

Cross-cultural encounters in Polish and Russian travelogues about colonial Indonesia, 1870s-1910s

TOMASZ EWERTOWSKI

ABSTRACT

This article explores cross-cultural encounters and identities discourses in selected Polish and Russian travelogues about the Netherlands East Indies. Poles and Russians could travel to the Netherlands East Indies thanks to advantages afforded Europeans by the colonial system. Their occupations (for example, a privileged tourist, colonial scientist, diplomat) often made them suitable imperial agents. They defined themselves as Europeans but, as Eastern Europeans, they occupied an ambiguous position: Russians came from a land-based, economically backward “empire of the periphery” (Boris Kagarlitsky 2008); Poles came from a semi-peripheral European nation subjected to foreign rule and, from their common experience of subjugation, some Polish authors were able to sympathize with the colonized peoples. Hence, a comparative approach leads to various insights into representations of colonial Indonesia.

KEYWORDS

Cross-cultural encounters, Netherlands East Indies, identity, Polish travellers, Russian travellers, travel writing.

TOMASZ EWERTOWSKI is a lecturer at the Shanghai International Studies University, China. He graduated from and worked as a researcher at the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland. His research interests include travel writing studies, imagology, post-colonialism, and comparative literature. He has served as a principal investigator on two grants from the Polish National Science Centre. His publications include *Images of China in Polish and Serbian travel writings* (Leiden: Brill, 2020). Tomasz Ewertowski can be contacted at: tomaszewertowski@gmail.com.

INTRODUCTION¹

Modest Modestovich Bakunin, consul of the Russian empire in the Netherlands East Indies between 1894-1899, openly expressed his disappointment with being posted in the Archipelago and with people he met there:

What is there in common, for example, between foreign representatives who in most cases regard their stay in Batavia as an exile, and Dutch officials or Indo-Dutchmen who regard the slightest criticism of local life, of local conditions, and procedures as a personal insult? There is no common ground between us, and we do not understand each other. (Bakunin 2007: 38).²

Despite his disappointment with the Dutch and Java, he did admire their colonial policies. However, his praises for the Dutch were inextricably linked to a belief in the superiority of the empire he was representing.

It seems to me that, in its attitude towards the natives, the right system has been implemented by the Russians in Asia and partly by the Dutch in their colonies in the Far East.

Neither is just concerned with the ruthless exploitation of the land under their control. The Russians and Dutch see their coloured subjects as living people, not just mute and powerless animals, and consequently consider themselves obliged to do something for the benefit of these yellow- and black-faced people entrusted to their rule.

Furthermore, we are endowed with an ability to make Asians closer to us and to assimilate them. (Bakunin 2007: 69).

These two quotations demonstrate that cross-cultural encounters and individual and collective identities are central issues in travel writing. The traveller comments explicitly on areas visited, attributing distinctive qualities to both them and the people encountered there. This attitude can involve “imaginative geography”, in which places observed are subordinated to existing notions and stereotypes (Derek Gregory 1995; Edward Said 2003), or it can be an attempt to correct existing representations with the hindsight of personal experience (Siegfried Huigen 2009: 30). Bakunin juxtaposes Dutch colonial possessions with the Russian empire, demonstrating how identity discourses in travel writing are invariably based on mechanisms like comparison, differentiation, or analogy, which often convey value judgements about both a traveller’s homeland and the country visited (Albert Maier 2007). An analysis of the rhetorical devices and intellectual ideas used in travelogues shows how their authors constructed their own identities through a description of cross-cultural encounters on both individual and collective levels. Bakunin emphasizes a contrast between himself and the local Dutch population, and

¹ I want to express my gratitude to Mateusz Skucha and Daniel Natkaniec for their assistance in obtaining the manuscripts of Marian Raciborski’s letters. During the preparation of the first draft, I made use of software tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly and services of www.english-proofreader.com and Academic Proofreading Services Ltd.

² All translations into English are my own, unless otherwise stated.

his description of the Dutch colonial system serves as a starting point from which to praise the Russian approach to its Asian possession. As Margarita Marinova notes in the context of Russian and American travelogues, “textual products of travel [...] actively engage in the process of nation-building” (Marinova 2012: 4).

Following Mikhail Bakhtin, some scholars have proposed that travel writing should be understood as a chronotope of an encounter (Vladimir Gvozden 2011: 29; Marinova 2012: 24). The objection is that this term is treated metaphorically, while “encounters are as essential to travel as place; they shape and define journeys” (Catherine Mee 2014: 3). Even if travellers themselves write generally about “Dutch officials or Indo-Dutchmen” and “yellow- and black-faced people”, like Bakunin, still, “they must constantly deal with actual people” (Mee 2014: 3). Yet, despite their importance, depictions of individual interpersonal encounters have not been central to studies of travel writing. Instead, researchers tend to focus on topics such as a traveller’s persona and the general image of the lands they visited. Therefore, following the ideas proposed by Mee, I examine how selected Polish and Russian travellers described interpersonal encounters during their visits to the Netherlands East Indies and what role representations of cross-cultural interactions played in identity discourses.

My enquiry draws together three main threads. The first is research on encounters and identity in travel writing, exemplified by Mee’s (2014) book on contemporary French and Italian travel writing and by selected contributions to *The Routledge research companion to travel writing* (Part IV, Interactions) (Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs 2020: 263-317). This approach allows the exploration of questions such as: How did travellers navigate cultural differences in the diverse reality of the colonial Netherlands East Indies? How did descriptions of the people they encountered contribute to the construction of travellers’ own identities? What rhetorical devices were used to describe cross-cultural interactions?

The second thread refers to investigations into links between travel writing, identity, and imperial discourse, for example, works by Said (2003), Mary Louise Pratt (2008), and David Spurr (1993), written within the confines of “a postcolonial paradigm” which was a dominant perspective in reflection on travel writing until recently (Carl Thompson 2011: 3). Despite criticism of particular aspects of this paradigm, concepts such as imaginative geography, connections between knowledge and power, contact zones, anti-conquest, and various rhetorical modes like aestheticization, insubstantialization, and appropriation facilitate the analysis of the narrative mechanisms employed by the travel writers who wrote about cross-cultural encounters in the colonized world.

Thirdly, I have been inspired by comparative studies of different traditions of travel writing, such as Ahmed Idriss Alami’s (2013) work on cross-cultural encounters in Moroccan, British, and French travel writing, Margarita Marinova’s (2012) book on Russian and American travellers, and Izabela Kalinowska’s (2004) comparative interpretation of Oriental travelogues in

Polish and Russian literature. By analysing the similarities and differences across different contexts, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the social, cultural, and political factors which influenced encounters and writings about them.

There is a growing body of research about travellers in Southeast Asia which does incorporate some of these concepts. Below I mention a few positions which have had an impact on the research presented in this article. Images of the Southeast Asian natural world in Western travelogues (mostly English and French, but also Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch) have been scrutinized by Victor R. Savage (1984). Susan Morgan (1996) has investigated gender geographies in female travel writing from the Victorian period. A comprehensive comparative analysis of three travellers of British, German, and Chinese backgrounds, examining the impact of a traveller's habitus on the image of Southeast Asia, was presented by Maria Noëlle Ng (2002). The collective monograph *Asian crossings. Travel writing on China, Japan and Southeast Asia* (Steve Clark and Paul Smethurst 2008) contains chapters on Victorian female travelogues about Malaya and the topos of ruins. Mikko Samuli Toivanen (2019), in his doctoral dissertation, shows how the leisure travel practices of colonizers in Java, the Straits Settlements, and Ceylon from 1840 to 1875 were inextricably linked to feelings of colonial boredom and anxiety, as well as to discourses on science and race. In recent years, the post-colonial interpretations of Dutch travelogues and travel literature from the late-colonial period have gained importance (Coen van 't Veer 2020a, 2020b; Rick Honings 2021, 2022a; Doris Jedamski and Rick Honings 2023), indicating how representations of "Otherness" played a crucial role in creating Dutch identity. The nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Czech travel writing about Southeast Asia has been scrutinized by Jan Mrázek (2013, 2017, 2022), who demonstrates the peculiar position occupied by stateless Europeans in the colonial world of Southeast Asia. Czechs, like the Poles, experienced subjugation and sometimes distanced themselves from European colonizers, but, as they were personally involved in imperial institutions, Mrázek's insights can inform reflections on Polish experiences in the Netherlands East Indies. Finally, travel writings by Czechs, Poles, Serbs, and other Central Europeans about Southeast Asia, including the Netherlands East Indies, are investigated in the collective monograph *Escaping Kakania. Eastern European travels in colonial Southeast Asia* (Mrázek 2024). Common trends in its chapters are the peculiarities of non-imperial nations' involvement in colonial ventures and the applicability of concepts created in post-colonial studies to the central European experience.

