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Recent Developments in the Netherlands East Indies

Speech delivered September 16, 1942

By

DR. CHARLES O. VAN DER PLAS

*Member of the Council of the Netherlands
East Indies, formerly Governor of East Java.*



*Under the auspices of the Netherlands Studies
Unit, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.*



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As an introduction to the developments I wish to trace, I should like to point out how totally different in their main aspects the problems of the Netherlands Indies are from those of the surrounding countries. In addition to Malaya and the Philippine Islands, the Indies are the only country where the original population is Indonesian. The Indonesians are a branch of the great Austronesian race, of which the Polynesians constitute the other branch. In Malaya, however, a practically unbridled immigration of Chinese and Indians has converted the Malays into a minority. Moreover, in the Indies native-owned soil has been protected almost completely against purchase by non-Indonesians. In Malaya, Chinese and others have acquired large tracts of formerly native-owned land. In the Philippine Islands, in Spanish time, the church and also individuals obtained a large part of the arable land. In the Indies, with few exceptions, all foreign exploited land was originally "wild" land on which no native exerted any rights.*

As the Indonesian smallest autonomous units have always had a strongly agrarian character and as the possession of land was mostly decisive for their social and political structure, the facts just mentioned have caused these Indonesian autonomous units in the Indies to remain truly active political, social and agrarian communities which have developed along natural and national lines. I shall say more about these autonomous units later.

Another difference which characterizes the Netherlands Indies is that Java and the more fertile parts of the other islands are very densely populated. As early as 1930 the population of Java, an agricultural population at that, was 818 to the square mile, and that figure is now estimated at 990—against about 46 per square mile in the United States. This figure gives some idea of the special character of the problem for the Indies.

It is also of importance to note that in the Philippine Islands there are 16,000,000 Filipinos compared with 130 million Americans in the

* It is only since 1873 that part of this "wild" land, this unexploited land, primeval forest, etc., has been given to western enterprise for agricultural exploitation. But as the population grew rapidly, it became impossible to give this "wild" land to anybody except the Indonesians, and for the last ten years no more concessions have been given or can be given to western enterprise.

United States. Great Britain has more than one half more inhabitants than all the present dominions together. In the Netherlands Indies there are 70,000,000 Indonesians against nine and a half million Hollanders in the whole Kingdom. Thus in this respect also the problem is not the same.

Another difference with the Philippine Islands is the fact that during the Spanish conquest, the inhabitants of the islands had not yet produced a highly developed culture and art; neither had they been nation builders. Spain unified them by force, by imposing its religion—except for a few tribes, they are Christians—its culture, and even, on the upper layers of the population, its language. Therefore, when America came, it found a situation which facilitated uniform development according to American political traditions. The Netherlands found in the Indies powerful kingdoms, with remarkable political and social systems which comprised, for instance, extreme democracy in the lowest autonomous units. They were confronted by ancient and noble cultures and languages. There was in the archipelago neither political nor cultural unity and many of the peoples of the Indies are devotedly attached to their own culture. Even political unity has not really been established until the beginning of this century.

There is now a growing national consciousness among the Indonesians for which the creation of a Pax Neerlandica was an essential condition. The Government, moreover, by transferring Indonesian officials all over the archipelago, by settlement of large numbers of Indonesians from the densely populated parts in empty or sparsely inhabited territories, and by unification in all those matters which did not have roots in the consciousness of the people themselves, earnestly strove toward the forming of an Indonesian nation. But this process is yet far from complete.

I do not refer so much to the differences between the groups of the population in Java, Southern Sumatra, Bali, etc., nor their reminiscences of past wars, from which the following song which is still sung by children in the Javanese villages in East Java is an example. It contains reminiscences of the wars with the Madurese in the 10th Century. The text is:

Pring, pring, godongé idjo!
Bapak enténnono, bapak enténnono!

Tak enténi ing Semandé.
 Bendé ono rété,* bendé ono rété.
 Rété roto.
 Djondjang kapiloeto, djondjang kapiloeto
 Bedil moeni Soerobojo
 Abibi Saridin! Abibi Saridin!
 Gendeng temen ngamek mantoe wong 'Doero ikoe!
 'Doero, 'Doero kawoek,
 Dipendem tjeloek tjeloek,
 Ditinggal mantjal mantjal.
 Wong 'Doero sing koerang adjar!

