Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)

Dutch Attitudes Towards Colonial Empires, Indigenous Cultures, and Slaves

Oostindie, G.J.; Paasman, B. (Bert)

published in
Eighteenth-Century Studies
1998

Link to publication in KNAW Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)
Oostindie, G. J., & Paasman, B. (1998). Dutch Attitudes Towards Colonial Empires, Indigenous Cultures, and Slaves. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *31*, 349-355.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the KNAW public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the KNAW public portal.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:
pure@knaw.nl

Download date: 12. Jun. 2026

'N 170333094 3R 1998 B 978

GERT OOSTINDIE AND BERT PAASMAN

Dutch Attitudes Towards Colonial Empires, Indigenous Cultures, and Slaves

I. Introduction[1]

From its very beginnings, Dutch colonial ventures gravitated towards Asia. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) was established in 1602, nineteen years before its West Indian counterpart, the WIC. In addition to various trading posts along the Indian subcontinent and along the Asian coast, Dutch expansion under the aegis of the VOC resulted in the colonization of the Cape Colony and, most importantly, the vast and populous Dutch East Indies. The importance of the Dutch West Indies pales in comparison. The New Netherlands' colony was ceded to the British in 1664; the Dutch intermezzo in Brazil was short-lived. By the late seventeenth century, the Dutch empire in the West consisted of six tiny Antillean islands and three as yet barely exploited and inhabited colonies on the "Wild Coast" of the Guyanas (fig. 1). Apart from this, the WIC only supported a few trading posts on the West African coast.

Dutch colonialism had started in the geopolitical context of the struggle against Spain. Initially therefore, there had been an obvious ideological rationale behind the overseas expansion. Once independence was attained, however, pragmatism ruled. In contrast to the Catholic nations, there was no serious attempt to convert the subjected peoples to Christianity, much less to socialize them into Dutch culture. Apart from the numerically insignificant colonial expatriates, metropolis and colonial world remained separate entities for all but economic purposes. Moreover as the physical presence of colonial subjects in the Netherlands was negligible, for ordinary Dutch people the colonial empire must have been an extremely distant reality at best. Accordingly, the rare debates about themes such as colonialism, slavery, or Christianization had a very limited participation and impact. At the same time, within the colonial empire, the divide between the VOC's and the WIC's respective territories was hardly ever bridged. This short paper therefore discusses these two parts of empire in separate sections.

II. The Dutch East Indies[2]

When the Portuguese arrived in Southeast Asia in the early sixteenth century, they found people with highly developed cultures, including their own languages and religions. European supremacy existed only in technology, especially in maritime and military fields. When the Dutch arrived about one century later, Portuguese had already become the lingua franca in most of Southeast Asia, certainly on the coasts. This was also true of the western part of the Indonesian archipelago; in the eastern part Malay served that purpose. In and around the Portuguese trading posts there were already large numbers of Eurasians (offspring of a European father and an Asian mother, or of mixed parents), the so-called mestizos, with their own culture. The Portuguese had already begun missionary work; the Jesuits in particular were active. The VOC, clad with sovereign rights by the States General, tried to push back the Portuguese influence by taking over trade contracts, conquering trading posts, and by replacing the Roman Catholic mission with a Calvinist one. Portuguese remained the major language in the "central rendezvous" of the Company, Batavia, as well as in other settlements far into the eighteenth century. Dutch was only spoken in the offices of the VOC by the governor general, the Councillors of the Dutch East Indies and other officials, and in some churches and schools. In the eighteenth century Malay gradually replaced Portuguese, while Dutch still played a minor role. Because of the influence of Asian and Eurasian women and their slaves, who raised the children, Portuguese or Malay was often spoken in the family circle. The so-called mestizo culture became more and more important during the eighteenth century. Every European staying in the East Indies for a period of time began to live like a mestizo to a greater or lesser extent. Marrying into mestizo families was even a means to make a career for oneself in the Company. Having obtained a monopoly for the whole