The present paper contributes to these ongoing discussions on travel writing and identity in the Netherlands East Indies by exploring depictions of interpersonal encounters in texts written by three Polish and three Russian authors who visited Java in the three decades before the First World War. The Polish group includes Jadwiga Marcinowska (1872-1943), a female poet, novelist, and teacher, who visited Java during her Asian holiday in 1913, Michał Siedlecki (1873-1940), a biologist who conducted research in Java in

1907-1908, and another biologist Marian Raciborski (1863-1917), who lived in Java between 1896 and 1900. The Russian group consists of Princess Olga Aleksandrovna Shcherbatova (1857-1944), an aristocratic tourist who travelled to Java in 1893, Vladimir Mitrofanovich Arnol'di (1871-1924), a biologist who – like Siedlecki – came to the Netherlands East Indies to conduct research in 1908-1909, and Modest Modestovich Bakunin (1848-1913), a diplomatic representative of the Russian Empire in Batavia during 1894-1899. All of these authors had diverse occupations, which enhances the complexity of the existing literature.

Some of the selected sources have already been investigated by various scholars, including biographical studies about single individuals (Zygmunt Fedorowicz 1966; Lev Mihailovich Demin 1984; Krystyna Wolska and Joanna Lidacka 2000; Leonid Vasil'evich Alekseev, G.A. Beliakova, and V.A. Poddubnaya-Arnol'di 2001). A monograph about Russian scientists in the Netherlands East Indies written in the Soviet era (E.I. Gnevusheva 1962) provides useful information about their experiences, although it is dated and reflects a Soviet anti-colonial political agenda which distorts the travellers' attitudes towards colonialism. There are also a few shorter studies problematizing issues such as the image of Java in Siedlecki's monograph (Joanna Waclawek 2014; Przemysław Wiatrowski 2014), Shcherbatova's travels as an example of Russian participation in nineteenth-century globalization (Martin Aust 2019), Bakunin's imperial identity (Karen A. Snow 2004; Evgeny Savitskiy 2019a), Russian identity discourse present in discussions of sites such as the Buitenzorg Botanical Garden (Savitskiy 2019b) and hotels in Java (Savitskiy 2020). As there are a fairly limited number of studies, examining Polish and Serbian sources in a comparative context, through a contemporary methodological lens can bring new insights into representations of colonial Indonesia from the specific position of Poles and Russians.³

Poles and Russians arrived in the Netherlands East Indies because of the advantages afforded Europeans by the colonial system. Their occupations (a scientist using colonial infrastructure, a diplomat, a privileged tourist) meant that they were deeply entangled in imperialism. However, as Eastern Europeans, they occupied an ambiguous position. The attitudes towards Western Europe of the Russians, who came from a land-based, economically backward "empire of the periphery" (Kagarlitsky 2008), were a mixture of admiration, curiosity, scepticism, and hostility. Some wanted to emulate its technological and cultural achievements, others considered Western culture a corruptive force threatening traditional Russian values, and others still saw Western European powers as competitors, even enemies. Despite its political ambitions, Russia did not have an imperial presence in Southeast Asia and, because of the country's relative backwardness, some Russians expressed fears

³ I have analysed some Polish sources in my previous papers, focusing on topics such as ethnic comparisons (Ewertowski 2016), images of the natural world (Ewertowski 2022a), representations of the island of Java (Ewertowski 2022b), and haptic aesthetics (Ewertowski 2022c). In the present paper, I take a different approach, exploring the issue of cross-cultural encounters.

that “Russia could – although formally independent and a great power – be colonized financially by other European powers” (Aust 2019: 90).

In the context of East Central European countries, the region’s in-between position has been marked by contradiction. Although there is a strong identification with Europe, this is also tinged with anxiety arising from a feeling of not fully belonging and not being seen as fully European (Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Siegfried Huigen 2023). Poles came from a semi-peripheral European nation subjected to a foreign rule and hence from a common experience of subjugation some Polish authors were able to sympathize with colonized populations. The rub was that, being on the periphery of Europe made Poles strive to emphasize their European identity by “othering” non-European nations and participating in colonial endeavours: “In the context of the Polish partitions, the colonies became a vital space in which Poles attempted to prove to other European nations their place in Western civilization” (Lenny A. Ureña Valerio 2019: Chap. 4).⁴ In this context, I am particularly interested in the following question: “Did Polish writers merely replicate the patterns of Western discourse, or did their own experiences with imperial subjugation lead them to find their own alternative ways of describing and relating to the oriental Other?” (Kalinowska 2004: 3).⁵ Finally, one of the Polish authors in the corpus, Marcinowska, was a Russian subject, although she did not identify herself as such. This shows how the juxtaposition of Polish and Russian sources assumes another interesting dimension: Russia was one of the partitioning powers responsible for the disappearance of the Polish state in 1795, and it controlled a large area of historically Polish lands for more than a century. “This striking and fascinating power disparity between the two Slavic nations” (Kalinowska 2004: 4) created an interesting tension. Consequently, Polish and Russian descriptions of encounters with subjugated peoples in Java and their Dutch colonizers demonstrate a fascinating interplay between power, culture, and identity in the context of European colonialism in Asia, as well as of Polish and Russian positions in the rapidly changing world of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.

To explore this interplay, I take scenes of interpersonal encounters described by travellers. In her study of contemporary travel writing, Catherine Mee distinguishes a few modes of encounters between travellers and “a travelee”, including guiding, hosting, staring, challenging, and accompanying, but because of changes in travel practices, such a list is of limited help in scrutinizing cross-cultural interactions in the Netherlands East Indies. Mee also pays great attention to the ethical dimension of travel encounters and authenticity. It is impossible to adopt this approach fully to an analysis of travel writing from the colonial period because of differences in worldview: from a contemporary ethical perspective, all travellers can be condemned as Eurocentric chauvinists, but this would

⁴ I have used an e-book version; hence page numbers are not given.

⁵ An increasing body of research is examining the ambiguous roles of Poles in the colonial world, as well as diverse attitudes towards colonialism in various geographical and historical settings. Besides the afore-mentioned works, see, for example, Pawel Zajas (2012), Waclaw Forajter (2014), Jochen Lingelbach (2020), Karina Gaibulina (2023).

not bring us closer to understanding the past. What is important, however, is a list of factors, besides nationality, race, and gender, which influenced encounters between individuals. Mee highlights numerous factors including age, social status, linguistic abilities, relationship dynamic, the reason or cause for the encounter, comfort, expectations, motivations and desires, cultural habits, wealth, and mobility (Mee 2014: 5). Additionally, singular encounters are rooted in long-running processes of knowledge production (Nandini Das 2016), therefore travellers' cultural luggage impacts on their interactions with the people they meet. Following this line of enquiry, I analyse several encounter scenes, considering the factors which influenced the course of the encounter and (perhaps more importantly) the way of writing about it.

ENCOUNTERS

COLONIAL SCIENTISTS MEET SERVANTS

Charles Forsdick (2009: 293-294) suggests that examples of two separately published accounts of a shared journey by two different travellers are relatively rare. However, different travel accounts do tend to contain descriptions of encounters with the same person. For example, many travellers described the famous Javanese painter Raden Saleh (circa 1811-1880) (Toivanen 2019: 239-242) and virtually all botanists visiting Buitenzorg commented on Melchior Treub (1851-1910). It is therefore interesting that there are two separate accounts of encounters with an ordinary local gardener, Nong-Nong (Figure 1), from the botanical garden in Buitenzorg, employed as a servant by both the Polish biologist Michał Siedlecki in 1907 and the Russian biologist Vladimir Mitrofanovich Arnol'di in 1908.



Figure 1. Nong-Nong and Mulut (Siedlecki 1913, unnumbered plate between pages 198-199).

Arnol'di was very disappointed with Nong-Nong's services.

I shall now focus on a few types of common folk to introduce the reader more clearly to the Malay⁶ tribes. Soon after arriving in Java, I and my fellow travellers employed a native servant, Nong-Nong, son of Pa-Idan, a famous plant-gatherer at the Botanical Gardens. Nong-Nong epitomized the negative aspects of the Malay race. A lazy chatterbox, he was utterly incapable of doing any proper work and, even though he not seldom did work with passion, his enthusiasm was sustained for only the shortest time. (Arnol'di 2014: 43).

In contrast, Siedlecki presents the same person as an inseparable companion and an excellent helper possessed of an extensive biological knowledge.

Immediately on the second day after my arrival in the laboratory, a servant approached me. Any researcher or traveller arriving here for any extended time must seek out a servant, who here is called a "jonges" in Dutch, or a "boy" in English. I was approached by Sundanese who introduced himself to me as Nong-Nong, *anak* Paidan, or Nong-Nong, son of Paidan. Paidan, a former horticulturist and one of the many helpers in the botanical garden, was then one of the best experts on the flora of Java, a man who knew the smallest herb, could recognize the species of plant by a piece of leaf – in a word, an unparalleled, innate botanical taxonomist. His son, Nong-Nong, was already employed by many naturalists, including Professor Raciborski. He had an excellent knowledge of plants; he knew how to prepare skins of birds and mammals; he helped expertly with anatomical preparations; he had sharp eyesight and knew how to track animals – and above all, he knew how to pack collections in jars and packets. From then on, he was my inseparable companion and an excellent helper in the workshop and on excursions. (Siedlecki 1913: 89-90).

This discrepancy is even more surprising when we consider that both Siedlecki and Arnol'di were writing about "Malays" in general in a similar way, sympathetically but condescendingly, for example, "the personality of the Malay race is very kind" (Siedlecki 1913: 200); "Malays are a very nice people and should be regarded as one of highly talented races" (Arnol'di 2014: 43). Interestingly, both spoke very highly of Nong-Nong's father.

