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The Colonial Table: Food, Culture and Dutch Identity in Colonial Indonesia

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This article examines some of the ways in which colonial identities were constructed and maintained with reference to food and eating in the Netherlands Indies (colonial Indonesia) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It argues that food was an important focus for the cultural performance of Europeanness among colonists with aspirations to European status. Specific notions of class and race informed these social performances, and degrees of competence distinguished between eaters. To eat 'European' often meant publicly avoiding Indonesian dishes, even if they were enjoyed privately, and learning to appreciate foods from 'home'. Class and cultural identity intersected with race at the colonial table.

In European as well as Asian histories, eating has functioned as a cultural activity that produces and reproduces social differentiations and reflects historical and cultural specificities. In colonial contexts, eating was one of the most profound and regular ways that Europeans might be forced to engage with (indeed, consume) the foreign cultures that they had transplanted themselves into. In the Netherlands Indies (colonial Indonesia), the colonial table was not simply a site of exchange between European and Asian foodways, but one at which Dutch colonists reflected upon, developed and sometimes attempted to regulate what it meant to be European.

Food as an issue for scholarly consideration has long been of interest to anthropologists and historians, and is attracting growing attention within colonial studies, notably among scholars of British India.[1] However, few historians to date have looked to the Netherlands Indies as an alternative case study.[2] This paper is intended to unite the significant literature that treats the construction of racial and class categories in the Netherlands Indies with a better understanding of how affiliations and cultural identities were expressed in daily lives.

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[1] See, for example, the excellent work on British India by Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (London, 2005).

[2] Important exceptions include Onghokham's pieces on *rijsttafel* and *tempe* in *The Thugs, the Curtain Thief, and the Sugar Lord: Power, Politics and Culture in Colonial Java* (Jakarta, 2003); Adel P. den Hartog, "Acceptance of milk products in Southeast Asia: The case of Indonesia as a traditional non-dairying region" in Katarzyna Cwiertka and Boudewijn Walraven, eds, *Asian Food: The Global and the Local* (Honolulu, 2001) — a case study of the long-term impact of Dutch food preferences on Indonesian diets; and in the same volume, a study of how colonial foodways have travelled into the post-colonial age by Anneke H. van Otterloo, "Chinese and Indonesian restaurants and the taste for exotic food in the Netherlands". See also Elsbeth Locher-Scholten's short study of colonial consumption and modernity, "Summer dresses and canned food: European women and western lifestyles in the Indies, 1900-1942" in Henk Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia* (Leiden, 1997).

The current study focuses on Java in the Netherlands Indies during the late colonial period, roughly between 1880 and 1942, a time when race became an important component of cultural and political life in Europe and in Asia. The late nineteenth century saw the rise of eugenics as a scientific discipline and a growing emphasis in official circles (both in Europe and throughout the imperial world) on race as a differentiator between ruler and ruled, colonist and colonised.[3] In the specific context of the Netherlands Indies, these broader developments coincided with significant demographic and legislative changes that saw an ideal model of white bourgeois domesticity transplanted onto a colonial society with an altogether different texture and history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Dutch possessions in the Netherlands Indies were governed by agents of the United East India Company (VOC, or *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*), "European" society comprised a largely male enclave that was closely tied to local Asian communities through intermarriage and concubinage.[4] In 1800 the VOC was dissolved for financial reasons and the Dutch state assumed formal governance of the Indies. Thereafter the expansion of Dutch control in the region was pursued with vigour by the colonial state, beginning with the hinterlands of Java and continuing with forays into the "Outer Islands", which were developed in the late nineteenth century by commercial mining and agricultural concerns. Java, however, remained the centre of colonial gravity, both in political and cultural terms: the capital, Batavia, was here, and throughout the colonial period the highest concentration of Europeans was to be found on this island.

Centuries of intermarriage between Dutch and Javanese (or Sundanese, from the west of the island) had created a distinctively hybrid culture, one where language, costume, food and family were a blend of European and Asian traditions. It was the short-lived British administration, presided over by Thomas Stamford Raffles between 1811 and 1816, that struck the first blow to this social arrangement.[5] The British enforced greater distance between ruler and ruled on Java, just as they were advocating in India, and their Dutch successors in the Indies eventually followed suit.[6] By the late nineteenth century, the weight of colonial legislation was thrown behind attempts to keep "Europeans" and "Natives" officially separate: a vexed issue, given the persistence of intermarriage and concubinage (where Dutch men took Asian women as "housekeepers" and sexual partners). In 1925, almost one-third of Europeans in the Netherlands Indies still chose Native or Eurasian spouses. In 1940, this proportion was still around one-fifth of the total European population and in the 1930s, only around

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[3] On the significance of eugenic discourses in the Netherlands Indies, see Ann Laura Stoler, "Making empire respectable: The politics of race and sexual morality in 20th century colonial cultures" in Jan Breman, ed., *Imperial Monkey Business: Racial Supremacy in Social Darwinist Theory and Colonial Practice* (Amsterdam, 1990). For a broader discussion of race as a pervasive component of culture, politics and economic life in late nineteenth-century Europe, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and London, 1995).

