



# Geographies of Difference

Dutch Physical Anthropology in the Colonies and the Netherlands,  
ca. 1900-1940

FENNEKE SYSLING

105

This article analyses how physical anthropologists created scientific circuits between the Netherlands and their colonies in the East Indies. It shows that national and imperial anthropology were not two separate spheres and that the movement of anthropologists and their objects was important both for the making of anthropology as a scientific discipline and for making anthropological ideas. Trying to define the physical features of people in Dutch fishing villages and in East Indies inland regions, anthropologists formed geographies of imaginary difference. Anthropological data from the Indies however was valued more highly than that from the Netherlands, which means that distance continued to matter. New Imperial Historians would therefore do better to sharpen their perception of these uneven geographies.

## Introduction

Dutch fishermen from the island of Marken and Papuan mountain dwellers might seem to have little in common, but not so in the eyes of early twentieth century Dutch physical anthropologists.<sup>1</sup> Many of these anthropologists – who were interested in physical characteristics of human populations – first practiced their profession in the Netherlands Indies but were eager to continue their fieldwork once they had returned to their native country. In both places they studied people they expected to be more aboriginal than others, hoping their bodies would give clues about past migrations and the racial make-up of the region. The ‘natives’ of Marken and those of central New Guinea were both seen as ‘older stratum’ of the population and described in similar terms.

This article analyses how physical anthropologists created scientific circuits between the Netherlands Indies and the Netherlands by their movement, that of objects and instruments and by their ideas. Looking, as this special issue and the New Imperial History does, at the connections and interaction between the Netherlands and that of its colonies, it draws attention to the real and imaginary geographies of anthropology but also at some of its uneven patterns.<sup>2</sup> After the conceptual framework this article sets out by introducing the protagonists, a group of anthropologists who travelled from islands like Borneo to Dutch villages like Urk, starting their careers in the Indies and bringing back their expertise to bear on the Dutch nation. The following sections of this article describe their assumptions and approaches to both ends of the imperial space and analyses how they made and recycled differences in the Indies and the Netherlands.

Physical anthropology developed in many different places in Europe and had roots in the medical profession and the taxonomic drive to classify the world outside Europe. Though the Netherlands was an important centre of early modern anatomy and anthropology, it was a latecomer on the European scene with respect to modern anthropology, involving research on large collections of human remains and on living populations. The goal of anthropologists was to map the races of the world and to find the right markers to define the differences between them and each anthropologist tried to provide building blocks of information to add to knowledge about mankind and its past, its migrations and evolution. Scholars of anthropology have shown how this tied in neatly with state-making processes, creating boundaries and assigning certain people (races) to certain regions. Thanks to these studies, by now it is also well established that physical anthropology contributed to racist and hierarchical thinking both in Europe and its colonies. Although race has been a remarkably flexible concept that attached itself to all sorts of prejudices and was made in all sorts of sciences, the discipline of

1 I would like to thank Barbara Henkes, Bernhard Schär, Robert-Jan Wille, the guest editors, the editors and the reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2 D. Lambert and A. Lester, 'Geographies of Colonial Philanthropy', *Progress in Human Geography* 28:3 (2004) 320-341.

physical anthropology and its attempts to quantify racial differences helped the spread of the idea that race was central to people's identity.<sup>3</sup>

The colonies provided the anthropologists with a promising starting point for anthropological research and anthropologists were happy to claim that a national task was waiting for them there. They were guided to their field sites by their preconceived ideas about differences and hoped that these were measureable with their anthropological instruments. The Indies however, and the Netherlands too, only provided fuel to the fire of the 'accumulated contradiction, inconsistency, and confusion' from which physical anthropology suffered.<sup>4</sup> Looking closely at the practices of doing fieldwork in the Indies shows how anthropologists were often puzzled by the diversity they encountered and that they were unable to quantify. They realised that most populations were made up of many influences but still hoped they could find characteristics and people that were remnants of an undefined, but supposedly more uniform, past. As the last section shows, anthropologists came back as successful experts from the Indies but their research in the Netherlands never had such an impact. This indicates an unevenness in the imperial network with respect to scientific prestige.

Dutch anthropologists and their ideas moved in Dutch imperial space but to a lesser extent in European networks too. A Dutch physical anthropologist in the early twentieth century would probably have studied medicine in Amsterdam, practiced physical anthropology as one of several scientific interests and visited meetings of the (often dormant) Netherlands Anthropological Society, founded in 1898.<sup>5</sup> Anthropologists believed in positivist methods, frowned on the descriptive methods of their predecessors and hoped that measurements, combined with photography, would lead

3 G.W. Stocking, *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York 1982); N. Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (London 1982); G.W. Stocking (ed.), *Bones, Bodies, Behavior: Essays on Biological Anthropology* (Madison 1988); G.W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York 1991); S.J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York 1981); A. Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago 2001); H. Glenn Penny and M. Bunzl, *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire* (Ann Arbor 2003); N. Dias, *La mesure des sens: Les anthropologues et le corps humain au 19ème siècle* (Paris 2005); H. Kuklick (ed.), *A New History of*

*Anthropology* (Oxford 2008); C. Blanckaert, *De la race à l'évolution: Paul Broca et l'anthropologie française (1850-1900)* (Paris 2009).

4 W. Anderson, 'Racial Hybridity, Physical Anthropology, and Human Biology in the Colonial Laboratories of the United States', *Current Anthropology* 53, suppl. 5 (2012) 95-107, 96.

5 Doctors with an interest in physical anthropology had found a first place for meetings and discussion in the Committee for Ethnology of the Dutch Society for the Advancement of Medicine (since 1865). In 1922, the Netherlands National Bureau for Anthropology was established and an anthropological committee of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences was started by Lodewijk Bolk in 1925.

to more objective knowledge. In some cases anthropologists took physical anthropology courses in Berlin or Zürich, where the influential German Professors Felix von Luschan and Rudolph Martin were based, and visited conferences or museums in other European cities: but Dutch anthropology was shaped above all by its empire in the east. A few experts on Dutch anthropology like Johan Sasse and Lodewijk Bolk never ventured beyond Dutch shores, but many other anthropologists travelled to the Indies and back, using and making imperial connections as they went.