Another Polish biologist, Marian Raciborski, whom Siedlecki mentions as a former employer of Nong-Nong, described his servants in private letters not intended for publication and hence written more bluntly. He stigmatizes his *Buitenzorg* servant, probably called Mijuma (it is difficult to decipher his name in Raciborski's letters), as "the stupidest man alive" and suggests that, had stupidity had not already been widespread in Europe, it would have been possible to earn money by exhibiting him (Raciborski, letter to Alfred Albinowski, 15 February 1997). After Raciborski moved to Tegal, he commented that there, he employed three worthless servants (Stanislaw

⁶ In the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, European writers often called all the peoples of the Indonesian Archipelago and Malay Peninsula "Malay". When referring to sources in the main text of this article, I use the word "Malay" in quotation marks.

Kulczyński 1977: 35). The reasons for his disappointment seem to mirror those of Arnol'di: the servants did not perform their tasks to his satisfaction, a shortcoming Raciborski attributed to their personalities rather than to their extremely low salaries or a possible language barrier (although biologists did speak Malay, their proficiency could well have been questionable).

We can only speculate why Siedlecki and Arnol'di describe Nong-Nong so differently, but it is important to view the two encounters in the context of their narrative style and historical circumstances. Arnol'di explicitly framed his encounter with Nong-Nong as a general presentation of types among the Javanese population. Individual interaction is subordinated to a broader discourse on the social and cultural characteristics of the Javanese people. His narrative is written in a mode referred to by Marinova (after Bakhtin) as a "social-quotidian" narrative, characterized by a focus on ordinary people and everyday experiences. The people around the narrator are often portrayed as types rather than as fully developed characters, and the narrator assumes a critical and authoritative perspective, making himself superior to those he describes. This kind of narrative often involves a reflection on national or cultural differences (Marinova 2012: 25). Arnol'di used his servant as an example of the embodiment of Malay vices and tried to give a sociological explanation.

Looking at them [servants], one would think that the entire Malay race is equally incapable of development. But that would be a mistake. The poorest of the population go into service – our Nong-Nong, for instance, had no buffaloes or other livestock; he did not even possess a field – nothing but a small hut. He was not a landowner and any work done by a servant is not conducive to raising self-consciousness. (Arnol'di 2014: 44).

Consequently, Arnol'di viewed the encounter through a generalizing framework. Nong-Nong exemplified the bad qualities of Malays and his vices stemmed from social conditions typical of his whole class: poverty and a non-creative, uninspiring occupation. However, Arnol'di undermined his sociological argument with his positive description of Nong-Nong's father, Pa Idan (?-1913).⁷ As mentioned above, both Siedlecki and Arnol'di admired this person and Arnol'di also framed an individual encounter with Pa Idan into a discourse on types.

⁷ Siedlecki and Arnol'di use different spellings of his name. In quotations I follow their spelling, in the main text I use a version used by M.J. van Steenis-Kruseman and C.G.G.J. van Steenis (1950: 397). This publication also contains a brief note about a person called Nongnong vel Nengneng (Van Steenis-Kruseman and Van Steenis 1950: 383, 387). Raciborski also mentions Pa-Idan as a person who accompanied him on trips as a collector, but without either praise or criticism (letter to Alfred Albinowski, 15-2-1997).

A very different type is represented by his [Nong-Nong's] father, the famous Pa-Idan. More than one naturalist gratefully remembers this amazing native man, from whom nothing in the Javanese forest was hidden. From a young age, Pa-Idan grew up in the garden and now, at a very great age, he holds the position of a forest plant-gatherer. It must be said that the Malay people are passionate about nature, and not only love it but are knowledgeable about it. Thousands of remedies for folk medicine are borrowed by them from the forest and the field; they know and give names to the innumerable trees and herbs of their luxuriant homeland, they are observant, as only men whose lives are one with nature can be. (Arnol'di 2014: 44).

The key question is whether the son's circumstances were really so different from the father's since Pa Idan was also a poor servant. Although Arnol'di is consistent in adapting a social-quotidian stance, his explanations are incongruent. There is also another interesting issue here. Arnol'di's high opinion of Pa Idan is placed in the context of the discourse on the Malay people as living close to nature, which gives them a special connection to and knowledge of wildlife. This offers a naturalist twist to one of the most common stereotypes in Western writings about Southeast Asia, namely: the portrayal of primitive locals as being unspoiled by civilization, joyful, and carefree (Savage 1984: 113-121), which in extreme cases led to a conclusion that "there is no culture at all, only nature" (Honings 2022b: 120). In more general terms, this notion reflects what Ter Ellingson (2001: 12, 25-26) refers to as "the myth of the Golden Age", a way of characterizing non-European peoples as having preserved ancient virtues. Arnol'di adapted this logic to the realm of biological enquiry. Pa Idan's expertise in the field of biology exemplified the general Malay familiarity with wildlife the result of a lifestyle closer to nature than that of the European.

Arnol'di's narrative is based on classification: ordering societies by attributing their features to an intrinsic, essential character while neglecting factors such as historical contingency (Spurr 1993: 61-76). Examples of people like Pa Idan were used by the Russian to make a generalization about the intellectual capacity of the Malays.

Only a man gifted with great ability, not to say talent, could acquire what Pa-Idan knew, and he was just a simple labourer, and for his ability, he was paid only 12 guilders a month with the right to receive a "bonus" after each of his excursions. Pa-Idan was a "virtuoso" of his trade, but he was not alone among his fellow workers. In the Tjibodas Mountain Garden served another Malay, Sapiin, who had a perfect knowledge of the forest flora, showing visitors to the virgin forest mosses or lycophyte sprouts which were tiny, barely visible to the naked eye. Two other Malay men also served in the Buitenzorg Garden: Mechanic Sariman and a gardener's assistant Jenri. They were thoroughly intelligent people, capable of creative thought. We can find many examples which exhibit the gifts of the Malay tribe and confirm the general idea that they could have a brighter future. (Arnol'di 2014: 44-45).

Arnol'di mentions Pa Idan's meagre salary and ironically remarks that the evaluation of Malay and European labour did not quite match up. Some Europeans, who were themselves earning more than 200 guilders, commented that the local assistant, who knew not only the native but also the Latin plant names, received a "colossal" salary of 60 guilders. The Soviet historian Gnevusheva (1962: 152) suggests that here Arnol'di was criticizing colonial exploitation. This is in keeping with a general tendency in her book to glorify the anticolonial sentiments of progressive Russian scientists, but Arnol'di's remarks about encounters with botanical garden servants must be read in the context of the role of this institution in the colonial system.

Florian Wagner claims that, by 1900, the botanical garden employed 300 non-European experts, whose role was downplayed. Western researchers at Buitenzorg learned a lot from local Javanese and Sundanese experts, but never credited them in their publications nor did they reward them, describing them instead merely as servants or "boys". Buitenzorg was a site of international cooperation between Western researchers creating colonial knowledge, but obscuring the efforts of local experts (Wagner 2022: 157). Siedlecki's and Arnol'di's depictions of encounters with Nong-Nong and Pa Idan partly challenge Wagner's interpretation. Siedlecki praised the biological knowledge demonstrated by the locals and remarked that Pa Idan's knowledge was unparalleled. However, by reporting that it was "innate", he implicitly contrasted local knowledge with "real" (meaning European) science. Another example is the following quote: "*Hortus bogoriensis* is managed by the Dutch, who have been familiar with horticulture for centuries, and cultivated by the Malays, who by their very nature are well versed in how to grow plants and have an inborn sense of wildlife" (Siedlecki 1913: 91). A similar mental picture is present in Arnol'di's description of Pa Idan. Both biologists respected local expertise, but still saw it as something different from "real" science. Arnol'di's narrative contains comments on pay disparity, but he himself profited from this disparity by having a cheap servant at his disposal. Siedlecki had no such qualms about his companion's low wage and unequal labour value: "His salary was 15 Dutch guilders a month, out of which he bought his daily needs and clothing; naturally, such a salary can only suffice in Java, where foodstuffs are very cheap for the Malays" (Siedlecki 1913: 90). This implies a sense of superiority, as he assumes that the locals should be willing to offer their services at a lower price because of a presumed lower standard of living, reinforcing unequal power relations. A more unmitigated form of this attitude can be seen in the letters of Siedlecki's colleague and predecessor, Raciborski. Oozing satisfaction, he writes that he could pay very little money and still obtain interesting specimens thanks to the intelligence and smartness of local boys; he could even employ a painter and a collector and pay them just 17 guilders a month (his own salary was 500) (Kulczyński 1977: 31-32). He was unbothered by inequality and, in fact, enjoyed the opportunities for a western scientist it created.

A policy of inviting foreign scholars to Java bolstered the image of the island as a place where excellent research on a European level was possible,

which in turn would help legitimize Dutch rule (Andrew Goss 2011: 59-75). By working in Buitenzorg, Siedlecki, Arnol'di, and other scientists not only took part in the creation of colonial knowledge but participated in a process of reinforcing colonial rule. Therefore, no matter how critically Arnol'di wrote about economic disparities, his general stance cannot be called anti-colonial. According to a contemporary historian (Evgeny Savitskiy 2019b: 60), Arnol'di presented an idealized image of the Buitenzorg Botanical Garden and this attitude, one which ignored the role of botany in colonial exploitation, can be described as verging on cynicism.

