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Why was the Dutch legacy so poor? Educational development in the Netherlands Indies, 1871-1942

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Abstract: The educational legacy of Dutch colonial rule in the Netherlands Indies has been widely regarded as disappointing. This paper probes further into the underlying causes of the poor Dutch legacy. It is argued that the spread of popular education was not only hampered by a lack of financial commitment by the colonial state, but also by notable inequalities in the allocation of funds for education and a major reluctance to support initiatives in investment in private education, which may be interpreted as a consequence of the Dutch metropolitan commitment to secular rule in an overwhelmingly Islamic society.

Keywords: colonial legacy, education, Indonesia.

JEL Codes: I25, N35, N45, O15.

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1. Introduction

In the wide literature of the 1990s on the ‘East Asian miracle’, Asian education systems have been singled out as a primary determinant of a particular Asian model of modern economic growth (World Bank 1993, Birdsall, Ross & Sabot 1997, Cummings 1995, Campos & Root 1996). Anne Booth has argued that this mainstream view suffers from gross overgeneralization (Booth 2003: 148-149; Booth 1999). Whereas in East Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea education clearly preceded rising demand for educated labour, there is much less evidence that growth leaned heavily on *ex ante* investment in education in the Southeast Asian ‘Tigers’.

This point is particularly relevant to Indonesia. Of all Asian colonies that gained independence in the early post-war era Indonesia inherited one of the poorest, if not *the* poorest colonial education system in Southeast Asia (Booth 2003: 159). In the literature the weak Dutch legacy in education has been discussed as a key aspect of a history of ‘missed opportunities’ (Booth 1998). Although there has been a rapid catch-up in access to primary and secondary schooling in Indonesia since independence, the quality of the Indonesian educational system is still extremely poor. In various rounds of PISA surveys, conducted between 2000 to 2012, Indonesian students scored at the bottom of international reading, science and mathematics scales (OECD 2013). This low international ranking may, at least partially, be attributed to the quantity-quality trade-off invoked by the rapid expansion of schooling since the early 1970s, when substantial oil revenues started to flow into the education system. Yet, for the deeper causes we have to step back into the colonial era.

That the educational legacy of Dutch colonial rule has been poor is not a new insight. This was already observed and commented upon by contemporaries (Brugmans 1938, Hartgerink 1942, Furnivall 1943). However, the question *why* Dutch education policies differed from those in neighbouring colonies is not that simple. A complete answer would require, amongst others, an analysis of both supply and demand factors, a closer inspection of religious issues and related conceptions of gender roles, a closer look at the role of Christian missionary schools and a review of political debates on the function and implementation of education programs in the mother country.

This contribution does not pretend to offer an all-embracing answer to the *why* question, but it seeks to exploit comparisons with other colonies in Asia and Africa to show that, firstly, the spread of popular education was not only hampered by a lack of financial commitment by the Dutch, but also by notable inequalities in the allocation of funds to

education and a reluctance to support private education investment initiatives, and secondly, that we should interpret such reluctance in the context of a metropolitan commitment to the principle of *laïcité* (laicism, also often denoted as *secularism*). The idea of *state neutrality* in religious affairs was scrupulously maintained in an overwhelmingly Islamic society.

2. Some stylized facts

In comparison to the development of formal education in other East and Southeast Asian countries the Indonesian experience can be sketched by a number of ‘stylized facts’. First, the expansion of education under Dutch colonial rule remained far below its maximum potential. If the colonial government would have accepted the budgetary consequences of the educational policies adopted by, for instance, the Americans in the Philippines or the Japanese in Taiwan and Korea, access to all levels of education would have opened up much faster. In his classic study on *Educational Progress in Southeast Asia*, Furnivall (1943) neatly sums up the varied performance before 1940 (Table 1). Together with French Indochina and British Burma, the Netherlands Indies recorded the lowest enrolment rates in primary education, not to mention the virtually negligible enrolment in post-primary education. A comparison with Thailand, the only country in the Southeast Asia that developed an educational system under an independent administration – which is not the same as saying that it was isolated from foreign influences - also endorses the poor Dutch legacy.

The ‘unrecognized schools’ in the second column of Table 1 refer to schools that were not officially recognized by the colonial authorities. In the Netherlands Indies the lion’s share of these schools consisted of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and mosque schools (*madrasah*), offering classes in religious philosophy and spiritual training (meditation), Koran recitation (in Arabic), martial arts, and a variety of manual skills (Steenbrink 1974). I will get back to the complicated relationship of the Dutch colonial government with the Islamic schools below.

