‘Indisch’ Identity and Decolonization

One of the key issues running through all the projects within the NIOD programme ‘From the Indies to Indonesia’ is the way that political, social, and economic change affected the different ethnic groups in the Dutch East Indies. In this article, Robert Cribb speculates on the reasons the mixed-race ‘Indisch’ community did not take a more prominent role in the nationalist movement.

Courtesy of KITLV

Left to right: pensioned resident P.W.A. van Spall, his wife, a son, a daughter, a son-in-law, and a daughter in front of his house in Rijswijk, Batavia. Circa 1875.

Report >
Indonesia

By Robert Cribb

The struggle over identity and political destiny in the Indonesian archipelago in the first half of the twentieth century was not just between Dutch and Indonesian ideas of society and of the future. A third identity, which we can call Indisch, hovered in the background.

The meaning of Indisch lurks somewhere between ethnicity – mainly mixed race Indo-European/Eurasian – and culture, standing for the whole complex of cultural adjustments between East and West which took place in the Indonesian archipelago and which involved not only Europeans and indigenes but also Chinese and other Asians. Indisch culture was marked by distinctive uses of language, dress, cuisine, entertainment, recreation, housing, family structure and so on, all of them loosely speaking hybrid between Western and Asian cultures. The term ‘identity’, however, implies both a collective identity and a sense of the political implications of that identity.

In these terms, it is very difficult to identify an Indisch identity either in the late colonial period or immediately afterwards. There was very little by way of a claim for political rights or political consideration on the basis of being Indisch. In fact, a conscious Indisch identity emerged first in the Netherlands and only from the late 1950s, following the mass expulsion of Dutch citizens from Indonesia in 1957.

It is intriguing to ask, however, just why an Indisch identity – and a corresponding political programme – did not emerge to dominate the political stage at end of the colonial era.

Most European colonies with a settler society followed a different trajectory. In virtually all regions of European settlement, the settler communities began rather quickly to differentiate themselves from the culture of the homeland. In this respect, the rich history of cultural hybridization in the Netherlands Indies, which Taylor, Gouda, and others have described as unremarkable. Most such settler societies, however, passed on to a second phase in which the emerging settler culture became the basis for a new identity distinct from the metropolitan identity both culturally and politically.

In the Philippines, for instance, the term Filipino was once analogous to Indisch. It described the Spanish who had settled in the Philippine archipelago, as opposed to the *peninsulares* from Iberia. During the nineteenth century, however, the term Filipino came to encompass all who lived in the Philippines, including the ‘natives’ (Indios), as a category separate from (and antagonistic to) the Spanish. This process made the Philippines, at least incipiently, a nation and underpinned the 1898 revolution against Spanish rule. Similarly, ‘Australian’ once denoted a sub-category of the broader identity known as ‘British’, but it subsequently developed as an identity which no longer connoted Britishness (at least not to most people). Implicit in this second phase was decolonization. In both cases, moreover, the emergence of a separate identity was related to a political agenda, anti-clericalism in the Philippines and social democracy in Australia. Being Filipino or Australian stood not just for cultural practices but for distinct political values. Ben Anderson has described this phenomenon as ‘creole nationalism’.

Indisch identity also failed to develop as a foil to the idea of Indonesia. The striking contrast here is with the Afrikaners in South Africa or the *pieds noirs* in Algeria. In both cases settler identity generated a vision of the future which was as much at odds with indigenous nationalism as it was with colonial rule. Although it is not difficult to uncover examples of Indisch opposition to Indonesian nationalism, the truly remarkable fact is that the Indisch alternative was so weak. Alongside the practical difficulties that plagued the Dutch in their colonial war from 1945 to 1949, the lack of any kind of developed Indisch alternative to Indonesian nationalism was a fundamental weakness.

Just why Indisch identity failed to develop a strong anti-colonial or anti-Indonesian character is difficult to say, especially since we can see the clear outlines of such a character in the name and programme of the Indische Partij, founded in 1911. The Indische Partij, with its slogan, ‘The Indies for those who make their home there’, represented the beginnings of a creole nationalism which failed to take definitive shape.

The failure of creole nationalism is likely to have had complex causes. The colonial authorities’ suppression of the Indische Partij and the exile of its leaders may have been decisive. The Ethical Policy, with its emphasis on protecting native welfare, also drove a wedge between Eurasians and indigenous Indonesians.