Finally, interpersonal relationships with Nong-Nong, Pa Idan, and other Buitenzorg labourers were marred by stereotypes and paternalism. For example, although Arnol'di praised local workers, he highlighted one perceived common vice:

The rest of the garden staff consists of Malays, who are indispensable to the garden, have an excellent understanding of how to care for plants, and are knowledgeable about them from direct contact with nature. They are extremely undemanding in food and, being Mohammedans, they do not drink alcohol; as such, they are fertile ground for the superintendent [material for good helpers], though they have one common vice: oriental laziness. (Arnol'di 2014: 68).

Despite his earlier attempts to explain Nong-Nong's behaviour sociologically and, despite knowing about the low salaries of local labourers, Arnol'di drew on the orientalist archive the stereotype of the "lazy native" (Syed Hussein Alatas 1977). Today, the term "Oriental" is a problematic, outdated word which reveals more about its user than about the object described. However, in Arnol'di's times, it referred to an influential collection of concepts and preconceived notions and was imbued with immense explanatory power. By simply adding "oriental" to "laziness", the behaviour of "Malay" labourers was linked to powerful images – from lazy servants to cruel despots to mysterious harems – which overshadowed any other possible explanation of the observed reality. Orientalist discourse is connected to concepts of "culturalism" and "psychologism", ascribing particular cultural and psychological traits to the inhabitants of "eastern peripheral regions" (Tomasz Zarycki 2023: 60). These traits are used to explain why they are "less civilised" than Europeans. Siedlecki also often uses "Eastern" or "Oriental" in this way, although not when describing Nong-Nong or other Buitenzorg servants and only when he was trying to describe a general characteristic of Malays. For example, in his opinion (quoted above) that "the personality of the Malay race is very kind", he continues, "naturally, like all peoples of the East, the Malays are self-contained, they resent offence, and are ready to take revenge for it; but they are quiet, polite, and courteous, hospitable and helpful" (Siedlecki 1913: 200). Another example is seen here: "the Malays, like many eastern races, have an inborn drive and an ability to embellish any object" (Siedlecki 1913: 202). Different Asian cultures are therefore lumped together in the uniform category of the "Orient" and described using essentialist notions

of “Eastern” vengefulness, narrow-mindedness, and inherent artistic talent. In terms of their attitude towards “Orientalism”, Siedlecki and Arnol’di are representative of their time. Despite calling Nong-Nong “my inseparable companion and an excellent helper”, Siedlecki sometimes wrote mockingly about him. For example, he describes how he was encouraging Nong-Nong to do something the servant was unwilling to do (night walk in the forest, reveal the secret of a sacred tree) by giving him a cognac; as a Muslim, Nong-Nong did not drink, but both he and Siedlecki called it “medicine” (Siedlecki 1913: 123; 1927: 46-47).⁸ Additionally, by portraying Nong-Nong as a believer in folk stories about supernatural beings, Siedlecki presented himself as a superior, rational European.

In a nutshell, Arnol’di’s and Siedlecki’s descriptions of interactions with Buitenzorg staff, without mentioning explicitly how, as colonial scientists, they profited from colonial exploitation, reveal anti-conquest narratives (Pratt 2008: 9), ensuring the “innocence” of travel-writers by showing them occupied with harmless and beneficial activities like science, rather than imperial conquest. In fact, their actions were grounded in colonial realities and helped to reinforce inequalities. Encounters with Nong-Nong and other servants provide insight into how unequal relations in the contact zone manifested themselves in everyday interactions between colonial scientists and their helpers.

THE JAVANESE RULERS AND THEIR FOREIGN GUESTS

In the previous section I have characterized the interactions between two biologists, their mutual servant Nong-Nong, and other Malay labourers in the Buitenzorg botanical gardens. However, Polish and Russian travellers also met people from the highest echelons of society. Therefore, in this section, I want to explore a portrayal of the Susuhunan of Surakarta, Pakubuwono X (1866-1939, reigned 1893-1939, see Figure 2), by the Russian Consul Modest Bakunin and a description of her encounter with the sultan of Yogyakarta, Hamengkubuwono VII (1839-1921, reigned 1877-1921, see Figure 3), by Polish traveller Jadwiga Marcinowska. Examining travellers’ meetings with the aristocracy after their encounters with the common people can provide arguments which either confirm or refute the thesis that ethnicity was the main factor behind the social distinctions in colonies (Honings 2022a: 51; Van ‘t Veer 2023: 111).

⁸ I refer to Siedlecki’s collection of short stories because, in his writings, there is no clear distinction between different forms of narrative. In his tales, we encounter the same subjects and individuals, as well as situations and expressions similar to those found in his travelogue.



Figure 2. Pakubuwono X.⁹



Figure 3. Hamengkubuwono VII.¹⁰

⁹ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8609985>.

¹⁰ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hamengkoe_Boewono_VII,_sultan_van_Jogjakarta,_in_uniform_-_Kassian_C%C3%A9phas_-_KITLV_10001.tif.

Both Bakunin and Marcinowska were travelling as Russian subjects, but, in terms of their habitus, type of travel, and ideological views, they were poles apart. Bakunin was a Russian patriot and a loyal official of the tsarist government, whereas Marcinowska's father had taken part in an anti-Russian uprising and she herself participated in the Polish independence movement (she was even arrested in 1902); and, as a writer, she adopted in a poetic, modernist style. Although the two travellers' images of the Javanese are constructed of similar elements, they evaluated the Javanese differently, their general messages contrasting with each other.

As a broader context to their description of Javanese rulers, both travellers presented a generally positive image of the Javanese people. In Marcinowska's case, her initial comments are confined to the realm of aesthetics. The appearance of noble women is described as "dreamlike, fabulous", while male faces, although not handsome, have compelling, subtle, delicate fine features, because their expression reflects "silent worry and doleful pride" (Marcinowska 1925: 154). Spurr comments that "the tendency to treat certain subjects as having inherently aesthetic value has special consequences for representations of the Third World in the Western press" (Spurr 1993: 46), but for Marcinowska the aesthetic moment was just a starting point for a socio-political comment, as we shall see in a moment.

Bakunin was not impressed with the appearance of the Javanese, but he praised their manners.

The Javanese dignitaries and courtiers, while outwardly forbidding and outré, are in fact not only benign people but also entirely courteous; in their own way of course. The inherent decency of Javanese manners, their refined politeness, and self-restraint, and their deferential attitude towards their elders might be the envy of many, even of a great many Europeans, who are not always among the cream of society. (Bakunin 2007: 357).

Writing as an artist, Marcinowska was more concerned with conveying her impressions rather than judging. In her case, her sympathy for the Javanese was unconditional and she did not feel herself a higher arbiter or member of a more exalted race. Bakunin both classifies and judges the people he observed, be they Javanese or Europeans, from a position of someone superior, representing "the cream of society". Moreover, he was writing as a high official of an autocratic state and, unsurprisingly, liked the Javanese for their supposed meekness, courtesy, and respect for authority.

The second common element in Marcinowska's and Bakunin's writings consists of remarks about the glorious past of the Javanese. For the Polish writer, the keyword is melancholy; the chapter on the Javanese in her travelogue is entitled "Melancholy in Sun-drenched Java". She remarks that the saddest Javanese are those who belong to what used to be a higher social stratum. The description of the sultan is replete with orientalist clichés, but the most important is its emphasis that only the "oriental" luxuries remained, but the rulers' "oriental" despotic power and cruelty had been consigned to the past.

The grandson or great-grandson of those who basked in the sight of the condemned men at the bloody wall live there today, cushioned by five thousand women, two thousand servants, elaborate ceremonies, soft splendour, utter idleness, and hopeless boredom (Marcinowska 1925: 157-158).

This description is very interesting because it is written according to the convention of oriental othering, albeit also conveying a political anti-colonial message. The melancholy of the Javanese is a result of their being stripped of political power by the Dutch, a deprivation which has led to the degeneration of a previously proud people.

Bakunin's remarks about the Javanese people's past are introduced by an interesting comparison to the pope in Rome.

To be in Java and not see Solo and Yogya is like visiting Rome without seeing the pope in his court, *Guardia Nobile*, with striped-suited Swiss bodyguards, and the papal throne. Both the Holy Father in Rome and the Susuhunan (the Javanese title of the emperor) belong to an era which has had its day which, even if it has not completely faded, certainly destined to disappear completely in the future, be that recent or distant. [...] personally, contemplation of the *non possumus*¹¹ of Surakarta is incomparably more original and unusual than the immobile papal intolerance, who in the royal Rome of united Italy has forgotten nothing and learned nothing from the lessons of history. In Solo, the sovereign and his people have forgotten everything, regret nothing of the long past, and have learned a great deal. Above all, they have learned to submit unconditionally to their destiny. For the Javanese, this is embodied in the *orang Belanda*, the Dutch, who have possessed Java for almost three centuries. (Bakunin 2007: 358-359).