[4] Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison, Wis., 1983), Chs. 1-3.

[5] This interregnum was imposed on the Netherlands Indies while the British decided how to respond to the ill-fated Dutch "alliance" (not entirely voluntary) with France during the Napoleonic wars. It was ultimately decided that the Dutch would retain the Indies (and Melaka) as colonial possessions. Other Dutch colonies, stretching from South Africa to the Malay Peninsula, were ceded to the British.

[6] For a discussion of the effect of British rule on colonial society in Java, see Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia*, Ch. 4. For a treatment of shifting cultural attitudes and official policies toward social mixing and intermarriage in British India, see E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c 1800-1947* (Cambridge, 2001).

one-third of "Europeans" (people with legal European-equivalent status) had even been born in Europe.[7] This occurred despite an unprecedented influx of European women to the Indies from the late nineteenth century onward, partly as a result of advances in international transport (the advent of steamships and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869). The colonial state threw its legislative weight behind the engineering of a white ruling class whose affiliations would be European and bourgeois (even if its historical lineage was somewhat more hybrid). In 1884 "suitability for European society" was one of the criteria for establishing claims to European-equivalent status, a legal category that bestowed privileged treatment in civil and criminal matters (not to mention in employment opportunities) relative to those of Native status.[8] The performance of Europeaness, then, became a crucial indicator of membership in elite colonial society.

Being seen to eat the "wrong" kind of food, or in an improper manner, was one of the behaviours that could exclude a colonist from this privileged faction.[9] Food and eating were therefore linked to the exercise of power, which was, in turn, embedded in notions surrounding race, class and cultural identity. Popular media and sources from within the sphere of high culture afford an insight into this nexus of associations, since they suggest what Dutch colonists on Java may have done and thought on matters of food etiquette. Research encompassing oral histories, such as the work recently conducted by Joost Coté and Loes Westerbeek, Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, also presents valuable insights into the way in which food seems to linger (in very different ways) in living Dutch and Indonesian memories of the colonial era.[10]

My aim in using these sources is not simply to identify and describe the contours of a discourse on food in Dutch colonial culture, but to take up the challenge posed by recent scholarship, notably that conducted by Ann Laura Stoler, to identify the cultural work that these discourses performed for colonial society.[11] If, as is widely accepted among colonial historians, so much of European comment on empires was less pertinent to a real understanding of Asian societies and more properly reflective of colonial assumptions, ideals and aspirations, then perhaps we should, as Stoler recommends, turn our attention specifically to how Europeans imagined themselves in the colonies.[12] Such an analysis proposes a unity of field between Europe and its empires. It sees the two develop concurrently, not just in their economic relations with one another but also in their cultural and political formations.[13] Recent work suggests

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[7] Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900-1942* (Amsterdam, 1995), p. 165.

[8] Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's 'History of Sexuality' and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham and London, 1995), p. 116.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] See the "Interviews" in Joost Coté and Loes Westerbeek, eds, *Recalling the Indies: Colonial Culture & Postcolonial Identities* (Amsterdam, 2005), and an oral history study by Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, "Memory-work in Java: A cautionary tale" in Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2002).

[11] "What work do such statements perform?" Stoler has asked of how discourses on race and sexuality in the Netherlands Indies function in the title chapter of her book, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p. 46.

[12] Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, p. 99.

[13] See, for example, Robert Gregg, "Apropros exceptionalism: Imperial location and comparative histories of South Africa and the United States" in *idem*, *Inside Out, Outside In: Essays in Comparative History* (London and New York, 2000).

that European notions of race, class and gender did not follow a developmental trajectory separate from the colonies.[14] Nor did exchange between the two spheres proceed in a unilateral fashion. Europe's sense of itself developed in tandem and consultation with its agents in the colonies. Views about what made Europeans "European" — and what differentiated them not only from Asians but from one another — were often embedded within ideas about what made Europeans imperialists, some more able-bodied than others.