It is on this Dutch imperial space that this article focuses attention. While George Stocking put forward a difference between nation-building and empire-building anthropologies in 1982, with Germany and Britain as the prime examples, historians have since given more attention to the interaction between the national and the imperial context.<sup>6</sup> In the field of anthropology, volumes by Bunzl and Glenn Penny and a book by Andrew Zimmerman for example, argued that German anthropology had an important imperial component and Zimmerman argued that anthropologists ‘made their notions of race, which they had developed in the studies of non-Europeans, relevant also to European identity’.<sup>7</sup> Susan Bayly connected the history of French and French colonial (cultural) anthropology by tracing how French anthropologists saw both themselves and the Cham of Indochina as a ‘racially composite’ but superior ‘stock’. For the French this implied that they could see themselves as the legitimate successors to the Cham rulers of the past and at the same time give themselves the moral right to suppress the Annamite rivals of the Cham whose ‘race energies’ were thought to be tyrannical.<sup>8</sup> The role of French physical anthropology in its Empire on the other hand was downplayed more recently by Emanuelle Sibeud who argued that in the French colonies, ‘anthropologists were at a loss to offer convincing support to colonial and metropolitan authorities’.<sup>9</sup>

Dutch anthropology was less important academically than the three or four ‘central’ traditions of French, British, American and German

6 G.W. Stocking, ‘Afterword: A View from Center’, *Ethnos* 47 (1982) 173-186; F. Cooper and A.L. Stoler, ‘Between Metropole and Periphery: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, in: idem (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Los Angeles, London 1997) 1-56. See for New Imperial History: J. Thompson, ‘Modern Britain and the New Imperial History’, *History Compass* 5:2 (2007) 455-462 and A. Lester, ‘Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire’, *History Compass* 4 (2006) 124-141.

7 Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 135.

8 S. Bayly, ‘French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina’, *Modern Asian Studies* 34:3 (2000) 581-622.

9 E. Sibeud, ‘A Useless Colonial Science?: Practicing Anthropology in the French Colonial Empire, circa 1880–1960’, *Current Anthropology* 53, suppl. 5 (2012) 83-94. See for a different argument P. Lorcin, ‘Imperialism, Colonial Identity, and Race in Algeria, 1830-1870: The Role of the French Medical Corps’, *Isis* 90 (1999) 653-679.

anthropology, but histories outside these main traditions can shed light on the varieties of disciplinary practices all over the world.<sup>10</sup> Until now however, the historiography of Dutch anthropology has focussed mostly on Dutch ethnology and ethnography. Works on physical anthropology were written decades ago by insiders using uncritical narrative tones.<sup>11</sup> In the field of cultural studies Dutch historians Rob van Ginkel and Barbara Henkes have already pointed to connections between (cultural) anthropology overseas and Dutch folklore, emphasising how in the eyes of ethnologists colonial subjects could give clues to the prehistoric past of the Dutch. Only when National Socialist thought entered the folklore profession in the Netherlands was this connection brought to a halt.<sup>12</sup>

The New Imperial Historians that are central to this special issue have called for more work on the links between empires and motherlands instead of dwelling on the dichotomies between the two. By focussing on the work of physical anthropologists both in the Dutch colonies and in its northern

- 10 See for example A. Boskovic (ed.), *Other People's Anthropologies: Ethnographic Practice on the Margins* (New York 2008); L. Ribeiro and A. Escobar (eds.), *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power* (Oxford 2006); B. de L'Estoile, F. Neiburg and L. Sigaud (eds.), *Empires, Nations, and Natives: Anthropology and State-Making* (Durham 2005) and the special issue on 'The Biological Anthropology of Living Human Populations: World Histories, National Styles, and International Networks' of *Current Anthropology* 53, suppl. 5 (2012).
- 11 For ethnology and ethnography see H.F. Vermeulen and J. Kommers (eds.), *Tales from Academia: History of Anthropology in the Netherlands* (Nijmegen 2002); H.F. Vermeulen, 'Anthropology in the Netherlands: Past, Present and Future', in: A. Boskovic (ed.), *Other People's Anthropologies: Ethnographic Practice on the Margins* (New York 2008) 44-69; D.C. Mehos, 'Colonial Commerce and Anthropological Knowledge: Dutch Ethnographic Museums in the European Context', in: H. Kuklick, *A New History of Anthropology* (Oxford 2008) 173-190; P. van der Velde, *A Lifelong Passion: P.J. Veth (1814-1895) and the Dutch East Indies* (Leiden 2006) and M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Tussen oriëntalisme en wetenschap. Het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde in historisch verband, 1851-2001* (Leiden 2001). For physical anthropology see A.J. van Bork-Feltkamp, *Anthropological Research in the Netherlands: Historical Survey* (Amsterdam 1938); T.S. Constandse-Westermann, 'Antropobiologie en samenleving: vroeger en nu', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 136 (1980) 1-20; T.S. Constandse-Westermann, *History of Physical Anthropology in the Netherlands* (Newcastle 1983) and M.J. Roede, 'A History of Physical Anthropology in the Netherlands', in: H. Vermeulen and J. Kommers (eds.), *Tales from Academia: History of Anthropology in the Netherlands* (Saarbrücken 2002) part 2, 1033-1094. For recent exceptions see J.J. de Wolf, *Eigenheid en samenwerking. 100 Jaar antropologisch verenigingsleven in Nederland* (Leiden 1998) and D. van Duuren et al., *Physical Anthropology reconsidered: Human Remains at the Tropenmuseum* (Amsterdam 2007).
- 12 R. van Ginkel and B. Henkes, 'On Peasants and "Primitive Peoples": Moments of Rapprochement and Distance between Folklore Studies and Anthropology in the Netherlands', *Ethnos* 68:1 (2003) 112-134.

