

## **My Hero and a Good Friend**

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Leiden Museum of World Cultures

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Dear colleagues, friends, and family

Thank you for showing up here in such large numbers helping me through this awkward moment of retiring

### *Decolonization*

Over the last two days we had an inspiring workshop at KITLV on the topic of decolonization in relationship with violence and citizenship. I learned a lot from the presentations by colleagues from Indonesia, Australia, the US, the Netherlands and from my own family.

At first sight decolonization seems to refer rather straightforwardly to a process of political independence of former colonies. But who is the main actor? In the case of Indonesia Bambang Purwanto and Remco Raben have argued that decolonization tends to give priority to Dutch actors who granted Indonesia its independence through diplomacy. Such a perspective not only conceals a history of military violence but deprives Indonesians also of their own *agency*.

Indonesian historians don't use the word decolonization. They talk about liberation and independence and prioritize of course their own agency.

Harry Poeze and I are currently writing a new overview of the war between the Republic of Indonesia and the Netherlands between 1945 and 1950. We sketch Indonesian ambitions to achieve independence and Dutch attempts to impose a sort of guided decolonization. We highlight also a series of internal conflicts among Indonesians themselves, including violent efforts to organize a leftist revolution, to establish an Islamic state, or a federal state dominated by old aristocracies, and we pay attention to conflicts between politicians and military, and conflicts among the many militia's, and also how militia's eventually became part of the political landscape in Indonesia. On the Dutch side we highlight structural military violence, and how coalition politics in the Netherlands between Socialists and Catholics determined the decisions to start large military interventions. The Indonesian war of independence was, in other words, a messy and complex set of processes, which were not exclusively determined by the Dutch or the Indonesians, or for that matter by "decolonization" or "independence". Instead, it was a collision of these processes that characterized this period.

Currently, anti-colonial sentiments feature prominently in Dutch public debates about Dutch-ness and its colonial and racist subtexts. These sentiments function primarily as a moral backdrop against which specific identity politics unfold. In these debates the colonial past is often reduced to a simplified dichotomy: between Dutch colonial violence and indigenous victimhood. Ironically, this victimhood tends to

reproduce a colonial perspective that denies Indonesian agency.

Decolonization seems to assume that we precisely know what colonial actually is. The dominant idea is that white rulers controlled and exploited indigenous societies by force. However, a closer look reveals that 85 % of the colonial bureaucracy was Indonesian, that the lower ranks of the colonial army were recruited from the local population, and that colonial power rested primarily on a system of indirect rule, in which local power was to a large extent delegated to indigenous aristocracies. Moreover, an emerging indigenous middle class actively gave shape to a new urban culture that celebrated modernity in terms of language, dress, and material culture. This culture was to a large extent inspired by Western examples, but displayed also a growing self-consciousness which did not automatically result in nationalism. By and large, this new urban middle class embraced modernity as the *life style* of a *cultural* citizenship that *helped* to sustain colonial rule:



Here we see on two school posters some highlights of this domesticated modernity: the nuclear family eating together, an obsession with cleanliness and domestic servants as

obvious attributes of the middle class; and two schoolchildren watching the material modernity that is waiting for them, if they obey the colonial order, while a European man moves modestly in the margin.

Together with the European elite all these cultural citizens constituted what we call colonial. *Colonial was a co-creation*, no collaboration, and yes it was very unequal, but it was a co-creation. And this constellation ran into a war of independence, and all these cultural citizens moved further into a new nation-state, bringing with them all kinds of colonial notions, habits, views, concepts and perceptions. The new nation-state was, in other words, heavily infected by a whole range of colonial legacies.

It is therefore important to broaden the notion of decolonization to include not only political liberation and economic independence, but also cultural sovereignty. Therefore decolonization should include also a critical introspection concerning the colonial nature of culture, education, ethnicity, historiography, heritage, tradition etcetera. The African author Ngugi wa Thiongo called in this respect in 1981 for a “decolonization of the mind” in order to achieve self-determination. And that had to be achieved in the very first place through language, because language is central to people’s definitions of themselves.

## *My Hero*

This brings me to the central figure of my talk, and to my hero: Mas Marco Kartodikromo.



