

## J.C. van Leur and the Problematic Origins of “Autonomous” Indonesian History

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### Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to criticize J.C. van Leur's reputation as a Dutch historian who had been very vocal in criticizing his predecessors regarding Indonesian history. For modern Indonesian historians, van Leur is seen as a pioneer to reverse the perspective of a centric Western perspective to an Indonesian-centric point of view. The Western-centric point of view places Indonesian history as an extension of Dutch history in Europe so it is clear that Indonesian history does not have autonomy. However, van Leur's critique is true for the history of Indonesia during the Dutch colonial period, not for critiques of the pre-colonial period. To critically review van Leur's conception of Indonesia's historical autonomy, this article will take a close look at the intellectual trends that van Leur responded to. This article argues that van Leur's research is very deductive by making the claim that the picture of the past trading community in Southeast Asia is proving to be misguided. This article finds that one of van Leur's weaknesses is that he conducts historical research that is thesis-driven, not research-based, and his belief in a thesis has prompted him to impose totality on Western categories of Southeast Asian history. The use of Max Weber's model in analysing history actually makes van Leur's analysis of Southeast Asian history not even fully autonomous.

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### Introduction

In the world of Southeast Asian studies, few scholars have been as blockbuster as Jacob Cornelius van Leur. Cut short by the battle of the Java Sea, J.C. van Leur's life was spent in the service of the Dutch colonial government and in examining Indonesian society. Van Leur took to task fellow Dutch authors whom he felt were writing national histories of the Netherlands overseas under the guise of Indonesian history. “This is not history,” said van Leur, “but national catechism” (van Leur 1967, 266). Van Leur knew that the early modern governor-generals and Dutch East India Company policies had little effect in the life of the average Indonesian and asked for a paradigm shift in the way that Netherlanders viewed Indonesians. He writes,

Is it correct to take the history of the Company as the frame of reference for the history of Indonesia in the seventeenth century? Does that history have to be treated as part of Dutch history? If so, one necessarily arrives at the epic of mariners and warriors. Indonesian history was not merely that and nothing more (van Leur 1967, 265).

Too many histories of the formerly colonized world had been written from the perspective of the colonizer. Histories of the VOC in Asia and of later periods were incredibly slanted along national lines and were in serious need of course correction. While that is true, van Leur's is a useful critique for the Dutch period, but not for a critique of earlier periods of Southeast Asia historiography.

That van Leur was on the cutting edge<sup>1</sup> in his call for the realignment of a West-East perspective cannot be disputed, but in the rush to embrace his ideas, Southeast Asianists have tended to overlook some very serious ‘chinks’ in van Leur’s armor. In order to expose van Leur’s weaknesses, I am not about to enter into a personal exposé about the private life of J.C. van Leur, but instead will look closely at the intellectual trends that van Leur is responding to. Van Leur turns out to be, like so many revolutionaries, a hard-line ideologue. The contradictory situation that van Leur gets himself into is the same one that ideologues of all colors face, that is, the application of pet-theories to contexts in which those theories do not apply. Van Leur’s prescriptive, deduction-heavy research pushes him to make assertions about the Southeast Asian trade community that earlier and later, more-comprehensive examination showed to be misguided. Like many current works in colonial studies, van Leur’s attempt at an autonomous history of the ‘Other,’ ironically ends up being more programmatic, confining, and orthodox than the ‘Orientalist’ tradition that it sets out to bring down. van Leur uses thesis-driven research, rather than a research-driven thesis and his ‘religious’ adherence to an idea pushes him to impose totalizing, Western categories on Southeast Asian history. His connections to Max Weber will be particularly telling in this respect and in the end will show that van Leur’s model is insufficient if the ultimate goal is an autonomous Southeast Asian history.

### Art History and Hindu-Javanese History

One area in which van Leur overextends himself academically is in his critique of the epigraphic and archaeological evidence of the Hindu-Javanese past. The presentism of van Leur’s ideas is amplified the further he delves back into Indonesian history. Rightly, van Leur recognizes the bulk of Dutch writing of Indonesian history after 1600 as little more high-political history moving from governor-general to governor-general, treating Indonesia as a remote province of the Kingdom of the Netherlands rather than a separate entity. His is a legitimate critique of colonial history, but an illegitimate critique of ancient history, especially regarding his forays into the specialized fields of linguistics and archaeology. A review of Europe’s stance toward the monuments of Java helps contextualize van Leur’s misguided stand.

Seventeenth-century Dutch silence as to the existence of the massive *candis* of Central Java, testifies to the slightness of the Dutch colonial presence in the archipelago at the time. I am not aware of any seventeenth century or earlier reference to the well-known (at least to the Javanese) Hindu temple complex at Prambanan or the more obscure (even to the Javanese) Buddhist shrine, Borobudur.<sup>2</sup> The toehold clung to by the VOC at Jakarta was far from the Javanese cultural heartland, where much of its artistic and literary treasures lay unknown to the outside world. It is not until the eighteenth century, when VOC officials began occupying regular places at courts outside West Java, that word of these extensive monuments starts to trickle out to the Western world.