The translation is:

The leaves of bamboo are green.
 Father wait for me; father wait for me.
 I shall wait for you at Semandé (where in the 18th century battles be-
 tween Javanese and Madurese had been fought)
 There are drums and cymbals, drums and cymbals,
 How flat they sound!
 Oh, beloved village chief, beloved village chief.
 The guns are sounding in Soerabaja!

(and then with a sudden change of tone)

Oh aunty Saridin
 How stupid you are
 To get a Madurese for son-in-law!
 A real imported Madurese!
 If you bury him he still yells at you!
 If you leave him he jumps from one leg to the other from fury!
 How insolent the Madurese are.

These reminiscences of old wars do not prevent the Javanese and Madurese from living side by side in one social and political system.

What I meant when I said that the formation of an Indonesian nation is yet far from completed is rather the fact that in North Sumatra and North Celebes the departure of Netherlands military authority during the Japanese invasion promptly led to tribal warfare and a recrudescence of old family feuds. I want to emphasize, however, that the extreme tolerance which is characteristic of most of the Indonesian groups seems

* The significance of "rété" is uncertain. It may mean the drum or the small cart on which the drum is placed.

to me a guarantee that the process of achieving complete consciousness of unity in the Indies will be a rapid one.

The Indonesian character will determine to a high degree the future political and social structure of the Netherlands Indies. Excepting a few of the peoples of North Sumatra, Celebes and the Moluccas, it can be said that the basis of the Indonesian character is a desire for harmony—harmony with God and nature, harmony with one's fellow creatures, harmony within one's self.

Javanese national, social and political philosophy is expressed in the words, "Toto Tentrem," which means harmonious order and peace. Not to be in harmony (*selaras*) with one's surroundings, is a deadly sin. This basic idea leads to almost incredible objectivity and a desire to see and to respect the other man's point of view. The Indonesian rates moral and spiritual values far above the material ones and a materialistic attitude is considered with distrust and contempt. If a man scrapes together great sums of money, one is inclined to believe in the villages that he has done so by selling his soul or his children's souls to the Evil One. There is even a word for that, *njupang*. One can also sell one's soul "to the monkeys," and there is another word for that, *ngetêk*.

The philosophy of the Indonesian teaches that a good deed is valueless as soon as one thinks of any recompense in this or any other world.

One of the developments I intend to trace is the character of the nationalist movement. At its birth in 1908, when the association Budi Utomo was formed, it was more or less a regional and cultural movement intending to raise the cultural level of the people of Java. Then foreign influences made themselves felt and in 1913 a popular movement started which was essentially an expression of the general feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty of the Indonesians as a result of the impact of western civilization, its technique, its organization and trade, especially, as simultaneously the villages were opened wide to the Chinese and Arabs, who hitherto needed permission to live in the interior. The small Indonesian middle men were suddenly confronted with competition from the Chinese. The reaction, therefore, found its greatest following among these middle men, who are as a rule strongly and consciously Islamic, and took a Moslem religious character. Soon it began to be influenced from abroad by pan-Islamism.

In 1917 Netherlands communists succeeded in converting some of the leaders of this party to communism. Soon the most zealous and noisy members of the movement, although they were not very numerous, took their orders from Moscow, where the leaders went to obtain instruction.

Although the communistic movement came to grief in 1926, the influence and technique of Moscow (which had conquered the Indonesian Students Association in Holland) remained strong among the most radical groups of the Nationalist Movement from 1927 until 1933. This group, moreover, had adopted from Gandhi the idea of non-cooperation, although this only meant refusal to be a member of an elected council. They would, however, accept an official position or work for the government.

