



Why Does Your Servant Ride a Bicycle and Wear European Trousers?: Clothing and Colonialism in 21st Century Indonesian Literature

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Abstract. As a physical practice, clothing plays a significant role in shaping one's identity, particularly in postcolonial Indonesia where this identity is often subject to contestation. In the turn of the centuries, the Indies was a society defined by appearances. This emphasis on external looks underscores how surface impressions can deeply influence how individuals are perceived and treated in society, creating an unpredictable dynamic in social interactions. This dynamic is explored in Iksaka Banu's short story "Di Atas Kereta Angin" ("On the Wind Train", 2019), where clothing is a pivotal element in the contestation of colonial Javanese society during the early 20th century. The story revolves around a debate between two Dutchmen regarding a native servant's choice to wear European clothing while riding a bicycle. Through this narrative, Banu presents how everyday events involving clothing and technology contribute to shaping perceptions about colonial identity, which remains unstable for both the oppressed and the oppressor. By focusing on the Dutch characters' argument, the author aims to convey the complexity and subtleties of history.

Keywords: bicycle, clothing, Iksaka Banu, Indonesia, postcolonial

1 Introduction

Clothing played a significant role in the contestation of cultural hegemony, particularly as it related to colonial rule. The significant work of Rovine (2009) [1] demonstrates the exploitative nature of the relationships between colonial powers and colonised peoples with respect to clothing and adornments. In the Dutch East Indies, the history of clothing reveals a clear influence of Europe, with Western clothing being accepted by men as everyday wear, starting in urban areas and then spreading to rural areas [2]. Academic studies have highlighted the significant role of clothing in colonial Indonesian society from the 17th to the 20th centuries [3] [4] [5] [6]. During the mid-19th century, the colonial government introduced regulations mandating distinct clothing for each ethnic group. The primary objective was to facilitate population control and ensure clear delineation and simplify the identification and differentiation of various ethnic groups from one another. Thus, Javanese, Chinese, Ambonese, or

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Bugis individuals were compelled to adhere to their traditional attire and were prohibited from adopting indigenous or European clothing.

The issue of clothing in both public and private spheres was highly significant during the high colonial period (1816-1942), an era referred to by Peter Carey [7] as a time when "Europeans looked down on those outside Europe as inferior beings." This period differed from the earlier era of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) which ended with the dissolution of the company in 1799. During that time, the Dutch were forced to accommodate themselves to the local culture in Indonesia. However, the transition from the 18th to the 19th century brought significant changes in Europe with the outbreak of the French Revolution (1792-1799) and the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815), which subsequently brought a tsunami of change to Java in the form of a transition of colonial power which held dominance there and triggered a major bloodshed in Indonesian history known as the Java War (1825-1830). The transition occurred brutally and marked the beginning of the operation of issues related to race, ethnicity, status, and honour in Java.

After the turmoil, the new stabilized colonial power was legally upheld and solidified through constitutionalising in the *Regeeringsreglement* (RR, Government Regulation, the *de facto* constitution in the Dutch East Indies). Through this constitution, legal pluralism was deeply ingrained: "Europeans" were subject to "European" law, while "natives" were subject to *adat* or customary law. Therefore, there had to be a fixed definition of "Europeans" and "non-Europeans". The legal categorization was then solidified in Article 109 RR, originally issued in 1854, which provided legal definitions of who qualified as "European," "Native," and "Foreign Easterner" [8]. This legal status ultimately had significant consequences in the daily lives of individuals bound by it, even "empowering the coloniser to categorise colonial subjects, assign them fixed ethnic costumes, and effectively define their cultural identities" [9]. In the everyday experience of colonialism, outward appearance facilitated social relationships and interactions: Who should submit? To whom? Should honorifics be used? What language should be used in conversations?

The power dynamics and societal norms that characterised this period in Indonesian history was stated by Siegel [10] as "fetish of appearance" which demonstrates that ambiguity in one's clothing and behaviour is unsettling. It highlights how the emphasis on external appearance and superficial impressions can have a significant impact on how individuals are perceived and treated in society and can create a sense of instability and unpredictability in social interactions. Clothing can serve as a symbol of nationality, the distinguisher of who is European and who is not. However, when individuals dress in a manner that is not typical of their nationality, such as cross-dressing, it can create uncertainty and ambiguity about their national identity. A blurring of race and ethnicity is only effective if it is displayed in public, on the streets for others to see. Europeans were able to show off and compete in affluence through outings on the street and attendance at receptions, concerts, and performances. The fetish of appearance is most visibly manifested in these situations [11].