A handful of footnotes from official Company visits to Central Java are the first sign of a European awareness of the Javanese monuments. The temple complex at Prambanan was the first of the major ruins to catch the attention of the Western world. In 1853, the first volume of the *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, published by the Royal Institute in The Hague, printed some of Governor General van Imhoff’s (1743-50) descriptions of Prambanan, which were originally written more than a century earlier in 1746. Van Imhoff’s rather underwhelming conclusion from his

<sup>1</sup>For example, van Leur also submitted articles to the very progressive periodical, *Kritiek and Opbouw*.

<sup>2</sup>It’s not that the Dutch were not completely ignorant as to Hindu and Buddhist monuments in the seventeenth century; extant writings in the period by men who had been to the Coromandel Coast or Ceylon describe those Hindu/Buddhist structures in some detail. However, probably because much of the description are written by missionaries, their comments are almost always aimed at alerting ‘good Christians everywhere’ to the *afgoderij* [idolatry] and *heidendom* [heathendom] of the East.

visit to Prambanan's Shiva temple is that the Javanese "formerly belonged to the sect of the Brahmins" (Theodoor 1917, 407).

It is both fitting and ironic that Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff should be among the first to 'uncover' monumental Java: fitting, because it is van Imhoff who paves the way for the so-called Indies Enlightenment by giving his blessing and patronage to the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences which organization sets about to explore Java scientifically; ironic, because van Imhoff is an instrumental figure in the movement to try and distance the Dutch from Javanese cultural hold that it exercised on Batavian life. . . a movement also known as the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences (Taylor 1983). Little more is said by the Dutch about monumental Java during the Company period, but no ink is spared by the subsequent British interregnum in criticizing Dutch ignorance concerning the Javanese past.

Detailing the military exploits of the British 'Conquest of Java,' in a book by the same name William Thorne also describes his amazement at how little the Dutch knew of the island that had long been their crown colony,

It may well excite surprise, that while the Dutch fixed here the seat of their Eastern Empire, and for above two centuries drew from hence immense supplies of wealth, *so little should have been comparatively done under their direction, either for the improvement of such valuable possessions, or in satisfying the natural desire of men to acquire knowledge of regions*, the productions of with avidity. This frigid insensibility to the concerns of science, and to the progress of the human mind, certainly did not arise from any apathy in respect to the value of their Oriental settlements, or for the want of energy in turning them to the most lucrative advantage (Thorne 1993, vii).

During the power-shift in Batavia, Thorne and other observers foreshadowed van Leur's 'thin and flaking glaze' (van Leur 1932, 120). notion of foreign—in this case, Dutch—influence on Indonesian society.

Most notable among the critics of the Dutch regime was Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles. His two volume *History of Java* was the first modern comprehensive study of the island.<sup>3</sup> Raffles was critical of the poor state of Dutch academic knowledge about Indonesia and set about to correct the oversights made by the previous 'unenlightened' colonial rulers, including the general ignorance about non-Batavian Java.

A major contribution made by Raffles was to literally sketch the basic outlines of Java's many ancient temples, or as Raffles called them, 'antiquities,'

The antiquities of Java have not till lately, excited much notice; nor have they been sufficiently explored. The narrow policy of the Dutch denied other nations facilities of research, and their own devotion to the pursuits of commerce was too exclusive to allow of their being much interested in the subject (Rush ed. 1996, 30).

Under British rule, in January of 1814, the Lieutenant Governor at Semarang received word from Javanese informants about the existence of the temple at Borobudur (Meinsma 1899, 238).<sup>4</sup> Later that same year, Dutchman and officer of engineers, H.C. Cornelius (who seven years earlier had worked on the restoration of Prambanan), spent six weeks with 200 coolies clearing away the overgrowth and making sketches of Borobudur. By October, Raffles was able to report to the Batavian Society, "Drawings of all the ruined temples and images are in hand, and it will not be long before I shall have it in my power to communicate to you fully, after surveying the whole" (Gomez 1981).

<sup>3</sup>Beset—as the modern traveler to Indonesia is—by glossy tour guides beckoning visitors to see ancient architectural wonders of Java, it is easy to forget how recent the 'monumental' view of a the Javanese past is.

<sup>4</sup>The *Babad Tanah Djawi* (ed. Meinsma, 1899, p. 238) makes mention of a prince seeking refuge at Borobudur, which puts the first written mention of the structure somewhere at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Raffles' new understanding of the Javanese past through its architecture helps him not to be fooled, by the then-present state of "internal war and the division of the country into petty contending sovereignties," into imagining an archaic and unsophisticated Javanese past (Raffles 1830, 2, 6).

