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WATES, SOLO OR WHERE? COLONIAL VIEWS ON JAVANESE CULTURAL CENTRES, 1811-1843

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membahas pendirian *Instituut voor de Javaansche Taal* (Lembaga untuk bahasa Jawa, 1832-1843) di kota Soerakarta atau dikenal sebagai Solo, yang mencakup latar belakang pendirian, pandangan orang-orang Belanda abad ke-19 terhadap kebudayaan Jawa, serta terpilihnya Soerakarta sebagai tempat belajar kebudayaan Jawa. Menggunakan pendekatan sejarah, penelitian ini menggali sumber-sumber pemerintah kolonial dalam koleksi *Algemeene Secretarie*. Lembaga ini didirikan oleh pemerintah kolonial agar pemuda Belanda dapat mempelajari kebudayaan Jawa demi kekuasaan jangka panjang kolonial. Alasan kemurnian kebudayaan Jawa, politik kolonial, dan pendidikan ilmiah menjadi alasan dipilihnya Soerakarta sebagai tempat belajar bahasa dan kebudayaan Jawa. Perubahan pandangan mengenai alasan ini kemudian menyebabkan pusat studi kebudayaan Jawa dipindah ke Belanda.

Kata Kunci: Instituut voor de Javaansche Taal, Algemeene Secretarie*, Soerakarta, studi bahasa Jawa, kebudayaan Jawa*

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the founding of the Instituut voor de Javaansche Taal *(Institute for the Javanese Language, 1832-1843) in the city of Soerakarta, also known as Solo. It covers the background of its establishment, how 19th-century Dutch people viewed the Javanese culture, and why Soerakarta was chosen as a play to study Javanese culture. Using a historical approach, this article explores colonial government sources found in the* Algemeene Secretarie *collection. The colonial government created the institute to help young Dutch people learn about Javanese culture as a way to support long-term colonial rule. Soerakarta was chosen as a place to study Javanese language and culture because of its purity of Javanese culture, colonial politics, and scientific education. Later, a change in perspective regarding this reason led the center of Javanese cultural studies to be moved to the Netherlands.*

Keywords: Instituut voor de Javaansche Taal*,* Algemeene Secretarie*, Soerakarta, Javanese language studies, Javanese culture*

INTRODUCTION

After the dissolution of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Dutch East India Compagny, VOC) there was a shared agreement among colonial senior administrators that their subordinates should learn Javanese. The new system of rule, as imagined by colonial administrators, would increase the contact between officials and Javanese nobles (*Inlandsche Zaken*, inventory no. 61). Improved understandings of Javanese culture and language mastery was needed to ensure successful communication. Mastering Javanese thinking and feelings through their language would bring international prestige, local political stability, and long-term domination and exploitation (*Resolutie*, 27 February 2832, no. 9). Raffles' History of Java (1817) and the Java War (1825-1830) increased the shared urgency to study Javanese culture.

Subsequently, governor-general J. van den Bosch agreed with missionary J.F.C. Gericke in 1831 to establish an institute for studying Javanese culture through theoretical and practical courses in Soerakarta, also known then as Solo. The *Instituut voor de Javaansche Taal* (Institute for Javanese language, 1832-1843) was intensively debated among colonial administrators, as it aimed to create future leaders able to manage Javanese hearts and minds. It was eventually deemed a failure, resulting among others in Javanese studies being relocated to the Netherlands. One of the main questions that Gericke and influential colonial administrators struggled with was where to study Javanese culture. This paper aims to analyse why the topic of location was deemed highly important, and in particular why was Soerakarta eventually agreed upon? What kind of considerations and arguments were circulated?

