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Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java (1900–1942)

Images and Language

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Abstract

This study investigates Java's urban middle classes and their importance in the formation of 'modern' lifestyles in Indonesia. They formed the backbone of both the Dutch colonial project and the resultant Indonesian nation-state. By foregrounding lifestyle as the defining factor of middle-class identity, we demonstrate how language and images provide a methodological framework to reconstruct this group's ambitions and aspirations. Their language, an urban variety of Malay, was key to accessing and, in fact, creating discourses of modernity. This transformation was accelerated by the 'visual turn' in the late-colonial Netherlands Indies—and, indeed, globally. Advertisements and other visual messages, typically through the medium of the Malay language, promoted new ways to dress, work, travel, and consume. Yet Java's middle classes were by no means uncritical recipients of these colonial and global novelties. A counter-discourse soon emerged, which questioned the consequences of being modern and the dangers of losing traditional values.

Keywords

Middle classes – Indonesia – modernity – colonialism – language – visual culture

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Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Dutch *Ethische Politiek* (Ethical Policy) promised to bring development, prosperity, and modernity to colonial Java. This coincided with the expansion of the colonial state and resulted in territorial conquest and the establishment of many new government agencies, such as police stations, schools, health clinics, agricultural and forestry extension services, railways, post and telegraph offices, pawnshops, and people's credit agencies. These institutions employed a rapidly expanding, and primarily urban, indigenous middle class, wedged between traditional aristocracy and manual labourers. The colonial state posited itself as a key source of employment for these newly arrived urbanites. Towards the end of the colonial period, 40% of the mid-level administrative jobs and 64% of the lower ranks of the colonial bureaucracy were occupied by indigenous officials (Wertheim 1956:148; Visman 1941:56). In addition, the newly formed middle classes found employment as clerks and skilled technicians in trading, transport, banking and insurance companies, plantations, factories, the mining and oil industry, and publishing houses.

It was the late nineteenth rather than the early twentieth century that provided the preconditions for the emergence of an urban middle class in Java. In this period, the Dutch government adopted more direct forms of rule and expanded to regulate almost all domains of urban life. A Western-educated Javanese aristocracy proved instrumental to the consolidation of colonial authority (Sutherland 1979). Around the same time, policies of economic liberalism slowly ended compulsory labour in Java, while giving rise to a growing workforce of wage labourers (Boomgaard 1991). Late-nineteenth-century Java witnessed the unprecedented growth of private-capital investments, industrial-age technological reforms, and urban residency. With some exceptions, a general pattern emerged in which Chinese and other 'foreign' Asians secured their niche in the retail trade, while the lower and middle ranks of the colonial administration became increasingly occupied by Javanese and other indigenous employees. With the patrimonial system of early colonialism rapidly crumbling, Java's towns came to be vibrant, multi-ethnic centres of economic and cultural life.

The role of the city as a space for inter-ethnic encounters is starkly portrayed in Fig. 1, an advertisement depicting two European children telling the Chinese shopkeeper in Malay: 'Thanks, but we don't want any other brand, we're only looking for Droste chocolate.' Indeed, the diverse population of Java's cities typically relied on vernacular Malay as their *lingua franca*, including in print. And just as the Javanese language had to make way for urban varieties of Malay, tra-



FIGURE 1

Advertisement depicting a Chinese-owned store

SIN PO 1930

ditional *wayang* made way for a more inclusive theatre form known as *komedi stambul*, and the gamelan orchestra lost part of its popularity to the hybrid *kroncong* music (Sykorsky 1980; Cohen 2016). From the early twentieth century, newspapers and books written in colloquial Malay provide lively vistas into the nature and nuances of modernity in colonial Java. These sources make it clear that modernity (*kemodernan*) denoted a cluster of related elements: notions of movement and mobility, progress and development, individual agency and the ideal of equality, consumerism, and a general longing for everything new, including in the realm of language. Modernity was, in other words, 'a sense of ever changing up-to-dateness of the contemporary era' (Gluck 2011:678). Models were appropriated from the United States, Europe, and Japan, resulting in hybrid, urban lifestyles that could be acquired through consumption.¹ In order to grasp the nature of this emerging urban mass culture, we should turn to visual sources and listen carefully to the new language through which the emerging middle classes started to reflect on the world they were part of.

1 See Schulte Nordholt 2015 for a first attempt to define Java's emerging middle classes in terms of lifestyle.

In an insightful book on the emergence of mass culture in the Netherlands around 1900, Auke van der Woud (2015) emphasizes that this new culture was urban-based, materialistic, and, above all, visual. In contrast to the elite culture of the nineteenth century, which emphasized more abstract, spiritual qualities explored and explained through the written word, this mass culture manifested itself foremost in the visible urban world. Authority was no longer primarily vested in texts, but also in images. As Walter Benjamin (2002) argued, the act of observing, by walking through shopping arcades and parks and sitting in cafés and restaurants, became a new kind of ‘reading’. Colonial Java experienced this visual turn as well. The visitors to the cinemas and huge fairs that sprung up all over Java experienced for the first time what it was like to be part of an emerging mass audience, consuming a mass culture (Van der Meer, Ruppin, this issue).

Despite their historical significance, members of Java’s emerging middle classes left few traces in terms of family pictures, diaries, and other ego documents. Beyond their desire for emancipation, we have little solid evidence as to how they saw themselves in society. In addressing this gap, we examine two reflections of their lifestyles: advertisements and fragments of their language. The former reveals idealized illustrations of how life should be, marketed in ways that resonated to mass audiences. The latter contains clues—through newspaper articles and short stories—as to how life actually was, as perceived by those not necessarily fluent in Dutch, but sufficiently literate in Malay. The narrative we portray of late-colonial modernity highlights local detail and reflects the desires that were projected upon the non-European middle classes of Java. What hopes, expectations, and anxieties accompanied the rapid social change that characterized late colonialism? What tensions arose between traditional values and a gradually interconnected world? What was being modern all about in the eyes of a 1920s urbanite?

The short story *Satoe gadis modern ...* (A modern girl ...) can be taken as an idealization—for most, a distant dream—of the life of a wealthy girl of Chinese ancestry. Written in local Malay littered with Dutch loanwords, the following extract provides a snapshot of the lifestyles desired by a new generation of women across late-colonial Southeast Asia (Lewis 2009) and globally (Weinbaum et al. 2008):

She learned French, English and German, in short, all the languages she wanted to learn, and there was no language in which she was incompetent. Alongside that, she learned to play the piano and the violin, likewise leaving nothing uncompleted. Oh, to make a long story short, Miss Tan was a very modern girl for Bandung standards and she became the topic of conversation for many people in that city. It should also be acknowl-

edged that Miss Tan was a pretty girl, and she was not happy if she could not flaunt her prettiness and 'modernness' to her friends and to everybody else. That is why, at any given moment, people could see Miss Tan driving around by car to Pasar Baroe Street or to one of the theatres in the city, wearing a sky-blue skirt and a hat topped with a bird-of-paradise's feather.²

This article, in four sections, explores some of the themes that surface in the ways Indonesia's emerging urban middle classes articulated modernity. We begin our analysis by highlighting the local and global changes that took place in the early twentieth century. To put into perspective this complex, fast-changing society, we examine how many people were part of Java's urban middle classes and who they were. From the outset we should stress that 'middle class' is a fluid concept, while the boundaries between elite and middle class are equally fluid. Arguably, the late-colonial middle classes were demarcated by income, education, and urban residency. Consumerism and the associated urban lifestyles, however, were equally crucial in facilitating new configurations of class identity (Schulte Nordholt 2015). For this reason, we use the term 'middle class' not in a narrow and strictly defined sense, but as a device to examine newly emerging 'in-between' groups in Indonesian society.

