

Empire as Horseplay?

Writing the Java Pony in the Nineteenth Century through the Lenses of Mobility, Modernity, and Race

Mikko Toivanen

Abstract

The Java horse, used for transport throughout the East Indies, provides an ideal locus for thinking about the intersection of travel and the animal world in the Dutch Empire. Ever-present in experiences of colonial travel, encounters with the horse soon became a recurring trope in colonial travel writing, with the small yet famously headstrong and unpredictable pony providing a reliable source of humorous yet revealing anecdotes. This chapter examines the horse-drawn carriage as a mobile ‘contact zone’ in which Dutch travellers encountered the realities of colonisation, whilst textual depictions of the Java horse are analysed as a rhetorical site from which debates on wider social/colonial issues, such as questions of technological modernisation and the politics of race, played out over time.

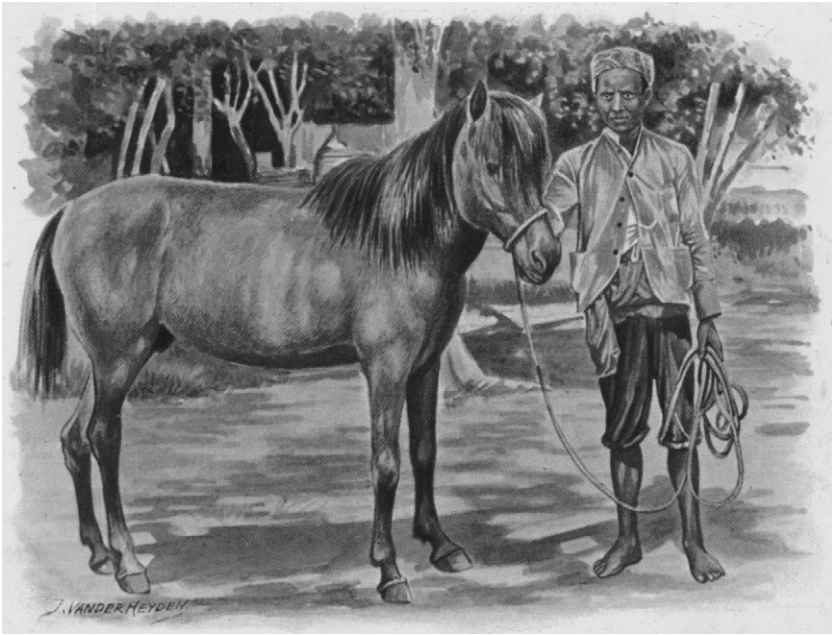
Keywords: Java horse, transportation, colonisation, race, Empire, Dutch East Indies

Nineteenth-century empires ruled, or attempted to rule, over non-human animal life as well as human subjects. They also depended on it, a multiplicity of interactions and engagements with animals both domesticated and wild underpinning their continued functioning and expansion. Amongst the great diversity of those relations, few animals have been as important, both materially and symbolically, to the establishment and maintenance of empires throughout history as the horse. Horses are central to the prevailing image of the Central Asian nomadic dynasties and, in the context of the Americas, their introduction was a crucial feature of the Spanish conquest. Also in Southeast Asia, the history of the horse has been likewise inextricably entwined with that of empires: They were sent into the region as gifts from the emperor of China to local elites, but also – and more importantly – exported into China, especially from Vietnam and Yunnan.¹ In the Indonesian archipelago, a breed apparently descending from the Tibetan pony was introduced from the mainland at some point in the first millennium, becoming an important commodity for specific islands.² Later on, the Dutch in turn introduced their preferred breeds – Arab and Persian – into the region, further cross-breeding

them with those already present.³ By the nineteenth century, the horse was truly a global animal. Embodying Antoinette Burton's succinct observation that 'animals drove both the symbolic and political economy of modern imperialism wherever it took root', its ubiquity entailed a variety of relationships with specific local constellations of imperial power all around the world.⁴