Although the British are often regarded to have pursued more ‘benign’ educational policies than other colonial powers, I have elsewhere argued that this claim is difficult to maintain in view of the vast intra-imperial differences in educational development across British Africa (Frankema 2012). This argument can be extended to Asia as well. The major distinction in educational investment was not between the various European colonial powers, but rather between the European colonial powers on the one hand, and non-European colonial

powers on the other. Indeed, British investments were quite meagre compared to the Japanese and American involvement in education. The British hardly had a better record than the French or the Dutch, especially if we consider that access to primary education in British India - not included in Furnivall's study, but by far the largest British colony in the region - was more or less comparable to the Netherlands Indies up to 1940 (van Leeuwen 2007: 265-268).

Table 1: Gross enrolment rates of total population in Southeast Asia, 1936-1939

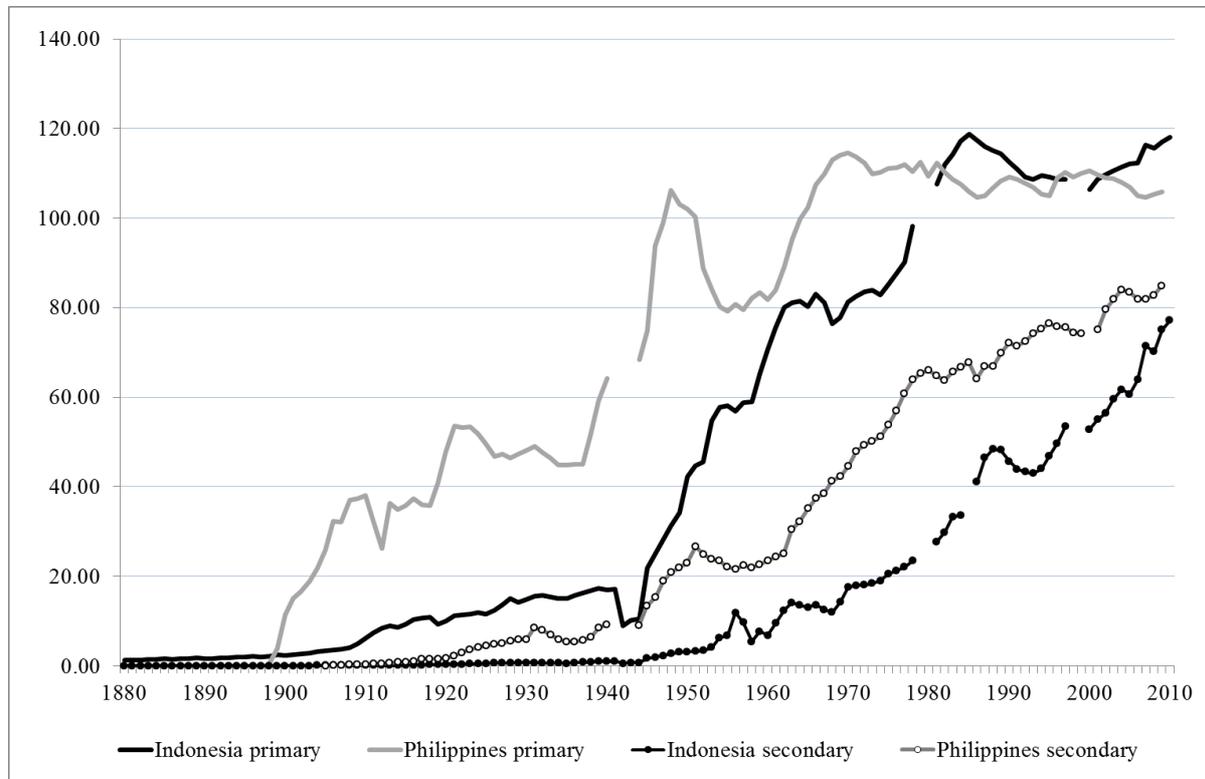
	Recognized primary schools	Recognized and unrecognized primary schools
Netherlands Indies	3.4	4
Malaya (Br.)	6	7.8
Burma (Br.)	3.9	5.5
Thailand	9.7	10.7
Indo-China (Fr.)	2.1	2.5
Taiwan (Jap.)	11.2	11.4
Philippines (US)	10.8	11.5

Source: Furnivall 1943: 111.

Note: Recognized schools are schools recognized by the colonial authorities, but not necessarily receiving state subsidies. The information provided by Furnivall on the unrecognized schools excluded from official statistical records is based on 'educated guesses'.

The comparison of primary and secondary school enrolment rates between Indonesia and the Philippines (Figure 1) reveals a second, important stylized fact. There was a clear break in the long-term development of school enrolment expansion after Indonesian independence, which did not occur in the Philippines. The looming prospect of independence after the defeat of Japan initiated a mere revolution in Indonesian educational access. Although the data constructed on the basis of official statistics may overstate the actual increase, there can be little doubt that this big push to school enrolment constituted a break with the colonial pattern. Secondary schooling expanded at exponential rates during the 1950s and, not much later, tertiary school enrolment rates started to take off as well. This change in the trend should not only be regarded as a rapid increase in supply, it also reflected the perceived economic value of basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, spurring *demand* for schooling. Changing prospects of social mobility emerged after the demise of the 'old' colonial elites, opening up lucrative vacancies in administration and business, while rapid public sector growth was adding a large number of well-paid jobs (Ricklefs 2008).