In the Netherlands Indies during the late colonial period, public discussions about private lives were extraordinarily profuse. The home and its occupants — fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, their children, and the servants — were subject to growing scrutiny on the part of the colonial state from the late nineteenth century onward. Defining who was European, as we have seen, was decided by law but informed by cultural affiliation and social connections. By the 1890s it was not enough to *look* white or to have a Dutch father, particularly for women, whose nationality was ultimately contingent on whom they married.[15] Women therefore had the most to lose when it came to performing Europeaness. Equally, however, men could not maintain a public or private European identity without reference to the women with whom they had relations or shared a household.[16]

In the late colonial period there was an abiding tension in Dutch colonial society between maintaining the culture and dignity of the "real" Dutch; showing that one was a capable colonist, which required familiarity with Indies culture and connections with local people; and distinguishing oneself from the natives. At the colonial table, this difficulty might manifest itself in a tension between preserving natal foodways (*biefstuk*, vegetables and potatoes); demonstrating an understanding of Indies society (knowing not to expect pork from a Muslim-Javanese butcher, for example); and behaving as befitted a colonial ruling class (putting on a grand *rijsttafel* perhaps). Negotiating these boundaries was sometimes treacherous. To learn the performance of appropriate eating, however, was crucial to the recognition of a European identity in the Indies.

Eating as Cultural Performance: Food and Colonial Identity

Food, Class and Learning how to Consume

Just as the ruling classes of Asia and Europe had historically distinguished themselves from their subjects by the way in which they feasted,[17] the Dutch differentiated

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[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100. See also Stoler, "Rethinking colonial categories" in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p. 24.

[15] As mentioned above, an 1884 statute ruled that to gain European-equivalent status required a demonstration of suitability for European society, which included having been brought up as a European in European surroundings *and* demonstrating an inability to live in Native society: Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, p. 116. In the same volume, see Stoler's discussion of how appearance alone was deemed to "poorly index" "internal traits, psychological dispositions, and moral essence": pp. 133-4. See also Stoler's title chapter in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p. 43; and in the same volume, "Sexual affronts and racial frontiers", p. 84. On state and public interest in private lives see Stoler, "Genealogies of the intimate" in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p. 6.

[16] Stoler, "Carnal knowledge and imperial power", pp. 55, 68.

[17] See Roy Strong, *Feast: A History of Grand Eating* (London, 2003) for an excellent and entertaining recent history of feasting in European history. Onghokham also notes a history of elite eating in Europe (see his *The Thugs, the Curtain Thief, and the Sugar Lord*, pp. 315-16), but insists that Indonesian meals have always been egalitarian — an inaccurate generalisation. R.E. Elson has been more careful, in his description of the foodways of early nineteenth century Java, to note that simple

themselves as a colonial ruling class in the Indies by developing new ways of eating that drew upon both European and Asian traditions but resulted in a new food culture.

One victual that the Dutch considered beneath them in the late colonial period was *tempe*, a soybean product popular on Java. The eminent Chinese-Indonesian scholar Onghokham considered tempe to be "democratic" because it was and is eaten on Java by both rich and poor.[18] His interpretation of tempe represents a modern idealisation of a food that was sometimes maligned up until recently. Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, urged independent citizens to "not become a nation of tempe [eaters]" *because* he regarded it as a sign of commonness.[19] In this regard, his views were very much in keeping with those of the colonial ruling class, who regarded tempe as a native food that ought to be kept out of Dutch kitchens and Europeans mouths.

Oral history projects frequently unearth memories that confirm the existence of taboo foods in colonial culture. One study cites a Javanese woman who had worked as a servant in a Dutch colonial household. She recalled how the children secretly avoided their parents' admonishments against tempe by eating it furtively in the kitchen, observed only by the cook.[20] Another more recent study tells of how Dutch children were sometimes forbidden from going to outdoor stalls (*warung*) or markets for snacks because the food here was thought to be unsafe, or because eating in the street (as many Indonesians did) was thought to be uncouth.[21] One Dutch interviewee recalled that her father "maintained himself very Dutch […] he wanted to have nothing to do with Indisch food like tempé".[22] The memoir of Marguerite Schenkhuizen, a Eurasian woman raised as a European in the Indies, corroborates the necessity of "keeping up appearances". She cites the example of her brother-in-law, a naval officer, who loved street food but could not be seen buying from vendors. A solution was found in the form of visits to his sister-in-law (Schenkhuizen), whose family were more than happy to sample the delights of stall-holders, but who were "careful to eat in the backyard, away from prying eyes". [23]

The *rijsttafel* ("rice table" — many dishes served with a rice centrepiece) developed as a prominent symbol of colonial eating in the Indies, in opposition to such lowly commoner foods as tempe. On the one hand, the *rijsttafel* represented a historical continuation of European interaction with native culture in the Indies, in that the dishes served were more or less derived from Indonesian cooking practices. Rice had often

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habits held specifically for ordinary Javanese (peasants): R.E. Elson, "Aspects of peasant life in early 19th century Java" in David P. Chandler and M.C. Ricklefs, eds, *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indonesia: Essays in Honour of Professor J.D. Legge* (Clayton, Vic., 1986), p. 58. Further, seventeenth-century European accounts of feasts in the court of the great Islamic ruler of Aceh (Sumatra), Sultan Iskandar Muda, noted hundreds of dishes being served on plates of precious metal: see Anthony Reid, "Elephants and water in the feasting of seventeenth-century Aceh" in *An Indonesian Frontier: Acehnese and Other Histories of Sumatra* (Singapore, 2005), p. 126. Today, middle-class Indonesians retain cooks and other servants, and eat out in restaurants — luxuries that many poorer Indonesians cannot afford.