In the Dutch East Indies, travellers could hardly avoid encountering the Java horse, one of the primary modes of transport on the island. Considering its omnipresence, it is not surprising that the animal appears frequently in colonial travel writing – a rather more mundane natural encounter than the more obviously exotic forms of tropical wildlife that were also a common trope. For Dutch travellers, it was more than just an animal or a symbol – it quickly became an anecdote, a trope. It was notable because it presented a unique blend of familiarity and exoticism. Whilst the domesticated horse was familiar to every European traveller, the Java horse was quite unlike any horse most travellers had ever encountered before. It was small, to the point of appearing ridiculous to European eyes – indeed, disparaging comparisons with cats appear more than once. Yet at the same time, unlike the travellers from afar, it was naturally suited to the local environment, possessing the right skills and instincts to thrive in it. Its unpredictable character was also a bit of a mystery, and a source of frustration as often as a cause for silent admiration. Whilst notionally there to serve the needs of its masters, in practice, the relationship between the animal and the coloniser was far more ambiguous. As Rohan Deb Roy has argued, human enterprise was in turn shaped by an interaction with the non-human through which the structures of empire were co-constituted.⁵ An analytical focus on the Java horse therefore provides a useful way of charting the limits of the (human) coloniser's control over the archipelago.

This chapter will examine how, in Dutch nineteenth-century travel writing, the encounter with the Java horse came to represent the ambiguous and unstable mix of awkwardness and discomfort experienced by European travellers transposed into an unfamiliar, tropical setting, or what Ranajit Guha has called the coloniser's 'pervasive anxiety about being lost in empire'.⁶ In particular, the analysis will focus on how authors discussed the Java horse as a lens through which to view, or a metaphor for, the wider colonial issues of the time: the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised; the development of racial thinking and taxonomies; and the introduction of new transport infrastructure as a symbol of modernity. In narrative terms, the Java horse became a site of displaced ethnography, a canvas on which a wide range of emotional and practical responses – to the totality of empire, or the unpleasant facts of colonisation, or the tropical environment – could be fixed and thus made easier to manage and communicate. In particular, many things that were written ostensibly about the horses appear, on closer inspection, to deal with the wider – and at that time, fast-developing – problematic of race.



Stable boy with horse on Java, circa 1900. Collection Leiden University Libraries.

Glib assumptions of European superiority appear side by side with, and sometimes run head-first into, persistent underlying fears of inadequacy and unsuitability. Sujit Sivasundaram has characterised ‘the intersection of the human and animal’ as the locus where historical ideas of race developed and argued that the classification and categorisation of humanity into racial blocks occurred in dialogue with contemporary conceptualisation of the human-animal divide.⁷ In the Dutch East Indies, this discursive double process was nowhere more apparent than in the case of the unsuspecting guest star of many a travel book: the Java horse.

The analysis of depictions of the Java horse below draws on a wide range of texts from the 1820s to the end of the century – short pieces from colonial and literary periodicals, as well as individually published travel books and pamphlets. The majority of the texts were authored by representatives of the Dutch colonial middle classes: officials of the colonial administration, officers of the Royal Netherlands Indies Army (KNIL), or merchants and journalists with literary aspirations. Some were published in Batavia, however, most of the accounts came out in Europe – at the time a common means by which returnees from the colonies could earn extra income or gain social status: The prominence of the genre in the mid-nineteenth century is reflected in the generic descriptor ‘Indische schetsen’ (Indies sketches), a

variant of which appears in no fewer than five of the titles considered here. Taken together, these accounts provide a representative cross-section of the so-called ‘Indische letteren’ (Indies literature) of the period, whilst a consideration of less-known authors and shorter pieces allows the analysis to move beyond the handful of famous and influential individuals.

The horse and carriage as a contact zone

That the Java horse was amongst the first acquaintances a newly arriving visitor made in the Indies is natural enough. After all, where could a traveller go without some means of transport? A characteristic scene is recorded in H. Prange’s brief account ‘De eerste dagen te Batavia’ (The first days in Batavia), published in 1858 in the Batavian literary magazine *Warnasarie*. Prange, a middle-class immigrant of a literary persuasion – apart from writing, he worked as an editor and a book salesman – describes his entry, after landing, into the port area of the colonial capital. Having cleared the customs and looking for a conveyance to take him to his hotel, Prange’s eye alights upon the horse: “Beware!”, I thought or said, I no longer remember which, “what are those, cats or horses!”⁸ The remembered and reported interjection may well be based on a real experience – although the hesitation in Prange’s phrasing is telling – but might also be an embellishment drawing on contemporary stereotypes circulating within the Dutch community.