Figure 1: Gross primary and secondary school enrolment rates in Indonesia and the Philippines, 1880-2010



Source: Indonesia 1880-1969: van Leeuwen 2007: 264-266, 1970-2010: World Development Indicators 2012; the Philippines 1898-1970: Mitchell 2007, 1971-2009: World Development Indicators 2012.

Note: The figure excludes enrolment in unrecognized schools. School enrolment rates for the Philippines up to 1970 were computed by dividing total numbers enrolled from *Handbook of Philippine Statistics, 1903-1959* and Mitchell (2007), by a constructed an age-group share of 15-18 per cent of total population for the primary school-age (6-11 years) and 10-12 per cent for the secondary school-age (12-15 years). Total population figures from Maddison 2010.

A third stylized fact refers to a number of structural inequalities in the colonial education system. The gender gap in school enrolment was comparatively large. Around 1920 primary school enrolment rates of boys and girls in Japan had been close to parity, whereas in colonial Indonesia the ratio was at best 4 to 1 (van Leeuwen 2007: 264-265, 270-271). In the Philippines the gender gap was much smaller as well, with rates of 1.3 to 1 in primary schools (*Statistical Bulletin* 1926). Furthermore, there existed a peculiar type of regional inequality. Literacy rates were higher in the outer regions than in the central areas. In 1930 indigenous male and female literacy in the Outer Islands of colonial Indonesia stood at 13.4 and 4.0 per cent respectively against 9.7 and 1.4 per cent in Java. Interestingly, for the Chinese minority

rates were the opposite, with 33.2 and 7.7 per cent in the Outer Islands and 47.5 and 16.0 per cent in Java (Furnivall 1943: 76). These figures reveal the impact of the long-term presence of Christian missionary schools in the outer provinces. Apparently, the increased investment in mass education in the first decades of the twentieth century had been insufficient to brush away this missionary legacy.

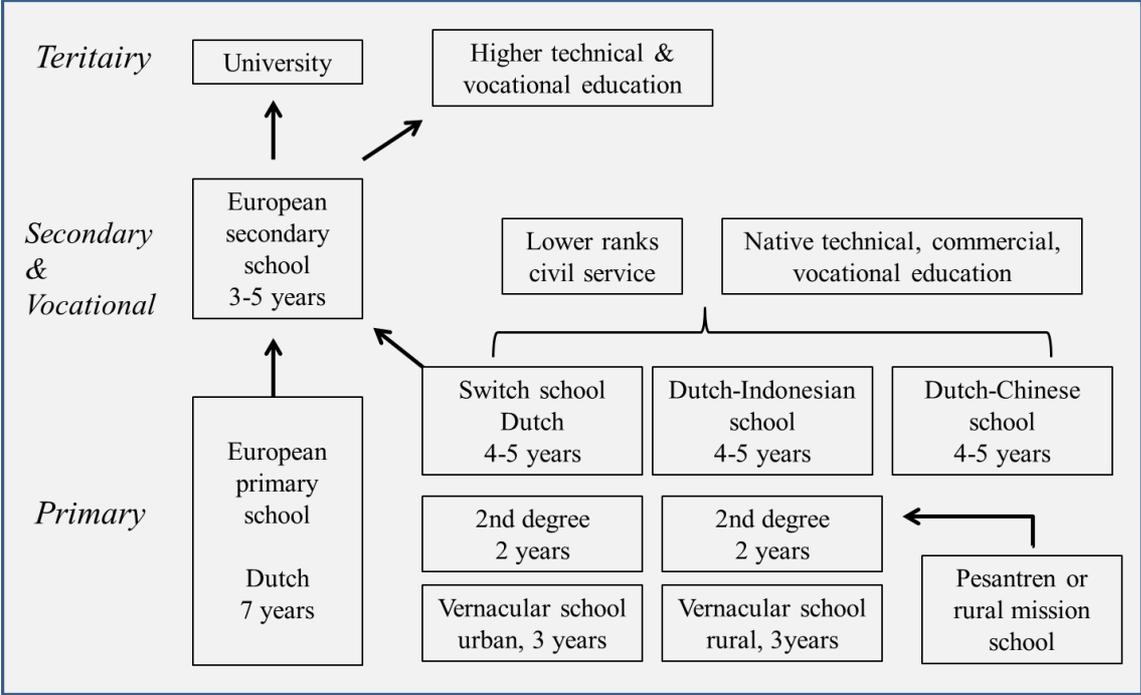
Finally, there existed considerable gaps in ethnic enrolment and literacy rates. Of course, most of the Dutch children and a large part of the Indo-European children were enrolled in European schools, where they were taught the standard Dutch primary school curriculum. But there was also a considerable gap between the Chinese and Indonesians. This gap shows up much clearer in literacy rates, than in the officially recorded school enrolment rates. This may point to an important role for home education among the Chinese, which would square with the fact that the Chinese were the first to exert pressure on the colonial authorities for support of the expansion of Chinese schools.