It is often argued that the Dutch system of racial classification, which divided the Netherlands Indies population into Europeans, Natives, and Foreign Orientals, entrenched amongst Indonesians a fundamentally racist view of the world in which non-Natives could never be unambiguously Indonesian. Yet, apart from the fact that this observation does not explain why Indisch identity also failed to confront Indonesian identity, it runs counter to what we know about the baroque complexity of Netherlands Indies society. Colonial Indonesia was not an archipelagic South Africa with a system of racial classification that permeated every aspect of society. Class, religion, law, region, and culture all blurred the boundaries in hundreds of ways. Nor does this argument help us to understand the relatively easy acceptance of Indians, Siamese, and Arabs. Classified as ‘Foreign Orientals’ they were also legally separate from the Indonesian population, though their separate legal status gave them fewer privileges than those enjoyed by the Europeans.

It has also been argued that the Indisch community, like the Chinese, held an intermediate position in colonial society and aligned itself with colonial conservatism because it feared a loss of privilege if independence were achieved. In many colonies, however, the mixed-race intermediate classes were a spearhead of the nationalist movement because they had the most to gain from eliminating the metropolitan authorities.

My suspicion is that an important part of the explanation lies in the fact that the Indisch community, to the extent that it lacked ‘Inlands’ (Native) status, was largely barred from owning rural land. This lack of access to land was not absolute – the ban on alienation of land came into force only in 1870 and significant tracts of land had come into the hands of Indisch people before that time, but that access had been frozen and lack of land became a powerful perception on both sides of the ethnic divide. It had at least two important consequences.

First, it worked against the development of agricultural attachment to the land as happened in the white settler colonies of North America, Australasia, and southern Africa. Although we now tend to be strongly aware of the ecological destructiveness of the European intrusion into these regions, many of the settlers quickly developed a passionate attachment to their lands, not just as a source and sign of wealth but also as a symbol of belonging.

Lack of access to land also insulated the Indisch community from the single most difficult and controversial issue in Indonesian politics. The issue of land ownership and control lay at the heart of the confrontation between colonialism and nationalism. It was an issue which was to contribute substantially to the massacre of hundreds of thousands of people in parts of Indonesia in 1965-66 and it is a leading source of tension in contemporary Indonesia. Yet the Indisch community, like the Chinese, had no significant interest in this issue. No wonder they seemed like bystanders in the struggle for independence.

The dilemma split the Indisch community. Some confirmed themselves as Dutch, becoming in time the ‘Indisch gemeenschap’ (Indies community); others chose to be Indonesians and became the *suku* Belanda-Indo (sometimes *suku* Indis). Despite their cultural similarities, each of these identities became lodged firmly within a broader national identity. Perhaps ‘firmly’ is the wrong word, for each community sits in a zone of uncertainty, not quite local, but not quite foreign. In neither case, however, do these identities become a significant challenge to the broader national identities.

The Indisch and Belanda-Indo communities combine elements from both Western and Asian cultures. The Belanda-Indo community in Indonesia is identified with Christianity in general, with entertainment, with the police and with crime. The community suffers formal discrimination – none of its members can be elected president – but faces few practical difficulties. Although members of the Indisch community faced significant problems of adjusting to life in the Netherlands and have significant grievances over their treatment especially by the authorities, they have suffered relatively little overt discrimination in Dutch society in comparison with other minorities in Europe. Most strikingly, there is an almost complete lack of political engagement between the two communities, despite their common heritage.

The second consequence is darker: because they were seen as not having a natural commitment to either side, the Indisch community faced a deep distrust on the part of Indonesian nationalists, especially at the more militant end of the nationalist movement. The violence they faced in the *bersiap* period, which in fact helped propel many who had been undecided into the arms of the Dutch, reflected a feeling that they could be intimidated into loyalty and should be punished for disloyalty.* <

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Note >

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‘Indonesia across Orders:

The reorganization of Indonesian society’ has been developed at the request of the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport. The research is aimed at providing new insights into the consequences of war, revolution and decolonization for the different population groups in the Indonesian archipelago from the 1930s to the 1960s.

The programme covers four research areas that embrace a wide range of social developments: the Indonesianisasi of the economy and of the world of industry and commerce; the financial settlement and the question of war damage, rehabilitation and back-pay; the mechanisms of and views on order and security; and the changes in urban society.

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