In the meantime, a real Indonesian philosophy of nationalism was steadily growing and gaining influence. In Surabaya, the father of the national movement, Dr. Sutomo, who had created the first association from nothing, was working hard with his friends on a constructive movement and spoke on rural reconstruction to the population of his country. Mere slogans, especially from abroad, were rejected. In the moslem movement, too, the typically Indonesian and constructive Mohammadiyah which had always rejected political agitation and which worked hard for social and religious reconstruction, had become the most powerful organization, completely superseding the political Islamitic movement. The strongest influence, however, was exerted by the founder of the national Indonesian education and of the Indonesian philosophy of nationalism. In 1922 Suwardi Suryaningrat, a man of princely birth, founded the first taman siswa (pupils garden) school. By experiment he gradually developed his system. His basic idea is that in order to live in harmony with others, a people ought to have definite foundations of culture and thought. The line of national culture must be bent to adapt culture to new circumstances and necessities, but it must never be broken. Foreign culture and cultural forms have to be adapted to and absorbed into national culture. They should not be superimposed upon nor uproot national culture.

As the schools grew in number and spread all over the Indies, his influence as the philosopher of nationalism grew steadily. As far back as 1925, he had begun to distinguish between what he called "holy nationalism" and "evil nationalism." "Holy nationalism," a synthetic

nationalism, was described by him as a desire to develop oneself so as to make the greatest possible contribution to the brotherhood of mankind on the basis of mutual respect and understanding. "Evil nationalism" is antithetic and egoistic nationalism. He warned that this evil was rampant at that time in Europe and he predicted that it would bring the world to grief if humanity did not turn from its errors.

In 1928 he declared at an Indonesian National Congress that the aim of national education should be to teach the people to live in harmony with other peoples and other nations.

It is this typical Indonesian philosophy which has gradually influenced the national movement and determined its direction.

Mere independence as an antithesis is no longer the aim of the national movement. It strives for a higher goal. The Indonesians desire, in the words of the editor of the principal nationalist newspaper, "Suara Umum," that their country should become a "unity in diversity." A country where all languages, cultures, arts, should develop along natural lines while profiting from their interrelation. A country where everybody should feel at home and where mutual appreciation would create a harmonious though diverse unity; a people prepared to fight for freedom and justice, everywhere in the world. It would be an example of the way to achieve world unity.

As a further step, they desire that the Indies, on a footing of equality with Holland, should participate in the creation of an equally harmonious though diverse higher unity within the present limits of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which would contribute to the achievement of the world unity in the end.

I have no doubt that the Netherlands Government understands this trend in Indonesian thinking and is working toward its realization as soon as the Japanese invaders have been defeated. In this connection one ought to remember the declaration of the Queen in the United States Congress, that, in accordance with sound democratic principles, no final decision will be taken without the cooperation of the people when they are again free.

Of course, the number of the Indonesians will make them, in all their variety, the preponderant component in the Indies of the future but full protection and appreciation of minorities, both Indonesian and non-Indonesian, is the cornerstone of their ideal.

Personally, I feel this is an ideal worth living, fighting and dying for. I believe, moreover, that in a common effort of the Indonesians, of our people, the Dutch, born from a struggle for spiritual freedom and justice, and of the Chinese in the Indies, one and a quarter million of them, we shall achieve this ideal.

A few words must be inserted about the political form these developments might take. In the lowest sphere there are even now purely Indonesian autonomous units. Above these are units—in Java the 67 regencies, having about 700,000 inhabitants each—ruled by councils, in which Indonesians have a majority. Public works of local significance, public health, sanitation, Indonesian education, local legislation, etc., are entrusted to them. Above these are the provinces in Java and what are called the group-communities in the other islands. These autonomous units have a task of great importance to fulfill with regard to public works, especially irrigation, education, public health, veterinary and agricultural services, etc. The councils of these group-communities have a great Indonesian majority. In the provincial councils there is parity with the Hollanders. At the top there is an assembly, in majority elected, called Volksraad (Peoples Council), which has thirty Indonesian members, twenty-five Hollanders and five Chinese or Arabs. It is the parliament of the Indies. Though in theory it can be overruled, in practice this happened only three times during the last five years, much less than the application of the veto by the President of the United States.

It stands to reason that, in the future, after this war, in Volksraad and provincial councils too, the number of Indonesian members will be appreciably raised and reach a strong absolute majority.