Such structural inequalities are important for the argument I wish to develop in the remainder of this article, as they reflect the outcome of a heated political debate on how to integrate popular indigenous education into the existing, more advanced, but also rather expensive system of European education which had been designed for the children of the Dutch, Chinese and indigenous elites. Until the late nineteenth century popular education (*volksonderwijs*) had been left almost entirely to the private market. One of the central issues was whether or not the indigenous Islamic schools and the Christian missionary schools had to be integrated into the system of public education. Should they be eligible to state funding or not? If yes, what demands would then be posed with respect to the curriculum and to which extent should the colonial state get involved in teacher training? All these questions emerged against the background of the fundamental question of how the Dutch state, and hence the colonial state, was to secure neutrality in religious affairs, that is pursuing the principle of laicism.

The end result of this political and ideological debate, which was mainly conducted in the metropolis rather than in the colony, was a highly differentiated system of education in which European schools were (p)reserved for the elites, while popular education was expanded via secular village schools (*desa* schools) operating a vernacular education program, serving as a cheap and basic alternative to Western education (Brugmans 1938: 302-317, Lelyveld 1996), while the existing Islamic and Christian missionary schools were largely excluded from the system of public education. Below I argue that the failure of the colonial

government to capitalize on private school initiatives was one of the reasons for the slow spread of mass education.

Figure 2: The educational system in the Netherlands Indies in the 1920s



Source: Frankema 2013: 159.

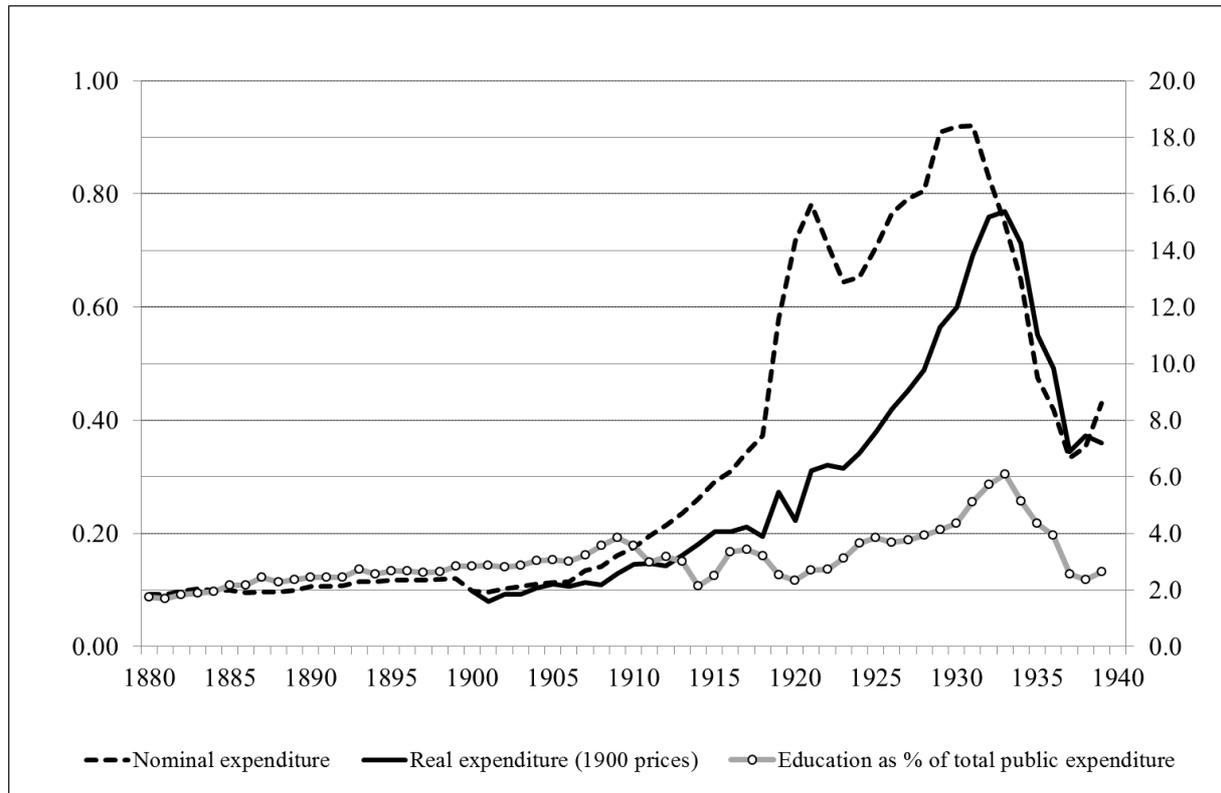
The state-funded Dutch-Chinese school (*Hollandsch-Chinesche School*; HCS) was established in 1908 to prepare children of the Chinese minority for a position at intermediary levels of business and public administration. The state-funded Dutch-Indonesian School (*Hollandsch-Inlandsche School*; HIS) was founded in 1914 in response to growing discontent regarding the limited opportunities for Indonesian children and the privileged position of the Chinese. As Figure 2 shows these new school types created the opportunity to advance into European secondary and tertiary education (van der Veur 1969). Yet, for the large majority of Indonesian children two or three years of education in a rural *desa* school was the maximum they could obtain before the 1940s, and the children who actually completed these three years of schooling still formed a ‘fortunate’ minority within their generation (Boone 1996).