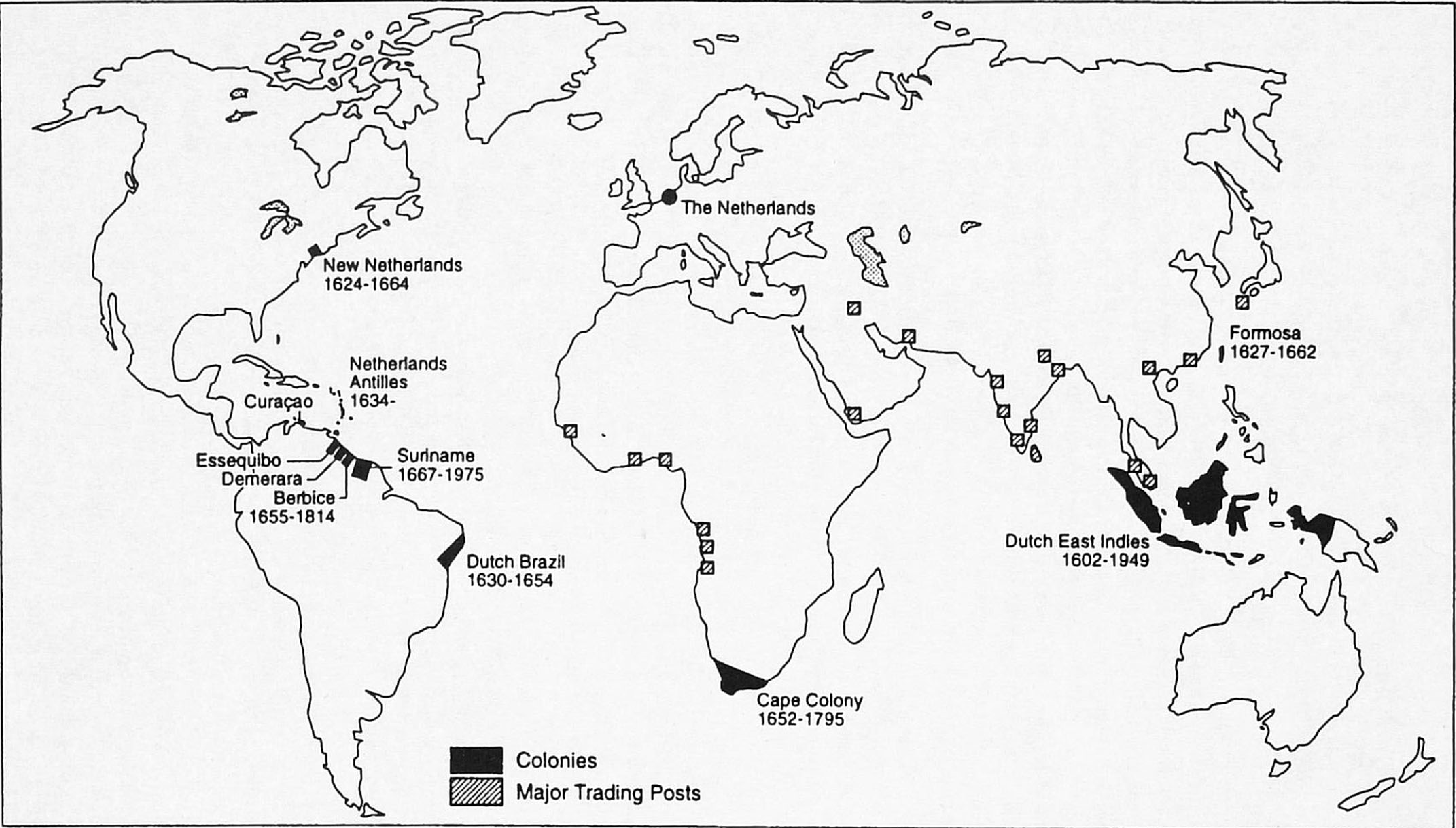

FIGURE 1. The scope of the Dutch Maritime Empire. (Map by G-O graphics, Wijk bij Duurstede).