The second section considers the role of language as a means to access expressions of modernity in dress, public appearance, and new social environments. By the turn of the twentieth century, vernacular Malay had become instrumental in the domains of oral communication, the colonial and vernacular press, dime novels, and various forms of entertainment. Under the Ethical Policy, its status was further bolstered as the language in which to educate the indigenous masses. Yet Malay also provided a window to the outside world through the lens of translated books, original fiction, and privately owned newspapers, many of them in the hands of locally born Chinese (*Per-*

2 'Ia bladjar bahasa Fransch, bahasa Inggris dan bahasa Duitsch dan pendek ampir seantero bahasa ia maoe pladjarin, tapi tida satoe bahasa jang ia betjoes. Salaennja itoe ia ada bladjar piano dan viool, djoega tida ada satoe jang kadjadian. Ah, pendek nona Tan ada satoe gadis jang sanget modern boeat di kota Bandoeng dan djadi boeah toetoernja orang banjak di itoe kota. Djoega misti diakoe bahoewa nona Tan ada satoe gadis jang tjantik, dan ia sanget tida senang djika ia tida oendjoek ia poenja katjantikan dan ia poenja 'kamoderenan' di depan ia poenja temen temen dan di depan orang banjak. Lantaran itoe dalem sasoeatoe koetika orang bisa liat nona Tan berkandaran auto liwat di straat Pasar Baroe dan di sala satoe theater di itoe kota, dengan pake badjoe rok biroe langit dan topi jang atasnja ditantjep dengan boeloenja boeroeng paradise' (Ang 1924:103).

anakan). In the third section we explore advertisements and other images and their role in promoting ‘modern’ lifestyles and novel concepts, such as clock time, transportation, hygiene, and nutrition. While these colonial-era novelities had an emancipatory effect on the non-European urbanites, in the fourth section we underscore that they also imposed limitations on them in terms of wealth, gender, and race. A renewed emphasis on domesticity as a counterforce to consumerism left a lasting mark on the discourse of colonial modernity. Meanwhile, the question of whether being modern was at all compatible with non-European values grew increasingly louder in Malay-language publications.

Middles Classes in an Age in Motion

According to Takashi Shiraishi (1990), notions of progress (*kemajuan*) and movement (*pergerakan*) put the Javanese world in motion and gave it a new sense of direction at the turn of the twentieth century. In Batavia, this found expression in electric trams and cinemas, while the first department stores offered the commodities deemed necessary to adopt a new lifestyle. All the clerks, teachers, doctors, policemen, pawnshop employees, overseers, mechanics, engine drivers, journalists, et cetera, needed specific costumes. These colonial subjects increasingly preferred European styles of dress, including trousers, hats, and shoes, exhibiting, in the words of Homi Bhabha (1994:86), ‘a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power’. The *nom de plume* of a well-known Indonesian contributor to a Malay-language newspaper at that time—Nieuwe Pakkendrager (Wearer of New Suits)—epitomizes the importance of this new social skin (see also Van Dijk 2007:35).

The combination of education, urban environments, transport, newspapers, and (social) mobility undermined the traditional forms of stratification that had characterized previous episodes of Dutch colonialism. Up to the late nineteenth century, the appropriation of ‘European’ aspects of society had been restricted to the Javanese aristocracy;³ in the early twentieth century, doing so gradually became a symbol of upward social mobility. Instead of sitting cross-legged on the floor dressed in a traditional *sarung* cloth and using Javanese honorific speech levels—under a ceremonial state parasol (*payung*) that served

3 See Brakel 1998 on Dutch influence on Javanese courtly culture. Bosnak and Koot (2013) give additional examples taken from a unique, nineteenth-century Javanese travelogue.



FIGURE 2
*Cartoon contrasting modern and
 traditional clothing*
 KADJAWEN 1939

to indicate a higher status (Van der Meer 2014)—Western-educated Javanese wanted to sit on chairs and shake hands while addressing Europeans in their own language, if not in Malay. In doing so, they also explicitly aimed to distinguish themselves from the uneducated, indigenous masses with whom they found it increasingly difficult to identify. Such awkward divisions provided fruitful material for cartoons offering ironic commentary on life's latest trivia. Fig. 2 depicts Petruk and Gareng, the famous clowns from the Javanese *wayang* stories, wearing modern clothing. The implication seems to be that the twentieth century's new dress codes, habits, and ways of thinking were not automatically adopted by everyone and would at times encounter ridicule, a point further elaborated on towards the end of this paper.

The political importance of Southeast Asia's middle classes became evident for the first time during the 1890s. The Philippine Revolution (1896–1898), led by mestizo elites and middle classes, served as a warning for the Netherlands Indies' authorities that they should not alienate the rising indigenous middle classes in Java. The latter became increasingly interested in politics and were eager to learn more about the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905. In that very year, a 640-page, six-volume book in Malay on the Russo-Japanese War was published in Batavia, while a long Malay poem on this event appeared the year after (Chambert-Loir 2014). Less than a decade earlier, those able to read Malay

in Latin script could also learn about the Graeco-Turkish War.⁴ The Chinese Revolution of 1911 unleashed an emancipation movement among the Chinese population in Java (Van Dijk 2007). Partly in response to the political organization of the Chinese, the Sarekat Islam (Islamic Alliance) manifested itself in 1912 as Java's first mass movement. This Islamic trade union was followed in the very same year by the predominantly Muslim middle-class movement Muhammadiyah (Shiraishi 1990).

As a result of these developments, the ideological framework of European colonialism increasingly found itself under Indonesian scrutiny.⁵ In response, 'enlightened' or 'ethical-minded' Dutch administrators and policy advisors like Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje and Godard A.J. Hazeu developed a new discourse to legitimize Dutch rule. The hybrid colonial regime of the nineteenth century, which had embraced a Javanese cultural idiom to communicate its authority, had to be replaced by a modern, developmental state able to offer opportunities to young, educated Indonesians. Seasoned conservative Dutch and Javanese administrators opposed this 'ethical turn', arguing that colonial authority could only survive as long as traditional Javanese rules of respect (*hormat*) were strictly maintained. As a result, a battle over *hormat*, dress codes, and proper language was fought between 'ethical' and 'conservative' factions of both the European and indigenous sections of the colonial administration. At the same time, the omnipresent racial hierarchy between Europeans and 'Natives' started to erode and was gradually replaced by a more complex system based on education, class, and outward appearance (Mrázek 2002; Van der Meer 2014; Colombijn 2014; Luttikhuis 2014). While issues of race never completely disappeared, status in the late-colonial period was increasingly determined by one's position in a particular organization and the prestige of this organization in society at large (Wertheim 1956:157).

