

Exploring Colonial Boundaries: An Examination of the Kartini-Zeehandelaar Correspondence

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Though Kartini is often revered as an emblem of nationalist and feminist thought in Indonesia, her enthusiastic embrace of these ideologies' Western variants actually illustrates the ways in which hegemonic colonial relationships are replicated, even under apparently progressive creeds. By subscribing to Western feminism Kartini attempted to access an alternative ideology and identity that simultaneously subverted Java's "archaic" and "inadequate" indigenous culture as well as Dutch colonial rule—thus allowing her to somewhat reconcile the apparent incongruities between nationalism and feminism. The problem, however, is that even though both Kartini and her Dutch pen pal, Stella Zeehandelaar, believed that their views placed them firmly outside the antiquated conventions that defined their world, in reality they both simply replicated the cruel dynamics of their shared colonial past. Both women dreamed of a more progressive and liberated world; however each was ultimately the inescapable victim of the various constructed categories that framed their respective colonial identities, namely, class, gender, and especially race. Though Kartini aligned herself with Dutch feminists, the strictures of imperial associations did not allow her to actually become a "Dutch feminist". She remained Javanese. This mutually acknowledged "fact" inevitably called forth an imposed and agreed upon notion of indigenous inadequacy, which ultimately prevented true transnational sisterhood with her Dutch contemporaries. Kartini's choice to enter into a traditional polygamous marriage indicates the pervasiveness of her own self-acknowledged place in colonial society. Realizing, perhaps even on a subconscious level, that her racial and cultural heritage did not provide the social credentials necessary to overcome imperially imposed categories of "superiority" and "inferiority", she resigned herself (perhaps unconsciously) to the roles assigned her by the circumstances of history.

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While colonialism, in all its forms, certainly ranks as one of the most influential phenomena of the early-modern and modern eras, it is also one of history's greatest enigmas. For nearly a century it has been widely acknowledged that the "West" had occupied and/or controlled fully "nine-tenths of the surface territory of the globe" by the opening decades of the twentieth-century (Young, 2001, p. 2). Edward Said has declared, "no other associated set of colonies in history was as large,

none so totally dominated, none so unequal in power to the Western metropolis" (1993, p.8) than those held by the Western powers in 1914. Yet, while such notions of colonial supremacy have been affirmed and reaffirmed many times, the concept of imperial hegemony remains very difficult to define or articulate in specific terms—especially in Southeast Asia. The region's historically fluid and syncretic cultural and political heterogeneity complicates notions of blanket imperialism and/or

homogeneous oppression of indigenous peoples. The diverse demographics of ethno-linguistic affiliation, diffuse geography, and relatively high mobility produced inherently difficult circumstances for comprehensive colonial rule. Nevertheless, the region's early-modern and modern histories have been largely contingent on close identification with colonial regimes and various degrees of imperial hegemony.

According to Miguel Bernad, in 1588 Bishop Salazar of Manila counted only "eighty Spanish citizens and about 200 soldiers" in the city of Manila, and almost none in the provinces. Fifty-one years later in 1639 the inhabitants of the city numbered only 150 Spanish families with almost no increase in the number of Spaniards outside the city walls. Even at the height of Spanish control in 1855 Manila's Spanish population rose to only 1600 inhabitants, although by this time the number of Europeans outside the city had somewhat increased.¹ Compare this with an indigenous population of nearly eight million persons scattered throughout the islands by the nineteenth century, most of whom had never even seen a Spaniard.² Similarly, John Smail reported, according to the Census of 1930, conducted at the peak of Dutch power in the East Indies, that there were only 100,000 Europeans claiming rule over 60,000,000 indigenous "Indonesians" (1993, p. 54). Considering the severity of such demographic disparities, which are fairly typical across the region, the question naturally arises: how were Europeans able to accomplish the level of totalizing hegemony usually associated with imperial rule, while successfully eradicating or supplanting indigenous institutions and cultural practices with those of the metropole? The sheer statistical improbability of such an endeavor is staggering. Yet, narratives of Western dominance and indigenous submission have traditionally exercised tremendous influence in the "history of imperialism" as an analytical genre without much question as to its apparent improbability.

This tension concerning the validity or fictitiousness of imperial hegemony currently occupies much of the work being done on empire.

In a broad sense, the historical literature seems to indicate that imperial hegemony was both fact *and* fiction. On the one hand, many scholars have traditionally relied on broadly conceived and somewhat abstract theories of systemic imperial hegemony related to the apparently totalizing forces of modernity, such as capitalism and the rise of nation-states. Most of these works ally themselves, in a variety of ways, to either the colonial project itself or to Marxist thought, each with their accompanying notions of historicist transition. On the other hand, post-colonial scholarship has recently witnessed the rise of "new imperial history," which strives to reveal a more discursive, contingent, contested, and heterogeneous imperial process shaped by indigenous as well as imperialist agency. This body of literature specifically aims to undermine the structuralist and deterministic models that compel a systemically dictated and indomitable collective imperial experience.