European territory this article points to the way they wove connections between both places.<sup>13</sup> Though at least one Dutch anthropologist, Paul Julien, worked in Africa, the Indies and the Netherlands were the two poles between which anthropologists moved. Their expectations drove them to both regions, searching for the purest parts in the composite whole of national *and* colonial geographies. This article works out the Dutch anthropologists' case to bring forward the making of scientific circuits. It contends however, that historians must be attentive to unevenness in the imperial space and aware of instances in which proximity and distance do matter.

### Imperial networks

In 1897 Dutch anthropologist Johan Sasse asserted in a lecture that the Netherlands was 'still entirely white'. Playing with the double meaning of 'white' in this sentence, he meant that the Netherlands was still a white (blank) space on the anthropological map with very little research done into the racial characteristics of the Dutch.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand the blanks on the Indies anthropological map were fast being filled in by colonial anthropologists. From the second half of the nineteenth century physical anthropologists started to emphasise the importance of fieldwork and measurements on living people. Whereas earlier scholars like the French anthropologists A. de Quatrefages and E. Hamy had based their work on skulls that trickled in from overseas, a new generation of explorers, among whom the Dutch anthropologist Herman ten Kate and German anthropologists A. B. Meyer and Bernhard Hagen included measurements on living people as a central tenet of their anthropological research in the Dutch colonies in the late nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

13 Articles that follow a similar approach are H. Marland, 'Midwives, Missions and Reform: Colonizing Dutch Childbirth Services at Home and Abroad ca. 1900', in: M.P. Sutphen and B. Andrews (eds.), *Medicine and Colonial Identity* (London 2003) 61-78 and A. Schrauwers, 'The "Benevolent" Colonies of Johannes van den Bosch: Continuities in the Administration of Poverty in the Netherlands and Indonesia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43 (2001) 298-328.

14 J. Sasse, 'Antropologies onderzoek van Oosterschelling', *Handelingen van het veertiende Nederlandsch natuur- en geneeskundig congres* (1913) 284-287, 284.

15 J.L.A. de Quatrefages and E.T.J. Hamy, *Crania Ethnica* (Paris 1882). Their book included descriptions of skulls from the Dutch East Indies. H.F.C. ten Kate, 'Verslag van een reis in de Timoergroep en Polynesië', *Tijdschrift van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap* 11 (1894) 195-246, 333-90, 541-636 and 659-700; B. Hagen, *Anthropologische Studien aus Insulinde* (Amsterdam 1890); A.B. Meyer and R. Parkinson, *Album of Papua-types: II North New Guinea, Bismarck Archipelago, German Salomon Islands* (Dresden 1900).

Around the turn of the twentieth century the Dutch anatomist Lodewijk Bolk developed an interest in anthropology and inspired a new generation of students to work on Dutch and Dutch Indies topics.<sup>16</sup> The first half of the twentieth century may well be considered the heyday of Dutch anthropology, partly thanks to the colonies that provided opportunities for more research in this period. The Dutch age of exploration took off only at the turn of the twentieth century when the government tightened its grip on what were known as the outer islands, which had often been only nominally under Dutch control.<sup>17</sup> As part of the intensification of Dutch rule, ethnologists and anthropologists joined other explorers to investigate lesser known regions. Medical officers in the Dutch army often doubled as physical anthropologists and took the opportunity to gather data wherever they were stationed.

J.H.F. Kohlbrugge, a contemporary of Bolk, became interested in anthropology when he worked in the Indies as a doctor. As he wrote, 'life among a lesser known indigenous population made me want to know more about ethnology and racial physique. That's how I became an anthropologist'.<sup>18</sup> During his leave in the Netherlands in 1901 he got in touch with the Netherlands Anthropological Society that gave him the opportunity to do anthropometric research on the island of Marken and in Volendam, opposite Marken on the mainland.<sup>19</sup> When Kohlbrugge was back in the Indies and ran a hospital in Sidoarjo on eastern Java, he was visited there by a young doctor, J.W.R. Koch. Koch was a member of the 1904-1945 South-West New Guinea expedition who wrote his dissertation on his observations on the Papuans there and visited Kohlbrugge to do anthropological research in Kohlbrugge's hospital and the local prison.<sup>20</sup> Back in the Netherlands, Koch became the assistant of the anthropologist Sasse when he did his research on the island of Urk in 1910, no doubt because of his experience with measurements in the Indies.

16 L. de Rooy, *Lodewijk Bolk en de bloei van de Nederlandse anatomie, 1860-1940* (PhD thesis University of Amsterdam 2009) 211.

17 It seems no coincidence that A.E.H. Lubbers, the first Dutch medical officer, took measurements in Aceh that was being 'pacified' violently in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. A.E.H. Lubbers, 'Eene bijdrage tot de anthropologie der Atjehers', *Geneeskundig tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 30 (1890) 634-644.

18 From Kohlbrugge's unpublished autobiography as quoted by H. Coumou, *Sociale pedagogiek in Nederland, 1900-1950* (Leiden 1998) 100.

19 J.H.F. Kohlbrugge, 'Zur Anthropometrie Holländischer Fischer', *Handelingen van de Nederlandsche Antropologische Vereeniging* 2 (1904) 33-44.

20 J.W.R. Koch, *Bijdrage tot de anthropologie der bewoners van Zuidwest Nieuw-Guinea, benevens uitkomsten van lichaamsafmetingen verricht bij Javanen, Sumatranen, Baliërs en Sasaks* (Leiden 1908) 38-39 and J.W.R. Koch, 'Beitrag zur Kenntnis der Anthropologie der Bewohner von Niederländisch Neu-Guinea (Südliche Küste)', *Petrus Camper* 4 (1906) 202-214.



Eye colour chart.

Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, Coll.nr. 140b-2.