[18] Onghokham, *The Thugs, the Curtain Thief, and the Sugar Lord*, p. 302.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 307.

[20] Stoler and Strassler, "Memory-work in Java", p. 199.

[21] "Interviews" in *Recalling the Indies*: Mrs Sch., p. 118; Mrs K., p. 121.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 123. *Indisch* means "of the Indies", and can refer either to Eurasians or to people of Dutch origin whose customs were a hybrid of European and Indonesian traditions. It is used in a pejorative sense here, but this is not always its meaning.

[23] Marguerite Schenkhuizen, *Memoirs of an Indo Woman: Twentieth-Century Life in the East Indies and Abroad* (Athens, Ohio, 1993), p. 156.

been considered an inappropriate food for colonists because it was the staple of the Asian masses. To eat rice Europeans therefore had to distinguish themselves from Asian commoners by making its consumption a great occasion.[24] The varied and intricate dishes and condiments that comprised a *rijsttafel* were a labour-intensive affair that often involved several cooks and a procession of servants, and also took a long time to consume. While a modest *rijsttafel* might consist of "only" six dishes, the grander version amounted to a luxurious feast, one that was eaten in particular places associated with elite Dutch culture, notably the steamships that brought Europeans to the Indies and the hotels that were scattered through major colonial cities. It was also served in many colonial homes, often on Sundays or at dinner parties, or, curiously, as a precursor to a European main course.[25] (One can only imagine the effort required for such a feat.)

Rijsttafel evolved into a meal associated primarily with the colonial ruling class because, apart from festival occasions, ordinary Indonesians did not eat on such a scale, restricting themselves more typically to one dish (often of vegetables) with rice.[26] European preferences also determined further variations from the local idiom. The Dutch *rijsttafel* was consumed hot, whereas Javanese diners (according to Onghokham) often prefer their food cold or tepid.[27] The colonial insistence on serving fried bananas with the *rijsttafel* also diverged from Javanese concepts of a grand meal. The Dutch loved bananas, which were considered a common fruit by the Javanese because they were available all year round; only luxury seasonal fruits were prepared as special dishes.[28] The Dutch also drank beer with their rijstttafel — an alcoholic beverage that Muslim Javanese would have rejected.[29] When hosting Dutch visitors, Javanese elites often made a point of putting *rijsttafel* on the menu, which suggests that this particular mode of serving food came to be seen among indigenous elites as a peculiarly Dutch habit.[30]

Ironically, in the Netherlands and Europe the *rijsttafel* came to be seen as a peculiarly *colonial* habit, one that Dutch people living on the Continent sought to distance themselves from. In European caricatures, the Dutch had historically been depicted as "guzzlers and sozzlers, as imposingly broad as they were dauntingly tall".[31] Their reputation for hard drinking among their European fellows had an historical

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[24] Onghokham, *The Thugs, the Curtain Thief, and the Sugar Lord*, p. 319.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 312-17. For an account of *rijsttafel* being served aboard a steamship travelling to the Indies in the early twentieth century, see Augusta de Wit, *Java: Facts and Fancies* (Singapore, 1989) [First published 1912], pp. 20-3. De Wit notes with pride her adaptation to the spiciness of Indonesian food, with the qualification that "that first meal was a shock". For an account of *rijsttafel* being served as an entrée to a European course, see Schenkhuizen, *Memoirs of an Indo Woman*, p. 92. Schenkhuizen also made regular mention of *rijsttafel* being eaten at home, often with guests, both in the Indies and in California, where her family eventually settles: pp. 147, 219.

[26] In Indonesia, the exceptions are religious feasts, where many dishes are presented and eaten with rice. Balinese ceremonies are a famous case in point, but Javanese Muslim festivals and *selametans* also often involve feasting.

[27] Onghokham, *The Thugs, the Curtain Thief, and the Sugar Lord*, p. 311.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 313.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 314.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 318.