These ongoing tendencies were accelerated by the First World War, which essentially cut Java off from the Dutch 'motherland' (Van Dijk 2009). Yet the irony of the 1920s is that, despite an unprecedented modernization of urban life—including electricity, telecommunication and aviation, and the emergence of middle-class lifestyles—white Europeans and indigenous middle

4 This conflict was analysed in the Malay-language historical work *Toerki dan Joenani* (Turkey and Greece) by the Eurasian journalist Ferdinand Wiggers (1897), who described the alternating hegemony of Muslims and Christians in Southeast Europe and the Levant (Adam 1995:92, fn. 69; Formichi 2015:243–4).

5 See, for example, Raden B. Kartadiredja's three-volume *Tjeritera perang Italie dan Toerkie di Tripolie* (The story of the war between Italy and Turkey at Tripoli), which came out in 1912 and strongly rejects Italy's colonial claims over Libya (Formichi 2015:244).

classes were increasingly confined to separate spheres, with Chinese middle classes occupying yet another separate niche. The number of Europeans in the narratives of Malay novels, for example, gradually decreased (Maier 2004:187). They also hardly featured in advertisements aimed at indigenous and Chinese middle classes. This created the illusion that these groups lived in a world of their own, whereas in reality the colony was still under strict European surveillance. Abdul Moeis's tragic novel *Salah asoehan* (Wrong upbringing), a classic published in 1928 by the Dutch-controlled Balé Poestaka (see next section), narrates how social mobility was ultimately still constrained by racial boundaries. Its two main protagonists, a Dutch-educated Indonesian man and a Eurasian woman, both prove unable to transgress this racial divide (Hunter 2002). The problems of interracial love proved a popular theme in other Malay publications of this period, in particular in the widely read dime novels (Maier 1993).

Before we address the importance of the Malay-language press, it is necessary to first delve deeper into the composition and size of Java's urban middle classes. While statistics on the numbers of Java's Dutch-educated elite are available (*Hollandsch-Inlandsch Onderwijs Commissie* 1930), the concept of a middle class remained nebulous in colonial statistics. As stated previously, we take into consideration three main demographic factors: income, education, and urban residency. In the context of Java's late-colonial cities, these factors were closely interrelated. Technological advancements and policies on spatial planning and housing created an urban landscape in which class, more so than race, determined where one lived, with whom one interacted, and what types of social conflicts emerged in the wake of modernization (Van Roosmalen 2004; Colombijn 2014; Colombijn and Coté 2015). The relationship between education and class was more complex, as demonstrated by the variety of school types, which differed ideologically, demographically, and in terms of the language of instruction (Suwignyo 2012; Luttikhuis 2014). The Dutch deliberately provided a small part of the indigenous male elites with access to Western education, allowing them to enter the 'Western cultural sphere', and in doing so incorporating them into the colonial system as cultural citizens (Van Niel 1960:246–50; Schulte Nordholt 2015). For the majority of Java's urban middle classes, however, the chief exposure to Western thought and produce was through popular culture, which they consumed in Malay rather than Dutch.

Given that the 'middle class' was a fluid category that people could move into as their spending power increased, it is notoriously difficult to measure its size. An earlier estimation assumes that in 1930 about half a million people belonged to Java's non-European middle classes (Schulte Nordholt 2015:226). Here we offer a firmer calculation, which suggests that this figure is far too low. We define middle classes as earning between 200 and 1,000 guilders per

year. An income of 200 guilders provided people with the minimum means to acquire a lower-middle-class lifestyle, while people earning more than 1,000 guilders belonged to the more affluent indigenous elite. Statistics of income tax (*Indisch Verslag* 1933:130) show that 414,271 people earned between 200 and 1,000 guilders per year in 1930. Excluded from these figures are unregistered, skilled labourers who earned 80 cents or more per day. Assuming that these people worked six days per week for fifty weeks, they would have earned at least 240 guilders per year, giving them access to the lower ranks of the middle class. There are no exact figures available, but it is safe to assume that at least 200,000 people belonged to this category. That would bring the total number to more than 600,000. In our calculations so far, only employees have been included. Again, assuming that a majority of about 450,000 were married, we should add their spouses as well (450,000) and add on average two children aged between 12 and 18 per couple (900,000). Taken together, we may then conclude that almost two million people, or 5% of the population of Java (and Madura), belonged to the lower and ‘middle’ middle classes in 1930.⁶

Despite their substantial numbers, the middle classes have long been overlooked as a meaningful category in Indonesia’s history. From a colonial perspective, these hybrid, non-European urbanites escaped familiar categories like ‘peasants’ or ‘aristocrats’ and were indiscriminately counted as either ‘Natives’ or ‘Foreign Orientals’. As a result, the rapidly expanding middle classes faced problems in finding decent housing that fitted their budget and lifestyle aspirations; usually they had to choose between poorly maintained expensive houses and *kampung* dwellings that lacked sanitation (*Toelichting* 1938; Colombijn 2014; Colombijn and Côté 2015). Indonesian nationalist historiography, too, failed to consider the diverse roles of these groups and retrospectively incorporated them as a single actor in the grand scheme leading from resistance to revolution. Yet, both William O’Malley (1980) and Agus Suwignyo (2012) draw attention to the significant differences between the small group of nationalists who propagated radical independence and the much larger group of people who aimed for emancipation—access to education, upward mobility, and equality—within the colonial system. Recent scholarship has furthermore underlined the role of the nuclear family (Sugiyama 2007) and the selec-

6 These calculation are also based on the data in Dros (1992, Tables 4.7; 5.4; 9.1–2; 10.2–3). We thank Arnout van der Meer and Thomas Lindblad for helping us to interpret these data. A case could be made for restricting middle classes to those who earned between 250 and 1,000 guilders (285,000 persons), but we decided to include those who earned between 200 and 250 guilders (130,000), because they certainly had upward aspirations to be part of the middle class.

tive adoption and rejection of European practices (Luttikhuis 2014) as equally important constituents in the formation of a modernity that made sense to Indonesia's indigenous middle classes. Upward mobility and emancipation from traditional hierarchies were key concepts in this discourse. For example, teachers refused to be called *guru desa* (village teacher), which they considered to be backward, and preferred the term *guru rakyat* (people's teacher), regardless of any nationalist aspirations they may have had. Similarly, Java's indigenous middle classes used the term *kemerdekaan* (freedom) as a protest against the burdens of colonial taxation, but also to indicate their desire to break away from traditional bonds of submission and to achieve upward social mobility (Reid 2011:116–20; Suwignyo 2012:163–4). Instead of perceiving middle classes exclusively as 'embryo nationalists' (Shiraishi 1990:32; also see Siegel 1997), it is important to identify the extent to which many of them actually sustained the colonial system through their upward ambitions to participate in it.

Language: Experiencing Modernity

In the context of Java's increasingly visible middle classes, technological advancements, and mass consumerism, the island's first youth culture took shape (Mrázek 2002). Young, middle-class urbanites possessed the tools and means to distinguish themselves from the generations before them. They did so through consumption, following the latest fashion, and frequenting specific places, such as cinemas, clubs, and parks. On an equally important note, being young and modern required a new language:

Malay was the language of youth and modernity, of newness and experiment, and the forms of Malay that were used on Java in writing and printing were leaning on the Malay that was spoken in the urban centres of Batavia, Semarang, Solo, [and] Soerabaja rather than on the written forms that were preserved in manuscripts in the Malay heartland.⁷

This section examines the particular ways in which the colloquial Malay spoken in Java's cities developed into the language of middle-class modernity and featured in popular books, newspapers, performing arts, movies, and songs.