Mediating between these views is a difficult task. The hegemonic/counter-hegemonic negotiation carried on throughout the broad aggregate of imperial history suggests both a totalizing process of imperial oppression and forced change, as well as an incomplete, superficial, contested, and compromised colonial project. The view one chooses to adopt depends heavily upon the selected chronological and political context. Considering the demographic disparities cited above, as well as the inhibiting lack of technological advancement relative to the modern era, imperial hegemony prior to the nineteenth century in Southeast Asia was decidedly fictitious. Early-modern European imperialists laid claim to geographic spaces over which they exercised little or no control. These "colonialists" simply inserted themselves into existing political and trade networks while inflating their sense of proprietary ownership over indigenous peoples (Ibid.: 54-55). By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, Southeast Asia began to experience a much more pervasive system of colonial rule that extended a certain form of European hegemony throughout the region. As colonizing nations began the rigorous process of institutionalizing "modernity" in their

colonies through territorialization, ethnographic codification, and the implementation of institutional and bureaucratic mechanisms of state, the heterogeneity that previously prevented invasive imperial hegemony was systematically neutralized. Indigenous peoples who were formerly “imperial subjects” in name only, now became increasingly circumscribed within an administrative matrix enabled by modern notions of ethno-racial identity, finance capital, the primacy of the nation-state, and the technological advantages of increased mobility and more effective weaponry. These developments remained discursive and contingent upon indigenous agency; however, this agency was now more strictly confined within the parameters of ubiquitous colonial discourses that reified and homogenized notions of colonial hegemony. Such discourses were crafted not only by the colonial powers, but also by anti-colonial nationalists, whose identity was contingent upon both a binary definition of the self relative to monolithic notions of imperial hegemony, as well as the systemic bureaucratic mechanisms of a colonial state that provided avenues for remonstrance. Hence, imperial hegemony in Southeast Asia was largely a product of the unique circumstances of modernity.

In an effort to expound on the above assertion, this paper will proceed in two parts. The first will provide a brief historiographical survey of the two paradigms discussed above, while taking special notice of the theoretical causes and manifestations of imperial hegemony. The second will analyze the parameters of modern colonial hegemony by focusing on the specific case of R.A. Kartini— young female Indonesian nationalist who famously probed the limits of imperial categories at the opening of the twentieth-century.

IMPERIAL HEGEMONY: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

Perhaps the most convenient and comprehensive theoretical model for exploring imperial hegemony is Marxism. Scholars have drawn upon Karl Marx’s notions of “historical

materialism” and “material determinism” for generations in an effort to explicate the worldwide phenomenon of colonial rule in the early-modern and modern eras. As a “Young Hegelian” Marx placed his analytical faith in the indomitable dialectical march of historical processes largely independent of human agency (Buchholz, 1999, pp. 120-127). In the preface to his 1904 work, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx penned the following conclusion: “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life . . . It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness”(1904: preface). Though subsequent interpretations of Marx have often identified the structural dictations of human existence with notions of conscious and conspiratorial oppression by the capitalist classes, these alleged architects of societal repression are themselves circumscribed within the structural matrix of material history, according to Marx. “Like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells,” modern capitalists similarly found themselves inescapably drawn into the historical narrative of their unique material circumstances (Marx & Engels, 1992, p. 24).

In terms of empire, Marx considered the colonial climate of the nineteenth century to be a strong affirmation of his universalist notions of material historicism. “The bourgeoisie,” wrote Marx and Engels in their famous *Communist Manifesto*, “by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization . . . It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image”(Ibid.: 22). These observations on empire were later adopted and expounded upon by V.I. Lenin in his landmark work, *Imperialism: The Last Stage of Capitalism*. Building on the works of authors such

as J.A. Hobson (1902) and Rudolf Hilferding (1985) in addition to Marx, Lenin argued, “that the transition of capitalism to monopoly-capitalism, to finance-capitalism, is connected with the intensification of the struggle for the partition of the world” (Lenin, 1926, p. 61). Lenin interpreted colonialism as the inevitable incorporation of the world’s disparate populations, including those from “backward countries,” into the vast narrative of modern economic development and global class divisions (Ibid.: 48). Though individuals may resist, the homogenizing forces of dialectical materialism virtually guaranteed the circumscription of all peoples into a single historical epoch characterized by socialist transition.

While Marx, Engels, Hobson, Hilferding, Lenin, and others produced a somewhat varied, but remarkably coherent structural analysis of imperialism, their paradigms allowed virtually no consideration of subaltern agency. The colonial world’s submission to Western authority was explained exclusively in terms of false consciousness and structural determinism. This deficiency, however, was recognized and addressed by thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, and to some extent Max Weber, both of whom offered an alternative interpretation of Marx’s material determinism. These scholars highlighted the unpredictable variables of human agency in the construction of history. Gramsci’s revision of Marxist thought suggested that the structural forces shaping world history were not necessarily natural or pre-determined, but rather, were the result of human agency and action (1968, 1991). According to Robert Boccock, Gramsci’s nuanced view of transitional historical time “marks a break with those forms of deterministic and mechanistic Marxism in which change is seen as unproblematically brought about by the laws of history working independently of political movements and human will” (1986, p. 11). While this shift in gaze allowed human beings a limited possession of their own history, it ultimately did not significantly challenge notions of resolute hegemony in the context of world systems. In other words, the lower classes and the colonized were still regarded as the passive recipients and victims

(although not necessarily deterministically so) of history rather than co-participants in its construction.