territory between South Africa and the Strait of Magellan, the VOC did not intend to colonize at first but aimed at making as much profit as possible by trading. Yet colony-like areas arose around the newly founded city of Batavia (after 1619), around the Cape of Good Hope (after 1652), pre-eminently in the Spice Islands, the Moluccas, in Ceylon, Formosa, and in some places on the coasts of India (Malabar, Coromandel, Bengal). The Dutch were the only European nation allowed to found a trading post on the floating island of Deshima off the Japanese coast near Nagasaki (ca.1640–ca.1850). Thus Japan became acquainted with European science and technology. A brisk trade was also carried on with the Arab world, especially with the territories around the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

By intervening in Javanese succession wars, the Company gradually extended its power throughout Java in the eighteenth century. The famous "Empire of Insulinde" (the present Indonesia except for East Timor) was not unified until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After the collapse of the Spanish-Portuguese power in the first half of the seventeenth century, the British became the chief rival in the Dutch East Indies. They appropriated the settlements in India, in Ceylon, and finally also in South Africa in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the Napoleonic age they took over in Java (1811). However, after the Conference of Vienna the Netherlands recovered Java and other parts of the Indonesian archipelago, including the Moluccas (1816). When the VOC ceased to exist in 1800, Java, Ambon and some other areas became state colonies. The Company was governed at home by a board of seventeen directors, the Heeren XVII (Gentlemen XVII). On behalf of this board the trade empire was directed by the Council of the Dutch East Indies and the governor general. Batavia, founded by Jan Pieterszoon Coen after the destruction of Jakarta, was a multicultural city. The population consisted of Dutch people and other Europeans, Chinese, Malaysians, Arabs, and other Orientals. The Javanese were not welcome at first because it was feared that they would conquer the city from the inside, because there was always indigenous Indonesian resistance to the presence of the Dutch. The city did accommodate Indonesians from the eastern islands, including slaves from Bali, Lombok, and Celebes (most slaves came from Ceylon and India). The Chinese took care of building and provisioning of the city; their manpower and financial-economic power were great. In the long run this led to all kinds of oppressive measures by the Company and the city council and to jealousy on the part of the non-Chinese population. In 1740 this resentment led to violent action against the Chinese, the so-called Chinese massacre, in which about ten thousand Chinese, including women and children, were killed.

The non-European population was generally free to keep their own culture, particularly their own language, religion, and social traditions (the adat). Although Dutch travel books and ethnographies described these expressions as inferior, oppression was not an issue. European culture was considered superior to Asian culture, which in turn surpassed African culture. In addition to Christianity, Islam was also recognized. The remaining religions were collectively identified as "paganism." Cultural relativism arose after the Enlightenment, first in the Netherlands and later in the Dutch East Indies. European institutions including educational establishments, the theater, freemasons' lodges, learned, literary, and utilitarian societies were transplanted to the Dutch East Indies. The Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen (Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, 1778–1961) paid attention not only to the East Indian geography and natural history but also to native languages, literature, religion, history, and the adat. The society library and collections became the basis for the present National Library and the National Museum in Jakarta. Calvinism was initially the only permitted religion for Europeans. In the course of the eighteenth century Lutheranism was also recognized (in connection with the large number of Germans and Scandinavians in the Company). There was no interference with the practice of Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism.

The native elite was treated with due respect as long as it was cooperative. The Company let the native nobility govern the native population, collect taxes, and enforce statute labor. The trade contracts and other contracts were concluded with the princes. Thus the Company activities were done on a legal basis as much as possible. In the Republic the Dutch East

Indies were known as a place where one could become rich fast (legally or illegally) and where one could send failed and incautious Europeans. Corruption and illicit trading boomed. A famous expression at the time was that people were hanging their conscience on the line on their way to the Dutch East Indies to get it off again on their way back. Nevertheless there were also incorruptible VOC servants for whom the native people were not unimportant. Slavery, existing by tradition in South East Asia, took on a less brutal form under the VOC than in the West Indies, especially because the murderous plantation slavery did not occur. Although most people were enslaved illegally and transported and sold disgracefully, the nature of the work was different and less extreme; most slaves were house, yard, and trade slaves. Maltreatment, sexual offenses, and cruel punishments also occurred in the Dutch East Indies. For the most part, the slaves' situation was not very different from that of servants. Discussion about slavery and the slave trade did not begin to an appreciable degree until about 1800 in the Dutch East Indies. During the British Interim Government Thomas Stanford Raffles founded an anti-slavery institute: "Java Benevolent Institution" (1816), renamed by the Dutch to "Javaansch Menslievend Genootschap" (Java Humanitarian Society). After the abolition of the slave trade the treatment of the slaves gradually improved, but slavery was not abolished until 1860. Around 1800, both in the Dutch East Indies and in the Netherlands, plans for reform were discussed in regard to slavery, (enforced) statute labor, taxes, land use, trade, and government. However, they were not implemented until the second half of the nineteenth century (the age of so-called liberal politics). In those days the gradually lifting of censorship imposed by the VOC, together with the shorter traveling time resulting from the use of steamships and the opening of the Suez Canal, raised the Dutch East Indies to a less peripheral position in Dutch thinking.