7 Maier 1996:191. Also compare Bowen (1991:94–5) on the role of Malay in articulating colonial modernity in the Gayo area, Sumatra.

This ‘pre-Indonesian’ form of urban Malay was never standardized.⁸ It exhibited regional variation and lexical influence from Javanese, Chinese, Dutch, and English, which contributed to its popularity. As a multi-ethnic language written in the Latin alphabet, it became the source of self-identification for the upwardly mobile middle classes, setting them apart from rural and working-class communities, who would have spoken Javanese or other indigenous languages. Late-colonial urban Malay did not just reflect on new developments, it helped to create them.

In order to fully appreciate the importance of Malay, some historical context is required at this point. Malay’s status as the archipelago’s lingua franca was firmly established in pre-colonial times. The Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East India Company) relied on Malay in their correspondence with local rulers and subjects, while the first wordlists, grammatical studies, and Bible translations in the language appeared soon afterwards. Communication between the Dutch and the Javanese aristocracy took place in a mutually non-native Malay variety that persisted throughout the colonial period, including from the mid nineteenth century in legal proceedings.⁹ It gradually became the language in which many urban groups—including a considerable part of the Eurasians, Indies-born Chinese, and Arabs—were best able to express themselves, followed at some distance by whatever ‘father tongue’ they may have had. Though despised by most contemporaneous philologists and other scholars—European and indigenous alike—this hybrid vernacular offers fascinating insights in the nature and topics of inter-ethnic communication in a colonial setting. For example, popular phrasebooks devoid of academic pretensions provide hundreds of real-life examples, including conversations expected to occur in train stations, offices, European societies, hotels, restaurants, and households with indigenous personnel.

It is no wonder, then, that colloquial Malay soon started to replace Dutch as the most popular language of Java’s printed press and of modern education. Malay-language newspapers first appeared in the 1850s at the initiative of European missionaries (Adam 1995:16–37), who sought to improve the level of ‘civilization’ of the Javanese in an early manifestation of the same mindset that would later yield the Ethical Policy. The vast majority of Malay newspapers published in Java used the Latin alphabet, as opposed to the Arabic-derived script

8 Dédé Oetomo (1991:55) names this variety ‘urban pre-Indonesian Malay’. The term ‘pre-Indonesian’, at least in the context of language, was probably coined by the celebrated writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006).

9 See Hoffman 1979, Grijns 1991, and Mahdi 2016 for a more detailed discussion on the use of vernacular Malay in nineteenth-century Java.

(*Jawi*) that was more common among literati outside the European sphere and in which the Malay classics were written. Initially, Eurasians made up the bulk of the editorial staff, although most newspapers relied financially on advertisements by Chinese businessmen. By the end of the nineteenth century, Java's Chinese started taking over existing Malay-language newspapers and establishing new ones to better fit their group interests (Adam 1995:58–78). In the same period, authors from various ethno-linguistic backgrounds, including Europeans, Eurasians, (Peranakan) Chinese and indigenous Indonesians, were involved in the translation of foreign literature into colloquial Malay (Watson 1971; Sykorsky 1980; Jedamski 2014).

The crucial role of Malay as the language of modernity becomes most palpable in the realms of education and popular culture. In 1901, the Indies-born Dutch philologist Charles Adriaan van Ophuijsen published his famous *Kitab logat Melajoe* (Book of the Malay language), a Latin-script Malay wordlist that soon became the basis of the standardized Malay orthography.¹⁰ As it was one of the aims of the Ethical Policy to familiarize the indigenous populations with the modern world,¹¹ a unified spelling system was deemed prerequisite to transform Malay into a vehicle for European thought. Malay newspapers published in the Netherlands, such as *Bintang Hindia* (Star of the Indies), edited from 1902 to 1907 by Abdul Rivai, stood at the foundation of language-mediated processes of emancipation within the colony (Poeze 1989). The state-owned publishing house Balé Poestaka (Bureau of Literature) was established in 1917 to help raise the cultural level of the non-European population, an ambition it retains to this day. Alongside its numerous contributions to modern Indonesian literature (see Teeuw 1972; Mahdi 2006), Balé Poestaka also published the successful journals *Pandji Poestaka* (in Malay),¹² *Kedjawen* (in Javanese), and *Parahiangan* (in Sundanese). Less widely known are its several practical manuals dealing with the tasks of local administrators in a rapidly modernizing world (Grijns 1991). Similar educational works were also geared towards a middle-class readership. The following excerpt is from Balé Poestaka's *Soeami isteri* (Husband and wife),

10 Around the same time, a romanized standard orthography for Vietnamese (*Quốc ngữ*) also rapidly gained popularity.

11 Motion pictures in the Netherlands Indies served the same educational purpose (Ruppin, this volume).

12 The journal *Pandji Poestaka* had a circulation of 7,000 copies and was primarily read by government employees. Messages from readers at the occasion of the end of the fasting month (*Idul Fitri*) give an impression of its readership, which included policemen, clerks, teachers, journalists, medical personnel, bank employees, and Islamic officials (*penghulu*).

a guidebook on the complexities of modern family life, and seems to introduce the notorious Dutch sense of frugality to Java's urbanites.

An important and useful matter in housekeeping affairs is thriftiness, in other words, not spending more than the income that we receive. [...] You should keep in mind that what people call 'being rich' is not the same as having the wealth of the late Tjong A Fie¹³ or having the wealth of the money kings in America; wealth also exists among common people. A wise man once said: 'Poverty without debts equals just as much as wealth.'¹⁴

This instance of Malay as a tool used to cultivate economical spending patterns hardly stood in isolation. A 1940 advertisement for the *Postspaarbank* (postal savings bank) puts the message rather dramatically (Fig. 3). An elderly man points a younger man—both are dressed in Islamic attire—in the direction of the post office, from which a bright light emerges. Two angels can be seen in the sky, sounding trumpets from above. The accompanying Malay text reads: 'Be economical if you want to be safe.'

As alluded to previously, the monopoly on Malay-language publications was by no means exclusively in the hands of colonial elites. The people dependent on it were quite heterogeneous. Balé Poestaka generally tried to publish their works in Van Ophuijsen's standardized spelling, which also increasingly served educational purposes and thus became known as 'School Malay' (Jedamski 1997; Mahdi 2006, 2016). On a smaller scale, other publishing houses also produced educational materials in Malay, such as Groneman (1899) on cholera, Joesoef (1913) on personal health and The (1915) on social etiquette—among many other examples. A number of Peranakan-authored guidebooks on biology, sex, pregnancy, venereal diseases, and menstruation should also be mentioned here (Hoogervorst 2016). But regardless of whether it was achieved through standardized formal language or an erratic colloquial idiom, modernity and European values almost exclusively entered the minds of the Indone-

13 Tjong A Fie (b. 1859) was a successful China-born businessman operating in Medan, the Straits Settlements, and China (Suryadinata 1995:210).