A restless journalist, novelist, poet, historian, activist with a rich experience as political prisoner of the Dutch colonial state. He was born in 1890 in Cepu, in the area of Blora in north central Java, breeding ground of other trouble makers like Samin, Kartosuwiryo, and Pramoedya Antanta Toer. Marco's father was employed as a low-level administrator in the colonial bureaucracy. Therefore Mas Marco attended only an extended primary education and did not enter the colonial educational trajectory for the Javanese elite. But he took private lessons to learn Dutch, because that offered him *access* to the modern world. He could read the Dutch language, and that was enough, because as we will see, he was not very interested in speaking Dutch.

Like many other young boys from the indigenous lower middle class he took in 1905 an office job. First with the

colonial forestry service, then with a railway company and finally with a printing company in Semarang. From the very start he was *restless*, and felt the urgency to move on.

In 1911 he left the offices run by Dutch managers. He moved to Bandung where he became an apprentice to the newspaper Medan Priyayi edited by the famous Tirta Adi Suryo the first modern journalist and political activist in Java.



From then on Mas Marco was always where the action was. He did not stay long in Bandung because Tirta Adhi Suryo ran into trouble and Medan Priyayi was closed down. It marked the beginning of Mas Marco's restless trajectory from one journal to the next, characterized by a recurring pattern of colonial censorship and financial breakdowns, followed by the establishment of a new newspaper, which was again hampered by the same problems and by readers who were slow in paying their subscription fees.

In 1912 he moved to Surakarta, Solo for short, where he became editor of the weekly journal of Sarekat Islam, the first political mass movement in Java. In 1913 he joined the congress of Sarekat Islam which was held in Taman Sriwedari

the royal pleasure garden annex zoo in Solo. Come and have a look. We go through this gate,



to the congress venue:



The congress was a new and festive event that attracted thousands of people and radiated a new energy as people started to realize that they could organize themselves and express their ambitions in a modern way.

1913 also marked a turning point in colonial policy. The Dutch realized that they could no longer maintain a hierarchical system that rested on invented traditions such as honorific umbrellas for power holders, differences in dress codes and places to sit, and the use of different speech levels in the Javanese language.



A new regulation abolished the old colonial forms of deference. Because liberal Dutch administrators favored education above invented traditions, Javanese officials were now allowed to wear western suits, and shoes, to sit on chairs, to give a handshake instead of a *sembah* and to speak Dutch or Malay instead of high Javanese when they addressed their Dutch superiors. On the right a cartoon depicting the new cultural citizen.



By wearing Western suits and shoes Mas Marco was *eager* to show that he belonged to the modern world while demonstrating his ambition to act on *equal* footing with the Dutch.

In 1914 he started his own weekly with the name *Doenia Bergerak*, the world in motion, which captured the feeling of many at that time: that the world was in motion, and that they themselves had the agency to put things in motion.



It was an exciting time, filled with pleasure –or *plesiran* in Malay – about everything modern. Fashion and films, trains and automobiles, electricity, cigarettes, leisure time in entertainment parks where one could drink lemonade or visit restaurants. Malay was the newly emerging vernacular language for the urban middle classes. It expressed the experience of novelty, movement, excitement, spreading new ideas and dreams. Moreover, the Malay language expressed a new egalitarian mood and became a powerful vehicle to criticize the colonial government. And that is what Mas Marco did. In an accessible language he attacked week after week colonial injustice and inequality. And in doing so he became one of the central figures of the *pergerakan* – the popular movement that emerged in the 1910s. And in doing so Mas Marco demonstrated precisely what Ngugi wa

Thiongo wrote about the importance of language as a precondition for a “decolonization of the mind” in order to achieve self-determination.

This, of course, brought him in conflict with the colonial state. That happened when Mas Marco attacked a high ranking Dutch official, D.A. Rinkes who was also an advisor of the Sarekat Islam, and a member of the colonial Welfare Committee. This Welfare Committee, by Marco consistently abbreviated as *WC*, toilet, investigated the living conditions of the Javanese. Marco attacked Rinkes in straightforward Malay and did not hesitate to address him in a non-honorific way using the word *kamu*, you/jij. How do *you* dare to say anything about the pledge of ordinary Javanese when *you* never spoke to them? Indirectly he also attacked the leadership of the Sarekat Islam for cooperating with Rinkes and seeking through Rinkes colonial protection.

Mas Marco had committed a so-called *Persdelict*, a press offence, by spreading hatred – *haatzaai* – against the Dutch. In 1915 he was convicted to three months imprisonment for disturbing public order by expressing contempt for the colonial government. This was the first in a series of convictions because Mas Marco was not at all impressed by these repressive acts. Courage and determination, he wrote, *that* is what we need to display when we face colonial repression. And that made him a hero, a *pembela bangsa Djawa*, a defender of the Javanese people. He became a celebrity as well because a brand of cigarettes – *Sigaret Djawa, Merek Marco* – was named after him.