Raffles was well versed in the Javanese chronicles and he uses the new architectural finds as a sounding board for these old legends, "The grandeur of their ancestors sounds like a fable in the mouth of the degenerate Javan; and it is only when it can be traced in monuments, which cannot be falsified, that we are led to give credit to their traditions concerning it" (Raffles 1830, 2, 6). In a chapter on the pre-Islamic history of Java, Raffles describes "various traditions regarding the manner in which Java and the Eastern Islands were originally peopled" (Raffles 1830, 2, 69). As source material for this period of Javanese history, Raffles exploits abstracts of the "archives of the princes of Java," abstracts that he himself had commissioned.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these digests of the *babads* (Chronicles), Raffles also consulted the chronological tables of the *Bupatis* and other native aristocracy (Raffles 1830, 68).<sup>6</sup> It is in these Javanese records that Raffles searches for the source of Javanese culture and civilization.

Raffles begins with a story, "amongst the various traditions," about the first settlers to Java arriving from Egypt. When the subcontinent of India was said to have still formed "an unbroken continent" with the Indonesian archipelago, religious exiles from the *Laut Mera* (Red Sea) made their way from the Middle East by hugging the shore all the way to Java. Presenting this as one among several possibilities for the original colonization of Java, Raffles seemed unconvinced of an Egyptian colonization, but instead focuses to the "supposed arrival" of Aji Saka as the point "that the Javans, even in their traditions, enter with any confidence into details" (Raffles 1830, 2, 71). For the rest of the chapter, Raffles continues to work straight from the *babads*.

Well over fifty percent of Raffles pre-Islamic history of Java consists of word-for-word recitation of the Javanese chronicles and most of the rest is his second-hand retelling.<sup>7</sup> One could try and explain his behavior by arguing that in 1830, Raffles has no other reliable information to include in such a history, but other explanations are also possible. By dirtying his hands in Java's relics, Raffles emerges with renewed curiosity about Javanese written history. Again he notes, "when it can be traced in monuments. . . we are led to give credit to their traditions concerning it" (Raffles 1830, 2, 6). Giving credit to traditions is not something we might expect from the man who, with his systematic surveys of Java, would set the wheels in motion for unprecedented exploitation of the Javanese. Whether we are dealing with van Leur or Raffles, each presents a bundle of contradictions that is not easily unpacked.

British officers commented frequently on the lowly state of Dutch academia in the East, but they were not the only ones who noticed the cracks in the 'thin and flaking glaze' of Dutch Orientalists. The Dutch themselves were aware of their shortcomings in Java, especially in terms of unrealized profit. Many Netherlanders saw the British interregnum under Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles as the great colonial leap forward from trading post to empire proper.

J.A. Sturler, a Resident of Banjumas (one of the new provinces of Java resulting from Raffles' reforms) and Dutch civil servant with "20 years uninterrupted service in many parts of the Dutch Indies," read Raffles' *History of Java* with great interest and, "want[ing] to make a copy accessible/obtainable to every 'official and officer'," set to work on a translation of what Sturler recognized as a "classic, and for the knowledge of that island is esteemed unmissable [onmisbaar]" (Raffles 1836, vii). Without going into the depths of Sturler's hero-worship for Raffles, Sturler distinguished Raffles from other colonial officials by the depth of Raffles' "place-specific knowledge,"

<sup>5</sup>The compilations were made by the Panambahan of Sumenap, the Kiai Adipati of Demak, and the secretary of the Pangeran Adipati of Surakarta.

<sup>6</sup>Raffles, who is trying to piece together an accurate timeline, is often confounded by the indigenous tables which he finds are "are not very consistent in what regards events anterior to the Mahomedan conversion", 68.

<sup>7</sup>On page 77 of the chapter, 'The History of Java from the earliest Traditions till the Establishment of Mahomedanism,' roughly 42 pages are devoted to the actual texts of the Javanese.

who with his “incredibly good Malay [language skills] . . . found himself everywhere on Java in order to check everything” (Raffles 1836, v-vi). Juxtaposed to Raffles’ erudition, Sturler notices comments on the lowly state of enlightened learning among the average East Indiaman,

This is especially the case with the Dutch East Indies, where a relatively inconsiderable Dutch population is, and where only a few people busy themselves with scientific practice in general or with the investigation of the noteworthy things of the land; where as a result the printing press yields little, such that people cannot expect to find, as in Europe, such a task ever brought to pass by one distinguished person, with complete knowledge of matters (Raffles 1836, vi).

If this was indeed the case, it is little wonder that Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences fell flat on its face shortly after its inception and failed to uncover the architectural wonders of Central Java. In addition to becoming a wellspring for Dutch defamation, the short-lived British period on Java marks the beginnings of the tradition of scholarship on Javanese history that van Leur would rail against a century later. Had Sturler chosen to translate Raffles’ *History of Java* in its entirety, he may have turned more nineteenth century Dutch attention to the monuments of Prambanan and Borobudur, instead he chose to “[leave] out as unnecessary, all the description of antiquities, all old temples, mythological remnants, legends and all the folk tales which concern only the enthusiast” (Raffles, 1836, viii).