Kenji's 1990 article has analysed how Javanology studies and networks, mainly the *Instituut voor de Javaansche Taal* in Solo during the nineteenth century, influenced the subsequent local literary resurgence, but does not discuss why the city was chosen for studying Javanese culture (*Reading Southeast Asia,* 1:79-80). Kraemer's 1932 article stated that Soerakarta was chosen because of the court traditions and customs (*Djawa,* 12[4]:272). Regarding Javanology studies being moved to the Netherlands, studies on colonial education and administrators have commonly agreed this was because the influential J.C. Baud originally wanted the institute established there (Fasseur, 1993:75; *Historische nota,* 1900:v). Thus, while some studies have argued why Javanology moved to the Netherlands, there has been little analysis about why Soerakarta was chosen for studying Javanese, which led to its impactful "literary renaissance" in the nineteenth century (Pigeaud, 1967:170). As of 2025, the city Surakarta remains well-known for its cultural production and heritage, the history of which has not been fully explored yet. Understanding why the city was chosen in 1832 as the location for learning Javanese will help to better understand the city's cultural history.

Besides these secondary literature works, it is worth noting that Soerakarta was again acknowledged as a Javanese cultural centre in 1919, when the *Java Instituut* (Java Institute) was established which published the prestigious *Djawa* journal, and later in 1926, when the *Algemeene Middelbare School* (General Secondary School, AMS) A-1 for Eastern Literature was established. Colonial Javanese language education was only re-established in 1926, after the *Instituut voor de Javaansche Taal* was abolished in (Swellengrebel, 1974:55). Heri Priyatmoko has argued that the AMS A-1 was established in Soerakarta because of its Javanese cultural heritage, external support by the city's elite, infrastructure like libraries, transport accessibility, and its image as the "city of poets" (2025:52-55). Especially the last reason refers back to the Javanology studies' influence after the *Instituut voor de Javaansche Taal* on literature production, making it interesting to view how colonial administrators' perceptions of Soerakarta have developed over time.

METHOD

This paper uses the historical method comprising five steps, namely (1) determining the topic, (2) collecting sources, (3) source criticism, (4) interpretation, and (5) writing (Herlina, 2020:31-83). The majority of the sources reside at the Indonesian national archives in Jakarta, which are compared to and added on with different sources. The main sources used belong to the collection *Algemeene Secretarie* (General Secretariat) of the colonial government at the *Arsip Negara Republik Indonesia* (Indonesian National Archives, ANRI). Items of this collection dating between 1816-1850 have little been explored due to difficulties in finding and accessing them. This is reflected in major studies after 1945 regarding Javanese studies and colonial education, which have been largely unable to incorporate these sources (Van den Doel, 1994; Fasseur, 1993; Kenji, 1990). The collection's sources are important to answering the research question, as they contain letters, debates, and commentaries on the decisions made by the colonial government. Only the final decisions were sent to the Netherlands, making this collection highly valuable for tracing debates that took place in the colony itself.

DISCUSSION

Early Javanese Studies, 1811-1827

The first organized plan for having European youths study Javanese language and culture was made by governor-general Janssen in 1811. The so-called *élève syteem* (student system) assigned children to be placed at indigenous palaces to learn through mimicry and observation (Teeuw, *Forum der Letteren,* 14:166-167). The youth were to interact with young nobles at Javanese courts and learn from them about indigenous politics and hierarchies (Kraemer, *Djawa,* 12[4]:263). Later, they would be able to interact properly and with full understanding with Javanese nobles.

However, due to the English occupation between 1811-1816, this plan was never executed. Studies of the Javanese language were nonetheless still pushed for by Raffles through his meddling in the *Bataviaasch Genootschap* and his well-known *History of Java* (Groot, 2009:171-174). New plans for young administrators to learn Javanese were made after the Dutch regained control over the archipelago. First, a military school was established on 8 September 1818 in Semarang with six special seats for learning Javanese and Malay. However, this program did not work out as the Javanese teacher passed away, while he would teach the basics only in reading and writing Javanese (Inlandsche Zaken, inventory no. 61).