Having sketched some political developments and possibilities in the top sphere, I shall now mention some facts about the lowest autonomous Indonesian communities, the village in Java, Bali, the west coast of Sumatra, and larger units in other parts of the Indies. Democracy in these communities is usually far developed, except that only Indonesians belonging to or accepted by the community can be members. The headmen and most of the officials are formally elected. The "village elders," an important factor in the life of the community, are designated by public opinion.

No village chief would act against public opinion in his village. All

the important local questions are discussed in gatherings of the members of the community. The Indonesians are so attached to this practice that the experiment made in 1919 and 1920 to introduce such modern forms of democracy as elected councils into the villages failed. The people refused to abandon their rights and the councils themselves brought all important decisions before a forum of the whole community. In Sumatra's west coast the introduction of elected village councils was even one of the causes of the unrest of January, 1927, as the villages felt they had been robbed of their rights. This fundamental local democracy is of great value. It must be jealously guarded.

A harmonious community in diversity cannot be achieved unless the people are inspired to confidence in the future and to the conviction that they are not inferior to any other race. Moreover, the economic side of the problem must be attended to. It is only in recent years that the Government has instructed its officials and organizations to work systematically on teaching the Indonesian masses self-confidence. In this work, of which I have personally been the leader, we had the most enthusiastic collaboration of the Indonesian press and the leaders of the political and religious parties as well as of the great body of Indonesian civil officers. We had to create faith, too, in the national arts and culture of the people in order to create that spirit of confidence necessary for all progress. We found that once the psychological difficulties had been overcome, progress in social and agrarian fields suddenly became rapid and important.

The agrarian masses, who are protected against loss of their land, had been taught in recent years cooperative organization and the most recent discoveries in the field of agriculture. By systematic research, ways have been devised to ameliorate their economic condition further by diminishing their debts. A new development has been the close cooperation between the cooperative societies of the great nationalist party, Parindra, and the Government authorities.

The following economic policy has been gradually developed, especially since 1926:

- a. By adequate measures, a larger share of the ultimate proceeds has been obtained for the primary producer.
- b. The price of primary products has been raised to parity with other commodities.

c. Wages have been systematically raised, first by pressure on employers, later by law empowering the Government to fix minimum wages.

d. In spite of the impending war the land tax for the masses has been gradually diminished. The cooperations profit tax has been raised to 85 per cent and the income tax on the highest incomes to 95 per cent. This, of course, tended to diminish the formerly very great differences between the upper economic layer of the population and the lower economic levels.

e. Organized emigration from the densest populated parts of Java has been strongly promoted and rose in 1941 to 65,000.

f. By all these means the buying power of the masses was raised. Capital was made available for government investment and industrialization.

g. Industrialization was taken up systematically. It was necessary to diversify the sources of income of the Indonesians to balance the increase of the population, still one of our greatest problems. Government participation was necessary for research purposes, to obtain the proper regional distribution and to create an Indonesian share in the capitalization of industry. The intention was also as soon as the new industry had proved an economic success, to enable Indonesians to acquire, in the form of small shares, participation in that industry.

Whereas these measures have already changed the social and economic aspect of the Indies, an urgent problem remains that must be solved. It is only very recently that non-Indonesians enterprise, including Chinese capital, has accepted Indonesians into higher administrative positions. The Government has striven since many years towards what is often called "Indonesianization." Private capital has been slow to follow. A radical change will have to be made after the war, if possible voluntarily.

There is another group of developments that deserves attention, namely those in the cultural and intellectual field. The impact of Western civilization, thought, customs, technique, organizations, trade and transport, on the Indonesians has been sudden and very strong since 1905. The enormous growth and success of private enterprise after that year brought close contact with the successful West. The limited liability company replaced the family concern and the personal

touch in business contacts diminished. Soon afterwards all limitations on traveling and settling of Chinese and Arabs in the interior were abolished. The motorcar brought a revolution. Now non-Indonesians were brought closer to the towns and had no longer to adapt themselves to Indonesian life. In a few years the people underwent a sudden change from barter to money and even to credit exchange. All the things the Indonesians had for a thousand years considered natural, essential, beautiful, and in general unassailable, were suddenly challenged—challenged by the triumphant West.