In the first part of this section on monumental Java, I have tried to relate the background to the archaeological tradition that van Leur positions himself against before jumping ahead to the archaeologists, epigraphists, and art historians that pick up where Raffles and others left off. Nineteenth-century, non-British archaeological work in Java will not be remembered for its bright and shining moments. Whether amateur archaeologists are doing more harm than good to the temples in their ‘restoration’ efforts or whether ignorant Residents are giving away sculpture after sculpture to guests (both of which happened repeatedly), not much in the way of scientific progress in made until early in the twentieth century. Still, the century had its bright, if only fleeting lights. Because of the artifacts, Raffles takes Javanese origin myths seriously and recognizes Java’s high cultural past. Ironically, because taking the *babads*—and ultimately the Javanese—seriously, means taking them at their word regarding Indian colonization of the archipelago, those scholars who follow the Javanese epic line become targets for van Leur.

Happily, professional archaeologists and art historians became involved in the business of temple preservation, resulting in the first scholarly treatment of early Javanese history. Th. van Erp is the first in several generations of archeologists whose work set the agenda for Hindu-Javanese history. Van Erp railed loudly enough against the thieving and general neglect of the Central Javanese monuments that a responsible restoration was set in motion with van Erp as the archaeological director. From 1907-1911, the sense was made of the uncataloged piles of rubble from previous ‘restorations’, photos were taken, and Borobudur was carefully put back together, piece by piece. Professionals with knowledge of South Asian archaeology were brought in to help with the interpretive work on the friezes. Dr. J. Ph. Vogel, who was acting Superintendent of Archaeological Survey for British India, took over as acting archaeological director for Borobudur and resigned in 1915 when Nicholas J. Krom took over (van Erp 1917, 285-287, 299-302). Next to Max Weber, few names show up more in J.C. van Leur’s footnotes than N.J. Krom. In the same way that scholars of early Southeast Asia must wrestle with Coedes’s *Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, scholars who deal with early Indonesian history cannot circumvent Krom’s 1926 study, *Hindoe-Javaansche Geschiedenis*. Even in 1964 revised and updated edition of *Indianized States*, Coedes still considers *Hindoe-Javaansche Geschiedenis* the industry standard on pre-Islamic Indonesia. It is no wonder that Van Leur finds it necessary to take Krom head-on if he is going to purge Indonesia from all things Indian.

Considering Krom’s background in the Hindu-Javanese relics, it comes as no surprise that he saw Indian influence in Java as being more than a thin and flaking glaze. After working out the

timeline for early Javanese history (the timeline that still defines the period) (Wheatley 1982, 17).<sup>8</sup> culture into Java. He writes, “the adoption of Hindu civilization by the leading circles was a consequence of *penetration pacifique*, originating with their merchants, who after remaining settled had established ties with the natives, and then perhaps had provoked more countrymen (also non-merchants) to follow their example” (Krom 1931, 90). Much discussion has followed about whether or not a trader-class would have been able to be the bearer of high religion and here Krom is open to criticism. While Krom is not infallible, van Leur’s representation of Krom is unfair in lumping him together with others who see everything pre-Javanese as ‘primitive.’

Several years before *Hindoe-Javaansche Geschiedenis*, Krom published a massive two-volume collection on Borobudur that was the culmination of the previous twenty years of scholarship on the monument (Krom 1927). Krom’s years of training and experience working with epigraphic evidence and Central Javanese monuments made his work sound and convincing, a hard target for van Leur. In consideration of the evidence, Krom could not help but recognize the Indian elements in the Javanese ruins, but he always saw syncretism at work rather than colonization. He writes,

The very first chief point is lacking almost entirely, i.e. the way in which the Hindu element combined with the Javanese; how much remained individual and how much was lost of each, their influence on one another, their gradual transformation into what at first sight appears so curiously fantastic but on closer examination becomes the harmonious union of Hindu-Javanese culture. *It is neither Javanese with a Hindu varnish nor Hindu merely transplanted into a foreign land*, but exactly what the name indicates, a combination of two dissimilar powers, in value also unequal, and therefore the more remarkable it is that they created a perfect whole (Krom 1927, 195-196).

As will later be shown, because van Leur is so committed to the wholesale use of Weber’s ‘unassailed agrarian society’ thesis, van Leur cannot accept intermarriage as an option. Van Leur states, “The whole concept of a Hindu colonization and the rise of a ruling ‘half-breed’ Hindu-Indonesian class as a result of ‘miscegenation’ between the representatives of Hindu culture, chiefly traders, and the ‘highest levels’ of Indonesian society needs to be abandoned” (van Leur 1967, 102).

One figure who appears on the Dutch academic scene and becomes a target for van Leur is fellow Leiden alumnist and Javanese linguist C.C. Berg. Professor Berg’s inaugural address at the University of Leiden assured him a place in the footnotes of studies on Indianization (Berg 1929). Certain Javanese narratives tell the recurring story of a robber baron who comes to Java by sea and marries into local aristocracy, thereby establishing the Javanese royal line. Through an interpretation of the robber baron leitmotiv, Berg reads the narratives as a description of actual Indian ksatriyas who “by marrying native women of high standing called into being a posterity of mixed blood and, in consequence of the caste-system, an exclusive race of Hindu-Javanese who resembled their fathers in their general conduct, but transmitted to it much of what they had received from their mothers” (Bosch 1961, 6).