3. Colonial investment in education

A brief survey of the development and distribution of educational expenses shows how Dutch colonial education policies worked out in practice. In 1864 the Dutch metropolitan government adopted the so-called *comptabiliteitswet*, a law stipulating that the annual government budget of the Netherlands Indies had to be ratified by the Dutch parliament. The tightening of metropolitan control on colonial fiscal affairs resulted, amongst others, in the establishment of a new department of education (*Department van onderwijs, eeredienst en nijverheid*) with a separate budget. In 1871 the Dutch parliament adopted a new education law that sought to uniform the highly scattered and diversified indigenous educational systems across the archipelago, and expand the number of teacher training schools under supervision of the colonial administration (Hartegerink 1942: 17-21). The budget for public schooling was raised in steps from ca. 300,000 guilders in 1864, to roughly 3 million by the early 1890s. These reforms resulted in a gradual expansion of public schools catering almost exclusively to the higher social classes.

Figure 3 shows the nominal and real per capita public expenditure on education on the left-hand axis. The right-hand axis shows the education expenses as a percentage share of total public expenditure in the period 1880-1940. There was a marked increase in investment on education after when the government started to push the expansion of *desa* schools. These outlays possible because of tax reforms implemented during the 1890 1900s and 1910s, resulting in an impressive increase in the overall colonial budget and a heavier tax burden on the indigenous population (Meijer Ranneft & Huender 1926, Butcher & Dick 1993). Nevertheless fact, funding allocated to education still hovered around 2-3 per cent in 1920, before rising to about 6 per cent during the 1920s. The 1920s represents the only decade in which the Ethical Policy, launched in 1901, was backed up by a genuine commitment to re-allocate public resources towards education. This commitment quickly gave way to austerity measures in the wake of the worldwide economic depression in the 1930s. The share of education in total expenditures dropped to the level of the 1880s, whereas real per capita expenditures fell by more than 50 per cent, from 0.77 Dutch guilders at 1900 prices in 1933 to 0.34 in 1937.

Figure 3: Per capita public expenditure on education (left, guilders) and expenditure on education as a percentage share of total public expenditure (right), 1880-1940



Sources: Nominal education expenditure from Van Leeuwen 2007 [original figures in *Jaarcijfers voor het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (Koloniën)* 1880–1922 and *Statistisch jaaroverzicht van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1923–1939]; total government expenditure: Creutzberg 1976. Real expenditure based on a retail price index from Van der Eng 2002.

From a global comparative perspective, a share of expenditure on education in the range of 3-6 per cent of the total budget was far from impressive. An allocation of that size was in fact common among British and French colonies in Africa (Frankema 2011, 2012). This may be compared to Japanese investment in colonial education in the first two decades of the twentieth century, where the share of educational expenditure went as high as 10-24 per cent of the budgets for Taiwan and Korea (Booth 2007: 72). The Dutch investment effort looks quite bleak.

Table 2 shows that expenditures on education in the Philippines after 1898 were much larger as well. Converting Dutch guilders and Philippine pesos into US dollars using current exchange rates, per capita expenses on education in the Philippines appear to have been five times higher in 1908 (\$0.06 versus \$0.30) and still, in 1929, about 3.5 times higher than in the

Netherlands Indies (\$0.37 versus \$1.31).¹ This difference cannot be explained by a lesser fiscal capacity in the Netherlands Indies. In both colonies per capita government revenue oscillated around \$2-3 in 1910, \$5-6 in the 1920s and \$4-5 in the 1930s (Booth 2007: 73).