About the same time, organized education of the Indonesian masses was attempted. Before, the Indonesian, for whom teaching knowledge, religion, customs and manners, arts and crafts are one and indivisible, and who considers the guru—that is, the teacher—as a person exercising a holy task, used to entrust his children to a village elder, a religious teacher, a craftsman or shadow-play performer to be taught everything needed to live harmoniously in the village community. Now he expected his children to receive religious, social and cultural education from the clever government guru who had attended special government schools.

Unfortunately, the problem of adapting primary schools to the needs and desires of the people was obscured at first by a desire to spread schools rapidly all over the archipelago, and by questions of organization, technique of teaching, textbooks, etc. Specialist training was preponderant in forming teachers, and no longer wisdom, art, and culture. A break between the idea the people had of the guru and reality ensued, in spite of the endeavors of many teachers to conform to the old ideal. It found expression in the bitter rhyme: *Bijén digugu lan ditiru. Saiki jén ditiru kliru!* "Before they were trusted and imitated. Now when they are imitated, one is wrong!"

Children who had been to school, especially to the Western schools, had little knowledge or respect left for what their parents had believed, practiced and enjoyed.

This development probably contributed to the effects of the impact of Western civilization. The Indonesians were in danger of being stunned into a feeling of impotence and inferiority—unjustified but nonetheless real. Traditions, culture, art, the harmonious cooperation in the villages, which is one of the most charming assets of Indonesian

culture, self-confidence, self-reliance, were all endangered or shaken. What was Indonesian and national began to be considered as inferior.

How serious the damage done in those years was, may be concluded from the following instances. When I was Resident of Cheribon in 1933, we used the restoration of the splendid old mosque, 500 years old, to revive the old Cheribon art of carving, which was far nobler than that of Bali. We found one man left from the old guild of carvers and we were fortunate that he could create a new school in this art.

When I became Governor of East Java in 1936, we began restoration of many Indonesian monuments of the 15th to the 17th century which are still held in high esteem by the people. This required carving of stone and wood. There was not a single carver left on Java proper. We had to bring in some of the new Cheribon carvers and some from Madura to teach the people to carve again.

Miss Vissering, who as late as 1908 travelled over Java and Bali, devotes a whole chapter of her book to the gong-smiths of Semarang, who occupied a whole desa (Indonesian village) at the city's edge, called gangсэн after their profession. Gangsa is namely the copperbronze used for gongs. Three years ago prince Mangkoe Negoro from Solo warned me that nowhere the so-called great-gongs of the gamelan orchestra could be made. The East Java provincial council promptly offered a reward for the first who would again construct a "great gong." It proved that desa Gangсэн had even lost its name and that one frail old man was the last possessor of this glorious art.

The first art to recover from the shock was Malay literature, perhaps because Malay literature had before not been on a high level and therefore could more easily adapt itself. In the early twenties a number of young poets and authors began to write works which borrowed many forms from foreign or Western literature, but still could be considered national literature. The sonnet especially has proved to be an adequate form of expression for the feelings of Indonesian poets in Malay. The very marked personal character of sonnets by the fiery communist Roestam Effendi, the wild Mohammad Yamin, the tender and dreamy Sanussi Pané proves that there was no question of imitation. It is a real renaissance.

The Indonesian literary magazine Poedjangga Baroe, (the New Poet and also philosopher as the word Poedjangga implies) has since eight

years been of the greatest value, not only by its poetry, but also by its criticism and illuminating psychological and social studies and by analyses of Western art.

Very important also is Poesara, the monthly of the Taman Siswa Schools.

Mixed Western and Indonesian institutes of science and Indonesian culture have for many years done important work.

It is only in recent years, however, that systematic promotion of Indonesian culture has been attempted by the Government, also for the masses.

A few examples of our work in East Java are illustrative of these trends. When in 1936 I became Governor of that region I discovered that the lovely and charming old children's songs were rapidly disappearing, as well as the art of telling half sung fairy tales. Ignorance and lack of appreciation from the Westernized leaders as well as from many Netherlands officials made the people feel ashamed of their own culture.

