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Berlages Indische reis. Een nieuwe vertelling van een vergeten koloniaal verhaal /
Berlage di Nusantara. Sebuah narasi baru dari kisah colonial yang terlupakan /
Berlage's Journey to the Indies. A new narration of a forgotten colonial story

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The colonial past has been the subject of intense interest for several years. After decades, in which the debate about the exploitation of people and resources outside Europe was marginalised, it's about time this issue is discussed openly. The critical attention emerging for the colonial past has led to a gradual shift in perspective. By questioning issues that were long considered fixed and absolute, aspects of colonialism that until recently received little or no interest, are finally being acknowledged and addressed, resulting in both positive and negative responses: recognition, confusion, understanding, doubt, anger and frustration. Seen in this light, the retelling of H.P. Berlage's *Mijn Indische reis* (*Journey to the Indies*, 1931) published by LM Publishers in 2024 provides an interesting case study.

Berlage's book is based on the diary he kept throughout his journey to the Dutch East Indies in 1923. The new edition, by the editors referred to as 'Indische reis 2.0' (Indian Journey 2.0), is a thematically organised collection of quotations from Berlage's original publication. The quotations, which the editors have provided with connecting texts and explanations, portray Berlage as traveller, architect, thinker and critic. The trilingual text (Dutch, Indonesian, English) is generously illustrated with sketches Berlage made during his trip, supplemented with contemporary photographs, archival documents (maps, letters) and cartoon-like 'portraits' of Berlage in the tropics. In addition to an abridged biography of Berlage, the book also contains a brief description of prominent figures Berlage met whilst in the Dutch East Indies: colleagues, politicians, administrators, scientists and thinkers. In the epilogue, twenty-one contributors from various backgrounds but all involved in Indonesia's colonial and architectural past, reflect on Berlage's original publication. For those interested in these reflections, there is also a series of podcasts available.

The ambition to rescue Berlage's Indian journey from oblivion is commendable and largely successful. The arrangement, content and length of Berlage's quotations, combined with additions and reflections by the editors and third parties, result in a user-friendly interpretation of Berlage's *Mijn Indische reis*. But there are disadvantages to this simplicity of interpretation. Because the editors radically reorganised and interpret Berlage's original text, the question arises to what extent 'Indische reis 2.0' reflects Berlage's original views, or those of the editors. And although this, in and of itself is not crucial – many readers will be aware that all adaptations are interpretations – it's critical readers keep this in mind when digesting the book's contents. As they need to be aware that the editorial framing and explanatory texts are rather idolising in nature. The impression thus created by the editors of Berlage as a nearly flawless architect and human being, fortunately is somewhat balanced by some of the reflections in the last part of the book; even though most of these reflections are not very critical and therefore hardly help to unpack the 'baggage' of the colonial past, as Amara van der Elst formulates it.

To determine why and which of Berlage's views are still relevant today, requires an objective reflection of those views in the framework of current perspectives on Berlage and the post-colonial debate. 'Indische reis 2.0' does not do this. For starters, because the references are very general and partial. One example is the editors' reference to, but otherwise negligence of, Herman van Bergeijk's publication – incorrectly described as a documentary by an architect. Why does 'Indische reis 2.0' ignore this relevant relatively recently published, thorough archival about the Berlage's journey? Is it because Van Bergeijk reveals issues about this journey Berlage didn't address in his own publication? For example that Berlage travelled to the Dutch East Indies at a time when the Netherlands was going through an economic downturn and his design commissions had virtually ground to a halt. A historical point that does not diminish Berlage's sincere interest in the colony but does suggest that his interest was probably equally motivated by personal as well as commercial considerations. An assumption that seems supported by that fact that Berlage's visited the Dutch East Indies because he was commissioned to write a report on a Hindu temple complex, and acquired several urban design assignments during his Indies travels. These financially lucrative commissions raise the question why those commissioning Berlage considered him to be the right man for these jobs, and why Berlage himself thought so. For someone who was well versed in Western architecture, who argued that Western architects should take local circumstances into account, who greatly appreciated local craftsmen and building methods, who was highly critical of colonial attitudes and of a misplaced sense

of Western superiority, accepting these commissions seems rather inconsistent. Because, considering the scope of and the different (building) cultures within the colony and the socially and professionally exclusive crowd Berlage engaged during his visit, it would have been impossible for Berlage to fully understand and appreciate all aspects of the Dutch East Indies during his journey. By accepting these design commissions, in other words, Berlage can be blamed of practices for which he regularly criticised others.

Another weakness of 'Indische reis 2.0' is that it fails to engage with the current critical postcolonial debate. The only echoes of this debate are Van der Elst's to the baggage of the colonial past, Kathleen Ferrier's reminders that perspective is everything and that labels such as 'exotic' and 'strange' are no longer appropriate, Melle Haak's emphasis on the importance of an open attitude and suspending judgement, and Obbe Norbruis' critical stance towards the appropriateness of Berlage's proposals to redesign the then Stadhuisplein in Batavia. If it would not have been for these justified but also oblique references, the book would have been completely devoid of any acknowledgement of the current expanding postcolonial debate. And that's peculiar; not only because that this debate is loud and clear, but even more so because an analysis of a contemporary publication about a journey in a colony offers a perfect occasion to engage in this debate. Not to attack or defend the author, but to examine the colonial language in such a publication and to gain insight into the nature and implications of that language – such as, in this case, Berlage's patronising opinion about the behaviour of 'colonials' that he himself was not necessarily a stranger to.

Although the book evidently has been created and published with great dedication and care, the lack of a critical postcolonial perspective unfortunately turns it into no more than a 'Readers' Digest' of Berlage's *Journey to the Indies*. For those who feel the need to consult the original and/or read up on the context of that original, it's good to know there are plenty of copies available of both Berlage's original work from 1931 and Van Bergeijk's publication from 2011.

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