While the Hindu cultural elements in Borobudur were clear for Krom, he felt strongly that the monuments were products of Javanese culture rather than foreign impositions, “the most convincing proof that the art of Borobudur was not a foreign import but a product of Java itself, is its pure Hindu-Javanese type both as to form and character” (Krom 1927, 186). His detailed study of the reliefs led him to speculate about the high level of pre-Indian, Javanese culture as it was reflected in architecture, the status of women, dress, music, and a host of other practices before Indianization (Krom 1927, 195-6). Krom’s assessment of the early Javanese was anything but primitive. Competing on the ground of early history, van Leur is far out-matched by Krom and epigraphists like Coedès. Paul Wheatley’s criticism of van Leur in this respect is stinging. Wheatley writes,

<sup>8</sup>Paul Wheatley remarked in his Presidential Address, “Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, in spite of the paradigm-subverting changes in absolute dating with which archaeology confronts us, the relative chronology of Southeast Asian prehistory has remained largely unchanged.

It is of particular significance that, despite exceptionally strong criticism, Professor Coedes has not found it necessary to modify his views on the mode and scope of Indian acculturation in Southeast Asia. . . . That his views will prevail cannot be doubted, and by ignoring them in favor of *the theories of J.C. van Leur, which were little more than extrapolations into an earlier period of conditions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we in this country have retarded out attempts to understand the process of Indianization by a quarter of a century*. Whatever the value van Leur's hypotheses may have possessed in their primary context—and I am led to believe that is was considerable—when projected into the first millennium of the Christian era they exhibited that anhistoricity which van Leur so rightly condemned in the writings of others (Wheatley 1965, 336).

*In general, those who study ancient Southeast Asia tend to rely more heavily on Indianization theories than do the scholars who work on later periods.* This is partly to do with the fact that the evidence that scholars working on early Southeast Asia use is rooted deeply in Indian traditions as well as Indonesian. Van Leur takes issue with this kind of evidence because he feels that the structural underpinnings of these societies is being overlooked. George Coedès sees this as a problem between disciplines,

The opposing forces in this discussion are the sociologists on the one hand and the Indianists—philologists and epigraphists—on the other. The sociologists attach more importance to the ethnological facts, which can still be observed amongst present populations, than to written accounts and ancient texts. The Indianists on the other hand set more value on ancient sources—archaeological and epigraphic—contemporaneous to the events which they study. The sociologists claim that the indigenous civilizations have maintained their original features; the Indianists regard the ancient civilizations of the Indianized countries as branches that stem directly from the trunk of Indian civilization (Coedès 1964, 3).

At the heart of van Leur's doubtfulness of Krom's findings and of historians of early history in general, is van Leur's refusal to see 'prehistory' as a legitimate discipline. Calling it "the youngest historical discipline, a lonely outpost in the no man's land of history," van Leur is highly skeptical of the ability of historians of ancient history to even put together what one could call 'history,' "Prehistory is a matter of a great deal of fantasy, of such a degree of imagination that it sometimes appears questionable whether a sociologically and historically reliable construction of the facts can be made" (van Leur 1967, 254).

Finally, Coedès turns the tables on the sociologists who are quick to criticize a methodology that they themselves know very little about. Coedès is convinced that more research will uncover the tendency opposite to that which the sociologists want to see in Javanese history. He writes,

The use of inscriptions in vernacular languages for the study of institutions, administrative organizations, economic structures, social conditions, and material civilizations. Moreover, I am convinced that such research will reveal numerous facts which will indicate a much deeper Indianization of the mass the population than the sociologists will at present admit (Coedès 1964, 4).

Whether or not van Leur's anhistoricity has set the clock twenty-five years on early Southeast Asia research remains to be seen, but what does seem clear is that the further back van Leur's ideas are pushed back in history, the less valid they become. That Java's monuments and inscriptions set the terms for the Indianization debate, is something that van Leur does not adequately deal with in his push for a sociological look at early Java. The epigraphs and temples are the few pieces of evidence cannot be reasoned away or easily discounted. It is here that Krom and van Leur seem to be talking past one another and where we see van Leur's critique as ill-conceived for work on early Java but tailor-made for work on the Dutch period.

## Ksatriyas, Vaisyas, Brahmins - Whence Hindu-Javanese Civilization?

By the time that van Leur weighs in on the Indianization issue, that particular academic arena was already highly contested, or as Coedes euphemistically notes, it was a field in which “much ink ha[d] flowed” (Coedès 1964, 3). In dealing with the intricacies of early Javanese history, van Leur is very much out of his element and it is here that we see his argument is strained past the breaking point, giving way to the opinions of others more qualified and well-versed in the source material from the period.