This passage is written using the convention denial of coequality which places a described other "in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse" (Johannes Fabian 2014: 31), thereby creating for Bakunin an aura of objectivity and superiority as a modern observer, even though he crudely manipulates the facts (in Bakunin's time even the city of Batavia was less than 300 years old, not to mention Dutch rule over the rest of the island). For readers in the twenty-first century, his stance is amusing, as the pope still rules in the Vatican and the royal family of Surakarta still reigns (albeit without political power), while the Romanov dynasty and tsarist Russia, whom Bakunin served, disappeared less than twenty years after the publication of his book. There is also a striking difference between how Bakunin and Marcinowska describe the respective Surakarta and Yogyakarta attitudes towards the loss of political power. The Russian suggests that locals are completely satisfied and regret nothing, while the Pole writes about melancholy.

This leads to a totally different evaluation of Dutch rule. Marcinowska describes it in unfavourable terms.

¹¹ A Latin phrase used to express absolute determination to cultivate the Roman Catholic faith; in the nineteenth century it was used to defend the position of the pope.

In general, Dutch policy towards these last rulers does not take an oppressive line which might provoke a reaction, a vigorous reflex. On the contrary, it does its best to provide them with everything except the slightest opportunity to be in contact with real life. Cunning! But this cunning is indeed fiendish, counting on moral decay, [and] the nurturing of this decay. (Marcinowska 1925: 158).

While Marcinowska calls the Dutch fiendishly cunning, Bakunin praises their bright, practical minds, and outstanding administrative skills.

Initially the Dutch, who are endowed with bright and practical minds and the outstanding administrative skills of cultural leaders, force by political circumstances, took care to reconcile the population of the conquered purely Javanese regions with their presence and, in practice, demonstrated to the people the advantages and benefits of their welfare, liberal, and paternal regime, which had so conveniently replaced the former lawlessness and the rapacious exploitation by the native rulers (Bakunin 2007: 360).

From their respective standpoints, both authors describe the same methods but evaluate them differently. Bakunin represented another imperial power, and, as shown at the beginning of this article, he considered the Dutch almost as good a colonizer as the Russians. Karen E. Snow (2004) suggests that Bakunin's views on the Indies expressed both the official standpoint of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and his personal notions of enlightened colonial policy, in which he favoured strong centralized control and limited paternalism, under which colonial expansion was an expression of the moral superiority of the more civilized white race. Additionally, unlike the British, Germans, or Americans whose colonial ventures Bakunin assessed much more critically, the Dutch were not competitors of the Russians. Conversely, Marcinowska hailed from a subjugated nation. In the introduction to her book, she states that, in the suffering of colonized peoples of Asia, she saw "a resemblance to the fate of her distant Homeland" (Marcinowska 1925: 2-3). Hence, her observations and reflections on colonialism in Southeast Asia were infused with her own experience of oppression and subjugation as a Pole living under the domination of other nations. Using images of foreign peoples to express concerns about Polish identity was not exceptional; for instance, Marcinowska's description of powerful oriental despots who been reduced to the role of idlers calls to mind the popular short story "Sachem" by Henryk Sienkiewicz containing the portrayal of an Indian chief reduced to a clown and a fetish of exoticism to exemplify the threat of denationalization (Anna Kołos 2011: 93-94; Raymond A. Patton 2022: 627). For Polish readers, the image of the corruption and deterioration of the Javanese under colonial rule recalled the similar fate Poland suffered under foreign domination.

Having sketched the context, we can proceed to descriptions of Bakunin's meeting with Pakubuwono X, as well as Marcinowska's encounter with Hamengkubuwono VII. The Polish traveller was just a tourist, so she could only observe the monarch during the festivities at the end of Ramadan. She describes the Sultan as a bird in a gilded cage:

His Majesty the Sultan then appears to his subjects, escorted by the Dutch Resident supporting his arm. It is a remarkable moment, as this is the only time in the year the sultan is allowed to leave the palace – with the Resident alongside him. [...] The present sultan, an old man, is said to be loved by the people and this is why he is not allowed to leave the palace, except on the afore-mentioned annual day, with the Resident at his shoulder. He also has a ceremonial throne in the Craton, a most excellent orchestra of “gamelans”, and a phalanx of spies. (Marcinowska 1925: 157).

Somewhat in contrast to the Orientalist clichés she employed earlier, Marcinowska presents the ruler not as a cruel despot living in luxury, but as an old man beloved by his people who is therefore kept under strict Dutch control, indicated by the presence of the resident and a company of Dutch guards. Her description is dominated by an aesthetic appraisal of the sophisticated ceremonies tinged with melancholy caused by the political subjugation.

On New Year’s Day, when the fast of Ramadan is over, at around nine in the morning we see the first minister riding towards the palace. There is no state, but there is a minister. He rides very slowly on horseback; [he wears] a kaftan of black velvet, generously covered with gold embroidery, a weapon – on his back behind his belt... A numerous retinue follows on foot.

At the end of Alun-alun, just in front of the palace, stands a tented roof on poles, protection from the scorching heat. It is woven - fairly loosely - from bamboo, so that the blue shines through, because a Javanese, as they say, must see above him – the sky. Below this pavilion, dignitaries with their retinues, and to the side a kind of gallery for spectators. The police, obviously of the Dutch government, maintain order. Already seated in rows on spread-out mats are gentlemen in lavish skirts and caps of stiff muslin. Officials of a state which does not exist. (Marcinowska 1925: 158).

The scenery, clothing, and formalities are described with ethnographic attention to detail and an artistic focus on colours and fine textures, but this description also has a political dimension. The Javanese are reduced to the trappings of power and splendour, as the real power is embodied in the Dutch police. Remarks about the ministers and officials of a state which did not exist suggestively express the emptiness of Javanese institutions, but, for Polish readers, themselves members of a stateless nation (“Poland, that is to say, Nowhere”, as Alfred Jarry famously wrote), they were one more sign that the description of Javanese melancholy was informed by Marcinowska’s thoughts and feelings about her homeland.

Bakunin, in contrast to Marcinowska, had an opportunity to speak to Pakubuwono X. The consul was not impressed: “The Emperor gave me the impression of being an untrustworthy, capricious man, stubborn and limited” (Bakunin 2007: 376). He was much more impressed by “the first minister, a Javanese with fine manners and an extremely fine, intelligent face” (Bakunin 2007: 378). This shows that Bakunin’s warm feelings towards the Javanese were conditioned by their conformity to his notions of manners and hierarchy. In

his account of a conversation with the Susuhunan, two moments are especially interesting. Firstly, Bakunin himself committed a breach of manners:

It turned out that, in front of the dim hotel mirror, I had hastily put my medal on upside down, which did not escape the keen eye of the Susuhunan, who had evidently made a speciality of studying foreign medals and was tickled by childlike amusement when he witnessed my confusion and amazement (Bakunin 2007: 377).

This excerpt exemplifies how authors of the travel account have “a certain control over their self-representation” (Mee 2014: 57) which enables them to twist the description of the encounter in their own favour. Bakunin admits committing a gaffe, but attributes it to accidental factors: haste and a dimly lit hotel mirror, whereas the Susuhunan’s reaction is seen in essentialist terms as a sign of an idiosyncratic, childish character of a person who had nothing more important to do than study foreign decorations and medals. It locates Bakunin’s interlocutor in the realm of Orientalist stereotypes of “child-like, idle natives”, therefore if the Russian’s narrative is taken at face value, his own blunder compromises Pakubuwono.

The second interesting moment is a conversation about Russia:

Susuhunan, having regained his composure, asked me much about Russia, and was curious to know how big the *negri* (state) of *Rusland* was, and how many people and troops Russia had. He was absolutely astonished when he heard that we could field up to four million soldiers in a war. The Susuhunan began whispering to his cronies rapidly and excitedly, apparently telling them that there are as many inhabitants in the whole of *negri Vlanda* [sic!] (Holland) as there are soldiers in Russia alone. (Bakunin 2007: 377).

Relating this conversation, Bakunin once again conveys to his readers the image of Russian power and the respect it commands among Asians. His actions subordinate the encounter with Pakubuwono to his own nationalistic discourse.

Finally, Bakunin (2007: 381) sums up his experience in Surakarta in the words, “this interesting phantasmagoria which calls itself the imperial court of the Susuhunan of Surakarta”. David Spurr writes about the rhetoric of insubstantialization “which makes the experience of the non-Western world into an inner journey, and in so doing renders that world as insubstantial” (Spurr 1993: 142), but this concept does not tally completely with Bakunin’s writings, because, despite his strong personal opinions, he was really more interested in presenting Surakarta than his inner self. Nonetheless, the use of phantasmagoria conveys an aura of unrealism, reducing the people encountered from fully-fledged human beings to mere caricatures. Marcinowska (1925: 169) ends on a very different note, poetically personifying the melancholy: “The huge, bright sun looked down on the sluggish movement, on the picturesqueness stripped of its spontaneity, on the spreading stigmata of lifelessness. The melancholy sighed over a deeply overwhelmed life”.

The suffering of the Javanese, albeit painfully real, is aestheticized, while Marcinowska's figure of speech roots it in the natural world, imbuing it with an almost a cosmic dimension.

As seen above, Marcinowska and Bakunin's narratives contain descriptions of similar themes: Javanese manners and ceremonies, reflections on a glorious past and contemporary subjugation, plus an assessment of Dutch rule. Despite certain analogous presumptions, the stories of the two encounters are totally different, since one was told by an imperial official, the other by an artist and political activist.