As noted above, the comparison with cats is not unique to Prange. A little later, in his 1872 booklet *Een reistogtje van Batavia naar Buitenzorg* (A trip from Batavia to Buitenzorg), the mining engineer P. van Diest describes the horse in very similar terms: ‘They are thin as a bone and stiff like goats, which they resemble as much as they do cats, but not in the least whatever a newcomer on Java might imagine a horse to be.’⁹ Like Prange’s anecdote, Van Diest’s is also given at the very beginning of the narrative – in this case, at the start of his recounted trip to Buitenzorg – and thus helps to set the scene for the adventures that follow. The image of the supposedly cat-like Java horse therefore serves both as a welcome and a reminder, a signpost indicating to the reader that a different world has been entered, one in which even the horses are unfamiliar. The horse also takes centre stage as the first encounter of the journey that has been embarked upon, often before any human beings, whether European or Asian, have been depicted, let alone engaged with. For narrative purposes, the horse is the colony, a living embodiment of its experienced strangeness and a promise for more exciting and curious discoveries to follow.

Beyond merely setting the scene, the encounter with the animal also defines the mood, often in the tone of a humorous anecdote. The stubbornness and unpredictability of the Java horse is a recurring trope and adds a flourish of dynamism and

uncertainty to travelogues that are frequently rather touristic and banal. Having overcome the surprising outer appearance of the beast and found their seat, actually getting started on the journey was by no means as simple for the hopeful tourist. The anecdote of the Dutch parliamentarian W.T. Gevers Deynoot, told with the weariness of the experienced Indies traveller, is representative: 'I had barely sat in the carriage when the as usual poorly reared horses refused to move and were so unruly that I feared I would end up back in my hotel room, wagon and all.'¹⁰ Another account, from a little later in 1887, contains a strikingly similar scenario, albeit this time ending up, not through the hotel window, but rather, in the roadside fields: 'Barely [...] had the horse finally been brought to move when a light shock of the carriage, caused by a hole in the road, scared the animal and made it suddenly jump to the side, tipping me and the cart over into the *sawah* (field).'¹¹

Occasionally, the trouble was less about ending up where you did not want to, and more about not getting anywhere at all. August Weitzel, an officer in the colonial army, made this clear in his 1860 book *Batavia in 1858*, lamenting the 'head-strong and unmanageable' animals: 'Sometimes they just stop and stand still in the middle of the road or even perpendicularly across it. And even if your honour, your life or your fortune depended on it, and even if you did your best, with curses and lashings of the whip, to make them understand it, they refuse to move their feet.'¹²

Anecdotes of this nature were, as already mentioned, a regular trope. An account by the colonial official J.S.G. Gramberg in the journal *Nederland* later in the decade uses very nearly the same words: 'the ambulance cart had stopped and the horses stood perpendicularly across the road. A Javanese horse is stubborn. If it thinks it has run enough, it stays still.'¹³ Such stories provide some light entertainment and the occasional laugh, as well as constituting a reasonable substitute for any real sense of challenge or danger, at a time in the middle of the nineteenth century when travel across Java had already become largely routine for the colonial elites. More generally, the use of the natural environment – not just wildlife, but volcanos, mountains, and waterfalls – as a backdrop against which travellers could adopt poses of adventurousness and exertion was a common characteristic of a fast-developing culture of colonial proto-tourism around the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

The self-deprecating humour of these anecdotes also helps to soften the underlying suggestion of the Dutchman's lack of control in the colonies. If the horse, native to the land and in some sense representative of it, cannot be made to move against its will, not even if your life depends on it, then what does that mean for the authority of the Dutch in the Indies as a whole? Arguably, the horse is a convenient site upon which to displace such fears of losing control: A stubborn Javanese horse is a joke, an anecdote, and a comfortably familiar one also from European lore, whereas an equally insubordinate Javanese human being would

represent an outright challenge to colonial rule, and a real threat of violence and rebellion. This was especially true around the middle of the nineteenth century, when memories of the Java War (1825-1830) were still fresh in the mind of many travellers, despite the fact that, notably, the conflict rarely features in the genre of popular travel writing, to the point of appearing deliberately suppressed at times.¹⁵ In contrast, the lovably headstrong Java horse represents a thoroughly acceptable and endearing form of depoliticised protest to the Dutch presence in the East, one frustrated would-be-tourist at a time.