The implementation of the Ethical Policy brought significant transformations in the Dutch East Indies [12] [13]. Such transformation eroded colonial power from within, as accurately described by Tagliacozzo [14] that during that time, when the colonial apparatus wielded supreme rule, while it was "so strong and impressive when viewed from without, the architecture of rule was slowly rotting from within". That

era saw the increasing access for natives to receive Western education, learn the Dutch language, and adopt European attire. Western education brought about a new mentality, a new awareness of identity, and created a new social class that, according to Lombard [15], consisted of urban dwellers who were "independent" and liberated from traditional interpersonal relationships. At that time, the old rules regarding clothing and ethnicity began to crumble.

Traces of such transformation and changes are reimagined in Iksaka Banu's short story, "Di Atas Kereta Angin" ("On the Wind Train", next abbreviated as DAKA) [16] which centres on a dispute between two Dutchmen about the appropriateness of a native servant wearing European clothing, specifically long pants or "pantalon," while riding a bicycle. Banu stands as a contemporary Indonesian author who adeptly translates the dynamics and daily life of colonial Dutch East Indies society into modern Indonesian literature. Within the collection of short stories titled "Teh dan Pengkhianat" (Tea and Traitor), "Di Atas Kereta Angin" garnered significant acclaim, earning the esteemed 2019 Khatulistiwa Literary Award (Kusala Sastra Khatulistiwa) in the prose category. Unlike other stories in the compilation, this particular narrative, alongside two others – "Kalabaka" and "Kutukan Lara Ireng" ("Lara Ireng's Curse") – was submitted as a last-minute addition to meet the publication deadline set by the publisher [17].

The significance of this study lies in revealing a narrative that uncovers the intricate interplay among clothing, bicycle (technology), and the colonial backdrop. To grasp the contextual milieu and perspective of this text, revisiting definitions of *kaum muda* (the young) by Shiraishi [18] is essential. Shiraishi briefly delineates the concept of *kaum muda* (the youth), an educated cohort exposed to Western education, a form more contemporary and progressive than that experienced by their parents or individuals devoid of Western-style education. Among the *kaum muda* themselves, those who attended European elementary and secondary schools exhibited heightened modernity and advancement in comparison to counterparts enrolled in native schools. The crux of this differentiation lay in their mastery of the Dutch language and their access to Dutch society in the Indies. The traits that characterized *kaum muda* became evident through the infusion of Dutch words into their vernacular conversations, their adoption of Western-style clothing and footwear, their penchant for frequenting eateries and enjoying lemonade, indulging in films and music rather than gamelan—essentially engaging in modern pursuits akin to the Dutch. According to Shiraishi, these *kaum muda* are portrayed by characters in *Student Hidjo* (1919) by Mas Marco Kartodikromo. However, Shiraishi's emphasis is not on clothing but rather underscores that The Dutch culture epitomized modernity, and the Dutch language served as the key to unlock the doors to modernity and progression. This stands in contrast to the situation in DAKA, which entirely omits characters from the *kaum muda* mentioned by Shiraishi. Consequently, reading DAKA, as undertaken in this piece, is vital to perceive that the representation of colonial identity in Indonesia is not solely dominated by characters from this *kaum muda*. In addition, while some analyses of Banu's work have prematurely concluded that the native adoption of Western attire is merely a superficial mimicry [19] [20], a deeper exploration is essential to understand the complex contexts that influence such choices. This article, therefore, delves into the significance of clothing and technology within the narrative, revealing how they collectively represent the contested nature of colonial Javanese society in the early 20th

century. This exploration of the interconnected aspects of clothing, technology, and colonialism is vital in understanding the intricate layers of identity and societal dynamics in the early 20th-century Indonesian context. It adds nuance to the prevailing discourse on colonial mimicry and highlights the multifaceted nature of historical and cultural interactions.

2 Discussion

2.1 Technology

Denys Lombard [21] explains how the introduction of Western techniques not only affected the geographical landscape of Java but also its demographics, economy, and eventually the behaviour of its society (Lombard refers to these as "techniques for building society"). Lombard's historiography, heavily influenced by the Annales school, narrates how Java underwent a metamorphosis during colonial times due to the massive influx of Western techniques that "broke the ecological and demographic balance". One of the significant influences of the new techniques was the massive opening of transportation networks from the west to the east of Java. The opening of road and railway networks became the foundation for the introduction of modern land transportation in Java, replacing traditional modes of transportation such as horses. Bicycles arrived relatively later in the Dutch East Indies or Southeast Asia, long after the arrival of trains in Java in 1860 and the circulation of cars and trams in Asian cities. However, in the transition of the 20th century in Southeast Asia, bicycles became a common and popular mode of transportation [22]. In Indonesia, bicycles were first introduced in 1894 by a European tobacco company manager in Asahan, North Sumatra. Since then, the two-wheeled vehicle has been used by various professions such as plantation managers, market inspectors, postal workers, police officers, and soldiers. The popularity and penetration of bicycles into the homes of colonial administrators is depicted in the opening of the short story DAKA. The first paragraph describes the arrival of the main character's (Kees') new bicycle.