14 'Soeatoe perkara jang penting dan bergoena dalam oeroesan roemah tangga jaïtoe hémat artinja djangan berbelandja lebih banjak dari pada hasil jang kita peroleh. [...] Hendaklah engkau pikirkan, bahwa jang dikatakan kaja itoe, boekanlah sebagai kekajaan almarhoem Tjong A Fie atau sebagai kekajaan radja radja wang ditanah Amérika sadja, melainkan ada djoega kekajaan itoe pada orang kebanyakan ini. Seorang `arifin telah mengatakan: "Kemiskinan jang tiada dengan oetang itoe ialah sebesar-besar kekajaan"' (Latif 1924:27).

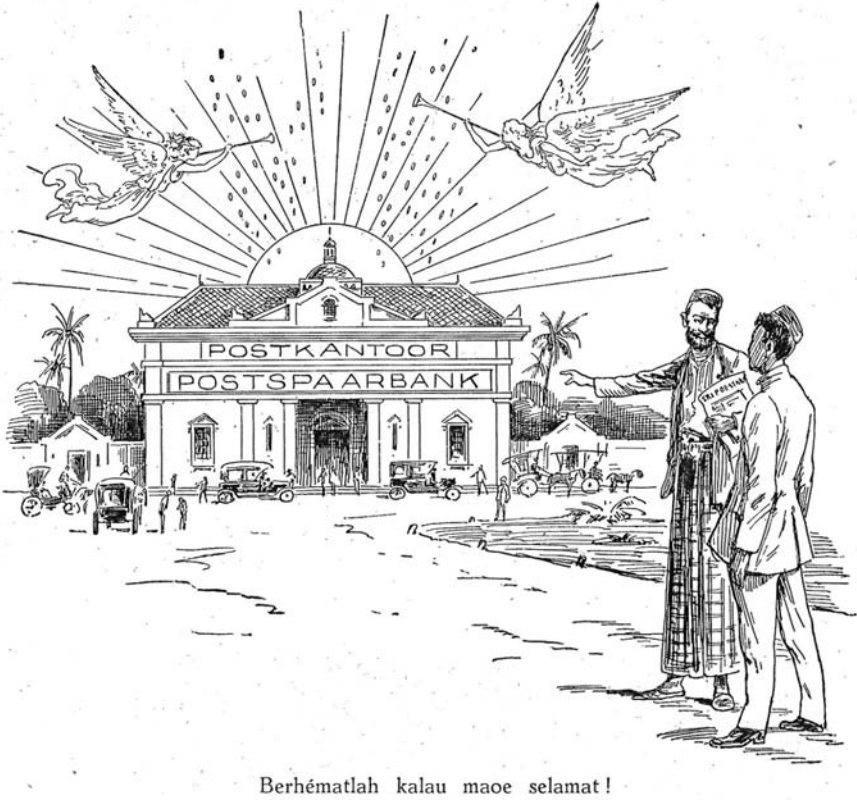


FIGURE 3 *Being economical at the postal savings bank*
 PANDJI POESTAKA 1940

sian middle classes—indigenous, Chinese, and Arab alike—through the Malay language. Javanese (as well as other regional languages) rapidly lost ground in this regard, due in no small part to its complex system of honorific speech levels deemed incompatible with modern life.

The heterogeneity within the Malay language requires some further elaboration. Indonesia's indigenous literati generally adopted the standardized Malay language that was also favoured by the colonial government, although many would have undoubtedly pronounced it with some local flavour. This monolithic attitude solidified in the declaration of the *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Pledge) in 1928, during which standard Indonesian—*bahasa Indonesia*—was proclaimed to be the single language of a united Indonesia. The Chinese, Arab, Eurasian, and indigenous middle classes, however, stuck with the less formalized, more expressive Malay variety they had used in the private sphere for generations. This highly mixed idiom—which flourished in Peranakan-edited

books and newspapers such as *Sin Po* (1910–1965) and *Keng Po* (1923–1961)—reflects the avidity with which Java's middle classes looked beyond themselves for cultural inspiration. As mentioned previously, pre-Indonesian urban Malay complemented Van Ophuijsen's School Malay in terms of its educational properties; it was essential to the introduction of new items and concepts among the emerging middle classes. One out of many examples of a noteworthy, pre-Indonesian, urban Malay publication is *Boekoe ilmoe keradjinan* (Book of industrial knowledge). The author—purportedly a doctor in chemistry (*doctor dalem ilmoe Scheikunde*)—describes his work as a special collection of factory recipes tested for their accuracy (*koempoelan special recept-recept fabriek, jang soeda ditjoba kabenerannja*), teaching his readers in a characteristically hybrid idiom how to make several household items at home, including mosquito repellent, paint, toothpaste, soap, cosmetics, lemonade, and shampoo (Lavy 1931). It is relevant to note here that several of the names for products and ingredients are followed by an explanatory gloss in Malay, for example rouge (*tjat pipih merah*, 'red-cheeks paint'), nail polish (*obat gosok koekoe*, 'nail-brushing mixture'), dry shampoo (*boeboek kramas*, 'hair-washing powder') and 'wascolite' (*obat tjoetji pakean*, 'clothes-washing mixture').

In all its diversity, Malay had effectively, and rather easily, superseded Dutch as a vehicle for Indonesia's middle classes to express and experience modernity. In the words of James Siegel (1997:93),

[t]his power of communication that had always been thought of as being the property of colonial authority or, if not, of Dutch paternal authority, now falls onto 'natives'. [...] [M]odernity is associated with the ability to achieve an identity as opposed to being always defined by identity given by birth and because modernity and Indonesian nationalism were almost indistinguishable for most of the first half of the twentieth century.

It is true that for these emerging middle classes modernity meant nothing less than the creation of a new kind of person, but we contest the causal connection between modernity and nationalism implied by Siegel. While anti-colonial mass organizations like Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah undeniably emanated from Java's middle classes, the colonial experience of modernity was by no means exclusively geared towards independence. It signalled an equally significant break with the past in terms of lifestyle (Schulte Nordholt 2015). We do not deny that urbanization and educational opportunities for Indonesia's middle classes and the associated processes of emancipation were instrumental to the rise of nationalism, but we argue that modernity, as articulated in the linguistic and visual arena, was a much broader phenomenon that

gave shape to a brand-new middle class. The next section continues this line of thinking by moving from language to images and investigating the powerful visual aspects of these expressions.

Images: Advertising Modernity

Across late-colonial Southeast Asia, the articulation of modern lifestyles was the product of mass consumption, print capitalism, visual merchandizing, and a fast-moving language (compare Dutton 2012; Schulte Nordholt 2015; Lewis 2016). In this section, we demonstrate how advertisements made mass culture visible through concrete images depicting archetypical middle-class people enjoying the fruits of modernity. These images presented new frames of reference about mobility, class, gender, and behaviour, and about how to materialize social aspirations by purchasing a new, middle-class lifestyle. In that respect, advertisements represented a roadmap to a commodified future. The full spectrum of male modernity comes together in *Student Hidjo* (Student Green), a popular Malay novel by Marco Kartodikromo (1919). This book's dandy-like protagonist lives in a world full of movement and new places like hotels, restaurants, and parks where he drinks lemonade, travels by train and steamship, and dives into everything Western (Shiraishi 1990; Maier 1996; Mrázek 1997; Siegel 1997). This Javanese *flâneur* also explores a variety of sexual relationships, while he remains highly elusive at the same time. Advertisements exhibit the same fascination for novelty, shaded at times by subtle undertones of fear for the unknown. And here, too, advertisers had to make sure that modernity 'made sense' to local audiences. In doing so, they often represented modernity as a long-anticipated break with outdated practices.