Table 2: Colonial education expenditure in Indonesia and the Philippines in 1908 and 1929

	1908		1929	
	Indonesia	Philippines	Indonesia	Philippines
Education as % share of total expenditure	3.6%	17.5%	4.1%	19.7%
Education expenditure per capita	0.06	0.30	0.37	1.31
Education expenditure per student	8.3	4.5	13.5	14.4
Expenses per student, European primary	19.9		34.3	
Expenses per student, Dutch-Chinese primary	5.4		8.1	
Expenses per student, Indigenous primary			5.5	

Sources: Indonesia: 1908: *Jaarcijfers voor het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (Koloniën)*, 1929: *Statistisch Jaaroverzicht van Nederlandsch-Indië*. Enrolment and population data for the Philippines: *Handbook of Philippine Statistics, 1903-1959*. Expenditure data on the Philippines 1908 and 1929: Bureau of the Census and Statistics, *Statistical Bulletin of the Philippines 1*, 1918, and *Yearbook of Philippine Statistics*, 1946.

Interestingly, expenditure per student enrolled in 1908 was considerably higher in the Netherlands Indies. This difference reflects the evolution of the colonial education system in the Netherlands Indies in the late nineteenth century, which specifically targeted the children of the elite (Hartgerink 1942). Scarce funds were spent selectively, whereas in the Philippines the focus was on popular education right from the start of the American intervention. The push for popular education after 1907 did not result in a major shift in priorities. European schools kept receiving much more funding per student than indigenous village schools or Chinese schools. In other words, the expansion of mass education was financed by budgetary expansion rather than by a redistribution of public resources. Indeed, the large inequality in the distribution of education expenses remained in place throughout the colonial period, and in 1929 the funding gap between European primary schools and indigenous primary schools had even grown larger, in both absolute and relative terms, than it had been in 1908 (Table 2)! In 1929, one-half of the budget allocation for education was spent on European education, whereas these schools catered to only 10 per cent of total enrollment (Van Leeuwen 2007). It

¹ The peso/dollar exchange rate was fixed at 2:1 throughout the years 1908-1929, as was the guilder/rupiah rate at 1:1. The guilder/dollar rate of exchange remained stable at 2.5:1.

should be noted, though, that these government funds were increasingly absorbed by Indonesian (elite) children as they formed a growing majority in the European primary schools and started to outnumber Dutch children in the secondary schools during the 1920s (Van der Veur 1969: 14).

The bottom line, however, is that in comparison to the program of mass education in the Philippines, where a standard English-language curriculum of four years, followed by three years of intermediate level schooling, was the norm, the spread of popular education in the Netherlands Indies was hampered by an unequal allocation of public funds. In the Philippines parents were not only obliged to register their children at a local school, the central government and municipalities also took care of free school materials and made a considerable investment effort in running teacher training schools to balance demand and supply. In addition, there were very few American children draining the budget. Although the mandatory use of English at public schools has been much criticized, it did generate a uniform system of education with a certain quality standard (Furnivall 1943). The duality in the education system of the Netherlands Indies closely corresponded with the language of instruction. In a colonial system where knowledge of Dutch formed the key to social and economic mobility, the opportunities to climb the social ladder were tightly controlled via the education system.

4. Explaining the poor legacy

To understand *why* the Dutch left such a poor legacy it is useful to confront the account of changing priorities of colonial administration over the period 1870-1942 with some of the particularities of the educational system in the Netherlands as well as the Indies, especially with regard to the metropolitan debate on financing of confessional schools and the colonial perception of the blessings and curses of the growing Islamic education movement.

Inconsistent colonial policies are more likely to arise when the long-term priorities of colonial rule are not clearly spelled out. The colonial subject was perceived as ‘an alien’ as well as ‘a relative’, and the question to which extent this ‘alien relative’ should be treated as ‘equal’ or ‘distinctively different’ was highly contested. The Dutch never seriously contemplated a merger of Dutch and Indonesian affairs into a single state system, nor did they envisage a separation of both countries into sovereign states. The colony was conceived as both geographically and culturally too distant from the metropolis to become a constituting

part of the kingdom. Yet, the idea of future Indonesian independence strongly conflicted with the long history of Dutch presence in Southeast Asia and the widespread conviction that the colonial connection was of vital importance to the economic and political standing of the metropolis.² Indeed, when the Dutch were forced to recognize Indonesian independence and sovereignty was transferred, the Dutch still had to make a beginning with the mental adaptation to the profound changes in political reality that had taken place in the 1940s (Dick *et al.* 2002; Ricklefs 2008).

Compared to the Philippine experience, the poor Dutch legacy should be seen against the background of very different conceptions of the history, objectives and long-term sustainability of colonial rule. Having fought a war of independence themselves, the Americans regarded colonial rule in the Philippines as a temporary phenomenon with the main purpose of preparing Philippine society for a politically independent government based on the American values of democracy and liberalism. Mass education was the principle means of achieving this goal. Even though the spread of popular education was one of the focal points of the Ethical Policy, the benefits of this target remained contested. Yes, the colonial authorities needed a steady supply of educated state employees, doctors, engineers and technicians, as well as a growing sense of participation by the indigenous population. But at the same time many colonial and metropolitan politicians feared that expanding education would fuel anti-colonial sentiments and undermine the colonial order in the long run (Lelyveld 1996). Such fears about a growing ‘white-collar proletariat’ were not unjustified: the rising nationalist movement engaged increasing numbers of young Indonesian intellectuals, who would play a key role in the struggle for independence (Frankema 2013).