Finally, did Polish and Russian encounters with servants and kings confirm that ethnicity was the main divisive factor in colonies, more important than class, status, or gender? The material analysed suggests that there was indeed a wall between foreign travellers and the local population: Siedlecki calls Nong-Nong "a companion" and Marcinowska constructs an analogy between the Poles and Javanese; nonetheless, their representations of the people of Java use othering strategies. That said, it should be noted that interactions with aristocrats were of a very different kind to interactions with commoners; furthermore, Europeans of high status, like Bakunin, were allowed far more leeway. Ethnicity is more important than class, status, or gender, but these should not be neglected. Following this line of enquiry, in the next section, the nature of the interactions between privileged Russian visitors and Dutch notables will be shown.

PRIVILEGED VISITORS TALK TO THE DUTCH ELITES

After examining travellers' interactions with the highest echelons of Javanese society, here I would like to focus on encounters with the Dutch elites and analyse how two travellers of high status, Princess Shcherbatova and Consul Bakunin, interacted with them.

The princess and her husband twice met the highest Dutch official in the island, Governor-General Cornelis Pijnacker Hordijk (1847-1908, in office 1888-1893, see Figure 4). The meetings were very conventional and although, at first glance, the description is not given much importance in Shcherbatova's narrative, they are still worth quoting. On the first occasion, the couple met the Governor-General and his wife privately.

On arrival at the palace, we were met by the adjutant of the Governor-General and ushered into a small drawing-room, which Mr and Mrs Pijnacker Hordijk entered a few minutes later. The conversation began in French, which the former spoke rather badly, but his wife spoke quite well. S. [Sasha, a diminutive form of Aleksander, Shcherbatova's husband] told him about our plans for Java and asked the Governor-General to give him an introduction to all the Residents and to facilitate our contacts with the native Regents. Speaking about earthquakes, which recur fairly frequently all over the island, though rarely with destructive force, Mr P. Hordijk said that only fifty years ago the whole upper floor of the local palace had been destroyed by such an event. (Shcherbatova 2019: 167).



Figure 4. Governor-General Cornelis Pijnacker Hordijk.¹²

The same day in the evening, they attended an official dinner.

At seven thirty we were back at the palace where a dinner was given in our honour; the Governor-General and his wife, following the example of high officials in India, entered the drawing-room only when all the guests were fully assembled. The dinner lasted long enough, and the conversation, which was mainly about Java, furnished us with much interesting information. (Shcherbatova 2019: 168).

Firstly, these descriptions and the conventional style in which they were written demonstrate Shcherbatova's aristocratic habitus; she moved naturally in the highest circles, and she thought that it was normal for the Governor-General to give a dinner in her and her husband's honour. This aristocratic habitus is also visible in other encounters; Shcherbatova expected to be treated with dignity and be served, and she would not have questioned the hierarchical society of the Netherlands East Indies (conversely, travellers like Arnol'di and Marcinowska did so partially, as we have seen above). Secondly, aware of their aristocratic status, she and her husband interacted with the Governor-General on an equal footing and requested he facilitate their journey through Java, which indeed he did. For example, they were given a special railway carriage to travel on a yet-to-be-opened part of the railway. In short, the encounter with the Governor-General, albeit as convention dictated, played an important practical role in the rest of Shcherbatova's trip. Thirdly, language is important. They spoke to the Governor-General in French, and

¹² [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cornelis_Pijnacker_Hordijk_\(1847-1908\).-_Gouverneur-generaal_\(1888-93\)_Rijksmuseum_SK-A-3811.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cornelis_Pijnacker_Hordijk_(1847-1908).-_Gouverneur-generaal_(1888-93)_Rijksmuseum_SK-A-3811.jpeg).

Shcherbatova assessed his and his wife's language competence, demonstrating her own proficiency in French, presenting herself as a cultured European. Ewa Thompson (2000: 146-147) remarks that, in the first chapter of his seminal novel *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy uses conversations in French to demonstrate how the upper classes in Russian society moved gracefully in international circles, addressing foreign aristocracy as equals – an interpretation which can also be extended to Shcherbatova's remarks (actually, the Governor-General spoke French badly, suggesting his lower status in comparison to that of the princess).

Fourthly, the couple had been to India two years before Java, and she published a book about that trip, too, so a comparison of social conventions in British India and the Netherlands East Indies ("following the example of high-ranking officials in India") is also significant, demonstrating the transnational (or trans-imperial) character of Shcherbatova's travels and writings. As noted by Martin Aust, despite some particularities, Shcherbatova travelled like a member "of an international mobile European community" (Aust 2019: 87), which forms part of this historian's argument about "Russians" involvement in exploring and internationalizing the world of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century (Aust 2019: 78).

Finally, the topics of conversations mentioned by Shcherbatova indicate another important dimension to the encounters between aristocratic tourists and local elites. One would expect that people of high status would have talked about old Europe, art, or world politics; however, over dinner, Shcherbatova participated in a conversation about life in Java. Bakunin, to whom I shall turn shortly, suggested that members of the local Dutch and Indo-Dutch society did not have many topics to talk about with an educated European, but Shcherbatova found a conversation about Java interesting. It reveals how tourists functioned in a bubble. The Russian aristocrat's sources of information were books written by Westerners (she quotes them quite often) and conversations with the elites of colonial society, which obviously had an impact on the image of Java in her writings. A similar point of view is presented by a high-status Polish tourist, the Apostolic Delegate to the Netherlands East Indies, Władysław Michał Zaleski (1852-1925), who visited Java in 1897. He wrote that his position meant he had to visit the main dignitaries in Batavia, about which he had no regrets, since they were highly educated people and a conversation with them about the land over which they ruled was very interesting (Zaleski 1898: 75-76). Unsurprisingly, Zaleski's book contains an apology for Dutch colonialism.

Bakunin's interactions with the luminaries of the Dutch colonial society appeared very different, and his opinion of their members also diverged significantly. In the excerpt quoted at the beginning of this article, he states that he did not have anything in common with the local Dutch, but even more importantly, he referred to his posting in Java as "an exile". The Consul had spent most of his career in the Balkans, and for him being moved to the Netherlands Indies was a cause of dissatisfaction which tangibly tints his book about "tropical Holland", although he portrays the Governor-General, Carel

Herman Aart van der Wijck (1840-1914, in office 1893-1899, see Figure 5) and his wife, born Constance Wilhelmine van den Broek (1853-1927), positively after he met them at a ball.

Van der Wijck is extremely amiable, easy-going, even cordial with his guests. His appearance is very respectable and his intelligent, lively face very handsome. Mr Van der Wijck is a man of extraordinary ability as an administrator, he works very hard, is very thorough, has rare energy, and can safely be counted among the most remarkable and distinguished administrators the Netherlands Indies have had for a long time. His wife is also a sweet and gracious person, a hospitable hostess who hates the constraints of etiquette which surround her and dreams of one thing: how soon her husband's term of office will be over (Governor-General are appointed for five years) and how nice it will be to return to Holland and live there simply, as she wanted, without parades, receptions, and dinners. (Bakunin 2007: 58).



Figure 5. Carel Herman Aart van der Wijck (source: Rijksmuseum).¹³

There are a few interesting moments in this depiction which demonstrate how the encounter with Batavian luminaries betrays Bakunin's own views. Van der Wijck was born in Ambonia, his wife in Surabaya,¹⁴ and they had spent most of their lives in the Netherlands East Indies, so in writing about a "return to Holland" Bakunin might have been expressing his own wish to leave the Netherlands East Indies, although both the Governor-General and his wife did live out their last years in the Netherlands. According to a

¹³ [Http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.9985](http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.9985).

¹⁴ See <https://www.geni.com/people/Constance-Wilhelmine.-van-den-Broek/600000015139318070>.

contemporary historian, during his long career in the colony, Van der Wijck acquired “a reputation for ruthlessness” and “had no compunction whatever about using armed force” (Alfons van der Kraan 1980: 52). Van der Wijck’s “extraordinary abilities”, praised by Bakunin, manifested themselves, *inter alia*, in an intensification of the Aceh War and the conquest of Lombok, called by one contemporary researcher “one of the most unjust military campaigns of the Dutch expansionist period under Governor-General Van der Wijck” (Adam Tyson 2013: 206). As we have seen before, the Russian Consul supported colonial expansion as an action appropriate to a superior white race, therefore hawkish Van der Wijck suited Bakunin’s notion of a good leader. Finally, the remark about the Governor-General’s wife being tired by “the constraints of etiquette” allows us to link the encounter with the Governor-General and Bakunin’s general views on the Dutch in Java. Describing the ball at which he encountered the Governor-General, Bakunin complained about the etiquette, and, parallel to this, criticized Indo-Dutch society in general:

For a few hours, the ball brought sleepy Batavia very unusual excitement and gave the illusion that all this was something familiar, an common occurrence, and that it was taking place in Europe. But it seemed so only viewed from a distance. In reality, the overall effect was very different: chocolate-coloured footmen in livery but barefoot, standing motionless on the stairs, ladies and gentlemen with broad cheekbones and gingerbread complexions could not be found in such abundance at any ball in Europe. The audience was large and tricoloured: white, yellow, and chocolate-coloured cavaliers and ladies lined the central “throne room” waiting for Their Excellencies to appear. At precisely 9.30 the doors to the inner apartments opened wide, and in a resounding voice from across the hall the aide on duty proclaimed: “Zyne Excellenzaire de Gouverneur-General”. The orchestra played the Wilhelmus van Nassauwen national anthem and the provincial Governor-General and his wife marched out to the assembled guests. A deep and universal bow ensued. The Governor-General and his wife approached the more distinguished guests and exchanged a few words with them while shaking hands. The cavaliers bowed low, and the ladies curtsied, almost diving into space in their excess of eagerness and reverence. Both were aware that it was all very effective and solemn, and that they were copying the court etiquette in The Hague, although half the guests had never been to The Hague, and not only were the Indo-Dutch mestizos not invited to court, they were not even admitted to decent clubs anywhere in Holland. (Bakunin 2007: 55-56).