The failure led to the re-establishment of the *élève systeem* on 25 March 1819. Students, ranging from young children to adult administrators, were placed at the local government offices with nearby ruling palaces. Subsequently students for Javanese were placed at the residency of Soerakarta or Jogjakarta, while those studying Malay were moved to the residency of Malakka (*Inlandsche Zaken*, inventory no. 61). The idea was that the students would master Malay or Javanese culture through guidance by superiors, using documents of local archives, local interactions, and daily observations. There was no organized teaching or learning method and the expensive program led to mixed results. In reality, the students received little guidance and help in studying or were given unrelated tasks by superiors (*Resolutie*, 27 February 1832, no. 9). The program was abolished in 1826 as part of cutting back on colonial expenses.

Meanwhile, there were plans in the Netherlands to establish administrator education around 1825-1926 (Van den Doel, 1994:53; Fasseur, 1993:43-44). Leiden University was deemed fit for including a special program where prospective administrators could learn Javanese and Malay among

others. There, students could learn other academic courses too, while Leiden already had other courses in "oriental" languages, and there were important collections of manuscripts and objects related to the archipelago (Fasseur, in Otterspeer [ed.], 1989:188). Since it was designed as a scientific study, students would not need to practice much with native speakers, which they also could do after being sent to the Dutch East Indies. However, the expensive Java War and the establishment of a military academy in Breda meant the plans were shelved (Fasseur, 1993:52).

At the same time preparations were made by missionary organizations to study Javanese and translate the Bible for evangelism purposes. G. Bruckner was sent in 1814 by the *Nederlands Zendelinggenootschap* (Dutch Missionary Society, NZG) as the first missionary in this framework. Bruckner visited Soerakarta and Jogjakarta in 1815 to survey Javanese culture and language, but lived in Semarang to learn Javanese there through readings and conversations (Swellengrebel, 1974:39-40). The NZG had assigned Bruckner to this location because Semarang was a centre of Christian activities.

Another missionary, J.F.C. Gericke of the *Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap* (Dutch Bible Society, NBG) arrived in 1827 in Batavia to study Javanese scientifically, as Bruckner's translation was deemed faulty. Gericke similarly travelled across Java to survey the language and culture. He moved soon to Soerakarta, as then governor-general L. du Bus de Gisignies advised him to do, most likely because of the government translator C.F. Winter who lived there (Swellengrebel, 1974:50). Subsequently the governor-general ordered Winter to teach Gericke Javanese, which he did for five years (Besluit, 8 February 1837, number 2). Winter was already known as an expert in Javanese and had been one of the reviewers of Bruckner's Bible translation (Swellengrebel, 1974:46-47). The NBG however had recommended Gericke to learn Javanese in Central-Java, as they argued this area was where the language was spoken in its purest version (Fasseur, 1993:57). At the time, the region of Central-Java was made up of the larger Semarang, Pekalongan, Banjoemas, and Kedoe areas, thus excluding the *Vorstenlanden* area of Soerakarta and Jogjakarta.

In short, these early views did not point dominantly towards the *Vorstenlanden* as the best place to study Javanese. Soerakarta and Jogjakarta were mostly viewed important because of their courts, where students could learn about social hierarchies and etiquette through observation. Understanding Javanese politics was important for future administrators who had to rule Java. For those only aiming to master the language, like at the military schools or for missionary work, learning Javanese could be done anywhere in Central-Java. Semarang was more of a logical choice, as it was an administrative centre with Javanese inhabitants located in Central-Java. Other places, like Soerakarta, were mostly interesting because of Javanese language expert Winter or the politically influential nobility.

Location and Environment in Institutionalizing Javanese Language Studies

Gericke was also tasked to establish an organized way of learning Javanese for others (Plomp, in Van der Molen and Arps [eds], 2000:92). Gericke imagined an institute based on English colleges to study Javanese language, which he proposed in 1828 to the colonial government. The NBG was unable to fund such an institute and would need external support. The initial proposal was rejected as it was deemed incomplete, while the ideal of administrators mastering Javanese was supported (*Resolutie*, 27 February 1832, no. 9). Gericke continued to seek support among prominent colonial administrators like J.I. van Sevenhoven, who had helped administrative reorganizations of Palembang and Jogjakarta after their respective uprisings (Houben, 1994:17-21).