Most controversial among the theories of Indianization is what has come to be known as the ‘ksatriya theory.’ At its core was the idea that either through settler colonies or martial force (hence the ksatriya or warrior), Indian culture came to Java on Indian terms in topdown fashion. At its most blatantly Indian nationalist, and most absurd, Radhakumud Mookerji uses the ksatriya theory to portray Javanese culture as the natural result of, “swarms of daring adventurers from Gujarat ports, anticipating the enterprise of the Drakes and Frobishers, or more properly of the Pilgrim Fathers, sailed in search of plenty till the shores of Java arrested their progress and gave scope to their colonizing ambition” (Mookerji 1912, 40-1). In the section in ‘Early Asian Trade’ where van Leur takes Indianization head-on, van Leur uses Mookerji as an example of the ‘nationalistic self-exultation’ that he perceives as behind Indianization theories. Setting up the straw-man of Mookerji’s Indian ‘Pilgrim’ next to legitimate twentieth-century academic debate makes for zinging rhetoric, but also makes for irresponsible and tendentious scholarship (van Leur 1967, 91).

As new queries chipped away at the logistics of ksatriya-Indianization, later revisions jettisoned the idea of a long-term subjugation of Java by the steady influx of Indians and the belief that there was no ‘local genius,’ but stood by the central notion that “even if initial contacts were made by traders, even if the latter spread of Indian culture was furthered by the initiative of local people, and even if it remained confined to the world of the elite, the essential, seminal, influence was the activity of Indian immigrant conquerors and settlers” (Mabbett 1977, 143). Scholars like R.C. Majumdar saw the Hindu roots running too deep in ‘Further India’ for anything short of Indian colonization to have had the deep and lasting impact that Indian language, culture, and arts had on Southeast Asia (Majumdar 1963). By fixing his guns on the ksatriya theory, van Leur is able to effectively skirt the evidential center of the Indianization debate that, unlike the ksatriya theory, is grounded on hard epigraphic and archaeological data.

Because of the existence of impressive Borobudur reliefs detailing Buddhist theology and obscure Hindu deities carved in stone at Prambanan, to name only a few examples, every serious theory of Indianization has to deal with the transfer of ‘high religion’ from India to Java. The ancient structures of Java make a clear point: whether or not Indian influence came by way of warriors, merchants, or holy men, somehow Indian influence made itself manifest in monumental fashion. Since traders and warriors are suspect for their capacity to pass on the doctrinal intricacies of Buddhism and Hinduism, many historians have turned to Indian clerics for their answers about the Indianization of Java. Brahmanization theories take many forms. In some, the Brahmins come on their own missionizing initiative. In others, Brahmins are summoned to Java by the Javanese. Interestingly enough, Java’s first European-authored history by Francois Valentijn showed the Javanese themselves going to India and elsewhere to receive training (Valentijn 1724, 4, 64).

The theory of Southeast Asian Indianization that has gained the most currency is the vaisya or merchant theory. Much of the attractiveness of the vaisya theory, is that it is the most plausible; we know that there were Indian merchants coming to ancient Java, but we do not know for sure whether Indian warriors ever set foot on Java. Since it is likely that traders were the first Indians in Java, the vaisya theory forms the starting point for subsequent variations on that theme. N.J. Krom is the leading advocate of the merchant theory and puts forth his best guess about Indianization as such, “the adoption of Hindu civilization by the leading circles was a consequence of *penetration pacifique*, originating with their merchants, who after remaining settled had established ties with the natives, and then perhaps had provoked more countrymen (also non-merchants) to follow their example” (Krom 1931, 90). Like C.C. Berg’s later theory about Indian warriors marrying into Javanese society



as the means of cultural infiltration, both Krom and Coedès attribute much of the true Indianization to Hindu-Javanese intermarriage, in this case between Indian merchants and Javanese women of no particular class. Keying off of—or perhaps more appropriately, “teeing off on”—the merchant emphasis of Krom and others, van Leur commits one of his most oversights in his drive to deflate the role of the trade in pre-nineteenth century Indonesia.

Van Leur remains unconvinced, “The ‘trader’ who by means of long residence and intermarriage is supposed to have brought a higher civilization remains a dubious figure”. According to van Leur, because of the lower status of merchants in pre-capitalist societies, “their origin and status held a position which did not in the least allow them to fulfill at once the function of transmitters of culture vis-a-vis the rulers of the coasts they touched upon”. Furthermore, van Leur points out, the distance between the coastal trading posts (where the merchants would have resided) and monumental Java (where the cradle of Hindu-Javanese culture was) made “pacific penetration with trade blazing the trail . . . nothing less than an enigma” (van Leur 1967, 253). His answer to the problem of Hindu cultural dissemination is Brahmanization instigated by the Javanese kingdoms.