The lack of an explicit long-term view on the purpose of the colonial relationship also comes to light in comparison to the Japanese approach. The Japanese clung to the idea of assimilating the Taiwanese and Koreans into Japanese society. The Japanese considered full-fledged Japanese education as the key to achieving this goal. Hence, the language of instruction had to be Japanese, the curriculum was Japanese and many teachers were Japanese as well. Obviously, geographical proximity played a key role in the different Dutch-Japanese approach. The French administered Algeria as an integral part of France, whereas Indochina was part of an overseas empire. And the embedding of Ireland as a constituent part of the United Kingdom obviously also differed from the way in which British Indian territories were integrated into the British Empire.

² The well-known Dutch saying *Indië verloren, ramspoed geboren* - freely translated as ‘loss of the Indies means disaster’ - neatly conveys this idea.

But Dutch uncertainty on the guiding principles of the colonial relationship increased during the second half the nineteenth century. During the heydays of the Cultivation System (1830-1870), the rather simple belief that the colony existed for the benefit of the metropolis had prevailed. However, with the gradual abolishment of the Cultivation System and mounting criticism of the explicit aim of exploitation, the discussion on how to reform the colonial relationship opened up a vast range of issues for reconsideration. In the sphere of education it was widely agreed upon that the colonial state had to start making more substantial investments, but whether these should be targeted at the sons of indigenous chiefs or at the common people remained a point of debate among liberals of various persuasion. Conservatives dissented in their judgement of the blessings and curses of Islamic education. And who was going to pay for this? (Hartgerink 1942: 17-21).

Private education initiatives were a special bone of content. In the first half of the nineteenth century the colonial authorities largely neglected the development of Islamic schools, but controlled settlement of Christian missionaries with a license system in order to avoid possible conflicts over missionary activities in orthodox Islamic areas. The government gave financial support to missionary schools in the Outer Islands, notably the Minahassa (North Sulawesi) and the Moluccas, where the Protestant missionaries had a strong position.³ However, the *subsidie ordinantie* (subsidy ordinance) of 1871 prohibited state subsidies for confessional schools in the Netherlands Indies. This was part of an attempt to bring the finances of colonial education in line with metropolitan policy principles. These principles originally stemmed from the education reform of 1806, when the Kingdom of Holland was a vassal-state of the French Republic. It contained three tenets: education officially became a state responsibility; public schools had to conform to state control of their curriculum and adopt a grade-based teaching system; and, finally, applying the principles of laicism, public schools were allowed to teach secular or general Christian virtues, but not to teach orthodox Catholic or Protestant views (Veld 1987).

These three cornerstones of educational policy were vehemently defended by the liberals, who dominated the political spectrum for most of the nineteenth century, but they were continuously contested by the confessional parties. The political struggle over these issues, the so-called *schoolstrijd* (school controversy), would dominate the political debate in the Netherlands for more than a century. In 1848 the confessional parties managed to secure the freedom of establishing private religious schools, subject to regular quality checks

³ As Portuguese and Spanish traders, soldiers and missionaries had been active in these areas since the sixteenth century, Dutch Protestant missionaries initially concentrated their efforts on these areas to drive out 'papal heresies' (Hartgerink 1942).

executed by state inspectors. However, an amendment to this law in 1857 stipulated that only secular public schools would be eligible to state funding, thereby reconfirming the principle of *laïcité*. This amendment invoked a new struggle over the issue of education finance that lasted for nearly six decades. The dispute was finally settled in 1917 when the confessional parties accepted the introduction of universal male suffrage in return for equal financial support to public secular and religious schools.⁴

The consequences of the Dutch *schoolstrijd* for the development of education in Indonesia were far-reaching. Since the colonial government was no longer allowed to support religious schools, they lost the opportunity to spread mass education through private-public co-financing of village schools. To see the implications we make a quick sidestep to several African colonies, where education was largely supplied by missionary schools and financed by a combination of church funds (donations), local investments (often in-kind or in-labour) and varying levels of state subsidy. At the eve of the Second World War enrolment rates in, for example, the Belgian Congo or British Nyasaland (present-day Malawi) exceeded 30 per cent, whereas the government budgets allocated to education were nothing compared to the Netherlands Indies (Frankema 2012; 2013, Dunkerley 2009). Per student expenditure in Nyasaland in 1938 did not even exceed \$0.50, almost thirty times less than in the Netherlands Indies. Yet, primary school enrolment rates in 1938 were about 35 per cent against 17 per cent in the Netherlands Indies. Of course, the rapid rise in enrolment rates in these African colonies was only possible because of large concessions to quality, but that is not the point to make here. What this shows is that colonial states with limited budgets had options to tap into, and build upon, private education initiatives.