Both J.P. Kleiweg de Zwaan, a student of Bolk and later Professor in the anthropology and medicine of the indigenous people of the Dutch colonies at the University of Amsterdam, and his student H.J.T. Bijlmer started their career with anthropological research in the Indies. Kleiweg de Zwaan went on two expeditions to Sumatra while Bijlmer worked in the east of the archipelago as a medical doctor and organised several expeditions into the New Guinean hinterlands. Back in the Netherlands, Kleiweg became an eager participant in Dutch societies that reflected his interest in Dutch folklore, prehistory and anthropology. He also founded the Netherlands National Anthropological Bureau that incorporated subjects as varied as colonial anthropology and Dutch folklore.<sup>21</sup> Bijlmer spent more time in the Indies than his Professor Kleiweg de Zwaan but he too continued to do research once he was back in the Netherlands. In the 1930s, he hoped that blood groups research would provide a new marker for racial classifications and investigated this both on the south coast of New Guinea and in the Netherlands.<sup>22</sup>

In the late 1930s, a large scientific project was begun to study the Zuiderzee villages before their culture and racial characteristics would be lost due to the changes coming with the reclamation of the region from the sea. Both Kleiweg de Zwaan and Bijlmer were supporters and advisors to the society that conducted the research. Bijlmer gave the Zuiderzee anthropologist in Urk and Middenmeer the use of his anthropometer and camera and Kleiweg de Zwaan loaned his eye and hair colour charts to the anthropologists.<sup>23</sup> The researchers also used paper strips impregnated with PTC for taste research 'like Kleiweg de Zwaan took with him for his tests in the Indies'.<sup>24</sup>

Like the movements of these anthropologists, the places of objects also indicated connections. Kleiweg de Zwaan was head of the Department of physical anthropology at the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam that became

21 Van Ginkel and Henkes, 'On Peasants and "Primitive Peoples"', 116.

22 H.J.T. Bijlmer, 'Contribution to the Anthropology of the Netherlands: Including the Further Elaboration of the Blood Group Research in Holland, commenced in 1926 by the late M.A. van Herwerden', *Koninklijke Nederlandsche Academie van Wetenschappen: Proceedings of the Section of Sciences* 53:1 (1940) 113-138. The female biologist W. Keers also started her career with anthropological research in the Indies and continued as an assistant to the blood group research of Dr Marianne van Herwerden.

23 *Jaarverslag Stichting voor het Bevolkingsonderzoek in de drooggelegde Zuiderzeepolders* [Annual report of the Society for population research in the reclaimed Zuiderzee polders] (1938) 8; Nieuw Land Archief, Lelystad, Archive Stichting voor het Bevolkingsonderzoek in de drooggelegde Zuiderzeepolders (SBDZ), Box 'Projecten 1938-1939', folder '1938 I'. Letter H.Tj. Piebenga to L. Kaiser, 3 April 1940 and Kaiser to Piebenga, 4 November 1939.

24 Nieuw Land Archief, Archive SBDZ, Box 'Projecten 1938-1939', folder '1938 I'. Letter Kaiser to Piebenga, 27 October 1938. In the thirties, scientists discovered that the ability to taste phenylthiocarbamide (PTC) is a genetic trait.

the centre of physical anthropological studies of the Indies in the 1920s and 1930s. For its craniological research, the institute collected skeletal material from the Indies sent by colleagues in the Indies. To a lesser extent however, it also collected remains from the Netherlands, including Johan Sasse's collection of preserved brains (after his death in 1916).<sup>25</sup> In the museum itself skulls from New Guinea were placed next to prehistoric European skulls and in 1932 the anthropological department displayed a skeleton of a Javanese man and woman next to a European 'for comparison'.<sup>26</sup> This combination was due to the fact that skulls and bones were the material basis for both anthropology and archaeology and because of the idea that prehistoric Europeans and the 'older layers' of the colonial population fell into the same category.

### Imaginary geographies of anthropology

The most essential information about the history of mankind, anthropologists believed, came from groups of people untouched by the modern world, so they preferred to do their research far from the centres of imperial activity, in regions with a reputation of isolation. Ideas about the best field sites were shaped by earlier ideas on the locals' supposed primitiveness, culture, ethnicity, language et cetera, and anthropologists hoped to quantify and confirm these characteristics with their methods. In the Indies, this meant that anthropologists travelled to the outer islands and into their mountainous hinterlands. Populations on the coast were thought to be part of the maritime network in the Indies and thus more likely to be of mixed descent.<sup>27</sup> Within the colonial state the highlands represented fixity and authenticity while change arrived by sea.<sup>28</sup>

Anthropologists who went to the Indies usually did so with the expectations that they would find people that could be classified more easily than those in Europe where the modern age had changed physical features as much as ways of life. Anthropologist Arie de Froe, who did anthropological research in the Zuiderzee polders, wrote that in the Indies 'such important material was present' that a national task awaited the anthropologists. The Netherlands on the other hand, according to him, were scientifically slightly

25 Van Duuren et al., *Physical Anthropology reconsidered*, 74.

26 Koninklijke Vereeniging "Koloniaal Instituut" Amsterdam. *Twee en twintigste jaarsverslag 1932* [Annual report of the Colonial Institute, 1932] 32.