Southeast Asian trade before the Dutch period was classified in van Leur’s model as a “peddling trade” (van Leur 1967, 133). Now well-known as “the peddler thesis,” van Leur’s world of Southeast Asian trade was defined by small-scale merchants trading in “valuable high-quality products” (Meilink-Roelofs’s 1962; Steensgaard 1974; Tracy 1990; Tracy 1991). As van Leur runs through a laundry list of goods ‘peddled’ in Southeast Asia, he is persistent in reminding the reader that even with his ‘liberal estimate,’ trade-volume was slight, “a few dozen bags of pepper” or “a few *picul* of silk and sandalwood per trader” here, and “a few dozen pieces of silk cloth” or a “mere trifle” of porcelain there (van Leur 1967, 126, 132). With local aristocracy and merchant foreigners running the commercial show, “trade was not of a ‘bourgeois commercial’ sort” (van Leur 1967, 133). At the mercy of the monsoons, traders and “markets were isolated from each other and showed important variations in structure, while the amount of goods turned over was small, even at the largest of them” (van Leur 1967, 135). In van Leur’s picture, distant markets were not linked by supply and demand and local market economies ground to a halt when, for whatever reason, the peddlers were not there. Even trade regulations functioned in forms similar to “those of trade in the western European middle ages” in a bazaar-like manner, similar to the “cheese trade in Dutch towns” (van Leur 1967, 136). Van Leur’s connection between medieval European trade and early Asian trade has gone unnoticed in the flood of scholarship that his work has precipitated. It lies at the heart of everything van Leur is trying to do with the Southeast Asian past.

### Jacob Cornelius van Leur, ‘Weberphile’

None of J.C. van Leur’s numerous disciples and detractors have accurately targeted what is truly at stake for van Leur in proving the “peddler trade” in Southeast Asia, but a closer reading of the works on which van Leur relies most heavily, Weber’s *Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations* and *The Social Base for the Fall of Ancient Civilization*, shows van Leur’s lock-step conformity to Weber’s general schematic. Van Leur’s project becomes much clearer when it is cast in the image of the work it so closely follows.

In *Agrarian Sociology*, Weber seeks to show the way that the deep structures and patterns of ‘Antiquity’ remained ‘autarkic’ from, for example, Roman Imperial market forces, “the exchange economy was a sort of superstructure; beneath it was a constantly expanding infrastructure of natural economy in which needs were met without exchange, the economy.. perpetually absorbed human material and satisfied their consumption needs mainly out of their own products rather than from the market” (Weber 1976, 394). Like van Leur, Weber has his merchants and economic activity on the periphery of a resilient pre-existing non-market system. Merchant culture and values, for van Leur, remain on the periphery of Southeast Asian society.

Van Leur’s model hinges on showing that commercialism seeps no further into the society than the traders themselves. Weber too was intent on showing the ephemeral effect of trade on society. His discussion of the Roman Empire might just as easily be a line from van Leur’s dissertation when

Weber notes, “we easily forget how insignificant this trade was in quantity” (Weber 1976, 392). His description of ancient Egypt is of a peddler economy where, for Weber “barter was the basis of trade” (Weber 1976, 128). Van Leur also resorts to descriptions of peddlers/merchants hawking their wares for payment in kind in Southeast Asia. Weber’s typifies the non-effect of Roman culture on the agrarian societies as such, “the natural economy [agrarian society] therefore remained largely unaffected and so commerce could not develop very far” (Weber 1976, 392). Following Weber, van Leur paints a portrait of a fleeting market trade that was person-to-person, purchase quantities small, and growth static. Van Leur writes, “The market tendency was the opposite of dynamic: what came on the market had to be sold, and the goods disappeared with the traders, or if the trading failed, traders and goods stayed over” (van Leur 1967, 135). In van Leur’s world, the same trade situation presented itself in early Asia, the late Roman Empire, and in ancient Egypt.

The similarity between Weber’s Roman trade and van Leur’s Asian trade is striking. Van Leur says of the early Asia trade, “It was a small-scale peddling trade, a trade-in valuable high-quality products” (van Leur 1967, 133). Weber description of the Near East could also pass unnoticed as van Leur’s description of Southeast Asia. Weber comments, “Such trade as existed was mainly in a small number of expensive articles: precious metals, amber, fine textiles, some ironware and pottery.. these were generally luxury items” (Weber 1976, 392). In order for Weber’s model to work, van Leur must prove that commerce was by and large relegated to either the realm of foreigners who were ‘walled away’ from the population, or to the local aristocracy with whom the buck stopped, so to speak. One way that Weber was able to keep the market out of the agrarian society is to show its accretion on only the thin, upper-crust of society. According to Weber, “export trade was a royal monopoly” in Egypt, much like van Leur’s aristocratic families who held the monopoly there (Weber 1976, 128). In discussing the Roman Empire he writes, “it was not the masses and their everyday needs with which international trade was concerned, but rather a small stratum of wealthy classes” (Weber 1976, 392). Van Leur employs the same strategy for downplaying Southeast Asian trade by observing that only upper echelons of society participated in a meaningful way. Like Weber, van Leur finds that, “the financiers of trade were often princes, religious dignitaries, and nobles” (van Leur 1967, 133).