[31] Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London, 1991) [First published 1987], p. 152.

lineage that was traceable to the 1500s, if not further back.[32] This image of themselves worried the Dutch as early as the seventeenth century, when fears over the effects of gluttony on the body (and the body politic) were articulated in the context of a Dutch Republic emerging as a powerful economic force in Europe with an expanding overseas merchant empire. Dutch moralists thought foreign foods from VOC outposts dangerous, particularly Brazilian sugar and East Indian spices, "with their heady fragrance and pagan origin".[33] At home, the diametrically opposed Fat and Thin kitchens — the former representing excess and transient earthly pleasures, the latter frugality and pious discipline — were a strong theme in Golden Age painting.[34] Images of a simple life that navigated the extremes of "privation and excess" found their apogee in the *banketjestukken* (breakfast pieces) of still-life painters working in the 1620s and 1630s. These painters depicted meals of bread, herring and ale, "all assembled with exquisite economy, both of hue and composition".[35] Even in the late nineteenth century, such foods were eaten by poor Dutch people as well as their wealthier counterparts.[36] In the late colonial Netherlands Indies, by contrast, the *rijsttafel* was increasingly associated with sensual overindulgence, with moral laxity, and with a departure from an idealised sense of historical Dutch frugality. Cartoon caricatures from the Indies press made fun of colonials who suffered the "horrors of digestion" after a hefty *rijsttafel*.[37] One such example — of a cartoon from a 1935 issue of an Indies periodical called *D'Orient* — shows an enthusiastic Dutch visitor to the Indies overcome by his first experience of a *rijsttafel*, to the extent where he is "too full" to complete his cartoon sketch.[38] Anglo-Indians returned to London in the late colonial period were similarly lampooned in English literature and theatre as greedy types with eccentric tastes cultivated in India.[39]

Colonial medical texts from the early twentieth century recommended that Europeans living in the tropics adopt a regime of exercise and an "abstemious diet" to counter the deleterious effects of an indulgent lifestyle.[40] The gluttonous practices of

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[32] *Ibid.*, p. 190. Indeed, brewing was a staple of the Dutch economy, and Holland was central to the European wine trade during the seventeenth century: p. 193.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 165. The pineapple, apparently, was also cause for suspicion. Being of tropical origin, it was feared that it carried beri-beri and other intestinal diseases from the East: p. 171.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 153. For a good example, see the Jan Steen painting on p. 154.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 160. The pleasures of eating were not entirely absent from such tableaux — Schama notes that foods were often shown partially eaten: p. 161. One presumes this was not just to afford the artist the pleasure of describing the transection of a halved lemon. See also Julie Berger Hochstrasser, "Feasting the eye: Painting and reality in the seventeenth-century 'Bancketje'", in Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek, eds, *Still-Life Painting from the Netherlands 1550-1720* (Amsterdam and Zwolle, 1999).

[36] *Ibid.*, p 163. See also Jozien Jobse-Van Putten, *Eenvoudig maar Voedzaam: Cultuurgeschiedenis van de Dagelijkse Maaltijd in Nederland* ("Simple but Nourishing: A Cultural History of the Daily Meal in the Netherlands") (Amsterdam, 1995), p. 259. Here the author states that the bread-based meal, for instance, remained a staple for "all social classes" in the second half of the nineteenth century, even if wealthier households could afford meat.

[37] The phrase "horrors of digestion" is here taken from the amusing title of an eighteenth-century caricature of the English Prince Regent by James Gilray, "A Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion" (London, 1792): see the front cover illustration of Timothy Morton, ed., *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

[38] The Indies cartoon was by "Billy Cam" and appeared in *D'Orient*, 24 December 1935: reproduced in Joop van den Berg, *Zo was Indië 1850-1950* (Luitingh, 1976), p. 97.

[39] Collingham, *Curry*, p. 130.

[40] Stoler, "Making empire respectable", pp. 55, 59.

old colonials were increasingly frowned upon, particularly in the context of the late nineteenth century shift (in official circles and in popular culture) toward more rigid definitions of what it meant to be "European" in the Netherlands Indies.

Race and Consumption: Indisch Foodways and the Problematic of Staying Dutch in the Tropics

Fictional sources from the late colonial period provide some evidence for the notion of eating as a significant component of the performance of Europeanness in the Indies. Such sources suggest that choices about food and eating communicated differences *within* the ranks of European society in the Indies, as well as *between* Europeans and Asians. Those fictional characters whose food preferences and eating habits failed to express a consistent or sincere cultural affiliation with Europe were subject to scrutiny and ridicule, and their status as "genuine" Europeans was brought into question.

Two late colonial examples serve to illustrate this. Both were originally published in Dutch but have since been translated into several languages, including English, and are therefore accessible to a wider audience of historians who are interested in colonial literature. Both also play on the tensions in a hybrid society, where "European" families often contained Asian relatives, and with many members who had never set foot on Dutch soil; and where elite status was increasingly signified by one set of cultural tastes and preferences — those of Europe.