Both the objects and the language in which they were described gave expression to modernity and—together with film, photography, and theatre performances—formed a new curriculum of desire (see also Strassler 2012). As had been the case in other commercial sectors, Java's Chinese communities ended up playing a pioneering role in this domain. As Karen Strassler (2015) points out, they belonged to a transnational, commercial minority and were sensitive to the currents of world communication, which made them excellent mediators of modernity. The narratives they portrayed, for example in the Chinese-dominated film industry (Setijadi-Dunn and Barker 2010), were often highly localized and targeted to multi-ethnic audiences. Once again, we see that modernity appealed more to notions of class than to race. An advertisement on laundry detergent (Fig. 4) depicts a parasol-carrying woman of unknown ethnic affiliation (which is possibly irrelevant anyway) talking in Malay with



FIGURE 4
Detergent obviates the need for a laundrywoman
SIN PO 1930

a laundrywoman: ‘You have no laundry today?’, asks the laundrywoman. ‘No need, I use Persil now,’ is the reply. The former clearly represents the hopelessly outdated past, the latter the optimistic future.

Modernity simultaneously fostered mass production and individual consumer choices (Giddens 1990; Van der Woud 2015:265). As a result, it introduced personal styles and individualism as a mass phenomenon—in the Netherlands Indies as elsewhere. Unlike Javanese attire, Western fashion offered a rich repertoire to distinguish oneself both as a member of a new class and as an individual. Shoes in particular constituted a much-needed conveyance from the obsolete traditional towards the modern urban world (Schulte Nordholt 1997), where they also marked the social distinction between ordinary, barefooted people and the upwardly mobile middle classes. Some of the advertisements for shoes moreover underlined the hygienic qualities of footwear, which protected the wearer against snakes and infections. And to appeal to their largely Islamic indigenous clientele, footwear companies strategically promoted their merchandise at the end of the fasting month.

As capitalism became crucial to modern urban life, large companies were constantly in search of markets in which to sell their products. In this respect, cigarettes served as one of the most successful commodities, linking capitalism to modernity, and the act of smoking itself grew to be a global condi-

tion of being modern (Schulte Nordholt 2015). Across Southeast Asia, tobacco replaced betel-chewing as the most popular stimulant. While attempts to seduce women to start smoking were considerably less successful (Reid 2015:284), a limited quantity of cigarettes advertisements depict women. That some eventually yielded to these strategies of ‘selling’ modernity—and that, by doing so, conventional social practices were being reconfigured—is pointed out, for example, in a small newspaper article from Jombang:

Nobody these days still makes a fuss about women who smoke cigarettes in public. This habit has already become an example to be copied and although people have been saying for ages that women smoking is no more than a ‘trend’, the little chunk of tobacco rolled by ladies has repeatedly proven to be a lively topic of conversation, just as lively as it was several years ago ...¹⁵

To some extent, smoking also had a levelling effect. The Van Nelle advertisement on the next page (Fig. 5) shows a line-up of representatives of the main ethnic categories—European, Javanese, Chinese—for whom the very act of smoking together breaks down the ethnic boundaries, against the dynamic background of a train, symbolizing movement and mobility. The cigarettes are presented by a young Javanese man in typical, hybrid, middle-class dress, combining a European jacket and tie, and a Javanese *sarung* and headdress.

This brings us to industrial-age modes of transportation—another phenomenon inseparable from modernity. The railway system facilitated mobility in colonial Java. Trains became the impressive motors of progress by putting the world in motion (Anderson 1996:26). In 1920, 173 million train tickets were sold in the Netherlands Indies.¹⁶ Train stations, for that matter, developed into bustling nodes of mobility and modernity, while railway companies offered a variety of employment for the new middle classes, enabling them to further subvert ethnic boundaries by wearing shoes and uniforms (Luttikhuis 2014; Van der Meer 2014). Bicycles, even more so than trains, offered individuals mobility

15 ‘Sekarang tida saorang jang repotken lagi pada orang prampoean jang isap sigaret diantara publik. Itoe kebiasaan soedah dibikin djadi tjonto dan maskipoen telah sakean lamanja ada dibilang, bahoea meroko boeat orang-orang prampoean ada berasal dari “mode” toch seringkali ternjata, bahoea itoe tembako ketjil jang digoeloeng oleh njonja njonja ada dibitjarakan dengan rame, sama ramenja seperti djoega bebrapa tahon jang laloe ...’ (Yoe Sen, 1-3-1926).

16 In 1930 the total number of passengers declined to 111 million due to the emergence of cheap bus companies (Visman 1941:21).



SHAG TABAK VAN NELLE

FIGURE 5 *Multi-ethnic group of smokers at the station*
PANDJI POESTAKA 1937

and widened the horizons within cities, not only for men but also for women. These modes of transportation were essential to the emancipation of non-European populations, in particular the lower middle classes (Van Dijk 2009). At the same time, capitalist modernity was eager to develop parallel markets. An advertisement for Royal Enfield bicycles (Fig. 6) demonstrates how, by at least the early 1930s, cycling in Java had also become a gender-specific affair involving gentlemen's bikes (*speda toean*), ladies' bikes (*speda njonja*), and race models among the available types.

The increased emphasis on the role of the individual in the discourse of modernity fuelled new concerns with personal hygiene and gave rise to a flurry of advertisements for toothpaste and soap. The perceived correlation between European notions of cleanliness and 'civilization' came to the fore throughout late-colonial Indonesia (Van Dijk and Taylor 2011). A fresh breath and a beautiful (and, undoubtedly, light) skin became core conditions for being modern. In this context, advertisements for Camay and Lux soap often depicted American movie stars, whose beauty and success were associated with the use of these particular brands. For obvious commercial reasons—and echoing bicycle advertisements—soap was soon advertised in typically gender-specific ways, promising alluring fragrance to women and post-exercise relief to men.



FIGURE 6
Bicycles for ladies and gentlemen
 SIN PO 1930

Next to Western companies, Japanese firms such as Banzai also tried to conquer Java's toothpaste market. They, too, typically used the smiling face of a white woman to achieve this goal.

With revolutionary technological innovations such as electricity, trains, and factories entering the everyday experience, new appliances soon found their way into middle-class households (Mrázek 2002; Arnold and DeWald 2012). The oft-advertised sewing machine arrived in Java as early as the 1880s and facilitated the production of modern clothing (Taylor 2012),¹⁷ hence transforming sartorial practices across the island and beyond. The refrigerator became a much longed-for, but expensive, must-have for Java's modern women. Along with the introduction of canned foods, refrigerators changed urban dietary practices throughout the colony. Initially, both served to ensure that the European elite could retain the dietary practices from the homeland that were deemed more prestigious (Locher-Scholten 1997). Yet, tins containing local products quickly followed the ubiquitous corned beef into the kitchens of the Indonesian middle classes, as we can see in numerous advertisements.