III. The Dutch West Indies[3]

In contrast to the VOC territory, the Dutch West Indies were virtually created anew by the colonizers and their imported subjects. When the Dutch reached the Caribbean, around 1600, the region's indigenous population had been decimated and would soon be extinct. Post-Colombian Caribbean colonies were peopled by immigrants: European free settlers and indentured laborers and African slaves. Only in the Guyanas did Amerindians survive, mainly in the interiors of the tropical rain forest, far from colonial society.

The two major Dutch West Indian colonies, Suriname and Curaçao, differed in many ways. Natural endowments are the key to these contrasts. A typical plantation colony, Suriname's population increased from a few thousand in 1700 to 70,000 in the 1770s. Over 90% of the population, situated mainly in the fertile coastal zone, consisted of African and Creole slaves. Apart from Amerindian tribes, the vast interior housed communities of Maroons, runaway slaves, and their offspring. In contrast, Curaçao, a small island, was already heavily populated with nearly 20,000 inhabitants in the late eighteenth century. Not suitable for tropical staple production, the island became a center for legal and illegal trade in merchandise and slaves. In the Caribbean perspective, the proportion of whites (about 25% in 1789) and free blacks and coloreds (about 20%) was quite high. Because slavery was not crucial to the economy, the percentage of slaves in the colony declined during the eighteenth century and continued to do so afterwards.

Symbolic of the modest metropolitan interest in the West Indies, divergent institutional arrangements were allowed to emerge in the rule of these colonies. Suriname, initially a colony of the province of Zeeland, was administered by a semi-private Sociëteit van Suriname; the city of Amsterdam, the WIC, and initially also the family of the first governor held shares in this body. The Sociëteit reigned until the collapse of the Republic; the Dutch state did not take direct control of Suriname until the nineteenth century. Curaçao and the other Antilles were directly ruled by the WIC. A measure of metropolitan rule was enforced through the WIC; however in comparison to other European powers in the New World, the Dutch state's control on local government gave latitude to the local elites.

The local, white elites were remarkably heterogeneous. In Suriname, the single most important white group was Sephardic, either immigrated directly from Brazil, or through the Netherlands. French Huguenots, Germans, and Brits added to a white population in which the Dutch segment formed a minority. In Curaçao, the white population consisted of metropolitan Protestants and also Sephardic Jews. To the extent that these white elites settled in the colonies at all, their sense of belonging to Dutch culture weakened as time passed; the transatlantic linkage was economic rather than cultural. However, in their views on the indigenous populations, the slave trade, and the Afro-Caribbean populations, Dutch Caribbean whites and metropolitan Dutch elites shared the basic tenets of colonial ideology. The fundamental assumption was that in the WIC territory—both the West African trading posts and the West Indies—there was no indigenous culture worthy of mention. In Asia and particularly the East Indies, the Dutch acknowledged the existence and value of indigenous cultures, and to some extent respected and assimilated local elites and their power and prestige. In the Caribbean colonies in contrast, there were no such concerns.

Except for the rather insignificant islands of Aruba and Bonaire, Amerindians did not live in the Antilles and were of numerical importance only in the Guyanas. The neighboring Dutch colonies of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo were not successfully developed as plantation colonies until after the British takeover during the Napoleonic Wars. Here, violent Amerindian resistance continued. In Suriname in contrast, the Amerindians had been successfully pacified by the early eighteenth century. Living in small numbers in the interior, these Amerindians of various ethnicities were depicted in quite benevolent terms in various eighteenth-century accounts on Suriname. When no longer a threat to the colonial order, the Noble Savage made a modest appearance on stage.