In the post-War period many scholars have taken up Gramsci’s ideas and carefully laid out humanistic and cultural explanations of imperial hegemony. The works of Michel Foucault have been particularly useful as scholars explore the diffusion of discourses of power through the various mechanisms of the modern state and other sites of knowledge construction (1972, 1979, 1988). Although in these studies there is a distinct de-emphasis on class struggle as the key to historical understanding, the preeminence of super-structural determinism remains. Perhaps the most widely recognized works regarding discourse and imperial hegemony are the collective writings of Edward Said. Said’s landmark works *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* carefully traced the subtle, yet comprehensive, institutionalization of Western hegemony through the reconstruction and codification of things “oriental.” Said argued that the inherent “cultural hegemony” of Western colonialism in the Middle East allowed the West to systematically remake the “Orient” through the careful construction of academic imperial discourse – “by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1979: 7, 3) These discourses in turn created a massive corpus of widely accepted scientific and literary knowledge about the Orient that was “sustained on both sides” of the contrived cultural divide (Said, 1993, p. 11). Thus, “Oriental” victims of Western imperialism were conditioned into a state of perpetual colonial submission via abstract discourses of power that both defined and ruled indigenous populations independent of coercive exercises of raw power.

More recently, these ideas of hegemonic imperial discourse have been adopted and enhanced by scholars of “Subaltern Studies.” With a particularly emphasis on colonial and post-colonial India, authors such as Ranajit Guha, Akhil Gupta, and Dipesh Chakrabarty have utilized Gramsci’s

humanistic notions of collaborative hegemony to produce an “anti-elitist” analytical model that transcends the limitations of “Eurocentric Marxism” (Chakrabarty, 2002). Though Subaltern historians embrace the validity of “history from below,” as demonstrated by Marxist scholars such as E.P. Thompson (1974) and E.J. Hobsbawm (1978, 1985), they take exception to the pervasive Eurocentric imperial historicism that continues to frame analyses of subaltern classes. In his landmark work, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty highlighted and criticized academia’s tendency to contextualize the political behavior of non-Western peoples within a transitional narrative of historical time inevitably leading towards a “modern” and “hyperreal Europe” (2000, p. 37). Non-western histories are subordinated to the higher narrative of European expansion, he continued, and made to “look like yet another episode in the universal and (in their view, the ultimately victorious) march of citizenship, of the nation-state, and of themes of human emancipation spelled out in the course of the European Enlightenment and after” (Ibid.: 39). Hence, despite the most ardent nationalist or indigenist sentiments, “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories” (Ibid.: 27). Like Said, Subaltern historians interpret imperial hegemony according to a pervasiveness and biased Eurocentric historicism that “depends for its strategy on [a] flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” – i.e. hegemony (Said, 1979, p. 7).

While notions of superstructural hegemonic discourse have fundamentally shaped post-colonial studies for several decades, recent scholarship has begun to challenge the monolithic, and indeed hegemonic, construction of these imperial discourses independent of indigenous peoples. A great deal of what has been termed “new imperial history” has made significant strides in challenging narratives of resolute imperial oppression and inhibited indigenous agency. Ann Laura Stoler and

Frederick Cooper, for example, offer a profound critique of mutually exclusive and/or dominant and subordinate colonial spheres. “Europe’s colonies were never empty spaces to be made over in Europe’s image or fashioned in its interests,” they argued, “nor, indeed, were European states self-contained entities that at one point projected themselves overseas. Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself” (1997, p. 1). In an effort to eradicate these false notions, the authors advocated including “metropole and colony in a single analytic field, addressing the weight one gives to causal connections and the primacy of agency in its different parts,” rather than casting colonizer and colonized as antagonistic binaries (Ibid.: 4). By contesting hierarchical relationships of power and the assumed pervasiveness of colonialism as a hegemonic discourse, Stoler and Cooper offered a significant reassessment of Western imperialism (Ibid.: 4; see also Stoler, 1989, 2002; Cooper, 2005).

These ideas are also articulated quite well in Nicholas Thomas’s work, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*. Thomas, in fact, takes the notion of a nuanced, contested, and contingent colonial discourse a bit further than even Stoler and Cooper did in their later work. The author argued that post-colonial studies, while correct in their critique of hegemonic discourse, were still, perhaps unknowingly, employing categories and concepts that reaffirmed imperial structures and epistemological foundation. “A critique of colonialism,” wrote Thomas, “-and particularly one of colonial *culture* – must deal with a wider range of events and representations, including some in which the critics themselves are implicated” (Thomas, 1994, p. 2). These “event and representations” included the “homogenization of racism” as a universal analytical tool, the persistent overestimation of Western power resulting in imperialism’s “fatal impact” on indigenous societies, and the bifurcation of “metropole” and “colony” as distinct and hierarchical entities (Ibid.: 14-17). Like Stoler and

Cooper, Thomas sought to mediate between the popular “public anger” of colonial histories and the “cooler scholarly project” of accurately interpreting the past while fully accounting for the validity of indigenous agency throughout the colonial experience.