Along with new tastes, new sounds entered Java's middle-class households. Through gramophones and radios, *kroncong* and other hybrid genres of pop-

17 See Wickramasinghe 2014 for a lively illustration of the role of the sewing machine and the social changes it brought about in the colonial setting of Sri Lanka.



FIGURE 7
Completely happy in the club
 KENG PO 1935, NO. 318

ular music could be enjoyed in the domestic sphere (Keppy 2013), although for many middle-class families these items remained just objects of desire, as prices varied from 30 to 2,250 (!) guilders. A more affordable option to enjoy modern music and dance—in the Indies as well as in other parts of Asia—was to go to a club or dance hall (compare Lewis 2016). As a space where alcohol was served and where modern dance afforded previously unthinkable physical contact between the sexes, the club plays a prominent role in Malay-language short stories and cartoons. While fictional accounts of Western dancing were often cautionary in nature (Chin and Hoogervorst 2017), more tongue-in-cheek commentary was provided in the form of cartoons. Fig. 7 shows a fragment from a cartoon published in *Keng Po*, a popular Peranakan Chinese newspaper. The text reads, in a Malay idiom interspersed with Chinese and English: ‘Come on, Tak, don’t be shy! When else will you learn the foxtrot made in Serba Senang [Completely Happy, the name of a club]?, ‘Drink, brother, a New Year’s drink, ha ha ha!’ We hypothesize in this context that the new urban spaces described here offered children from wealthy families an escape from the demanding cultural straitjacket that underpinned their elite status. For them, entering the ranks of the lower middle class offered a liberating array of modern lifestyles.¹⁸

Telephones and electric light were equally desired, yet only affordable to an affluent upper middle class inhabiting those parts of town that were connected to electricity and telephone wires. Advertisements for telephones promised to make the household more efficient, in line with the idea of housewives as modern managers. Electricity literally enlightened—preferably with Philips bulbs—Java’s living rooms and provided them with the coziness, happiness and harmony stereotypically associated with Dutch homes. As such, the light-

18 We thank David Kloos for sharing this idea with us.

bulb advertisement was emblematic of modernity in the Indies, which ‘tells us of dream and reality, of rhetoric and referentiality, of propaganda and subversion, of stasis and anxiety, propelled by electricity, the invisible, the ungraspable’ (Maier 1997:197).

Time-keeping became another essential part of modern life and its concomitant regimes of social discipline. This was not restricted to office-going men. Women, from teachers at the *Hollandsch-Indische School* (H.I.S., Dutch-Indies School) to housewives, were reminded of their responsibilities in time management. Public-housing projects had a disciplinary effect on their inhabitants in terms of ensuring that rent was paid on time (Wijono 2014:190). Public forms of transportation that had regular departure schedules, such as trams, required passengers to think in terms of clock time (Proudfoot 2005:164). Big clocks located at crossroads in provincial towns—such as the iconic clock tower Jam Gadang (Big Clock) in Fort de Kock, present-day Bukittinggi—further helped to disseminate the concept of public clock time. This was soon followed by advertisements for alarm clocks and fashionable wrist watches, ultimately making time-keeping an individual responsibility.

Technological advancements from the West could be felt the strongest at public fairs, and in theatres, commercial enterprises, and the offices of government agencies. Yet, even the most modern office space, equipped with calendars and telephones, apparently found itself threatened by the malodours of employees still ignorant of personal hygiene as another benchmark of modernity. As one Malay advertisement for *eau de cologne* promised: ‘If you always want to dress smartly and stylishly, [experience] a cool breeze, and feel comfortable at work, this is the only secret’ (Fig. 8).

A Sundanese advertisement for a Corona typewriter (Fig. 9) that reads, ‘Things used to be slow and complicated, now they’re fast and orderly’, brings together many of the aspects of modern life discussed in this section: the quest for efficiency, the order and neatness achieved through new technology, and the benefits of time management, all of which resulted in a relaxed sense of fulfilment, which was celebrated with smoking.¹⁹ This image captures eloquently how modernity was sold in the context of Java’s increasingly globalizing, capitalism-driven trends. But were the middle classes buying into this discourse wholesale? Considerable reservations regarding the trope of modernity are outlined in the final section.

19 We thank Suryadi for bringing this advertisement to our attention.



FIGURE 8 *Personal hygiene at the office*
KENG PO 1935, NO. 318

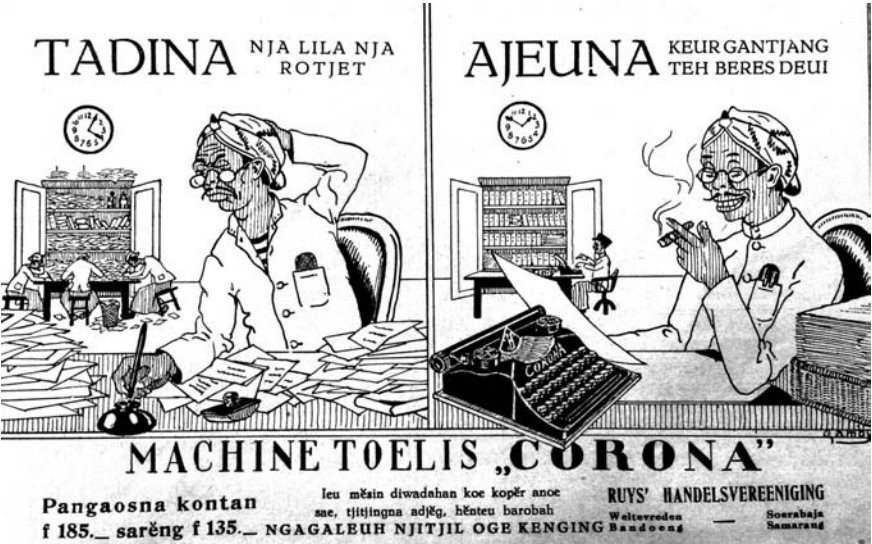


FIGURE 9 *The efficiency of the typewriter*
PARAHANGAN 1930

The Conservative Face of Modernity

As Su Lin Lewis (2016) shows in her book on urban life in Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok in late-colonial times, the experience of global modernity among Southeast Asia's (upper) middle classes was distinctly cosmopolitan in nature. We do not deny these powerful influences, but in this final section we call attention to the restrictions and tensions that emerged in the wake of modernity and the increased exposure to alleged 'modern' values. Akiko Sugiyama (2007) demonstrates that the nuclear family began to occupy a central place in Java's Dutch-inspired idealizations of middle-class lifestyles. Next to consumerism, a renewed focus on family values proved equally formative for the self-image of the modern middle class (see also Schulte Nordholt 2015). Images of the modern nuclear family excluded grandparents but explicitly included lower-class servants. The conventions for dress in the domestic space were different for men, who typically followed Western fashion, and for women, who tended to dress traditionally or in a hybrid, Indo-European way.²⁰

The modern household was defined by monogamy and a key role for women as managers of domestic matters, experts on hygiene, and guardians of a good education for their children. As a counterweight to the perceived threats of overconsumption, individualism, and hedonism, women's magazines propagated domestic coziness (*gezelligheid*), modesty, and spirituality.²¹ It was, in other words, the task of women to withstand the destructive elements of modernity by strengthening the nuclear family. A similar counter-discourse emerged in the realm of education. By the 1930s, not only the indigenous Taman Siswa (Student's Garden) movement, but also the Dutch administration aimed to indigenize modernity through educational policies (Suwignyo 2012:148). Schools were required to function as cultural institutions, while teachers were expected to propagate government-formulated conceptions of cultural identity among the local communities (see also Luttikhuis 2014:171–206).