Cynical pragmatism and blatant contempt dominated Dutch and Dutch colonial perspectives towards Africans and their Caribbean offspring. Studies of Dutch attitudes towards the slave trade and slavery have uncovered an undercurrent of antislavery writings starting as early as the first Dutch ventures in this field. Yet this undercurrent was limited to metropolitan opponents with little influence in their own country, and none whatsoever in the colonies. The prevailing view was that slavery was essential for development of the West Indies; therefore, both the slave trade and slavery were acceptable. There was the usual array of additional arguments. The African was by nature coarse, lascivious, not prone to civilization, and so on. In fact, the transfer to the Dutch West Indies would allow them to escape the brutality of Africa and perhaps, in due time, gain admittance to the far superior European culture. The question whether Africans were human beings at all was answered affirmatively at an early stage. Yet there was little inclination towards further concessions. Most of the stereotypes regarding slaves, or Africans and their descendants in the New World, were negative and provided the ideological tenets for the defense of the slave trade and slavery itself. The modest corpus of writings is all too obvious to anyone familiar with the literature on New World slavery.

The contrast between a presumed long tradition of democracy and religious and political tolerance in the metropolis and the cynical exploitation and discontempt for the overseas subjects may be disheartening, but is not surprising. After all, such double standards characterized virtually all colonial ventures. What does stand out, however, is the absence of any significant movement for abolition well into the nineteenth century. By the second half of the eighteenth century, Britain had begun to develop an abolitionist tradition which would eventually gain enough momentum and both elite and popular appeal to usher in the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Denmark, a lesser Caribbean power, followed suit. To a lesser extent, France too developed its variety of abolitionism in the eighteenth century. However, the Republic, like Spain and Portugal, remained virtually passive and inflexible on these issues. Whatever its influence in other spheres of society, the Enlightenment left but the faintest imprint on Dutch attitudes towards slavery.

In the nineteenth century, when the abolition of the slave trade was imposed by the British and the eventual abolition of slavery became inevitable, a major change occurred in the colonial approach towards slaves. In contrast to previous ideology and practice, Christianization of the Suriname slaves—previously denounced as casting pearls before swine—would now be welcomed as crucial in the effort to convert the slaves into an obedient free population. This belated and opportunistic change of policy highlights again the crude discontempt and lack of appreciation of previous white generations with regard to their slaves. The absence of a consistent Dutch colonial policy about Christianization in the West Indies is demonstrated in the contrast between Suriname and Curaçao. In Curaçao, both slaves and free blacks and coloreds had been at last nominally part of the Catholic church since the early eighteenth century. On the island, slave owners had long since understood that conversion was no threat at all to the social order and had therefore never felt the cynical urge of their Suriname counterparts to demonstrate that blacks were simply not (yet) ready to understand and embrace Christianity. Catholicism in Curaçao drew the black population more into the colonial culture, even if always at a distance: the whites, after all, were Protestants and Jews, and moreover delegated conversion to Spanish missionaries. The Republic did not interfere in either place which illustrates its limited ambitions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Dutch colonialism in the East and the West were clearly two separate endeavors; the divide was institutionalized by the creation of two different entities, the VOC for the East Indies and the much less successful WIC for the West. For most of the colonial period, the importance of the West Indies enterprise dwindled in the face of colonialism in the East Indies. In the East, and particularly in the Indonesian archipelago, the Dutch were colonizers without a strong cultural impact, willing to tolerate if not necessarily appreciate the local elites' culture. In the West, the Dutch, like the other European powers, virtually created new societies by the importation of African slaves. While the European minorities had little appreciation for the slave cultures, they could not avoid a measure of creolization, which however was not as thorough as the emergence of a mestizo culture in the East. As the absence of serious debates about issues such as colonialism or slavery attest, in the metropolis the colonies were seen as another world, where Dutch standards of culture, freedom, and civility did not apply.