Bakunin’s description is based on a contrast: too elaborate, semi-royal ceremonies versus a society which did not match the splendour of the protocol. He criticized local notables from a racist position typical of the end of the nineteenth century. For example, the food metaphors used to describe the complexion of servants and guests (chocolate-coloured, gingerbread complexions) reified peoples of colour, reinforcing racial stereotypes and the notion of European superiority. Bakunin’s real target was the mestizo community, because typically of that period he thought that the excellence of the white race was endangered by racial mixing and by the corrupting influence of the tropical climate (Savage 1984: 175-179; Ulbe Bosma and Remco

Raben 2008: 293-295). Savitskiy (2019a) links Bakunin's views of Dutch colonial society to Max Nordau's (1849-1923) concept of degeneration. The Russian official saw himself as more European than the degenerate local Dutch society, as he positioned himself as distinct from both the natives and the Dutch. In other places in his book he also rejects British colonial practices. Although colonial literature was often organized by the opposition between Europe and "the Orient", Bakunin also attempted to establish a hierarchy among real Europeans exemplified by himself and degenerate ones like the local Dutch.

To sum up, both descriptions of Russian encounters with local Dutch elites are a product of a Russian discourse on European identity. The Russians presented themselves as enlightened Europeans, and not only in opposition to colonized populations. As a real European, Bakunin contrasts himself sharply to the Batavian personalities, while Shcherbatova subtly suggests her superiority in remarks about the French language.

A BIOLOGIST LOOKS FOR "HALF-WILD TRIBES"

During his time in the Netherlands East Indies, Arnol'di and his companions organized a research expedition to the eastern part of the Archipelago, visiting the Aru Islands. Inspired by the narratives of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) and a Russian biologist named Konstantin Nikolayevich Davydov (1877-1960), besides their scientific goals (collecting seaweeds), they also wanted to get to know the local "half-wild" tribes and a nature almost untouched by humans (Arnol'di 2014: 139). Exploring Aru, Arnol'di (2014: 220) concluded that, in the six years between his and Davydov's journey, the islanders' life had undergone greater changes than in the fifty years between Davydov and Wallace. Therefore, Arnol'di's narrative about encounters with people in Aru reveals his thoughts about culture, wildness, modernization, westernization and globalization, highlighting not only the complex relationship between European travellers and local peoples in a colonial situation, but also the tensions in the Russian's own notions of civilization and development.

One very interesting scene is a description of Arnol'di's encounter with schoolchildren on the island of Kobroor (see Figure 6):

The little savages could already read and write Malay, could count a little, and, still being pagans, used the Bible as a reading book. The children did not betray the slightest shyness and huddled trustingly around the *guru* (teacher) and his wife, running various little errands. I wanted to photograph them; in an instant all the children disappeared but soon returned, dressed in Malay costume - a white jacket and trousers; having photographed them in these outfits, I asked them to present themselves as they would normally look and the children again changed from cultured boys to half-wild islanders. (Arnol'di 2014: 205).



Figure 6. Aru people (Arnol'di, "Po ostrovam Malayskogo arhipelaga" Moskva 1911, unnumbered plate between pages 174-175).¹⁵

The references to the children as "half-wild islanders" and "little savages" reveal the author's perception of them as uncivilized, although, in a different suit of clothes, they briefly appeared to be "cultured/civilized". This transformation must be put in the context of Arnol'di's discourse on "civilization" (or "culture") and "wildness" (or "savagery"). Generally speaking, in his book we often find a binary opposition between "civilization" (or "culture") and "wildness" (or "savagery"), so Arnol'di seems to follow the typical conventions of colonial literature on the Netherlands East Indies which depict a hierarchical, asymmetrical structure, based on the superiority of one group and the inferiority of the other, to justify colonialism (Honings 2023: 157; Nick Tomberge 2023: 220; Van 't Veer 2023: 119). However, in some passages, this straightforward scheme is undermined. For example, when commenting on the peoples of the Archipelago, he remarks that the "Malays" are divided into "cultured" in Java and "half-wild" and "wild" in Borneo and Sumatra, while the Papuans in the eastern islands are even less cultured (Arnol'di 2014: 141-142). In another place, he comments that the "Malays" in Java had developed a highly original culture, but at the end of the nineteenth century this was swiftly being replaced by a European culture; so much so that life was turning into a general template (Arnol'di 2014: 71) (Arnol'di does not use the word "globalization", but it could be employed here). Culture can also be an attribute of individuals; Wallace is called the first cultured European to visit the Eastern Archipelago (Arnol'di 2014: 183), and

¹⁵ https://www.prlib.ru/item/437607#v=d&z=3&n=5&i=7592287_doc1_3F45A940-FDF9-4612-A6D7-0839C0B0E614.tiff&y=588.8125&x=567.8000001907349.

among the Aru people, a certain Latenin is distinguished as the most cultured (Arnol'di 2014: 190). Finally, without a shadow of a doubt, Arnol'di considered himself a cultured European, but this did not extend to Russia as a whole, for he even wrote, "We are more likely to be conquered than we are to become a cultured country" (Arnol'di 2014: 249). This begs the question: Was Latenin more cultured than the Europeans other than the highly educated Wallace? Did the modernization and globalization of the Javanese mean acquiring a higher cultural level or losing one's identity? Can a non-European culture be an engine for progress?

The excerpt about pupils at school quoted does not describe a simple encounter between "a civilized European" and "barbarian natives", because the situation described is not dichotomized: a remote part of a Dutch colony is visited by a Russian, who encounters Papuan children in a school established by a Christian teacher from the island of Saparua, identified by Arnol'di as "a Malay". On the one hand, the author seems to express admiration for the children's ability to read and write Malay, as well as their willingness to use the Bible as a reading-book. On the other hand, while nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century travellers often identified Europe as the embodiment of civilization, understood as an advanced stage of social and cultural development, here Arnol'di notices that the modernizing and civilizing processes were being driven by "a Malay". Being in the Aru Islands changed the context, there "Malay" meant modernizing and civilizing, even though this "Malay" was a Christian and therefore westernized. But can we equate Christianity and the Bible in the Malay language with Western civilization?

Arnol'di's desire to photograph the children and their willingness to comply can be seen as an example of the power dynamics at play in such encounters. The fact that the children disappeared as quickly as they reappeared in Malay costume suggests that they might have been eager to present themselves as "civilized" to their "civilized" guest. Conversely, Arnol'di wanted them to conform to his notion of the Aru people as Papuan savages, hence his desire that they be dressed in something other than Malay dress. Questions of photography and clothing are closely linked to the question of authenticity: the traveller wants his encounter to be authentic and the photo to give a "real" image of the people encountered (Mee 2014: 21-26). Arnol'di used the words "present themselves as normal", but we may ask what is "normal"? Maybe for those children, wearing Malay costumes for special occasions was "normal", while presenting themselves for the photo half-naked would have been weird, even though in casual situations, they did not wear Malay clothes. Arnol'di himself wore different clothes in different situations and we doubt if he would let anyone photograph him in his pyjamas. Additionally, these children were living in a rapidly changing world and they were negotiating their identity with modernity, signified by school and clothing, so it is difficult to say what would have been normal for them. One can only wonder whether Arnol'di's pursuit of authenticity, which he identified with exotic savagery, might have led to forfeiting an insight into an authentic process of the cultural change happening in front of him.

The symbolic power of clothing is significant here (Dúnlaith Bird 2019). The changing into Malay costume is a performance act through which the children manifested their modernizing cultural affiliation or maybe subjugated themselves to the colonizing gaze of the traveller. In this second interpretation, their actions can be seen as an example of mimicry, even though they used Malay, not European clothes. However, Arnol' di did not want Aru to be "almost the same, but not quite" (Homi Bhabha 2004: 122), because he fetishized their half-nakedness, projecting the Other as a symbol of a past era, unquestionably different to the contemporary Western culture.

The second interesting situation is Arnol' di's interaction with the sailors. In Aru the Russian biologist spent three weeks in the company of local mariners, sailing with them through the Archipelago. He reported feeling anxious at the beginning of the journey: "We were alone among dark-skinned strangers on a distant sea, with only penknives as a weapon and a Javanese *golok*, which we used for botanical purposes" (Arnol' di 2014: 195). Mikko Toivanen (2019: 20-34) emphasizes that anxiety and racial discourse constitute an important context for understanding travel in the colonial period, and Arnol' di's example demonstrates how those categories were linked: being surrounded by people classified as a different race in an unfamiliar environment made the Russian traveller feel ill at ease. However, ultimately, the encounter with sailors showed how prolonged contact with local peoples in a relatively egalitarian setting not only dispelled anxiety but also allowed for a meaningful and friendly relationship. While Nong-Nong was treated as a servant by the biologist, in interactions with the sailors, hierarchy was not adhered to as strictly. Therefore, shared space and adventures on a sailing boat resulted in enjoyable companionship. Consequently, Arnol' di left a personalized portrayal of the crew, and despite its sketchy character, it is still very different from common generalizations about "natives" written by many other travellers.