This type of approach to imperial history has found an especially welcoming atmosphere in Southeast Asian studies. The syncretic and heterogeneous nature of historical influence and imperial intrusion in the region has allowed scholars to significantly broaden their critique of monolithic structural discourses of imperial hegemony. Craig Reynolds and Tony Day, for example, have challenged the imperial genesis and progressive narratives of state formation in Southeast Asia by exposing the confining teleology of the region’s history as it relates to a continual preoccupation with Western imperialism and anti-colonial nationalism (1995; Day, 2002; Day & Reynolds, 2000, pp. 1-55). Other scholars, such as Vicente Rafael, Reynaldo Ileto, and Paul Kramer, have likewise shown great success in their attempts to disaggregate imperial narratives while uncovering a much more contested, contingent, and discursive colonial experience throughout Southeast Asia (Rafael, 1988, 2005; Ileto, 1979, 1998; Kramer, 2006). Each of these authors has demonstrated the pervasive propensity of subaltern classes to co-opt the discourses and symbolism of imperial rule, and then appropriate these elements as a means of counter-hegemonic, anti-colonial resistance. Such reassessments demand a careful reexamination of imperial history as it has been cast in terms of “perpetrators” and “victims.”

Certainly, these “new imperial histories” severely undermine notions of imperial hegemony, historical stasis, disrupted or damaged indigenous development, deviant historical trajectories, and seamlessly sequential teleological narratives. It is becoming increasingly clear that Southeast Asia’s imperial experience is a deeply nuanced and, as of yet, largely undiscovered and misunderstood process. However, despite all of their vindications and support of indigenous agency, critics may point

out that this “new imperial history” ignores one of the most glaring evidences of Western imperial hegemony of all – the current status of post-colonial nation-states relative to that of their former colonizers. The various disparities that define our modern world system seem to categorically affirm the legacy and continued existence of Western dominion and neo-colonial ties. Why is this so? In order to mediate between and understand these conflicting realities of imperial hegemony, scholars must look to the critical developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As European colonial possessions in Southeast Asia became increasingly codified and regulated according to the new systems and mechanisms of bureaucratic colonial administration, indigenous elites (i.e., those who would later become “nationalist” elites representing an “organic” indigenous nation-state) found themselves operating in an ambiguous world that required a simultaneous embrace and rejection of colonial hegemony. This schizophrenic relationship is, in large part, the modern foundation of the colonial and post-colonial legacy of imperial hegemony in Southeast Asia. The following case study of R.A. Kartini’s position within the elite-centered imperial matrix illustrates particularly well the construction and reality of colonial boundaries and the establishment of imperial hegemony in Southeast Asia.

COLONIAL BOUNDARIES: AN EXPLORATION OF R.A. KARTINI’S NATIONALIST, FEMINIST, AND REFORMIST IDEOLOGIES

Writing on the complexities of empire, Edward Said offered the following observation,

the enterprise of empire depends upon the *idea of having an empire* ... all kinds of preparations are made for it within a culture; then in turn imperialism acquires a kind of coherence, a set of experiences, and a presence of ruler and ruled alike within the culture ... the durability of empire was sustained on both sides, that of the rulers and

that of the distant ruled, and in turn each had a set of interpretations of their common history with its own perspective, historical sense, emotions, and traditions. (1993, p. 11)

Perhaps one of the most damaging and enduring “preparations” or constructions of empire is the creation of what Franz Fanon would later term as the “national bourgeoisie” (1963, pp. 148-205). These native elites had the unfortunate and paradoxical task of mediating imperial rule through a combination of collaboration and resistance, which were often times simultaneous and indistinguishable actions.

Negotiating the imperial encounter required indigenous elites to enter into an ambiguous category, which obliged them to simultaneously embrace and reject both native culture and imperial rule. As the facilitators of empire, this constructed class imitated their European rulers as well as the various indigenous subaltern classes with whom they supposedly shared a homogenizing racial identity. They became symbols of imperial oppression from above and native resistance from below. In this way they were inescapably hemmed in by the dual functions of their existence. Because of the paradoxical nature of their imperial purpose native elites came to embody the notion of indigenous inadequacy. No matter how diligently they tried to assume the cultural characteristics of their European overlords, they were perpetually denied full fellowship among the ruling classes because of the undeniable racial credentials that defined and categorized their worlds. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, “even in the most socialist or nationalist hands, remains a mimicry of a certain ‘modern’ subject of ‘European’ history and [such a native] is bound to represent a sad figure of lack and failure” (2000, p. 40). However, because of their adherence to and reliance on Europeans for their positions of power, indigenous elites also experienced a severe disconnect from their native contemporaries. As they aspired to enter into the upper cultural, social, and even racial echelons of colonial society, native elites developed a deep-seated disgust for all things “native” outside of their

own constructed class. The indigenous masses, and the elites’ ethno-cultural relation to them, came to represent the impossibility of transcending the parameters of their colonial function and existence. For this select class, “the peasants and the workers, the subaltern classes, were given the cross of ‘inadequacy’ to bear for . . . it was they who needed to be educated out of their ignorance, parochialism or, depending on your preference, false consciousness” (Ibid.: 33) In this sense, native elites came to represent the apex of colonization. As Filipino historian Vicente Rafael astutely observed, “the culmination of colonial rule . . . can be achieved only when the subject has learned to colonize itself” (2000).