As European education became available to an increasing—yet still relatively small—part of the indigenous and Chinese population, concerns grew stronger that Western modernity would lead to an erasure of traditional Asian principles. The question of whether 'being modern' was predominantly a positive or a negative thing became more and more prominent in newspapers and fiction (see Chin and Hoogervorst 2017). Such tensions came to the fore in lit-

20 See Locher-Scholten 2000 for a more detailed discussion on women and dress in the Netherlands Indies.

21 Sugiyama 2007; see also Latip, 'Pemeliharaan roemah tangga', *Pemandangan*, 28-2-1935.

erature, for example in the short Malay novel *R.A. Moerhia* (Njoo 1934), which tells the tragic story of an interracial relationship between a self-proclaimed modern, upper-class Javanese woman and a Dutch man. Especially in Islamic circles, the production of alcohol was a further point of contention. A newspaper from Surabaya leaves little to the imagination regarding their stance on the increased popularity of beer:

Indonesia faces a flood ... of alcohol. Batavia will set up a beer factory. People must surely be shaking their heads in utter disbelief that, in these troubled times, people still feel the need to try and make their fortunes by unleashing a flood of alcohol.²²

These kinds of comments in Malay writings reveal an awareness among the middle classes that having ‘modern’ attitudes and lifestyles was quite different from actual progress (*kemajuan*). Few would have taken issue with economic, technological, or infrastructural progress, yet the impact of modernity on social structures was less unanimously accepted and gave rise to a counter-discourse opposing the perceived erasure of traditional values. Terms such as *gila barat* (obsessed with the West) became common tropes in popular fiction and newspaper articles (compare Jedamski 1998). In this regard, Japan was often seen as an enviable society that had managed to achieve progress without betraying its core values. This point was made rather explicitly in the following opinion piece published in *Sin Po*.

In many respects, the Japanese remain far more ‘unyielding’, ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘conservative’ than the Chinese, yet they are nevertheless more advanced than the Chinese, so that it would be good to think about the more important causes for China’s slow progress, because it is very clear that we cannot simply place every single flaw under the banner of ‘conservatism’.²³

22 ‘Indonesia kebandjiran ... alcohol. Batavia akan berdiri satoe fabriek bier. Orang tentoe gojang kepala sebab merasa sangat heran, jang didalam zaman begini soesah toch masih perloe orang tjoba geroek keoentoengan dengan djalan kasi bandjir alchokol [sic!]’ (*Al-Jaum*, 1932, no. 32, p. 5).

23 ‘Dalem banjak hal bangsa Japan masi djaoe lebih “koekoeh”, “kolot”, dan “koeno” dari bangsa Tionghoa, tapi toch iaorang djaoe lebih madjoe dari orang Tionghoa, hingga baek orang pikirken dimana sebabnja jang lebih penting dari lambatnja Tiongkok poenja kamadjoean, sebab terang sekali orang tida bisa maen lempar antero kasalahan diatas poendaknja “kakoenohan”!’ (Tj. 1927:604).

Whereas the word ‘modern’ increasingly accumulated negative connotations in Malay publications, the word *maju* (advanced) continued to be seen as something overwhelmingly positive. It was associated not only with technical and economic development, but also with education and gender equality. In both regards, the Philippines were regarded with some envy. Whereas Philippine revolutionaries such as José Rizal inspired Indonesian nationalism, its female academics drew praise in the domain of women’s emancipation, as can be seen from another anonymous *Sin Po* article:

Philippine women are more advanced than women in the Netherlands Indies. Among others, they already have a ‘women university [sic!],’ a university established especially for women. Philippine women have their own associations (women’s club).²⁴

The above excerpt reveals a perceived connection between progress, education, and gender equality. Nevertheless, it was published in *Sin Po* one page before the rather superficial short story with which we began our article, about a pretty girl who aspired to be modern by following a consumerist lifestyle and wearing European fashion. Both contributions exemplify the multitude of layers and perceptions surrounding modernity and progress, and the tensions between them in an increasingly globalizing society eager to redefine its place in the world.

Concluding Remarks

From 1900 onwards, Java’s urban environments formed the breeding ground for a mass culture that foregrounded consumption and visibility. Advertisements encouraged the emerging Indonesian middle class to embrace ‘being modern,’ while using and developing a multi-ethnic vernacular language to reflect on everything new. Language and visually mediated lifestyles were the two key components of late-colonial modernity that came together in Malay novels, newspapers, and especially in the images they contained. Technology and

24 ‘Prampoean orang Philippino ada lebih madjoe dari Hindia. Antara laen-laen di sana soeda ada Women University jalah University yang speciaal didirikan boeat orang prampoean. Orang-orang prampoean Philippino ada mempoenjai perkoempoelan-perkoempoelan sendiri (Woman’s Club [sic!]).’ ‘Kemadjoean orang prampoean di Philippynen,’ *Sin Po* 59 (1924):101–2, p. 101.

mass-printing connected Java's vibrant middle classes with each other and with the wider world. And as these people's lives unfolded in homes, offices, shops, clubs, theatres, and sports fields, the powerful combination of mass consumption and Malay proficiency—standardized Malay as well as the hybridized vernacular variety—exposed them to new ideas about hygiene, nutrition, personal appearance, and leisure.

To Indonesia's middle classes, being modern did not equal a linear march-of-progress towards nationalism. Rather, it encouraged them to rethink key concepts of life, such as time, mobility, materialism, gender, the family, the community, and the individual. This often occurred through the use of new linguistic and visual forms of expression. Two aspects of Netherlands Indies' modernity (*kemodernan*) in particular—consumer culture and changed social structure—also fuelled different forms of non-radical dissatisfaction with colonial society. The notion of progress (*kemajuan*) offered a preferable alternative to modernity and became a prominent theme in Malay novels and newspapers, but ultimately this concept was equally bound by the confines of gender, ethnicity, and class. In other words, Indonesia's middle classes consciously adopted and developed lifestyles that were accessible through literacy and purchasing power rather than birth, yet they also gave rise to a prolific counter-discourse that opposed the erasure of traditional values. In this regard, Japan (and to a lesser extent, the Philippines) was regarded with envy as a nation that had modernized without Western dominance and without neglecting its traditional values. In the Indies, however, modernization remained firmly embedded in, and disciplined by, colonial constraints, the nuclear family, and all-encompassing timetables providing a structure for society.

We conclude with a question. If the Ethical Policy and its aspects targeted at welfare in the cities yielded an Indonesian middle class that aspired to modern lifestyles within the context of colonial rule, they were part and parcel of 'the colonial'. What, then, are the implications for the study of decolonization and the key role played in this process by Indonesia's middle classes, whose ambitions and anxieties have largely been overlooked in colonial and nationalist sources alike? Some of the solutions, as we have argued, can be found in their use of language and visual culture.

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