After his release from jail in 1916 friends in the movement raised money for Mas Marco which enabled him to travel to the Netherlands. Apparently they wanted to prevent that he would directly run into another press offense, and they wanted to keep him away for a while from internal conflicts within Sarekat Islam. And so, Mas Marco lived for five months in the Hague as a correspondent for yet another Malay language newspaper. When he arrived in September 1916 he was amazed by the extent of freedom of expression in the Netherlands, something he was not used to, back in the Indies. But, he could not stand the winter cold and already in December 1916 he went back to Java.

After his return Mas Marco resumed the restless rhythm of journalism and activism interrupted by three more periods of imprisonment.

In 1917 he launched in a long polemic poem his well-known slogan – *Sama Rata Sama Rasa* – which would echo for decades to come in leftist circles in Indonesia. *Sama Rata Sama Rasa* stands for equality and solidarity, and referred to the fundamental equality between Javanese and Dutch as human beings, and to the solidarity with people who suffered from colonial injustice. The slogan implied also a demand for voting rights for ordinary people. Although Mas Marco never referred to it explicitly, *Sama Rata Sama Rasa* summarized in a very powerful way the fundamentals of political citizenship. That is, in the words of Hannah Arendt: the right to have rights. To me, Mas Marco is one of the founding fathers in the genealogy of citizenship in Indonesia.

The Dutch ran out of arguments to counter Mas Marcos's opposition to the colonial state. In the same year he was convicted to twelve months imprisonment for disturbing the public order. He did not consider his internments as lost or wasted time. On the contrary, he called his internments 'retreats' during which he could concentrate on his literary work.

Apart from articles and polemic pieces in newspapers, he wrote short realistic sketches with a strong moral message about modern city life. He depicted lonely persons who sought *plesiran* on crowded Saturday evenings. These sketches were full of electric light, electric streetcars, all sorts of entertainment, against the backdrop of capitalist exploitation and poverty, and naïve men who were seduced by clever prostitutes living on the margins of modernity. It was a world full of desire and deceit where the poor and not-so-smart had little to gain.

Mas Marco had a keen eye for strong and independent women. Apart from a novel on the legendary spy Matahari, he wrote a novel on a self-conscious Javanese concubine of a European man. When this man was about to return to Europe she left him for another lover. No female victimhood in this novel about free love and female autonomy.

In jail Mas Marco wrote his best known novel: Student Hidjo (Student Green) for which he used his experience in the Hague.<sup>1</sup> Student Hidjo lives in Solo a happy and affluent life

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<sup>1</sup> I owe much of what I am saying hereto Takashi Shiraishi, Rudolf Mrazek, Agung Dwi Hartanto, Harry Poeze and Henk Maier.

with his girlfriend Biroe (Miss Blue), life is full of *plesiran* and, again, modern things like cars, electric light, movie theatres, and drinking lemonade in the zoo while mixing many Dutch words in their colloquial Malay to demonstrate modernity: *Dag Biroe, Heerlijk toch, Nee lieve, Kom nou, Kijk, Tot morgen,* etc. At first sight the novel is an uncomplicated love story of young kids from elite families. Hidjo's father is a rich entrepreneur who sends his son to the Netherlands to study engineering in order to climb the social ladder in Java. He lives in The Hague with a Dutch family where the daughter falls in love with Hidjo and seduces him. After watching a performance of Faust in a theatre in The Hague Hidjo experiences a moral crisis: should he surrender to the pleasures of western civilization, and betray his own cultural roots? Eventually he rejects European civilization by exclaiming: "*Bah Europese Beschaving*". He decides to break up, and returns to Java. Meanwhile Hidjo's mother is arranging a marriage for him with the daughter of an enlightened modern Javanese *Bupati*, district administrator. Parallel to this story runs another story about a Dutch Controleur, government official, who falls in love with the same daughter of that *Bupati*. But his attempts to become engaged with the girl fail and so do his attempts to enter the world of Javanese culture. When he tries to perform a Javanese dance the audience can't stop laughing. Humiliated and *disillusioned* the man travels back to the Netherlands. In the end, however, there is a sudden happy ending. Hidjo marries the daughter of the *Bupati*, his former fiancée Biroe

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marries his best friend, and the Controleur is back married with a Dutch woman. And they *all* live happy together in a small Javanese district town where the men are employed by the colonial state. No conflict, no exit of the Dutch, no racial mixing either, but a harmonious living apart together of Javanese and Dutch, seemingly on equal footing in what still is *colonial* Hindia.