The pervasiveness of this colonial phenomenon’s unyielding rigidity is illustrated particularly well in a series of letters written by a young Javanese *priyayi* woman named Raden Ajeng Kartini. Between 1899 and 1903 Kartini engaged in voluminous correspondence with a young Dutch postal clerk named Stella Zeehandelaar.³ Each of the communicants held a strong sense of crusading social awareness that produced a certain ideological symbiosis between them. Stella was a committed socialist and an activist on behalf of women, children, the poor, animals, and especially colonized peoples (Kartini, 2005, p. 7). At the opening of the Netherlands’ “Ethical Policy”⁴ in the East Indies, Stella represented the quintessential “modern girl”, which Kartini aspired to know and emulate (Ibid.: 23). Their correspondence allowed Kartini to candidly express her deep dissatisfaction with Javanese Islamic and colonial culture, as well as her aspirations for a more liberated and more “European” womanly existence. Her eloquent and insightful commentary on such controversial issues has made Kartini an icon of Indonesia’s emerging modernity at the opening of the 20th century.

However, though Kartini is often revered as an emblem of nationalist and feminist thought in Indonesia, her initial enthusiastic embrace of these ideologies’ Western variants actually illustrates the ways in which oppressive colonial relationships are replicated, even under apparently progressive

creeds. By subscribing to Western feminism Kartini attempted to access an alternative ideology and identity that simultaneously subverted Java's "archaic" and "inadequate" indigenous culture as well as Dutch colonial rule—thus allowing her to somewhat reconcile the apparent incongruities between nationalism and feminism. The problem, however, was that even though both Kartini and her Dutch pen friend believed that their views placed them firmly outside the antiquated conventions that defined their world, in reality they both replicated the cruel dynamics of their shared colonial past by reappropriating the rigid dynamics of imperial power within a supposedly modern, progressive, and companionate discourse. Both women dreamed of a more progressive and liberated world; however, each was ultimately the inescapable victim of the various constructed categories that framed their respective colonial identities, namely, class, gender, and especially race. Though Kartini aligned herself with Dutch feminists, the strictures of imperial associations did not allow her to actually become a "Dutch feminist." She remained Javanese. This mutually acknowledged "fact" inevitably called forth an imposed and agreed upon notion of indigenous inadequacy, which ultimately prevented true transnational sisterhood with her Dutch contemporaries. Kartini's choice to enter into a traditional polygamous marriage indicates the pervasiveness of her own self-acknowledged place in colonial society. Realizing, perhaps even on a subconscious level, that her racial and cultural heritage did not provide the social credentials necessary to overcome imperial categories of "superiority" and "inferiority," she resigned herself to the roles assigned her by the circumstances of history.

Colonial Class

Kartini's letters reveal her adherence to two closely interrelated class identities—her privileged socio-economic status as a member of "one of the most important Javanese families in East Java," and her specific position within the colonial hierarchy (Ibid.: 2). Both identities (although more

specifically the latter) are characterized by an aspiration to ascend to a certain "Europeanness" and a dissatisfaction with the inhibitions and inadequacies of "nativeness". To her credit Kartini did possess a certain self-reflexive knowledge of her place within a variety of larger continuums. This sense of self-awareness prompted her desires to transcend the preexistent categories that defined her and Stella's world by entering into a progressive, enlightened, modern intellectual class that defied categorization within the present colonial edifice. Despite her efforts, however, her orientation was always exclusive of "nativeness" in its contemporary and, especially, "authentic" forms, and was constantly conceding a supposedly superior Dutch alternative. It should be noted, however, that these notions of colonial class differ significantly with the rigid and deterministic Marxist categories of "class" that are typically associated with the inevitable developments of capitalist market systems. In this case, Kartini's notion of class is not so much the result of bourgeois economic compulsion, but rather, the product of her unique position within the colonial hierarchy.

Through her letters Kartini clearly illustrates and acknowledges the ultimate vertical stasis of her class identities. Although an overarching lament for lack of freedom characterizes her correspondence, Kartini remains fully aware of her family's privileged socio-economic status and is unwilling to compromise it for mobility's sake if it means acting beneath her class. For example, when discussing employment as a path towards personal liberation Kartini frankly states, "Were I to choose an occupation it would have to be something which was fitting! Work that we would like to do, and which would not shame my most noble and high-placed family . . . is so far out of reach!" (Ibid.: 35) In this sense Kartini does not resemble the "tragic rich girl" who desires to experience the perceived liberation of lower classes unconstrained by the symbols and expectations of affluence. Kartini's gaze is always oriented upward rather than downward, or even horizontally within her class. This does not suggest, however, that Kartini is

driven by stark materialism alone. Her attitudes, rather, reveal an acute awareness of the realities and difficulties experienced within the colonial spectrum by those situated below her.