GERT J. OOSTINDIE directs the Department of Caribbean Studies at the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology in Leiden and holds a chair in Caribbean Studies at Utrecht University. He is managing editor of the *New West Indian Guide*. He has published various books on Caribbean history, ethnicity, and politics.

BERT PAASMAN is lecturer in Dutch Colonial and Postcolonial literature at the University of Amsterdam. He is editor of the magazine *Indische Letteren*. He has published works on the literature of the Enlightenment and on the literature of the East and West Indies.

NOTES

1. See: Allison Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World; The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993); C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch seaborne empire 1600–1800* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1965); Jan Willem Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en Verlichting; Een cultuurhistorisch en -sociologisch onderzoek naar enkele aspecten van de Verlichting in Nederland (1755–1810)* (Zwolle: Waanders 1992); Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand W. Mijnhardt (eds.) *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century; Decline, Enlightenment, and Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992); and G. J. Schutte, *De Nederlandse patriotten en de koloniën; Een onderzoek naar hun denkbeelden en optreden, 1770–1800* (Groningen: Tjeenk Willink 1974).

2. See: Leonard Blussé, *Strange company. Chinese settlers, Mestizo women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia*, (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1986) and Jean Gelman Taylor, *The social world of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

3. See: Gert Oostindie (ed.) *Fifty Years Later; Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press 1996); A. N. Paasman, *Reinhart; Nederlandse literatuur en slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting* (Leiden: Nijhoff, 1984); Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade 1600–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990); and Neil L. Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit; A History of the Caribs in Colonial Venezuela and Guyana 1498–1820* (Dordrecht/ Providence: Foris 1988).

PIETER SPIERENBURG

Close To The Edge: Criminals and Marginals in Dutch Cities

The characteristically Dutch urban culture of the Republican period is to be found first of all in the western part of the country: the area which today is called the Randstad and which, as Jan de Vries argues, already formed an integrated urban network in the seventeenth century.[1] Consequently, most of the examples in this brief essay will be from that area. Within the Randstad, Amsterdam was by far the largest city. It is also the one most extensively investigated with respect to crime and marginality. In addition to Amsterdam, ample information exists about towns such as Haarlem, Leiden, and Delft. Our principal question is whether this urban culture, as far as crime and marginality are concerned, had peculiar features, not to be found elsewhere. Was there a typically Dutch pattern? Since this is a broad question, I will restrict the discussion to a few themes.

One common characteristic results from the integrated urban network itself. Interurban mobility was very common, especially among the less settled sections of the lower classes. Admittedly, German bandits might easily cross the border of one territory and move to the next, and it was not uncommon for French beggars to traverse large parts of rural France. However, moving swiftly from one town to another is a different experience. That is what beggars, vagrants and criminals in the Netherlands often did, remaining all the while in an urban environment. The people on the edge were quick to learn new practices and rituals, as is apparent in the spread of the popular duel, in imitation of the noble duel. Banishment of undesirables often just meant an exchange of individuals from one urban subculture to another.

When historians of early modern Europe speak of marginal people, they refer primarily to beggars and vagrants. Prison-workhouses were established in the Dutch Republic around 1600 to lock up members of this group, along with unruly family members and petty criminals. It was felt that something should be done about the exchange of undesirable individuals. It makes no sense, the Leiden magistrates stated, that we "banish such people upon each other's necks."[2] Because the towns in Holland constituted an integrated urban system, concern about public order transcended the local level. Around 1600 the magistrates of Amsterdam and Leiden, and their colleagues in some other towns, wanted to cooperate, instead of diverting their problems to each other. The supra-local cooperation of urban magistrates aimed to restrict the interurban mobility of marginals just referred to.[3]

However, the authorities had only limited success in this. Complaints about vagabonds and impertinent beggars continued to be heard throughout the Republican period and after. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, for example, the burgomasters of Haarlem requested advice from the prison regents on how to deal with "foreign" marginals. The regents recommended strict supervision over all houses which provided lodging. One of the suggestions was that people staying there with children should be forbidden from going out at night without them.[4] This practice of abandoning children, in the expectation that they would be cared for from