In 1918 it was too early for Mas Marco to imagine an independent Hindia, or Java. Note that not only Dutch conservatives warned against racial mixing with the Javanese, but that enlightened Javanese also opposed mixing with the Dutch, be it for cultural reasons.

Mas Marco did not yet imagine an independent Indonesia - that idea would emerge in the 1920s in full force through the voices of Sukarno, Hatta and all the others. Nevertheless Mas Marco achieved his personal decolonization by expressing his own opinions in his own language while showing no fear when facing Dutch repression. He was independent, but not liberated.

After his release from prison in 1918 Mas Marco returned to real life in Semarang where he sided with left wing union activists who organized mass meetings and strikes. Colonial repression increased while a conflict between communist and Muslim politicians tore the movement apart in opposing parties, internal factions and personal animosities.

In 1920 and again from 1921 till 1923 Mas Marco was imprisoned. The Dutch simply wanted him out of the way. Meanwhile the split between Sarekat Islam and the new

Communist Party, this split was accompanied by the introduction of party discipline which demanded from its members to take sides. Disillusioned Mas Marco decided to leave the movement, and he retreated in a Javanese way to Salatiga where he wanted to become an historian. He started to write his own *Babad Tanah Jawa* (a chronicle of Java). It was not a traditional *babad*, because he did not trust the reliability of these old Javanese texts. Instead, he used recent publications by Dutch scholars like Brandes, Veth, Stutterheim and Kern. He wrote his text in accessible Malay because he wanted to bring Javanese history back to the people and through this history he wanted to increase their self-consciousness. When he had reached the early 17th century and was about to write about the VOC he interrupted his project in 1924 because he felt he had to return to activism.

While communist and Muslim leaders were further drifting apart, Mas Marco concluded that words were no longer enough. Action was needed; he joined the communist trade union Sarekat Rakyat, and organized rallies and strikes and, started, of course, a new journal.

The political atmosphere in the Indies increasingly deteriorated since the colonial authorities prepared repressive measures against the communist party and leftist activists, while conflicts within the communist party over strategy further fragmented the leftist movement.

Despite the fact that the colonial authorities kept a close look at communist activists, the government was taken by surprise

when in late 1926 early 1927 communist revolts erupted in West Java and West Sumatra. After the first shock the colonial repression was overwhelming: in Solo alone 1.000 people were arrested, more than 400 were convicted, and 38 of them were sent to a new internment camp in Papua.



Boven Digul, as the place was called, was not intended to be a concentration camp, but was designed as a place where communists were allowed to settle and establish their own community some 400 kilometers upstream the Digul river, far away from Java, and surrounded by a thick jungle, crocodiles, unfriendly Papua, and malaria. In actual practice Boven Digul *was* of course a concentration camp.

In total 1.300 communists were interned in Boven Digul. Among them Mas Marco and his wife. In his diary he wrote in 1931: When we heard about our exile to Digul we thought: Does the Netherlands Indies government exile all communists to the same place in order to find out how we will practice communism over there? That is inconceivable, there must be colonial agents who stir up commotion and conflict among us to demonstrate our inability to do so. Then the Dutch

government will say: Look at this these communists in Digul. They cannot even organize their own community, therefore, people of the Indies, you better obey the Dutch government.

The prisoners in Digul were classified in three groups: those who were willing to cooperate, the half-hearted ones, and the unwilling who refused to give in. The last group was brought to a special camp, Tanah Tinggi, 50 kilometers further upstream, where they lived under very harsh circumstances. Mas Marco was one of them.

Marco described the living conditions in Digul as appalling. The unwilling received a very small allowance, while the willing had to work hard, cutting trees, clearing the land, but the soil was infertile and malaria was everywhere. When a high Dutch government official arrived by boat to inspect the camp the unwilling lined up along the riverside. They turned their back to the boat and pulled down their trousers, showing the Dutch officials their bottom. Dutch civilization? My ass! But overall the internees displayed little solidarity among themselves, as political and ethnic factions fought over ideology, resources and sometimes even over women.