I got some children of a mountain village to sing their old songs, found them and their parents delighted to see that the treasures inherited from their ancestors were appreciated and collected 186 original songs, games and fairy tales in a few days. So rich is Java's spiritual treasure that in a neighbouring village I found a totally different set! I had these songs broadcasted. In a few months the whole of East Java was awake again to the old songs and games.

The province offered a prize for the best collections of children's songs in Javanese and in Madurese and the unfortunate jury had to judge thousands of songs. Deputies of the provincial council—who with the governor manage the province—prescribed that the children would be allowed to sing their own old songs, do their old dances, play their old games, instead of learning from a textbook only a small number of songs and games. Simple Indonesian musical instruments were provided to all schools. The result was unexpected! In Madura, thusfar, we had not been able to drive the children to school. No punishment helped and the parents even offered to pay double the small fee, provided the children were not obliged to go to school. Immediately after the local songs, games and dances had been restored,

the children began to throng the schools. We had to build schools and train teachers in such numbers that the three regencies of Madura and the province of East Java had at last to appeal for help to the central Government, which agreed to finance the building of 600 extra schools in Madura, and paid for us the costs of their upkeep.

Monuments of Javanese culture were restored in cooperation with the villages and regencies and the government archeological service.

The success of an artistic and inspired Roman Catholic priest who taught the people of a mountain village to build and decorate a church in Javanese style—this village became the centre of a revival of sculpture—led us to invite these Javanese artists to design and execute monuments at each of the important irrigation works we were building, on the condition that they would teach local artisans their art. It is almost unbelievable what perfect good taste and spiritual depths these simple villagers showed and what pride and pleasure they found in their resuscitated art.

We appointed Indonesian technicians, who loved the splendid but dying Javanese architecture, to study its techniques and to help both the regencies and private Indonesians build with modern materials but in a national style.

The buying of Javanese instruments (*gamelan*) by the villages was encouraged and the dying art of making *gamelans* came to life again. Incredibly small subsidies were sufficient to start the giving of lessons in Javanese ballet, in shadow-play, and in the splendid combined dancing, acting and singing of the Javanese "human wayang" all over the country.

We tried to broaden the outlook of the schoolteachers; to stimulate their love for their people and its culture. We brought them together in camps, where we got Indonesian specialists in their art and culture, often teachers of the national Taman Siswa school, to lecture. They responded very well. Their unpaid work for combating illiteracy and spreading culture was splendid.

Before starting the battle against illiteracy—and illiteracy was a great problem there, which I think we proved could be solved by common effort—we investigated the causes. We found that modern hasty life had ended the old laborious habit of scratching prose and poetry on palm leaves. The collection of palm leaf texts in the villages had

dwindled and the cheap booklets of our age did not keep. The tradition of gathering on certain evenings at a village sage's home to read and recite or sing, in turn, old and beautiful texts was also fast disappearing. Further, we discovered that preceding efforts to eradicate illiteracy had failed because the texts were too simple to interest grown-ups. Therefore, a new method was evolved in trial courses. Reading books, combining practical information with texts attractive for Javanese readers, with some songs and poetry included, were tested. The attention of public and private teachers, government civil officers and nationalists, Mohammedan leaders and Christian missionaries, was directed to these tests and an urgent appeal for their help was made after the new books had been sufficiently adapted to the result of the tests.

The courses for combatting illiteracy spread rapidly and achieved success with over 80 per cent of the pupils within a reasonable time, but it was found fairly useless to teach the people over 40 to write. Reading was possible, but the hands were too stiff to learn to write with legible characters.

Village libraries were created in over 5,000 of the 7,000 villages in East Java in cooperation with the autonomous villages and regencies. In a conspicuous building, a bright "stormking" lantern was hung, which in Java means the door is wide open for every guest who wants to come there. Books and some writing materials were supplied, and to promote singing poetry—poetry is sung in Java and not recited—simple musical instruments were provided. As there existed no books for grown-ups in large type, new books were edited by the province, or new editions were encouraged.

When I compare our efforts and our village libraries with the magnificent libraries of America, I smile to think how simple and sober our achievements were. But I am not ashamed of them, because they were inspired and accomplished by the love and the attachment of Hollanders and Indonesians alike for that noble and lovable people I have had the honor and the inexpressible joy to serve for thirty-one years.

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