Gericke rejected Van Sevenhoven's idea to establish the institute in Soerakarta, which was inspired by the previous *élève systeem* located in the Vorstenlanden area. To Van Sevenhoven, it would make sense to continue studies in the same location, but Gericke opposed this for three reasons. First, the Javanese in Soerakarta were deemed contaminated because of their "long history of interactions with Europeans". This had resulted in most inhabitants there losing their "original character" (*oorspronkelijk karakter*) and "true Javanese habits" (*echte Javaansche manieren*). Second, the Javanese in Soerakarta used "faulty Malay" (*gebrekkig Maleis*) when interacting with Europeans. They were very reluctant to speak Javanese with Europeans trying to learn the language. Third, interactions with local Europeans would be dangerous as it could compromise the student's "morality" and would be harmful for their studies (*Resolutie*, 27 February 1832, no. 9).

Evidently, Gericke held negative views of the Europeans in Soerakarta, where he had been living and serving the Christian community since 1827. He preferred to isolate his students in what he viewed was an authentic, isolated Javanese setting, where the practiced culture and spoken language was still pure. The Wates area matched Gericke's criteria for the institute's location, which furthermore had fertile ground, a healthy and aesthetically pleasing environment, plus Javanese locals who did not speak Malay. Gericke hoped that his students could also learn about agriculture and cultivation of products like rice, sugar, coffee, and pepper. Gericke argued that knowledge of this would be of high importance for upcoming administrators, since land exploitation was becoming increasingly important in the years leading up to the *cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system). Gericke had already received permission to use a portion of the land by Dezentjé of Ampel, who was renting the land at the time (*Resolutie*, 27 February 1832, no. 9).

Another proposed location was somewhere in the Netherlands. General secretary I. Bousquet argued in 1831 that scientific studies could be done anywhere and that it was more important to pay attention to the prospective students (*Resolutie*, 27 February 1832, no. 9). The aim was that Dutch youth could study Javanese and administrative duties. Bousquet argued that few would want to make the long, uncertain journey overseas, even if tuition and daily expenses were paid for. Bousquet furthermore argued from experience that organizing education in the archipelago was very expensive. Locating the institute in the Netherlands would thus ensure that Dutch students born in Europe would attend, while the overall expenses would be lower.

In the end, Gericke proposed Soerakarta as the definite place for studying Javanese. He argued that Wates was unfit as the institute's location for three reasons (*Resolutie*, 30 March 1832, no. 27). First, Wates lacked the buildings needed for the institute, which would be expensive to build, while Soerakarta had proper buildings that could be rented for a cheap price. This argument seems odd, as Gericke's plan for building houses had already been approved. There was thus no need to seek cheaper options. Second, Gericke argued that there were no hospitals in Wates. Sick students would need to go to another place to seek treatment. Third, Gericke argued few indigenous linguists from Soerakarta would be willing to move to Wates. This is another odd argument, as Gericke viewed even the smartest Javanese as unable to teach their language, since they lacked the grammatical, theoretical understandings of linguistic studies (*Besluit*, 18 May 1834, no. 2). Javanese poets and writers from Soerakarta were well-known at the time by the Dutch, like Yasadipura II, but their knowledge was understood not scientific. Consequently, they were never seriously considered to be appointed as teachers at the institute. Old manuscripts at the courts were also not a consideration regarding the institute's location, as Gericke had purchased the extensive library of deceased Javanese expert A.D. Cornets de Groot (*Resolutie*, 26 May 1832, no. 1).