27 To some extent these ideas coincided with indigenous distinctions between downriver and upriver populations.

28 See R. Roque, 'Mountains and Black Races: Anthropology's Heterotopias in Colonial East Timor', *Journal of Pacific History* 47 (2012) 263-282.

less interesting because ‘all the different races have mixed so much that one cannot speak of a pure race of Friesland, Zeeland or Groningen’.<sup>29</sup>

That most Dutch, including the anthropologists themselves, were of mixed racial descent was generally seen not as a problem but an asset. Bolk for example, stated that the Dutch had incorporated the best of both the Germanic and Alpine race:

Besides men of policy of mainly Nordic type, such as our statesmen De Witt, Fagel, Oldebarneveldt, the Alpine race gave our history men of action, such as our admirals De Ruyter, Maarten Tromp and Piet Hein.<sup>30</sup>

Historical studies about Dutch cultural nationalism trace the inclusion of regional diversity as part of Dutch national identity to around 1800.<sup>31</sup> Diversity in the colonial context was one of the first things that was always mentioned in descriptions of the archipelago and has remained a source of fascination for westerners. Dividing, as anthropologists did, colonial subjects into different ‘layers’ who had immigrated at different times however could also imply that the Dutch were just the latest newcomers, with the task of protecting those authentic Indonesians. As Robert Cribb suggested, the Dutch employed the discourse of cultural diversity to suggest that not the nationalists but ‘only the Dutch could rule impartially and fairly’.<sup>32</sup>

29 ‘Wieringermeer, studieobject voor vele takken van wetenschap’, *Wieringermeerbode* 13 July 1939.

30 L. Bolk, ‘De samenstelling en herkomst der Nederlandsche bevolking’, *Nederlandsch Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* 68 (1924) 672-677, 677.

31 E. Koolhaas-Grosfeld, *De ontdekking van de Nederlander. In boeken en prenten rond 1800* (Zutphen 2010). Physical anthropologists were not the only ones trying to make sense of the variety of people living in the Netherlands. See also B. Henkes, *Uit liefde voor het volk. Volkskundigen op zoek naar de Nederlandse identiteit, 1918-1948* (Amsterdam 2005); M. Beyen, ‘A Tribal Trinity: The Rise and Fall of the Franks, the Frisians and the Saxons in the Historical Consciousness of the Netherlands since 1850’, *European History Quarterly* 30:4 (2000) 493-532. As we will see however, most anthropologists had

a tendency to think in dichotomies and reverted to a division of the Dutch in Germanic and Alpine influences. Bolk for example, was inclined to suggest (after his survey of Dutch school children) that there were two major groups in the Netherlands, a Germanic and an Alpine type, and he was not afraid to link the latter to the Catholic south of the country. L. Bolk, ‘De bevolking van Nederland in hare anthropologische samenstelling’, in: J.H. Gallée, *Het boerenhuis in Nederland en zijn bewoners* (Utrecht 1908) 124-189. Bolk explicitly excluded Jewish people from his study, and Sasse studied Jews separately too.

32 See for a similar argument R. Cribb, ‘Orang Pendek and Papuans in Colonial Indonesia’, in: S.B. Barthet (ed.), *A Sea for Encounters: Essays towards a Postcolonial Commonwealth* (Amsterdam, New York 2009) 223-242.

In their research anthropologists often excluded groups that they presumed beforehand not to be part of the original population. In the Indies, anthropologists had little interest at all in measuring Chinese or Arab immigrants or people living in Batavia.<sup>33</sup> Kleiweg de Zwaan decided to leave all Muslims on the island of Nias out of his study because they had had too much contact with the wider world. Herman ten Kate called the harbour town of Waingapu on the island of Sumba the racial ‘garbage bin of Sumba’ before travelling further inland.<sup>34</sup> Among isolated people anthropologists believed they could find the purest descendents of the ‘original’, primordial races of the region, called proto-Malay, Indonesian, Negrito or pygmy, whose characteristics they saw diluted in modern populations.

With research in the Indies as an incentive and because they thought that the Netherlands deserved to be known as well as the Indies, anthropologists went looking for places of racial purity in the Netherlands too. These remnants from earlier ages were increasingly located in the fishing villages of the Zuiderzee, villages along the North Sea coast and the islands in the North where life was thought to be lived at a different pace and modernisation had made only partial inroads.<sup>35</sup> Unlike in the Indies, the sea meant stagnation here. Kohlbrugge decided to go to Marken, because of its reputation of having a population that had developed from just a few families, with little influence from outside.<sup>36</sup>

33 Note that physical anthropologists were not interested in studying the most important legal racial categorisations in the colonial state: Europeans, natives, and foreign Orientals. For more on these racial classifications see: C. Fasseur, ‘Cornerstone and Stumbling Block: Racial Classification and the Late Colonial State in Indonesia’, in: R. Cribb (ed.), *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies, 1880-1942* (Leiden 1994) 31-56; F. Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900-1942* (Amsterdam 1995) and A.L. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley 2002).

34 Ten Kate quoted S. Roos in saying so: S. Roos, ‘Bijdrage tot de kennis van taal, land en volkenkunde van het eiland Sumba’, *Verhandelingen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* 36 (1872) 1-125, 1 and H. ten Kate, ‘Verslag van een reis in de

Timoergroep en Polynesië’, *Tijdschrift van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap* 11 (1894) 541-636, 545.

35 H. Roodenburg, ‘Making an Island in Time: Dutch Folklore Studies, Painting, Tourism, and Craniometry around 1900’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 39:2-3 (2002) 173-199; B. de Pater, ‘Conflicting Images of the Zuider Zee around 1900: Nation-building and the Struggle against Water’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011) 82-94. See also M. Eickhoff, B. Henkes and F. van Vree (eds.), *Volkseigen. Ras, cultuur en wetenschap in Nederland, 1900-1950* (Zutphen 2000). Blumenbach had once classified a skull from Urk as Neanderthal but this was dismissed by several anthropologists in the early twentieth century. However it was still hoped that Urk and other villages could give clues to the Dutch past.

36 J.H.F. Kohlbrugge, ‘Zur Anthropometrie Holländischer Fischer’, *Handelingen van de Nederlandsche Antropologische Vereeniging* 2 (1904) 33-44, 33.

By looking at the travelling anthropologists, their texts and instruments and their ideas about the Netherlands and colonies, the real and imaginary geographies of Dutch anthropology become apparent. Anthropologists tied the Netherlands and the Indies together by their movements and the way they conceptualised both regions, distinguishing between purer populations and more modern and mixed ones, and thus determining the scope of their anthropological research. That things were always a bit more difficult on the ground they only found out when they started their fieldwork and in these instances differences between anthropology at home and in distant places emerge alongside the connections.