Apart from the two of us, myself and my comrade and collaborator, there were Captain Moytina and five dark-skinned men on board the *Marie*. The captain was from the island of Ceram, a Mohammedan. His father was almost a savage and his closest relatives honourably upheld the ancient custom of head-hunting; Moytina himself was a very amiable man, well-versed in his profession, able to influence his sailors. Among the latter were two Christian Ambonese, Abram and Jeremias, of whom Abram was a very interesting type of young man, not without talent, resolute, and capable of hard work. In difficult moments he was singled out by Captain Moytina: during storms and thunderstorms, Moytina's voice was most often heard summoning Abram for some difficult task. His brother, the handsome Jeremias, was a great joker, very fond of songs, and always glancing in the mirror, but he was not a good worker, and once I had a few shake-ups with this Ambonese at the oars. The big, muscular Butonese, Lassani, was less civilized than the graceful Jeremias but he was irreplaceable as a worker; I especially liked to row with him as he rowed smoothly and skilfully, no matter what the waves were like. Apart from this team, we had a cook with us whose name I did not recognize. He was called "kokki" and was obviously made fun of. He was a clumsy-looking chap, oafish-looking. It is probable that the cook's

job, which included washing and scraping dishes, had been given to him because he was incapable of any other occupation. Finally, the last dark-skinned man on the *Marie* was our servant, Mesak, an Ambonese, cunning and lazy, a real lackey type. (Arnol'di 2014: 193-194).

Despite some negative comments about clumsiness and using such categories as “savagery”, “laziness”, and “dark skin”, Arnol'di generally avoided reducing his companions to types based on their ethnicity and cultural background. Spending time together in a particular setting on a sailing boat made it possible to supplement Orientalist stereotypes with some personal notes, to some extent at least. Derek Gregory (1995: 48) suggests that Flaubert, in his account of Egypt, upset some conventions of Orientalism by using sensuality, characterizing the inhabitants of Egypt as bodies and subjects, thanks to privileges derived from masculinity and patriarchy. Analogically, from the heights of his privileged position as a white explorer, Arnol'di was allowed to sail together with a group of sailors which enabled him to represent them more as real people than types. There is, however, an interesting tension between the individual portraits and a generalized description of the crew as a whole, as in the following excerpt:

All in all, the whole company made the best impression. Who were these people? As you see, they came from different parts of the Archipelago; pirates and crooks, as the eye-witness Davydov described them; but, during the three-week voyage in their company, we invariably saw polite, well-behaved people. Not once was there a quarrel or swearing among them. Always cheerful and contented, they constantly found material for conversation in their spare time, and often we heard their heartfelt, sincere laughter. They were eager to sing, but unfortunately, instead of their own native songs or melodies, we had to listen to the banal tune of a Maxixe they had learned from a gramophone. (Arnol'di 2014: 194).

In this excerpt, the characterization of the crew is positive, but here real people are subordinated to the discourse based on previous textual representations (Davydov). Arnol'di seemed surprised that his companions were different to the characters described in the book he had read, exemplifying that sometimes “the Orient” was more “a set of references” than a real place (Said 2003: 177). Once again, Arnol'di's quest for pristine, exotic, primordial culture can be observed, not unlike the scene with the photographed children. He was disappointed that the crew sang modern songs learned from a gramophone, denying the coequality of local peoples.

In the two situations analysed above, the concepts of culture and savagery are crucially important. Usually, European travellers who wrote about the Netherlands East Indies treated themselves as representatives of an advanced civilization, exploring lands which were savage to varying degrees. In this context, it is worth noting what Arnol'di wrote about his homeland. He complained about a small, shabby steamship (Arnol'di 1914: 250) and a dirty Siberian train (Arnol'di 2014: 252) and, describing a mediocre but expensive hotel in Vladivostok, he exclaimed: “The first sign of a lack of culture in a city

and country – there were no such prices in the best hotels of Java, Singapore, Japan” (Arnol’ di 2014: 251). Savitskiy (2020), refuting Maurizio Peleggi’s (2012) thesis that hotels in colonies were outposts of Europeaness and comfort, claimed that for Russian travellers, Javanese hotels were inconvenient, while visitors experienced their European identity not because of familiarity and comfort, but by comparing the conditions encountered with their expectations. Here, this discourse on hotels, civilization, and identity assumes a peculiar twist: it is the hotel in Russia compared to hotels in colonies which leads Arnol’ di to question the civilizational level of his own country. Finally, despite travelling shortly after the Russo-Japanese war (or maybe because of it?), the Russian botanist paints a very positive image of Japan, and, while writing about potential Japanese expansion to Siberia, states, “Alas! Siberia and all the strategies of our governance show that we are more likely to be conquered than we are to become a cultured country” (Arnol’ di 2014: 249). In this context, it is worth mentioning how Savitskiy (2019b: 62) interprets one scene from Arnol’ di’s travelogue. In peaceful Buitenzorg, the biologist was reading a Russian newspaper containing news of political violence. It introduces a contrast between the idealized space of the colonial botanical garden and a Russia gripped by political chaos. This opposition plus his remarks about Siberia and Japan seem to hint at a Russia in need of imperial domination, not by an autocratic tsar but by enlightened people devoted to science and progress, at least according to Arnol’ di.

It reveals an interesting conundrum. Arnol’ di does not refer to his own country as “savage”, but suggests that it lacks culture, even though he eagerly describes the colonized inhabitants of Java as “cultured”. Russia is not likely to become a cultured/civilized country, even though the “semi-wild” peoples of the Aru archipelago, whose ancestors were cannibals, are becoming “cultured”/civilized. Earlier, we have seen how Bakunin and Shcherbatova, privileged Russian visitors representative of the tsarist elites, betrayed their European identity in descriptions of encounters with the people of Java, whereas Arnol’ di’s position was different. When commenting on Nong-Nong or Aru children, he assumes the position of a privileged European observer, assessing the civilizational level of “exotic” people, and yet, as a liberal thinker critical of the tsarist regime, adopting the same perspective when writing about his homeland. Whereas Kalinowska, discussing the Russian travel writing of the first half of the nineteenth century, remarks that throughout that period Russian culture became more self-oriented (Kalinowska 2004: 182), and accounts of oriental journeys demonstrated not Europeaness but imperial Russian culture (Kalinowska 2004: 139). Arnol’ di’s perspective at the beginning of the twentieth century is different. His habitus equipped him with a feeling of his own Europeaness and a set of concepts linked to Europe as a depository of universal culture, but it also made him critical of Russia. Encounters with the people of the Netherlands East Indies and the eastern peripheries of Russia led him to re-evaluate where culture, non-culture, and savagery can be encountered and delineated.

CONCLUSION

The key contribution of the present paper is to ask how the experience of Polish and Russian travellers broadens our understanding of the social world of the Netherlands East Indies. Broadly speaking, these experiences illustrate trends described in general works on the colonial period (for example, Merle Calvin Ricklefs 2007; Bosma and Raben 2008; Jean Gelman Taylor 2009). Not eschewing violence, the Dutch were expanding their colonial empire and this is visible in Bakunin's remark on the energetic Governor-General Van der Wijck. Colonial inequalities were evident in various aspects of society, including the economic, political and social spheres, and the indigenous population was largely excluded from economic opportunities. This scenario is exemplified by Siedlecki's and Arnol'di's remarks about the low wages paid the Buitenzorg gardeners. Bakunin's disappointment at the ball given by the Governor-General was because colonial society consisted mainly of people of mixed Dutch and Asian origin. The modernization of local indigenous societies was witnessed by Arnol'di in a remote school in the Aru Archipelago. This list can be continued; however, the material analysed expands knowledge not through generalizations, but in three main ways.

Firstly, by scrutinizing personal encounters in travelogues, we can discover how some general phenomena manifested themselves on the individual level and, metaphorically speaking, how they "tasted". It is one thing to know that Surakarta and Yogyakarta were puppet states and another to read a description of a conversation with the Susuhunan.

Secondly, a comparative critical reading of travelogues can reveal the underlying systems of thought and power which shaped past understandings of the world. Examining the differences between Bakunin and Marcinowska, and between Shcherbatova and Arnol'di, unearths social, political, and cultural contexts underlying various narrative conventions and visions of the world. Many of these paradigms still influence our way of thinking, for example, the concepts of modernization and the rhetoric of classification used by Arnol'di.

Finally, the present article has examined less-studied sources written in Slavic languages. Eastern Europeans were writing from a different perspective to that of the Dutch, English, or Javanese. In the Netherlands East Indies, they were privileged Europeans but, at the same time, their Europeaness was being called into question. They also viewed colonizers like the Dutch as "Others", which adds a particular perspective to our understanding of colonial encounters in the Netherlands East Indies.

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