Javanese just enough to keep him from starving. Famine? In rich, fertile, blessed Java? Yes, reader. Only a few years ago, whole districts died of starvation. Mothers offered their children for sale to obtain food. Mothers ate their children."

The publication of "Max Havelaar" in 1859 was nothing less than earth-shaking. Just as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" gave ammunition to the American abolitionist movement, "Max Havelaar" became the weapon for a growing liberal movement in the Netherlands, which fought to bring about reform in Indonesia. Helped by "Max Havelaar," the energized liberal movement was able to shame the Dutch Government into creating a new policy known as the ethical policy, the major goals of which were to promote irrigation, interisland migration and education in the Dutch Indies.

The impact of the reforms was modest at first. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, a small number of Indonesians, primarily the children of traditional rulers, were beginning to feel their effects. One of them was Agus Salim, the man with the clove cigarette, whose reading of "Max Havelaar" in school proved an awakening. He, along with other Indonesians educated in

Dutch, fostered a movement for emancipation and freedom, which eventually led, in the 1940's, to full-scale revolution.

The Indonesian revolution not only gave birth to a new country, it also sparked the call for revolution in Africa, which in turn awakened ever more of the world's colonized peoples and signaled the end of European colonial domination. Perhaps, in a sense, it could be no other way. After all, wasn't the world colonized by Europe because of Indonesia's Spice Islands? One could say that it was Indonesia's destiny to initiate the decolonization process.

To Multatuli -- Eduard Douwes Dekkera whose work sparked this process, this world owes a great debt.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer article on millennium's best story cites 1859 novel by Dutchman Eduard Douwes Dekker, published under pseudonym Multatuli, as book that killed Dutch colonialism in Indonesia; traces colonialism to Western pursuit of spices; holds educational reforms inspired by book fostered revolution against colonialism; photo (M).
Best Story; The Book That Killed Colonialism. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/18/magazine/best-story-the-book-that-killed-colonialism.html>. Advertisement. Continue reading the main story. Supported by. Continue reading the main story. Best Story; The Book That Killed Colonialism. By Pramoedya Ananta Toer. April 18, 1999. Themes related to colonialism and its effects are explored by science fiction and fantasy authors as well as historians, because those genres offer fertile ground for experimentation with the laws of reality and human behavior. It's important to note, however, that there is a difference between colonialism and imperialism, although not all of the titles on this list fall strictly into the camp of addressing one or the other. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy offers further definition to the term 'colonialism'.
Midnight's Children tells the story of Saleem Sinai, who was born at the precise moment of India's independence. He is one of 1,001 children born in the midnight hour, all of whom have special gifts and are telepathically connected with Saleem. So the book was published. And here the story takes yet another turn. For although van Lennep had found a publisher, he was in a dilemma. He had a political as well as a literary life and feared repercussions.
Most controversial of all however is his attitude to Colonialism. He may have been largely responsible for starting the anti-colonialist movement but many people have suggested that he was not in fact anti-colonialist and Dekker himself distanced himself from the movement. Bouda Etemad from the universities of Geneva and Lausanne has pointed out that although he criticised the abuses of the system he never actual contested the validity of the principle of colonial surplus.