### Experiences in the Indies

Physical anthropology was always a discipline of unfulfilled expectations. Generation after generation of anthropologists arrived in the Indies or the Dutch countryside only to be surprised by its diversity. Both in the Indies and in the Netherlands, anthropologists found that physical characteristics were not as easy to quantify as they had assumed. This section shows how the ideas of physical anthropologists changed through travelling to specific places in the Indies, while the next section deals with the same process in the Netherlands.

Physical anthropologists who did their measurements in the Indies were only able to do so because of the structures of the expanding Dutch colonial state. Physical anthropologist Kleiweg de Zwaan was able to go to Nias in the 1900s because it had just been 'pacified' and when A.W. Nieuwenhuis explored central Borneo the Dutch colonial government was very eager to use the contacts he made to open it up. Anthropologists also needed to invest considerable time negotiating, persuading and (to an unknown extent) obliging people to subject themselves to anthropological measurements. This contact between anthropologist and subject also influenced ideas about indigenous people, with people who resisted being called 'stubborn' while those eager to cooperate were more likely to be defined as 'peaceful'.

During his journey to Nias, Kleiweg de Zwaan measured 1,298 men (but not one woman) on the island of Nias off the coast of Sumatra. The anthropologist Herman ten Kate, a generation older than Kleiweg and not very sensitive to colonial sensibilities, wrote in a review: 'Probably acting on the suggestion of some timorous and over circumspect Dutch Government official, for fear of creating trouble, Dr De Zwaan carefully avoided touching any woman'.<sup>37</sup> With the anthropologists backed by colonial rule, people had fewer opportunities to voice their dissent than in the Netherlands, as we can

37 H. ten Kate, 'Die Insel Nias bei Sumatra. Vol. II, Anthropologische Untersuchungen ueber die

Niasser' (Review), *American Anthropologist* 17 (1915) 164-166, 165.



▲  
Skulls of the department of physical anthropology on display in the Colonial Institute in 1923.  
Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, Coll.nr. 60054469.

conclude from the number of people Kleiweg de Zwaan measured on Nias compared to the small numbers measured in the Netherlands.

When Kohlbrugge lived in the Tengger region on eastern Java he hoped that the local Tenggerese could direct him to the whereabouts of the 'original' Indonesians. In an 1898 article, he asserted that the key to the original Indonesians was their heads: 'The Indonesian blood shows itself by the length of the head: the more it approaches the dolichocephalous [long-skulled] type, the purer the blood is Indonesian'.<sup>38</sup> He also expected the Indonesian blood to show itself through small stature. His measurements however, showed that the Tenggerese were in fact taller than the surrounding Javanese so they could not easily be classified as remnants of the original race.<sup>39</sup> His next hope was the Dayaks of Borneo (especially the Ulu Ajar Dayaks) who were quite small but he found that they included both broad-skulled and long-skulled people.<sup>40</sup> Kohlbrugge suggested that this was possibly because a long-skulled people mixed with a broad-skulled group, but left the question of originality for future researchers to decide.<sup>41</sup>

Kleiweg de Zwaan had travelled to Sumatra in 1907 and concluded that the Minangkabau village he studied there differed in 28 somatic characteristics from other groups who lived further inland. He suggested that perhaps the latter represented an autochthonous primeval element of Sumatra but did not rule out the option that the diet of the coastal people might have been advantageous or that mountain people in general, by some hidden rule, were taller than those living on the plains.<sup>42</sup> Years later he found that the Nias people were not a homogenous race. The majority of the people were short and stocky with a few slimmer and finer built types.<sup>43</sup> He refrained from giving his final opinion about the races of Nias and just published an avalanche of details, for which he was sharply criticised by the anthropologist Johan Sasse. According to Sasse, Kleiweg should have done better to just conclude that there were two separate races on Nias which, according to Sasse, was obvious

38 'Le sang indonésien se décèle donc par la longueur de la tête: plus celle-ci se rapproche du type dolichocephalous, plus pur est le sang indonésien'. J.H.F. Kohlbrugge, 'L'anthropologie des Tenggerois, Indonésiens-Montagnards de Java', *L'Anthropologie* 9 (1898) 1-25, 2.

39 J.H.F. Kohlbrugge, 'Longueur et poids du corps chez les habitants de Java', *L'Anthropologie* 12 (1901) 277-282.

40 Kohlbrugge worked out the measurements A.W. Nieuwenhuis had done during his exploration of Borneo: A.W. Nieuwenhuis, *Anthropometrische Untersuchungen bei den Dajak. Bearbeitet durch J.H.F. Kohlbrugge* (Haarlem 1903) 2.

41 *Ibid.*, 11-13.

42 *Ibid.*, 173-174.

43 J.P. Kleiweg de Zwaan, 'Bijdrage tot de anthropologie der Niassers', *Nederlandsch Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* 58 (1914) 475-482.

from the collected material.<sup>44</sup> During the rest of his career Kleiweg always preferred not to jump to conclusions: 'The intensive miscegenation makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for the anthropologist to trace the original elements [...] from the mixed product'.<sup>45</sup>

Bijlmer in New Guinea was also looking for differences between the inhabitants of highlands and the coast. He organised several explorations to the interior to find out whether he could locate the 'pygmy' people some earlier visitors had reported. After having encountered several groups of highland people, he found that the distinction between pygmies and coastal Papuans was not so easy to make and concluded initially that anthropologically the two showed more similarities than differences. However, once he returned to the Netherlands it turned out to be very difficult to get rid of the exotic rhetoric of pygmies and dwarfs versus the larger coastal folk. This dichotomy continued to be part of his text.<sup>46</sup>

The tables with the results of the measurements in the books of anthropologists show little of the daily experience of work in a foreign environment, resistance of people to being measured and instruments that did not work the way they should. Anthropologists often found that the methods of physical anthropology could hardly deal with the variety of people they encountered. They reacted to those challenges differently: they reverted to difficult 'scientific' language, they wrote humble statements of how their data would just add to the larger pool of data that would only lead to conclusions in the far future. They also continued to rely on their first impressions when describing a people and added ethnographical or medical data. But they did not give up on the discipline and returned to the Netherlands as experts ready to continue their academic career.