Although her family's prestige and affluence are the most outwardly identifiable symbols of its place in colonial society, these accoutrements are a derivative of this class's larger imperial function, which it has been conditioned to maintain. The most important service to the empire of educated and Westernized native elites was that of acting as intermediaries between Europeans and the native masses. The various modes of knowing and perceiving things "native" and "European" were channeled through indigenous elites and disseminated on both ends of the colonial hierarchy. Hence, all ideological innovations emanating from the metropole, whether radical or mainstream, necessarily passed through this imperial conduit. It was this function that compelled Kartini (perhaps unconsciously) to sustain the very colonial strictures she was trying to escape by reinforcing the structural dissemination of knowledge that adhered to a very rigid colonial hierarchy.

In virtually every one of her letters Kartini grieves over her lack of mobility and access to things "outside." She repeatedly describes her existence as "cloistered" and "chained." Yet, as is consistent with her class, it is only the physical and intellectual spaces of an abstract "Europe" that offer liberation. The various native spheres below her in the colonial hierarchy are already presumed to be completely knowable, and thus constraining. In November of 1899 she complained, "If I had full command of the Dutch language then my future would be guaranteed. A large field of endeavour would then lie before me and I would then be a free person because, as a native Javanese, I know everything about Native life" (Ibid.: 36) By assuming a comprehensive knowledge of the entirety of her race, Kartini reinforces the reified and irreducible colonial categories that "cloister" her within the worlds they create. By conceiving of "nativeness" as an ahistorical static condition, which can only be improved upon, Kartini supports and reiterates the overall rationale for Dutch colonialism at the opening of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, despite her desires for a more European existence, she could not completely sever her Javanese ties. It is precisely her indigenoussness that legitimated her standing in the colonial hierarchy. As a native Javanese, Kartini was perceived by herself and others as having exclusive access to knowledge of things "native." This knowledge was then relayed up the colonial hierarchy and became essential to the maintenance of empire. Throughout her letters, Kartini reiterated this imperial function, reminding Stella of her indispensable service to those in the metropole. "No matter how long a European has lived here," she explained, "... he would never be able to fully understand our native society as a native person. Much of what is now unknown and mysterious for Europeans I could easily explain in a few words. Where a European cannot go, a native can. All kinds of details, which remain unknown even to an Indologist, a native person can shed light on" (Ibid.). Her unhindered access to the native world offered Kartini and Stella exciting opportunities to disseminate their reformist ideologies down through the colonial hierarchy. As Kartini observed, "The urge to imitate is inherent in human beings I believe. The masses imitate the habits of their betters, who in turn follow those of the higher classes and ultimately these imitate those at the very top – the Europeans" (Ibid.: 26). Kartini showed a remarkable awareness of classes and their functions within colonial society, and the ways in which imperial rule is propagated throughout the colony. What she failed to realize, however, was that despite her progressive philosophies, she was still sustaining a colonial system that indefinitely defined and confined her relative to those above and below her in the colonial hierarchy.

Although it is more difficult to ascertain Stella's views, it seems evident from Kartini's letters that Stella also acquiesced to the colonial status quo, believing that her ideological progressivism exempted her from duplicating past transgressions. While Stella certainly disassociated herself from traditionally oppressive colonial ideologies, she did find the overall structure of empire conducive to her own crusading designs. Where past imperialists used the natives' supposed inadequacies and racial

otherness to justify exploitation, European reformers used these notions to justify their activism. One approach was malicious, the other was patronizing, yet both were spawned by the same colonial mentality in the metropole, which accessed avenues of influence through a constructed colonial hierarchy. The presumed moral superiority necessary to reform unfamiliar peoples and cultures thousands of miles away required a strong, mutually recognized and supported system of categorization that acknowledged an authoritative center. Western feminists' reliance on this colonial system inevitably weighed them down with the "cultural baggage of Western superiority"—ultimately compromising their professed intentions to liberate native women (Blackburn, 1997, p. 19). Hence, both Kartini and Stella were beholden to a colonial class system that, while appearing to enable their reforms, actually constrained them to replicate the dynamics of colonial rule.

Gender

Gender was the primary avenue by which Kartini believed she could forge a link with Stella that would transcend colonial boundaries. Patriarchal oppression had a certain cross-cultural resonance that allowed these women to build connections and share in collective identities based on their gender. Gender also supposedly provided a way for Kartini to subvert both "archaic" Javanese culture and overt Dutch rule without necessarily compromising her (or Stella's) place in the colonial hierarchy. It represented the possibility of "protected" liberation within the colonial edifice. This is perhaps why Kartini unleashed such uninhibited and virulent criticisms against Islamic marital practices, such as arranged marriage and polygamy, as well as condemnation of native men in general. By resisting marriage (especially polygamy), Kartini felt that she had accessed an alternative category that challenged the status quo, but did not fundamentally betray her ethno-cultural heritage or the colonial system that legitimated her class. Yet, as in virtually all matters, rather than breaking down barriers, Kartini and Stella's imperial relationship served to reinforce

colonial boundaries that rested on ethno-centric and class-centric rationales for empire.