Moreover, Gericke revisited some of his previous arguments against Soerakarta. He argued that the anxiety of negative moral influences by the Europeans in Soerakarta could be avoided by continuous surveillance and additional tasks after formal learning hours. Furthermore, Gericke argued that since Soerakarta was a main city, it would be easier for students to learn other skills needed to become ideal administrators. The students could still learn about agriculture and village life through study trips around the countryside. Regarding the lost "original character" of Javanese culture in Soerakarta, Gericke argued that even though much was lost, there were still enough "old *adats* and true court traditions" left to justify Soerakarta as place fit for learning Javanese traditions and social hierarchies. Kraemer has argued that Soerakarta was chosen because of the old court traditions, but Gericke's own explanation shows a very different picture (*Djawa,* 12[4], 1932:272). In fact, it appears that the direct support of H. MacGillavry, the resident of Soerakarta, was the most important reason. The resident's support would provide stability and protection to the institute, ensuring its longevity and continued help in managing the institute. This support convinced Gericke to opt for Soerakarta, which was cemented with the appointment of the resident as the permanent curator of the institute and Soerakarta as the definite location (*Resolutie*, 30 March 1832, no. 27).

MacGillavry furthermore suggested that the Javanese printing press could be moved to Soerakarta, as he predicted that most documents would be printed there in the future. The institute was envisioned to play an important role in improving the Javanese printing press and consuming the printed output. However, Merkus and other Raad van Indië members argued that there was no need for this expensive move (*Resolutie*, 26 May 1832, no. 1). Eventually the institute was opened in October 1832 as an experiment, which was cemented as special administrator education late 1834.

After 1832, the previous *élève systeem* which was located in both Jogjakarta and Soerakarta continued to influence some administrators like Van Sevenhoven to establish the institute in Soerakarta specifically. It was by then already clear that Gericke would lead the institute, as the only available European scientist knowledgeable of Javanese. Thus, Gericke had a significant influence on where the institute would be established. Gericke himself had to choose between places he was familiar with after having lived in Soerakarta for five years, which included Wates in the south.

Degrading Opinions of Soerakarta, 1834-1843

From 1834 onwards, Gericke and the institute were increasingly criticized for underperforming and being unable to deliver fluent Javanese administrators (*Resolutie*, 18 December 1834, no. 1). Gericke himself responded to some of his critics by stating that they did not understand Javanese studies, further also arguing that the Javanese language in Soerakarta was pure, unlike the inferior, "village" dialects of Pasoeroean, Kediri, Tjirebon, and Banjoemas (*Resolutie*, 30 November 1835, no. 5). Gericke eventually left the institute in 1836, after which the resident of Soerakarta managed most affairs while lessons were cared for by C.F. Winter and alumnus J.A. Wilkens (*Besluit*, 21 November 1836, no. 26).

Nonetheless, after disappointing exams in 1834, some argued that the location was the problem. Governor-general J.C. Baud stated he would ascertain whether the institute could be moved to Madioen as he disliked Soerakarta (*Besluit*, 28 May 1834, no. 1). Baud had visited Madioen and a series of other towns before visiting the institute in 1834, which apparently had made a positive impression. Baud's criticism regarding location mostly related to Soerakarta's social environment, as he had complained about the nightly adventures of womanizing and drinking youths and the lack of language

practice (*Resolutie*, 18 December 1834, no. 1). It seems that Baud's criticism had already been negotiated through increased practical learning and accepting only adults with proper morals instead of corruptible children. The literature and other cultural traditions of Soerakarta apparently made a neglectable impression on Baud, as he never mentioned them nor argued them as benefits in Soerakarta.

The then resident of Soerakarta, J.F.T. Maijor, proposed that the institute should be moved to Buitenzorg in 1837 (*Geheim Besluit*, 27 November 1839, no. La A4). Since the department of rural incomes and cultivation was located there, the students could continuously study the *cultuurstelsel* there while being supervised directly by the director of rural incomes and cultivation (*Landelijke Inkomsten en Kultures*). The latter however argued against this, stating that all the benefits of learning Javanese in a Javanese setting would be lost (*Besluit*, 17 October 1837, no. 14). Soerakarta was where the inhabitants spoke Javanese, where students could easily learn the daily lives and history of the Javanese at its centre. The nobility in Soerakarta was also born there, different from places like Buitenzorg with Javanese speaking nobles originated from other areas. Thus, while this reasoning was not used by Gericke to push for Soerakarta as a location, it was perceived by others as a centre of Javanese culture and nobility.