44 J. Sasse, 'Dr. J.P. Kleiweg de Zwaan. Die Insel Nias bei Sumatra. Band II: Anthropologische Untersuchungen über die Niasser' (review), *Tijdschrift Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap* 31 (1914) 654-660. Sasse's archive (Leiden special collections) also shows that he continued to work on the data that Kleiweg de Zwaan had collected in the Indies.

45 'Juist deze, vaak zoo intensieve kruising onderling maakt het voor den anthropoloog wel uiterst moeilijk, niet zelden geheel onmogelijk, de oorspronkelijke elementen,

waaruit het kruisingsprodukt is on[t]staan, in het mengproduct op te sporen'. J.P. Kleiweg de Zwaan, 'De anthropologische samenstelling der bevolking van Nederlandsch-Indië', *Nederlandsch Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* 68 (1924) 678-681, 678.

46 H.J.T. Bijlmer, *Anthropological Results of the Dutch Scientific Central New-Guinea Expedition a. 1920, followed by an Essay on the Anthropology of the Papuans* (Amsterdam 1922) and H.J.T. Bijlmer, 'De dwerg-papoea's van Nieuw-Guinee', *Tijdschrift Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap* (1934) 403-421.

## Experiences in the Dutch hinterlands

The more information came in about the anthropological characteristics of the colonised people the more Dutch anthropologists considered the lack of knowledge about the Dutch a problem. Kohlbrugge wrote in 1901 that it was a pity that his fellow countrymen doing measurements on the living 'did this so far only in the colonies, while no one thought of one's own Fatherland'<sup>47</sup>, and even in 1927, the self-taught anthropologist D.J.H. Nyëssen complained:

The Dutch Government is still blind to the great value of the population, the richest treasure of the realm. Far away in the Colonies, wild tribes are investigated but no attempt has yet been made to study the people of the mother country.<sup>48</sup>

As in the Indies, anthropologists were mostly strangers to the places they wanted to research. This meant that they needed local contacts and that they had to put an effort into persuading people to cooperate. This turned out to be not so easy. When Kohlbrugge, on leave from the Indies, went to Marken and Volendam to do anthropological measurements he met with quite a lot of local opposition. Because they were the easiest to approach he measured mostly school children:

I deplore that I have been able to measure so few Marken adults. They made all kinds of trouble, and a longer stay would have been necessary to overcome this. In three cases of the few women measured there I could not measure the head width because they could not be persuaded to take off the caps that have a cardboard cover on both sides.<sup>49</sup>

This was in sharp contrast with the Indies where, according to his own account, Kohlbrugge was a well-known and trusted figure.

47 'Meiner Landsleute, die das Menschenmessen üben, thaten dies bisher fast nur in den Kolonien, während Niemand an das eigene Vaterland dachte', Kohlbrugge, 'Zur Anthropometrie Holländischer Fischer', 33.

48 D.J.H. Nyëssen, *The Passing of the Frisians: Anthropology of Terpia* (The Hague 1927) 6.

49 'Ich bedaure nur dass ich so wenige erwachsene Marker habe messen können, die Leute machten allerlei Schwierigkeiten, und ein längerer Aufenthalt wäre nöthig gewesen um diesen zu überwinden. Bei den wenigen untersuchten Weibern konnte ich dreimal die Kopfbreite nicht messen weil sie sich nicht dazu bequemen wolten die an den Seiten mit Carton bekleideten Mützen abzunehmen', Kohlbrugge, 'Zur Anthropometrie Holländischer Fischer', 43.

I have never needed to overcome the well-known difficulties that oppose the research of travelling anthropologists because I have lived here for more than four years among a population of about 7,000 souls whom I have given my medical care. I have won their trust entirely and have been able to do many anthropological observations.<sup>50</sup>

**In the Netherlands Kohlbrugge had made a mistake in assuming that anthropological measurements would be accepted more easily.**

Sasse and Koch had experienced the same distrust on Urk. ‘Of course the people on Urk’, Sasse wrote,

did not understand anything of these ‘tricks’ [the measurements]. Less evident, stupid even, was that fact that they accused us of indecent actions, even though we were working in a classroom where we could be watched from three sides through glass doors. And one had even wanted to attack us, according to rumour, if my colleague Koch had not left by then and if I was not off the island for one day to attend a family party. This rather amusing affair was repressed by firm action by the sensible citizens, headed by the mayor.<sup>51</sup>

**In the Indies, resistance to the practice of anthropologists was of a comparable force but anthropologists were well aware of the fact that in the Netherlands this could much more easily lead to repercussions.**

This resistance took place despite the fact that in the Netherlands the anthropologist could explain more easily what kind of research he was doing. Writing about the anthropological survey of Germany, Andrew Zimmerman argued that through the experience of being measured people were taught to understand Germanness in racial terms.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, anthropologists doing

50 Kohlbrugge, ‘L’anthropologie des Tenggerois’, 8.

51 ‘Dat de mensen op Urk niet van “deze grappen” begrepen, spreekt van zelf. Niet zo van zelf sprekend was het, ja meer, nog al idioot – dat men ons, die in een schoollokaal werkten, waar van drie kanten ons doen en laten nagegaan kon worden door glazen deuren, dat men ons, zeg ik, van oneerbare handelingen meende te moeten betichten en dat er zelfs een ons te lijf had gewild, volgens het gerucht, als collega Koch toen niet vertrokken was en ik voor één dag het

eiland verlaten had voor een familiefeest. Dit niet onvermakelijke voorval werd bezworen door flink hiertegen op te treden, gesteund door de weldenkende burgerij, de Burgemeester aan ‘t hoofd [...]’. J. Sasse, ‘Voorlopige meedeling over ‘t antropologies onderzoek op de eilanden Urk en Terschelling’, *Bijblad der Nederlandsche Anthropologische Vereeniging* 1 (1913) 8-11, 9.