Student Hidjo lived happily in harmony with the Dutch in that imagined place somewhere in Java, but Mas Marco died – or should we say: he was killed – in 1932, 43 years old in faraway Papua, exhausted due to malaria. Indeed, when the Dutch ran out of arguments, they had only one answer left: violence. Marco's death in March 1932 coincided with the final turn of the colony towards a repressive police state which rested on a wide and effective system of indigenous spies. Those spies were also a feature of the colonial. The Dutch retreated in their own white neighborhoods, no longer in touch with Indonesian society, and unable to understand that they had already lost all legitimacy long before the Japanese invasion terminated in 1942 Dutch colonial rule in the Indies.

Mas Marco never became a national hero, too leftist, too unruly. Looking back over a period of 40 years during which I was engaged in Indonesian studies, Mas Marco emerged as my hero. That is why I present here this spoken monument for him. Perhaps in The Hague, where Student Hidjo experienced his existential crisis, at least a small park – or *plantsoen* – should be named after him. August 2020 sounds like a good moment for that.

### *And a Good Friend*

The title of my talk also announced a Good Friend. Time to introduce him/her. In 2005 I started to coordinate the new research department at KITLV which after an ill-conceived reorganization in 2014 eventually became *the* institute.

Once KITLV was a straightforward area studies centre primarily focused on Indonesia. Area studies assumed that particular areas like Indonesia formed bounded units with essential characteristics which legitimized the existence of Indonesian as a separate academic field. That is no longer the case. Regions are no longer considered to be foundational. Instead, they are part of wider global networks and exposed to all sorts of influences. Research topics are no longer exclusively related to particular areas either. Indonesia represents, in other words, no longer a problem that should be solved by foreign scholars.

Together with colleagues from Indonesia we addressed recently questions concerning citizenship in Indonesia because it is also an important issue in Europe. We share in other words similar problems. And that requires a trans-border comparative approach while research is firmly rooted both in deep local knowledge and academic disciplines.

Area studies did help to familiarize ourselves with an interdisciplinary approach in which humanities and social science talk to each other. KITLV is now on its way to bridge a wider gap in order to meet natural scientists in our effort to put the governance of climate change on the research agenda. That is indeed ambitious but we feel the responsibility to address this topic.

During the last decade we created at KITLV a new core group of very smart and talented researchers at KITLV. They combine an impressive disciplinary expertise with deep local knowledge, and a readiness to cooperate and engage in

transdisciplinary projects. They are able to navigate KITLV towards the next level.

A few names to conclude with. From the start I could always count on Gerry van Klinken who reminded us that it is a privilege to work at KITLV.

Fridus Steijlen, in 2003 we started Recording the Future, our long term project to make an audio visual archive of every day live in Indonesia. I am convinced that in the long run this will become one of the most precious treasures kept at KITLV.

Rosemarijn, Vanessa, Gert, it was a great pleasure and, once more, a privilege, to be part of the management team of KITLV. You were wonderful colleagues and I will miss our comradeship that kept us going during all those years. David Kloos, I am sure you will experience that very same feeling now you have replaced me in the MT. KITLV faces new challenges and you are the right person to handle these, with the support of all your colleagues.

And what could we achieve without our professional and truly committed administrative staff: Ellen, Jeannette, Yayah, thank you from the bottom of my heart for enabling us to work at KITLV.



I experience KITLV as a good friend. What makes KITLV special is that all these colleagues are very smart and very nice people. Together, they make KITLV a place that welcomes new postdocs, PhD students, fellows and visitors, showing sincere interest in each other's work and willing to cooperate. And every time we got a new NWO or Veni grant, when we welcomed new postdocs and PhD students, or fellows, when new publications were launched, during our seminars, and the *Entre Nous* meetings when we were engaged in lively discussions about new plans and projects, and work in progress was discussed at the Under Construction sessions, and other colleagues convened the so-called Coffee and Theory sessions, during the Tuesday Lunches, and when we gathered at our famous in-house Christmas dinners, you could feel the heartbeat of our institute.

Outside KITLV I enjoyed teaching at LIAS, our close neighbor at Leiden University. Nira, David and all the others, thank you for your hospitality.

KITLV is also a good friend who has many friends abroad. In that context I would like to thank my dear colleague Bambang Purwanto from Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, for his friendship and our longstanding cooperation. I consider your department as my second academic home.

Last year an international evaluation committee gave our institute the highest possible ranking: that of excellence. For me the right time to leave.

KITLV, my good friend, I wish you all the best.