A few years later in 1839 the location of Soerakarta was again questioned. The general secretary A.D. Cornets de Groot argued it would be better to move the institute to Buitenzorg, as it was where the indigenous affairs department was located (*Geheim Besluit*, 27 November 1839, no. La A4). He argued that the true scientific and abstract study of languages was possible anywhere. Furthermore, practical applications were easy at the indigenous affairs department because there were plenty of official documents while students would be able to visit Javanese areas to practice speaking. Cornets de Groot argued that it was a misconception that students in Soerakarta were able to practice the language often, to the contrary, all court princes spoke Malay with them and there was no contact with other Javanese people there.

The director of rural incomes and cultivation agreed to this, but governor-general De Eerens was against the idea (*Geheim Besluit*, 27 November 1839, no. La A4). While he agreed that studying languages scientifically was possible anywhere, De Eerens preferred the Netherlands over Buitenzorg. This was mostly because of his view that the Dutch East Indies were only territories for exploitation and not settler colonies needing education. De Eerens' arguments resembled Bousquet in 1831, as he concluded that too few Dutch youth had made the journey to the archipelago to study Javanese. It would be easier, and cheaper to enrol Dutch students for Javanese studies in the Netherlands.

The minister of colonial affairs in the Netherlands, previous governor-general Baud, agreed with De Eerens and subsequently worked establish Javanese studies in the Netherlands. When the programme, to be located in Delft, was finalized, the order was given to abolish the institute in Soerakarta in February 1843 (*Besluit*, 11 January 1843, no. 34). Delft was chosen because other practical courses related to the *cultuurstelsel* were being taught there, which were to be combined with Javanese studies. This plan was feasible, as Taco Roorda was able to teach Javanese and the expenses were initially paid for through the colonial budget. Baud appeared mostly concerned with the frequent use of Malay by minor administrators (*Besluit*, 17 December 1842, no. 13). Prospective administrators could learn Javanese in this isolated, nationalist Dutch setting without becoming used to speak Malay with Javanese people. Furthermore, Baud argued that it was only possible to provide true scientific education in the Netherlands.

CONCLUSION

The various arguments made about why Javanese should be learned at certain locations can be divided in three main sets of arguments, namely regarding understandings of 'pure' Javanese cultural knowledge, colonial politics, and scientific studies. Javanese cultural knowledge was initially deemed most pure in Central-Java, which only over time changed to Soerakarta after the *Instituut voor de Javaansche taal.* Other locations were preferred initially, as they were centres of colonial politics and Javanese culture like Semarang, or isolated, authentic settings away from the immoral Europeans and Malay-speaking Javanese of Soerakarta, who had lost some of their Javanese traditions according to Gericke. Scientific studies, being abstract and theoretical, could be done anywhere. Soerakarta was a place for studying Javanese language mostly because of C.F. Winter who lived there.

Political reasons, like studying court politics and hierarchies, were initially important for colonial administrators. However, with the increased emphasis on scientific language studies, this appeared no longer the case. Gericke deemed his own private collection and scientific knowledge enough to be able to teach Javanese himself to anyone. Rather, the political protection of the resident of Soerakarta was the most important factor in convincing Gericke to establish the institute there instead of in Wates. In turn, Gericke's opinion was the deciding factor in locating the institute in Soerakarta, which had been shaped by his personal experiences, understandings of Javanese culture, and scientific language education. As the only available European scientist familiar with Javanese, his voice was highly influential.

Perceptions of the role of socio-cultural environments and scientific education changed over time, eventually leading to the institute being moved to the Netherlands. Gericke had initially used such reasoning to promote Wates over Soerakarta, while later proponents of scientific administrator education in the Netherlands used similar arguments. The socio-cultural environment of not just Soerakarta, but also the whole archipelago made inquiry-driven scientific education impossible. This was different from initial opinions that scientific education was possible anywhere. Rather, isolated settings in the Netherlands where scientific education was possible was preferred during the 1840s over continuing Javanology in the archipelago.

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