P.A. Daum's *Ups and Downs of Life in the Indies* (1890) was written in such a context. Daum (1850-98) was himself a Dutchman born on Java. Here he worked as a journalist and editor on several Dutch-language newspapers, criticising government intervention in what he considered to be matters of private enterprise during a time when colonial censorship of dissent was punitive. Indeed, Daum was imprisoned several times for publishing contentious views.[41] Like many other colonial writers, therefore, Daum was positioned somewhat tangentially to the mainstream of his society[42] — a trait that made for vitriolic writing. His novels were often based on real events and were popular in his time, but fell into oblivion after his death and were not revived again until the 1960s.[43]

Ups and Downs concerns itself with the unhappy fate of a Dutch planter named Geber who marries into a prominent colonial family on Java. Geber's young wife is Rose Uhlstra, a girl from a wealthy, respected Dutch family with strong *Indisch* ("of the Indies") roots, including a living Javanese grandmother. Geber is charmed by Rose's good looks and flirtatious nature, but she quickly disappoints any further expectations: her interests are unsophisticated, confined principally to local events and the dramas surrounding marriage, children, and family feuds. Geber quickly tires of her and revives a forbidden interest in an old flame, Clara Lugtens, the Dutch wife of a friend and business associate. Both parties are dissatisfied with their marital lives:

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[41] See Gerard Termorshuizen, "P.A. Daum on colonial life in Batavia" in Kees Grijns and Peter J.M. Nas, eds, *Jakarta-Batavia: Sociocultural Essays* (Leiden, 2000), p. 127. See also E.M. Beekman's "Introduction" to the English-language edition of P.A. Daum, *Ups and Downs of Life in the Indies* (Singapore, 1999), pp. 1-2.

[42] Other scholars who have noted this feature of Dutch colonial literature include Rob Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies: A History of Dutch Colonial Literature* (Amherst, Mass., 1982), p. xxvi; E.M. Beekman, *Troubled Pleasures: Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 7-8

[43] Rob Nieuwenhuys notes that some characters in *Ups and Downs* were based on real people recognisable to Daum's contemporaries in the Indies: Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies*, p. 117. See also Beekman, "Introduction" to *Ups and Downs*, pp. 3, 38.

Clara's husband is cold, stern and avaricious, and does not fulfil her emotionally; Geber's wife is fickle, provincial, and prone to histrionics, and cannot satisfy him intellectually. The two become careless in pursuit of their illicit relationship, and narrowly escape bringing shame upon their families before deciding to end the affair. Faced with the prospect of a tedious marriage and unsympathetic friends, Geber becomes increasingly despondent and, finally, commits suicide.

Part tragedy and part satire, Daum's novel was an indictment of the hypocrisy and parochialism that defined colonial society in the Indies. Geber and Clara are both portrayed as characters of superior sensitivity and sophistication, whose worldliness and vibrancy are oppressed by the narrow interests of their spouses and, to some extent, their friends. For Geber, issues of cultural identity punctuate this difference, namely his disdain for Rose's *Indisch* traits. To Geber, Rose seems almost to assume the European status of her family as a costume, one that amuses her and brings prestige but that ultimately fails to express her true identity. The Uhlstra family's wealth has accustomed Rose to imported consumer luxuries from Europe, but she constantly reverts to the simpler preferences that mark her out as *Indisch*, including her taste for Javanese food:

> Rose couldn't see a fashion magazine without writing to Paris for a new outfit, and yet she lived month after month in nothing more than a *sarong* and *kabaja*. It was the same with everything. While she hardly ever ate anything except rice with *sambal*, some dried meat, and native fruit, her *gudang* was chockfull with the best quality cans which, stacked up, covered entire walls as if in a *toko*.[44]

When Geber and Rose decide to host a party as a belated celebration of their marriage, his wife's extravagant pretensions become too much for Geber. "Why don't you feed them rice with fish too", Rose retorts when Geber recommends restraint in the preparations. To which he replies: "I know some people who'd like that much better than canned pheasant."[45] Rose's display of conspicuous consumption is derided as an affectation by Geber because of what he views as her inconsistencies: her outward proclamation of European tastes is not equalled by her private preferences, which are for Javanese foods and *Indisch* habits.

A similar exposition of the discrepancies between European and *Indisch* identities, and between private and public personas, occurs in *The Ten Thousand Things* (1955) by Maria Dermoût. The novel is included as colonial literature here, despite the time in which it was published (five years after Indonesian independence from Dutch rule), because of the way in which it revived the colonial past and in recognition of the fact that Dermoût wrote from personal experience. Dermoût (1888-1961), like Daum, was born in the Indies and spent a large part of her life there. Her great-grandfather, a sea captain in the VOC, had been the first in the family to settle in the archipelago.[46] Dermoût published her debut novel relatively late in life, at the age of 63: after she had returned to the Netherlands, the Republic of Indonesia had been formed, and her

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[44] P.A. Daum, *Ups and Downs of Life in the Indies* (Singapore, 1999) [First published 1890], p. 125. *Sarong/Sarung* is a wrap skirt; *kabaya/kebaya* is a long blouse; *sambal* is a condiment, usually spicy; *gudang* is a storeroom or pantry; *toko* is a grocery store.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[46] Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies*, pp. 255-6.