The subsidy ordinance of 1871 sent a considerable number of missionary schools into financial difficulties. Some had to close their doors and others were taken over by the local government and transformed into public schools (*gouvernementsscholen*). Since the colonial authorities could now rightfully claim state neutrality in religious education, they could easily continue to refuse support to Islamic schools, which they viewed with suspicion. Colonial officials maintained that Islamic teachers paid insufficient attention to basic skills of reading, writing, and algebra. More importantly, however, the Islamic schools were also considered as a potential breeding-ground for anti-colonial conspiracies. Leaders of the Islamic nationalists belonged almost without exception to the educated class of Islamic scholars (*ulama*) and the Muslim reform movement that emerged in the Minangkabau (Central Sumatra) during the 1900s stood at the basis of the Sarekat Islam.

⁴ Two years later, in 1919, this was extended to universal adult suffrage.

The *taman siswa* (garden of pupils) was another influential nationalist movement aiming at uniting and emancipating Indonesians of various social classes through a schooling campaign. The colonial government accused the *taman siswa* movement of communist sympathies. A number of laws in the 1920s and 1930s sought to prevent the spread of so-called *wilde scholen* (wild schools), thought to spread subversive ideas. The wild school ordinance of 1932 stipulated that all teachers working in unrecognized schools should register themselves with the local authorities and undergo a ‘quality check’ by an official state representative. The protest against the ordinance was fierce, and the government had to repeal the law only a few months later (Tsuchiya 1987: 151-197).

Ironically, it was the expansion of Islamic schools in the late nineteenth century that enhanced the re-appreciation of missionary education by a new generation of Dutch politicians, as missionaries could help to constrain Muslim activism in the Outer Islands (Noer 1973: 162-175). In addition, the idea that the missionary schools could serve as a cheap alternative to the more expensive public schools also gained ground. Hence, the subsidy ordinance of 1871 was repealed in 1895. In 1909 Hendrikus Colijn, the leader of the confessional party ARP (*Anti Revolutionaire Partij*) and later prime minister of the Netherlands (1925-26 and 1933-39), even went as far as to suggest that missionary schools should be leading in the spread of popular education. In his view the educational philosophies of the missionary schools aligned much better to the daily life experiences of the people in the *desa*.

At the turn of the century public schools were again outsourced to the missionaries. But despite this re-appreciation, the missionaries were not in a position to occasion a major breakthrough. When the government handed back the public schools in Minahassa to the NGZ (*Nederlandsch Zendings Genootschap*), the largest Dutch Missionary Society, the local population protested vehemently as they feared the handover would involve a serious loss of quality. Indeed, the secular vernacular village schools became the cheap alternative to the *gouvernementsscholen* the Dutch were looking for, but to which extent they offered better quality than the average missionary school is a question still unanswered. What seems certain, however, is that the incapacity of the Dutch to ‘make up their mind’ on how to organize the development of popular education resulted in a waste of time and resources.

5. Avenues for further comparative research

This paper has probed into the underlying causes of the weak education system of Indonesia, and more in particular the poor legacy of Dutch colonial rule in the Netherlands Indies before 1942. It has been argued that the spread of popular education was not only hampered by a lack of financial commitment, but also by serious inequalities in the allocation of the education budget and a general reluctance to support private education investment initiatives. I have proposed to interpret this reluctance as a consequence of the Dutch metropolitan commitment to secular rule in an overwhelmingly Islamic society. This has resulted in a ‘missed opportunity’ to open up access to education to Indonesians at much faster pace than what was achieved in practice and has created poor conditions for subsequent Indonesian governments to build upon.

Instead of repeating the details of the argument, I prefer to point at two possibilities for future comparative research instead. First, it is interesting to note that the Dutch commitment to the principle of *laïcité* is shared in common with the French, but not with the British or the Belgians. In this respect it would be worthwhile to study possible similarities between French colonial education policies in Indochina and sub-Saharan Africa, and those discussed above. In many cases (not all), the French displayed a similar reluctance towards missionary education and, contrary to the British, the French were also less inclined to support the expansion of private schools through state subsidies.

Second, it would be interesting to explore more deeply the particularities of colonial educational policies in Islamic areas. In Sub-Saharan Africa there existed a sharp divide in the spread of both public schools and Christian missionary schools in Islamic and non-Islamic regions (Frankema 2012). In Nigeria, for instance, the British permitted missionary activities in the south, but prohibited them in the Islamic north. The Dutch controlled missionary settlement with a license system and also differentiated between the Outer Islands and Batavia on the one hand, and the core Islamic areas in Java and Sumatra on the other. The comparison with other Asian countries with large Islamic communities, such as British Malaya or British India, would be illuminating as well.

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