Apart from recessitating Weber, what is at stake for van Leur in his persistent use those ideas? Why is he so intent on showing the small-scale, ephemeral nature of early Asian trade? Like Weber’s autarchic agrarian societies, a truly autonomous Southeast Asia hinges on proving that those agrarian civilizations went uncontaminated from the onslaught of the market and its culture, especially the highest culture. Weber’s description of the Egyptian agrarian system that wiped away the ‘thin and flaking glaze’ of royal Egyptian culture, sounds hauntingly familiar to a van Leur’s Javanese culture on which Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam<sup>9</sup> had no effect. Before, during, and long after the great pyramids, the Egyptian Nile farmer endures and remains as unaffected as the Javanese cultivator of wet-rice who labour in the shadow of Prambanan. Weber’s portrait of decline matches van Leur simple Southeast Asian peasantry, “Just as the commerce and the marble pomp of the ancient cities have disappeared, so too all the intellectual achievements and values of these cities seem sunk in darkness: their art, their literature, their science, and their sophisticated commercial law” (Weber 1976, 410). Thus the ‘thin and flaking glaze’ that is high culture gets swallowed up in the behemoth of ‘natural culture.’ Van Leur’s heavy reliance on Weber’s idea of ‘timeless and static’ agrarian cultures,

<sup>9</sup>He also wants to show an Indonesian agrarian core undisturbed by the foreign influence of Muslims. Of the ‘thin and flaking glaze’ of Islam van Leur writes, “What is most important . . . is that with that process [expansion of Islam] the authority of the nobility remained the same— more strongly put, the Islamization took place under its protection” (van Leur, 143). According to van Leur, because Islam was only adopted for political motives, Indonesia’s “sociological structure needs to be considered quite separately from any possible cultural or political results” of the process of Islamization (van Leur, 144). Again, van Leur is driven by a desire to show a deep Southeast Asian agrarian structure that remains entrenched until the nineteenth century and in which Southeast Asia’s population is goes untouched by the outside world.

means that van Leur *needed* to see the same processes at work in Southeast Asia in order for his model to work.

Going hand in hand with Weber's *Agrarian Sociology* is his shorter article, *The Social Base for the Fall of Ancient Civilization*, published together in English as a single volume. Together they round out Weber's presentation and gesture in the direction that van Leur wants to take with Southeast Asia. There is 'change' in Weber's model and it comes on the heels of trade developments. Medieval Europe was able to snap out of its agrarian coma by involving the masses in commercialism. In Weber's model, a "slow but irreversible" transformation whose "effects were profound" occurred when peasant met the market. This "constituted a great alteration of the institutions which shaped the lowest classes of society" (Weber 1976, 400). Weber continues, "In the Middle Ages there was a transition from production for individual local orders to production for an interlocal market. This transition was made possible by the slow ascent of capitalist free enterprise and the principle of competition, and their penetration into the centre of the local economic structure" (Weber 1976, 394). But this change is not what van Leur wants to show going on in Southeast Asia, and so Southeast Asia functions for van Leur as the static societies function in Weber.

Change seems an admission of defeat and so van Leur is intent on showing the same resilience among the Indonesians under the foreign influence that Weber wanted to show among the agrarian cultures under the Roman Empire. Much more than simple resilience, these agrarian structures were even responsible for the failure of imperial initiatives, "the disintegration of the Roman Empire was the inevitable political consequence of a basic economic development: the gradual disappearance of commerce and the expansion of a barter economy" (Weber 1976, 408). The same forces that disintegrated the Roman Empire had a corrosive effect on all outside influence on Indonesia.

Through van Leur's writing, we can almost picture him thinking about how the same scenario in the Roman Empire played itself out in, for example, Srivijaya. When the agrarian structures triumphed in the Middle Ages, writes Weber, "Interlocal commerce has also disappeared; the commercial ties connecting the self-sufficient cells of economic life have been cut, trade has relapsed to the level of peddling left to foreigners—Greeks and Jews" (Weber 1976, 409). Like Weber, van Leur wants the 'peddling left to foreigners' and so Chinese, Indians, and Arabs take the trade reigns in his world, as opposed to the Indonesian population.

## Conclusion

One morning, while in a graduate seminar with fellow historians, a professor of mine became animated over a debate between Marxists and non-Marxists about the origins of the enclosure system. The stakes in the debate, as we were told by our professor, were quite high, but failed to evoke a passionate response from us, one way or the other. This was not the first time that what had once been a knock-down, drag-out issue for our professor when she was a student was now unable to raise a pulse among any of us. After her best attempts at controversy fell on unprovoked ears, she exclaimed, "You are all a bunch of wimps!", to which we politely shrugged our shoulders, neither in agreement nor disagreement. What does a generation of scholars, who experience neither highs nor lows, have to offer? Maybe it is only at the turn of the millennium, decades after decolonization, that we can re-examine J.C. van Leur with neither the Orientalism of colonial-era scholarship nor the raw contempt of the "anti-colonialist tradition" (Smail 1961, 76-105, 77). Whether seen in contrast to the archaeologists or in conformity to Weber, not only does van Leur come out looking unoriginal, but his lock-step application of essentialist categories of society provides Southeast Asia with anything but an autonomous history.

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