For Kartini, an attack on marriage equaled an attack on Islam. She admitted, "Not to marry is the greatest crime a Muslim woman can commit, is the greatest scandal which could befall a native girl and her family" (Kartini, 2005, p. 25). Nevertheless, she dramatically denounced all things associated with native marriage. "Can you now understand the utter disgust I have for marriage?" she asked in 1899. "I would undertake the most humble work with love and gratitude if it saved me from that and made me independent" (Ibid.: 35). In the same letter, while caught up in the emotion of her tirade, she exclaimed, "I hate, I despise them all [Muslim men], married or unmarried; there is not one for whom I have some regard, all of them I reject" (Ibid.: 34). For Kartini, marginalizing marriage necessarily entailed marginalizing Islam, and this did not seem to pose a great problem for her. "To be honest", she explained, "I am a Muslim only because my ancestors were" (Ibid.: 38). By portraying Islam as a superficial imposition of tradition, Kartini was able to render it superfluous to her core Javanese identity, thus eliminating a severe obstacle to further identification with Stella and the metropole. After all, as Elsbeth Locher-Scholten observes, "Female 'Europeanness' was identified with monogamy." The debate over native marriage practices "implied ideas about gender, class and race in a colonial context ... it offered visions of whiteness/'Europeanness' and 'otherness' " (Locher-Scholten, 2000: chapter VI). By marginalizing marriage and Islam on a gendered level Kartini felt that she could blur the lines designating "Europeanness" and "otherness" while retaining the colonial distinctions that framed and legitimated her relationship with Stella. Despite her efforts, however, Kartini's condemnations of native practices did not enable her to escape them, but rather reinforced notions of indigenous inadequacy that more clearly defined her as distinct and lacking relative to the metropole, thus inhibiting her ability to transcend colonial boundaries. Although Kartini expected to establish a transcendent link with Stella through feminist activism, the fact that it was primarily native practices that they were attacking, rather than an abstract, cross-cultural notion of

patriarchal oppression, prevented such a connection from ever existing.

Race

Before the advances in travel and communication in the latter half of the nineteenth century, racial boundaries were somewhat ambiguous in the colonies. However, by the opening of the twentieth century the colonial edifice was relying heavily on racial delineations to structure and guide its relationship to indigenous subjects. Defining “nativeness” and “Europeanness” in racial terms became key to understanding one’s place in the colonial hierarchy. Europeans meticulously constructed notions of “the native mind” and inherent racial predispositions. Such conclusions portrayed the brown colored natives as ahistorical, static entities, which contrasted sharply with the more dynamic and progressive Europeans (Fasseur, 1994, pp. 31-56; Stocking, 1982). While such racial categories claimed scientific validation, they did present colonial reformers with a difficult intellectual dilemma. Dutch activists derived the supposed moral and cultural superiority required to “uplift” natives from their socio-racial credentials. The problem, however, was that the racialized hierarchy that legitimated their crusades simultaneously solidified binary notions of inherently inadequate “nativeness”. Hence, although both Dutch and Javanese reformers may have desired equality at some point in the distant future, the racial order that enabled and legitimated their endeavor ultimately expressly forbade it. It was this quandary that proved most challenging to Kartini’s efforts to rise above her colonial constraints.

It is clear from her letters that Kartini desired to overcome her racial differences with Stella by forging an intellectual bond based on enlightened ideals and humanistic equality. If Kartini could only demonstrate her ability to overcome her apparent racial limitations through exposure to and absorption of things European, then integration into Europe’s upper echelons of intellectual and cultural modernity would become a distinct possibility.

Thus, she frequently attempted to differentiate her “true” inner self from the external indicators of her ethno-cultural heritage. “As regards [to] my thoughts and feelings,” she professed, “I am not part of today’s Indies, but completely share those of my progressive white sisters in the far-off West” (Kartini, 2005, p. 23) These “thoughts and feelings” prompted Kartini to solicit signs of acceptance from Stella. In a letter dated August 18, 1899, Kartini wrote the following,

Dear Stella, I am really pleased that you regard me as the same as your Dutch friends and that you will treat me accordingly, and that I am for you a kindred spirit ... for you all people, white or brown, are equal. From truly cultured, educated people we have never experienced anything but goodwill. No matter how stupid, ignorant or uncivilized a Javanese may be, the class of people to whom you belong will always see in them fellow human beings whom God has created just as he has created civilized people. (31, 33)

This passage accurately and concisely encapsulates Kartini’s sense of racial limbo. While she explicitly acknowledged racial delineations and their accompanying assumptions of inherent superiority and inferiority, she also hinted at the possibility that “truly cultured, educated people” could overcome such distinctions and handicaps.

