

PPI Belanda and the coloniality within

Tamara Soukotta

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Amid the various discussions and debates around Dutch colonialism and the question of sincerity behind the words of apology from the Dutch government for the violence committed during their colonial administration of present-day Indonesia (see “The Dutch are not guilty of war crimes in Indonesia?”, The Jakarta Post, Feb. 22, 2023), it is equally important to reflect on our own positions as Indonesians, particularly Indonesian intellectuals on this matter.

In fact, checking our stance on Dutch colonialism is rather urgent, if the recent Instagram reel released by the Indonesian Students Association in the Netherlands, (PPI Belanda), on the Royal Palace of Amsterdam can be taken as an indicator of whether or not Indonesian intellectuals take colonialism seriously.

PPI Belanda, historically a political association of young Indonesian intellectuals studying in the Netherlands, was an important part of the Indonesian anti-colonial movement that contributed to the birth of the Indonesian nation-state. Although over time the political awareness of PPI Belanda, in general, has been eroded, the reel released on Feb. 23 should be of urgent concern to us.

Presented as a part of PPI Belanda’s series of museum visits introducing various museums in the Netherlands, the caption of the reel freely translates to “Curious about what the palaces of the Kingdom of the Netherlands look like? This time we had the opportunity to visit the Royal Palace of Amsterdam”.

Through the reel the audience is invited to appreciate the Royal Palace of Amsterdam while listening to Mozart's Violin Sonata No. 26. As the camera takes us on a quick tour of the palace in all its modern/colonial glory, the audience is further introduced to the palace through texts describing the palace and its history.

While the rest of the texts are relatively unproblematic: Explaining when the museum was built and how its use has changed over time while also providing a brief description of the palace's interior, one text, in particular, draws attention. It says, “Seluruh lukisan dan pahatan/patung yang ada di istana ini simbol dari pemerintahan yang solid, bertanggung jawab, adil dan juga tentang perniagaan” (All paintings and sculptures/statues in this palace are symbols of a solid, responsible, and just government, as well as of trade).

There are at least two points to raise regarding this statement. First, to describe Dutch colonial rule as solid, responsible and just government is at the very least ignorant. If the Dutch colonial rule was indeed solid, responsible and just, why did the Indonesian founding fathers, including Mohammad Hatta, onetime chairperson of PPI Belanda, bother giving their all when they insisted on “Merdeka ataoe mati!” (Freedom or death!)? If that was the case, why did we bother to demand justice for victims of Dutch colonial violence, from Jan Pieterszoon Coen to Westerling, to mention but two?

Second, to accept that all riches in the Amsterdam Royal Palace are symbols of trade is to echo the Dutch modern/colonial government’s meta-narrative that reduces hundreds of years of colonialism with all its brutality to simply trading, where they conveniently forget to mention that their version

of trade included trading by force (as in the case of the Banda archipelago massacre in 1621) and the trading of humans as commodities (Dutch logistical records from their “trade” ships preserved at the Zeeuws Museum In Middelburg list “human cargo” among other items loaded in the belly of those ships).

Decolonial thinker Rolando Vazquez in his book *Vistas of Modernity* explains that one important dictum of decoloniality first introduced by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano is that there is no modernity without coloniality. Vazquez further elaborates on this non-separation of modernity/coloniality in four movements-methods: 1) modernity, 2) coloniality, 3) colonial difference and 4) decoloniality. Modernity speaks of what is there, while coloniality, the darker underside of modernity, speaks of what has been erased for modernity to be there. Colonial difference brings awareness to the intimate relation between modernity and coloniality and urges us to reflect on the ethics behind our practices, which leads to options to decolonize (decoloniality), that is a call for justice.

In their praising of the modernity embodied by the Royal Palace of Amsterdam (its history, its structure, its marble floor, its furniture), PPI Belanda missed the coloniality, the darker underside of that modernity, the histories, the structures erased for modernity to shine: that is the fact that the palace, the marble floor, and all the furniture were paid for by the people and nature enslaved to bring forward the modern/colonial glory that is now being appreciated by PPI Belanda.

This continuing to praise modernity while also continuing to ignore coloniality that PPI Belanda is exercising through its Instagram reel is a perfect example of another important dictum of decoloniality, that coloniality is not over, it is all around. Coloniality (the underlying logic of colonialism) survives colonialism and is now all around in our modern/colonial institutions (the state, the university, the museums), in our minds, in our ways of being and in our perception of the world around us.

According to Vazquez, colonial difference asks if we side with modernity or coloniality in our words, our acts and our works. We should always ask ourselves: Are we contributing to more erasure, of even our own people and land, in what we say and do?

This important question resonates with Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s words of wisdom in one of his *Buru Tetralogy*, *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind): “seorang terpelajar harus sudah berbuat adil sejak dalam pikiran, apalagi dalam perbuatan” (An intellectual should be just in their thoughts and acts).

When as young Indonesian intellectuals we praise the Dutch colonial government as “just” and echo the meta-narrative that reduces colonialism to simply “trade”, are we being just to our own land and people, our past and our present? If we are not and have not been just in our thoughts and acts particularly when it comes to colonial violence that deeply wounded our land and people, can we still call ourselves intellectuals, much less Indonesian intellectuals?

Hopefully, by asking these questions, we take small steps toward decoloniality, toward decolonizing ourselves: That is taking the option to liberate ourselves from the grasp of coloniality.