husband had passed away.[47] *The Ten Thousand Things* was her second novel, and was highly acclaimed in the Netherlands.[48]

The Ten Thousand Things concerns itself with the declining fortunes of an old Indisch family on Ambon in Maluku (or "the Moluccas", in older texts) — the site of the fabled spice islands and one of the oldest regions of European settlement in the Indies. Dermoût herself had spent the four years before the First World War on Ambon. The family described in her novel were once great spice growers and later, on Java, sugar barons, but financial crises and extravagances had reduced them to almost nothing. The novel focuses on Felicia, a woman estranged from unsympathetic and squandering parents, and who has been abandoned by her fortune-seeking husband. She is left alone in Europe with her young son Himpies and decides to return to her family's remaining property in the Indies, a spice garden tended by her grandmother. The family Van Kleintje ("from the small garden", referring to their patch of earth on Ambon) are all Dutch, but their long history as spice growers has made them *Indisch*, particularly the grandmother.

Himpies' recollections of Europe are few, and he therefore thinks of Ambon as his home. His grandmother teaches him indigenous folklore and nurtures Himpies' appreciation for the natural world around him. Felicia's concern as he grows older is that her son will lose appreciation for his Dutch heritage and thereby sacrifice the economic, social and political advantages that accrue to Europeans in the Indies (and in Europe). When he reaches adolescence, Felicia comes to a decision that was commonly made by the parents of European children in the late colonial period: her son is to complete his education in Holland, a place that he cannot remember. When Himpies protests, Felicia responds thus:

> Are you too indolent to study? Oh, I know, you'd rather stay and hang around the Small Garden. Be a little Indo man in pyjama pants and *kebaya*, sell eggs and milk, and spices that no-one wants to buy anymore! Look out for a woman with some money, certainly […] otherwise a plate of sago porridge and a fish from the bay, is that what you want?[49]

For Felicia, the fear that Himpies will become *verindisched* — an identity expressed through costume but also, importantly, through food preferences — would be the final blow to the obliteration of her family's status and her son's prospects in the Indies and Europe. Financially ruined and geographically marginalised, racial status (the performance of Europeanness) is the only security left to the last generation of her family. As Ann Laura Stoler has eloquently stated: "Skin shade was too ambiguous. Bank accounts were mercurial. Religious belief and education were crucial markers but never clear enough. Social and legal standing derived from the cultural prism through which colour was viewed."[50] Though a cultural reality, "Eurasian", let us remember, was not a legal category in the Netherlands Indies: one had to be either European or Native in the late colonial period during which this novel was set.[51] Himpies' preferences therefore placed him in a dangerously ambiguous legal position, particularly in the absence of a European father. When he points out to his mother that

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[47] Johan van der Woude, *Maria Dermoût: De Vrouw en de Schrjfster* ("Maria Dermoût The Woman and the Writer") ('s-Gravenhage, 1973), p. 70; Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies*, pp. 255-6.
[48] Beekman, *Troubled Pleasures*, pp. 483, 485.
[49] Maria Dermoût, *De Tienduizend Dingen* ("The Ten Thousand Things") (Amsterdam, 1959) [First published 1955], p. 85.
[50] Stoler, "Carnal knowledge", in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p. 43.
[51] Stoler, "Sexual affronts", in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p. 90.

they do not eat "fish from the bay", it is immaterial: Felicia has made her point and, more importantly, has her way. Himpies goes to Europe for his education.

Like Daum's novel, Dermoût's *Ten Thousand Things* ends in tragedy. Himpies' identification with his homeland (Ambon) is strong, and he returns to the Indies after his schooling — as a soldier in the colonial army (the KNIL, or *Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger*). Soon after, he is killed on assignment by an Alfuru (a member of a nomadic tribe of eastern Indonesia). His mother outlives him, remains isolated on Ambon with her memories, and adopts more of the *Indisch* ways from which she had tried so hard to dissuade her son.

Though a fictional character, Himpies remains a powerful figure in Dutch historical memory. A wax effigy of him was recently on display in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, as part of a permanent exhibition of artefacts from the former Netherlands Indies.[52] Perhaps his meaning has endured because of the hybrid identity — part Dutch, part Indonesian — that he once represented in a time when neither the Netherlands nor Indonesia had fully come to grips with the legacies of the colonial past. It was during the 1950s that Dutch writers who had lived in the Netherlands Indies, like Dermoût, began to publish the first postcolonial reflections upon a vanished era. Their texts often conveyed nostalgia, regret, and ambivalence about the colonial period, and fit uneasily into post-war Dutch consciousness. People from the former colonies were an awkward reminder of loss and defeat for the Netherlands, and their experiences during the Japanese occupation (1942-45) of the Indies had no official place in the Netherlands, where the Nazi occupation dominated any discussion of wartime suffering. In Indonesia, too, Dutch and Eurasians who had inherited a hybrid culture did not fit into nationalist, anti-colonial narratives. Indeed, it was during the late 1950s that Sukarno decided it was intolerable to leave any remnants of the Dutch colonial regime intact. He nationalised Dutch companies and seized Dutch property, and in 1957 he expelled from Indonesia all Dutch people who had not taken Indonesian citizenship. It was perhaps only writers like Dermoût, working in an indistinct medium — fictionalising aspects of a real but vanished life, documenting memories of a society that was a political embarrassment, and inventing characters like Himpies — who could, in this early post-colonial period, begin to express publicly the unresolved ambiguities of identity in a colonial setting.