Despite her lofty ideals, however, Kartini remained painfully aware of her undeniable racial features. At times her gratuitous references to skin color and race indicate a profound uncertainty in her and Stella’s ability to actually become “fellow human beings.” For example, when discussing the Dutch custom of kissing, Kartini revealed, “No matter how fond I was of someone (a Dutch person of course, we Javanese never kiss each other), you see, I would not know if she would like this. For us it is a joy to brush a soft pale cheek with our lips, but whether the owner of that cheek also likes the feel of a dirty black face against her is another question” (Ibid. 39). The racial contrast in this statement is quite severe. By characterizing this act

of intimacy as the convergence of a “soft pale cheek” with a “dirty black face”, Kartini called forth and reified the various racial constructions that dictated colonial relationships. Yet, she did not completely resign herself to these constructions. Her expressed uncertainty regarding how the soft pale cheek’s owner received this racial interaction reveals both her hopes and doubts concerning the ultimate flexibility of racial distinctions. Her statement stands as an open solicitation for acceptance from Stella, as if Stella could answer on behalf of the pale cheek’s owner, thus quieting Kartini’s doubts and confirming the possibility of transcending racial barriers.

Ultimately, however, regardless of whether such racial interactions could be reconciled, or even tolerated, both Kartini and Stella were compelled to continue laboring under the conception of racial binaries. This was perhaps the cruelest irony of their imperial relationship. Due to the vastly unequal intellectual, social, and political configurations of empire both Stella and Kartini were obliged to reify and sustain racial barriers, even as they tried to conquer them. Although their intentions were benevolent, both women continually acknowledged white “Europeanness” as the sole source of enlightenment and goodness, while colored “Nativeness” remained inherently inadequate.

Colonial Boundaries

While Kartini’s struggle presented her with exciting possibilities it also produced a tremendous sense of insecurity. Whereas Kartini’s specific position and function in the colonial system may never have actually been negotiable, her personal sense of identity and allegiance certainly were. She was facing very fundamental questions concerning individual character and ethno-cultural fidelity. If Kartini refused to become a submissive Muslim wife, could she still consider herself a Muslim? If she completely rejected indigenous culture for that which was foreign could she still consider herself Javanese? The problem, of course, was that there never were any truly viable alternatives. As was discussed above, the ethno-cultural constraints of

imperialism ultimately prevented Kartini from transcending the various categories that defined her position in the colony. Although Kartini aligned herself with Dutch progressives, the strictures of imperial associations ultimately did not allow her to actually become a “Dutch progressive”. She remained Javanese. The only real possible outcome of her dissent was to become partially and permanently estranged from either side of the ethno-cultural divide.

Perhaps realizing the ultimate gravity of her dilemma, Kartini consented to her father’s wishes and entered into a polygamous marriage in October of 1903. Despite Stella’s refusal to accept her friend’s decision, Kartini continued her quest for education and women’s rights, with the support of her husband, until her death in September 1904 (Kartini, 2005, p. 5). This apparent betrayal of her earlier ideals is perhaps the sharpest point of speculation and controversy surrounding Kartini’s life; however, her decision is not surprising. Ann Laura Stoler has aptly shown how “a racially coded notion of who could be intimate with whom” ultimately defined acceptable colonial identities (2002, p. 6). Kartini’s decision to enter into a polygamous marriage perhaps reveals her most astute and insightful understanding of the realities of empire. After realizing the limits of her own social and political identity, Kartini chose the most empowering avenue possible within the rigid dynamics that framed her existence, thus confirming her feminist and nationalist ideals.

CONCLUSION

Imperial hegemony, as demonstrated in the case of R.A. Kartini, is more than a mere abstract manifestation of systemic differentials inherent in imperial societies. It is a very personal and agency-driven phenomenon crafted according to the unique circumstances of political and technological modernity. While class, gender, and race all played very critical roles in articulating imperial hegemony, it is evident that these categories were not simply vertically imposed discourses of power. Yet, neither

were they entirely discursive and persistently contested by those “below.” Imperial hegemony found its expression in the institutional and epistemological foundations of the modern nation-state. The bureaucratic, territorial, political, and philosophical codification of populations that accompanied such a development, both harnessed and arrested the heterogeneity that defined the formerly contingent nature of imperial hegemony.⁵ It is only here that the myth of imperial hegemony met a reality conducive to its establishment.

NOTES

¹ For more information on these numbers, see Bernad, 1972, pp. 284-87.

² According to the United States’ 1903 Census of the Philippine Islands, “The total population of the Philippine archipelago on March 2, 1903, was 7,635,426.” See Census of the Philippine Islands 1905, p. 15.

³ Kartini was also exchanging letters at this time with a Spanish woman named Rosa Abendanon-Mandri. (See Kartini, 1992). Although their correspondence contains a great deal of Kartini’s observations and opinions about the important issues of the day, her correspondence with Stella Zeehandelaar holds special significance due to the colonial dynamics that frame their relationship.

⁴ For an excellent discussion on the Ethical Policy’s aims and impact on native women, see Locher-Scholten, 2000, and Blackburn, 1997.

⁵ For the best description of these processes surrounding the rise of modern nation-states and nationalism, see Anderson, 1983.

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