"I bought the beautiful black Columbia Roadster, the latest model, six months ago at A. Resink and Co., Yogyakarta. A bicycle for men with a dark brown leather saddle, supported by foam and a large spring that made it comfortable to ride even on bumpy roads." (Banu, 2019, 92)

The description not only presents technology in general, but also the character that is dreamed of in technological achievement: newest, latest, modern, contemporary. It also includes a brand "Columbia Roadster" with features and advantages contained in the bicycle model. Kees' new bike is then contradicted with his old Simplex bike in the next sentence, which even gets labelled as "old".

"With the arrival of the flashy Columbia, I decided to hand over my old Simplex to Dullah, my houseboy, to use as a means of going to the kiosk to buy tobacco, delivering letters, or picking up goods." (p. 92)

The presence of the new bicycle rendered the old one available for his native servant's use. This initial scenario introduces the contrast between the old and new bicycles and underscores the hierarchical relationship between the master and his servant. This dynamic reinforces the top-down nature of technology, with innovations cascading from the upper echelons to the lower strata. In its early days, the bicycle was a privilege enjoyed by a select few. Subsequently, as more advanced technologies emerged, the erstwhile cutting-edge technology, now obsolete, became accessible to groups previously excluded from its benefits.

As noted by Dijk [23], the introduction of bicycles in Southeast Asia echoed the arrival of automobiles, which were predominantly utilized by the affluent, businessmen, and colonial elites as their personal vehicles. This trend was especially pronounced in colonies, where members of the white colonial elite set the tone. In regions like Malaya (Malaysia and Singapore) and the Dutch East Indies, the new vehicle symbolized affluence and status for local rulers and their families. Unlike Malaya, where bicycles assumed the role of a "toy" for the elite, in the Dutch East Indies, bicycles quickly gained popularity and emerged as a widespread mode of transportation. The adoption of bicycles as a preferred mode of travel in the Dutch East Indies can be attributed to diverse social and historical factors unique to the region.

At the onset of the 20th century, bicycles were more economically viable compared to alternatives like horses and cars, particularly for the lower and middle-class European populations, which were notably larger in the Dutch East Indies compared to Malaya. While Malayan literature often highlighted horse racing and British sports, such as cricket, golf, tennis, and billiards, the Dutch East Indies saw a surge in bicycle racing. Considering this popularity, Kees' elation upon acquiring a new bicycle in the opening scene of *DAKA* is comprehensible. The narrative paints the bicycle with descriptors like "the beautiful black" ("Si hitam cantik") and "flashy" ("serbamentereng"), further underscoring its substantial social significance. Hence, the opening scene of the short story not only introduces a bicycle but rather a bicycle embedded with profound societal implications and roles.

2.2 Clothing

However, how does this short story represent bicycles as agents of social change in the Dutch East Indies in the early 20th century? The aforementioned quote from page 92 presents the tasks that a native person can perform with a bicycle as a new transportation technology. Bicycles support the efficiency of the natives in their work. Furthermore, in order to ride a bicycle easily, a *pribumi* or native does not cover their legs with a sarong but instead wears long pants and shoes. Here, the bicycle is associated with bodily movement, and bodily movement is related to clothing. It is the issue of clothing that is emphasised by Jan Buskes, an assistant administrator of the government-owned tobacco plantation in Deli, who protests to Kees upon seeing his native workers riding bicycles and wearing European clothing.

"I saw a surprising sight from the window, Kees," Jan Buskes reached for his jacket. From his pocket, he took out a pipe, shag tobacco, and a lighter. "It's a sight that, in my opinion, deserves serious attention before it's too late," he

continued... "Your worker. That person was freely riding a bicycle. And wearing trousers and shoes, no less," Jan replied. "I find that a bit excessive." (p. 93)

The seriousness of the issue, for Jan, does not lie in "what is happening now," but in its potential to invite "something dangerous in the future" for the colonial government. Wearing European clothing is an ethical violation of the established rules in the Dutch East Indies, which state that "every citizen is required to wear clothing according to their ethnic origins" (p. 94). Meanwhile, Kees is more aware that times have changed and that such regulations can no longer be upheld (p. 95). By allowing native people to ride bicycles, the Dutch are actually "trying to soften their hearts and paint a positive image" (p. 98). Their debate remains unresolved, and Kees complains to his wife about Jan's idealism, saying that "some people still live in the past and want to be treated like kings" (p. 99).