Conclusion

In the Netherlands Indies, the maxim "you are what you eat" appears to have resonated powerfully among those colonists who aspired to European status. Food and eating recur as important markers of racial and cultural identity in primary sources and oral histories, and though by no means an exhaustive analysis of such materials, this study of colonial foodways suggests that there is ample scope for supplementing current understandings of what it meant to be "'European' for colonials who had never set foot in the Netherlands, England, or France".[53] In the Netherlands Indies, cultural identity — and perhaps more importantly, credible public performance of cultural identity — was a crucial component of status in late colonial society. Here the daily necessity of eating assumed a deep significance: it performed the social function of demonstrating cultural affiliation (or aspiration). As we have seen, the parameters of ruling class respectability in the late colonial period were historically specific: the organs of the

[52] The effigy was there when the author visited the museum in 2004.

[53] This statement was originally posed as a question by Ann Laura Stoler in "Genealogies of the intimate: Moments in colonial studies" in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p. 12.

colonial state sought to engineer a racially homogeneous governing elite, a difficult task given the actual hybridity of colonial society. In such a context, the subtleties of what constituted "genuine" Europeanness were shifting and elusive, mediated by class and race as much as by fashions and taste. Depending on one's audience and ambitions, food preferences and eating customs could equally be construed as an expression of one's birthright as a European or as a telltale sign of *Indisch* inclinations. As a colonist in the Indies, to eat meant to navigate a treacherous path between familiarity and ignorance. To be manifestly unaccustomed to Asian foodways marked one out as a colonial novice, unworldly and perhaps even badly educated since, from the late nineteenth century onward, new government recruits were expected to be academically trained in "Indology" (the study of Indies culture and languages).[54] Hence the necessity of introducing new arrivals from Europe to the *rijsttafel* as soon as possible (often aboard the steamship) and the popularity of demonstrating an acquaintance with *rijsttafel* among travel writers, who liked to instruct their Dutch audiences on how to enjoy it properly.[55] On the other hand, too strong an attachment to local food customs might betray an indigenous lineage (perhaps a Native relative, like Rose with her Javanese grandmother in P.A. Daum's novel) or — once again — a lack of education (like Himpies in Dermoût's book, whose mother insists on his learning Dutch manners through finishing school in the Netherlands).

Education, both formal and informal, appears to have been key to learning how to perform European identity and, ideally, to internalise this affiliation. To be schooled between two countries was, of course, expensive and therefore not available to all colonists. Indeed, as Europe and its empires are studied in an increasingly contiguous field, it has begun to emerge that social mobility was in fact a crucial "tension of empire".[56] A Dutch discourse of colonial foodways clearly operated in the late colonial Netherlands Indies, one that described how respectable members of the ruling elite ought to behave at their meal tables. However, familiarity with this discourse and an ability to recite its strictures were not sufficient to demonstrate Dutchness. There were evidently degrees of competence and fluency involved, and those who did not demonstrate a set of behaviours plausibly enough were identified as frauds and deemed bereft of a true European identity. Race was an important component in conferring European status on those who aspired to it, but was not a sufficient marker of status on its own. Class and cultural identity intersected with race at the colonial table.

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[54] On the development of a professional bureaucracy in the Netherlands Indies see Heather Sutherland, *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite: The Colonial Transformation of the Javanese "Priyayi"* (Singapore, 1980). The historical centre for the study of Indology (and for Dutch studies in Orientalism) was in the university town of Leiden, but an academy for training colonial civil servants was also operational in Delft during the latter half of the nineteenth century: J.L.W. van Leur, *De Indische Instelling te Delft* (Delft, 1989).

[55] See, for example, Augusta de Wit, *Java: Facts and Fancies*, pp. 20-3.

[56] See, for example, John L Comaroff's work on the social origins of British South African clergymen, "Images of empire, contests of conscience: Models of colonial domination in South Africa" in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1997), pp. 166, 168-9. See also Ann Laura Stoler's discussion of class in the Netherlands and the Indies, "Cultivating bourgeois bodies and racial selves" in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, pp. 117-18.