52 Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 135.

research in the Netherlands articulated the idea of race as a building block of identity. When Johan Sasse studied at the island of Terschelling in 1912 locals repeatedly asked him: 'So what am I?' 'Am I a racially pure Frisian or not?'<sup>53</sup> As Indonesians were less likely to be told or able to understand the reason for anthropological measurements, this is only partly true in the colonial situation. Even so in 1939 Kleiweg de Zwaan handed out certificates with their race on it to the Balinese who asked for these.<sup>54</sup>

Sasse found that there were two types of people on Terschelling, one more Alpine and one more Germanic.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, Kohlbrugge concluded that the Volendam inhabitants were more broad-skulled than the men from Marken but did not elaborate on that. He left it to his successors 'to express opinions about Franks and Frisians and their distribution'.<sup>56</sup> He did emphasise however, that besides all the blond men, he also found two 'brunette' men in Volendam. This proved his assumption that people in Volendam were mixed with the surrounding people more than those in Marken.<sup>57</sup>

Assumptions also led Hendrik Bijlmer to study the blood groups of the Dutch, only to conclude that no sense could be made of the blood group variations of the Netherlands. Similarly, Arie de Froe and his assistant anthropologists spent months in the reclaimed Zuiderzee polders where original islands were soon to lose their unique isolation, but the data of this research were never published.<sup>58</sup> Anthropologists trying to deal with diversity in the Netherlands came up against the same problems as in the Indies. Getting to know the people of a village also meant recognising differences and seeing variation instead of the uniformity they had expected. Coming back from the Indies hoping they could apply their skills to the Dutch in a similar way, they found that in the Netherlands local resistance impeded their research while their findings received less interest from the academic community. Anthropologists from the Indies could conceal their lack of findings more easily through their adventure stories and general knowledge about the region. As De Froe argued, they got away with it, because 'coming back they

53 J. Sasse, 'Zur Antropometrie der Bewohner der holländisch-friesischen Insel Terschelling', *Zeitschrift für Morphologie und Anthropologie* 18 (1914) 357-386, 382. 'Was bin ich nun?', 'Bin ich ein reinrassiger Frieser oder nicht?'

54 Family archive Kleiweg de Zwaan, notes mrs Kleiweg de Zwaan-Vellema.

55 *Ibid.* and J. Sasse, 'Antropologies onderzoek van Oosterschelling', *Handelingen van het veertiende Nederlandsch natuur- en geneeskundig congres* (1913) 284-287.

56 Kohlbrugge, 'Zur Anthropometrie Holländischer Fischer', 34.

57 *Ibid.*, 35.

58 In the 1960s a student was asked to look at De Froe's data again but he concluded that the measurements were all useless.



▲  
'The difference in hand length between the Germanic and the Alpine races shown by Mr. Wiegiersma and Mrs. Keyzer Meyer'. Terschelling, 1912.

Photograph Sasse Archive.

Special Collections, University Library, Leiden University.

could count on an attentive audience'.<sup>59</sup> Knowledge made in the Indies was more valuable because of its exotic context while results of measurements in the Netherlands were more likely to be forgotten.

## Conclusion

Following the central issue in New Imperial History, connections instead of dichotomies, this article followed the movements of physical anthropologists and their ideas between the Netherlands and the Netherlands Indies. As other historians of anthropology have pointed out, national and imperial anthropology were not two separate spheres and this is also true of Dutch physical anthropology. Networks between the Netherlands and the Netherlands Indies were shaped by travelling scientists, their objects and ideas and they tied together the ends of Dutch imperial space. These networks were important both for the making of anthropology as a scientific discipline and for the ideas of physical anthropologists. As we have seen in this article, generations of physical anthropologists found their intellectual orientation in the Netherlands and their disciplinary practice in the Indies. They went to the Indies as young medics and returned as experts. In the Netherlands, they applied their knowledge to the Dutch countryside, seeing both regions as comparable scientific laboratories.

In the Netherlands the fishing villages had a reputation of isolation; in the Indies it was the mountain people of the outer islands that exerted a pull on anthropologists. Together they formed geographies of imaginary difference and anthropologists hoped to see these differences confirmed in their metric data. The results were hardly ever to their satisfaction, either at home or in the colonies. In the Netherlands however, physical anthropology lost its lustre more quickly than in the Indies. I suggest that this is because information about regions in the Indies was considered more exotic and more valuable because it was new and could be less easily criticised than data from the villages of Urk and Marken that everyone in the scientific communities in the Netherlands knew quite well. It means that distance mattered here and could not be bridged by the connections in the anthropological network. New Imperial Historians would do better to sharpen their perception of these uneven geographies.

59 'Bij hun terugkeer konden ze rekenen op een aandachtig gehoor', A. de Froe, 'Korte beschouwing over de ontwikkeling van de moderne Anthropologie en haar plaats in het

werkprogramma der Stichting', *Jaarverslag Stichting voor het Bevolkingsonderzoek in de drooggelegde Zuiderzeepolders* (1939) 16-19, 16.

**Fenneke Sysling** (1981) is a historian specialising in the history of science and European colonialism. She was trained at the University of Amsterdam, the University of Oxford and the VU University Amsterdam. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden. In February 2013 she successfully defended her PhD thesis *The Archipelago of Difference: Physical Anthropology in the Netherlands Indies, ca. 1890-1960*. She has also published 'Een schandaal in drie bedrijven. D.J.H. Nyèssen en zijn onderzoek naar de rassen van Java, 1928-1930', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 125:1 (2012) 34-47. Email: [f.h.sysling@vu.nl](mailto:f.h.sysling@vu.nl).