The debate between the two Dutch individuals is not something extraordinary. The pro and contra arguments in the early 20th century regarding the appropriateness or permissibility of native people wearing European clothing were not only circulating among the Dutch, but also among educated youth in Java, as seen in the debates in *Bintang Hindia* [24]. These discussions were usually limited to elite circles who were fascinated by modernity and aspired for equality with European nations. Some arguments put forth linked the issue of clothing with mentality and identity, revolving around questions such as: Why does a colonial sartorial hierarchy exist? Does wearing European dress make someone Western in spirit? What vital role does clothing play in the emancipation movement in Java? In Java in the early 20th century, the elite circles were not only concerned about issues of mentality and identity regarding clothing, but also language. Similar to contemporary urban youth in Indonesia who speak English, a group of young Javanese individuals around a century ago were described by Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana [25] as a group that "woke up and slept with the Dutch language; they had no knowledge and no interest in their own language." This group consisted of *ambtenar* or civil servants and private individuals who, due to their social interactions, occupations, and business ventures, acquired Western intelligence and used the Dutch language on a daily basis to the extent that it was no longer a "foreign language in its truest sense." Alisjahbana commented that, nevertheless, the Dutch language would always remain an alien language that they would never truly understand, especially in terms of marking themselves as Dutch.

However, by understanding that debates about "becoming European through clothing and language" generally arose among the educated elite, it is intriguing to observe how DAKA positioned itself in relation to this issue. It is interesting to note that the person wearing European clothing (pants and shoes) in DAKA is a *bujang* or household assistant. Dullah is portrayed as a passive native who is not given a dialogue to express his ideas and choices in clothing. Being traditional, uneducated Javanese servant who is submissive and obedient, but wears European clothing, is a rare figure in postcolonial literature in Indonesia. This is because the consciousness of wearing European clothing is often associated with challenging ideas or an assertive mentality that is sharpened in the educated younger generation in Java or the aforementioned *kaum muda* who learn that colonial subjecthood was a shared experience [26]. The turn of the twentieth century marked a significant era of social and cultural change in colonial Indonesia, as educated young Javanese collaborated with progres-

sive European authorities to challenge the enduring Dutch rule and strive for the implementation of the Ethical Policy. Nevertheless, their efforts were opposed by conservative European civil servants and the Javanese *priyayi*, who argued for maintaining the existing system. This opposition was not just an ideological struggle for hegemony, but was also reflected in material culture and outward appearance. In this short story, the prominence of Dullah's obedient attitude seems to contradict the challenging ideas or assertive mentality held by the educated young generation in the early 20th century.

3 Conclusion

In this short story, Iksaka Banu imagines that small and everyday events related to clothing and technology actually contribute to the transformation and formation of perceptions about colonial identity. The motif of Iksaka Banu's short story, which is the exploration of rational actions and sharp reactions of its fictional characters who are stranded in a specific situation and ultimately culminates in a comment on major events in the Dutch East Indies [27], still appears in this short story. But, unlike his other short stories that put its characters in precarious and dangerous situations, this short story feels more relaxed because it is more focused on gossip, chatter, and commentary from two Dutch administrators, not only directed at natives who wear Western clothing and riding a bicycle, but also on the social transformation in the Dutch East Indies during the Ethical Policy era. The native who becomes the subject of their gossip here is a servant or household assistant who is submissive and obedient, and who wears European clothing not because he is educated and progressive, but because his adoption of technology has made him appear so.

Why does DAKA take a different perspective compared to other postcolonial literary works in Indonesia that often focus on educated, progressive characters who are conflicted about their identity? In this short story, DAKA also addresses the confusion surrounding colonial identity, but from a different angle. The catalyst is not the education for natives that the Ethical Policy hoped would solve issues of labour or colonial governance, but rather the adoption of technology by the natives, which became a quick solution for efficiency in work. Adopting technology is not something new in the Dutch East Indies, but in this short story, the bicycle brings direct consequences to the outward appearance of a native, and that is where the problem lies. Although the Native Servant can work more efficiently for the European Master, he remains a subject of discussion among the Europeans, who have conflicting attitudes because he challenges the racial divide that the Dutch had constructed for almost a century. The reactions and dual attitudes of the Dutch characters are at the core of the story. By representing this, Iksaka Banu shows that history is not always black and white; it is nuanced. While past canonical works like *Student Hidjo* or *Salah Asuhan* depict native characters grappling with their colonial identities, this short story demonstrates that, in the face of modernity and changing times, Europeans are also equally confused when it comes to discussing colonial identities. Consequently, this study's unique perspective provides a fresh vantage point on the complexities of colonial

identity within Indonesian literature, bridging the gap between conventional portrayals and unveiling a multifaceted understanding of Indonesian history.

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