Yet, naturally enough, the horse was not merely – or even primarily – an obstacle to making progress on the road. In fact, once it had finally been convinced to move, many travellers expressed sincere admiration for the animal's speed and efficiency. Rather than *koppig* (stubborn), another favoured adjective for the Java horse was *vurig* (fiery). This was primarily spun as a positive trait, at least in the sense that, once the animal had made its mind up to move, progress would be rapid. This led the journalist and writer Cornelis la Motte to characterise the animal's pace as 'the steam-power and the railway of the Indies'.¹⁶ Whilst La Motte himself appears to never have visited the Indies, instead modelling his pseudonymous 'sketches' on the popular travel writing of his time, his characterisation of the Java horse can be taken to reflect the animal's reputation in the 1850s.¹⁷ Indeed, the statement points to a significant truth: The horse and carriage, and especially the post coach system developed on Java around the turn of the nineteenth century, formed the backbone of travel across the island until the introduction of the railway in the latter part of the century.¹⁸ This was a system that frequently garnered praise from (both Dutch and non-Dutch) visitors. As the colonial official and writer G.H. Nagel commented in his own 'sketches', an early example of the genre in 1828, 'it is a very rare occasion that a traveller on Java has cause to complain about the post horses afforded to him'.¹⁹

The traveller's dependence on the post coach, or similar modes of transport, meant that the carriage was also one of the most important routine sites of encounter between the colonial tourist and the local population. Notwithstanding the fact that servant labour was central to the life of Dutchmen in the colonies, it often remains understated in colonial travel accounts, partly out of a sense of embarrassment on the part of the coloniser, partly to create more heroic and adventurously individualistic narratives. Yet the coach encounter is a trope that occurs repeatedly, a curiously multipolar microcosm of colonial society in which the non-human presence of the horse intrudes upon, and modifies, the relations between the coloniser and the colonised. In some instances, the familiarity of the setting from the Netherlands provided an opportunity to bridge the cultural distance between European and Asian. One example is provided by the colonial official and amateur scholar J. van der Chijs, who in his travelogue observed wryly

that 'the coachmen [on Java] have this in common with Dutch ones, that during breaks they gladly take a little nap'.²⁰ Notably, however, the potential cross-cultural identification here is undercut with the class-based stereotype of the lazy worker, which the author unfavourably contrasts with the stamina of the horse.

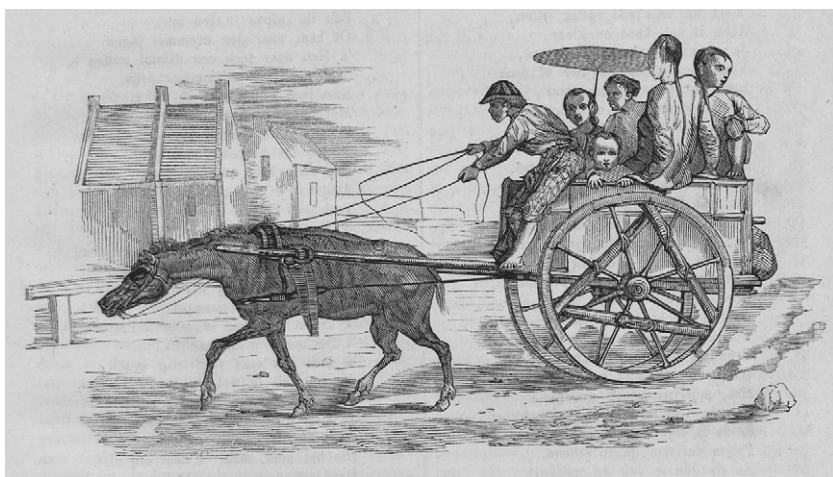
At other times, the European trappings of the coachman's role could lead to bemusement and discomfort:

Such an apparition had I never seen before [...] A coachman dressed up like a Javanese, with the usual cloth around the head, but on this cloth a European coachman's hat, and before his eyes two great green spectacles! Moreover, a small slender little man who held the reins of four brave Javanese horses in his slender hands.²¹

This fascinating little vignette contains two simultaneous juxtapositions: the Javanese coachman's local style of clothing clashing with the European-coded accessories of his occupation; and his diminutive physique with the energy of the 'brave' horses. It certainly seems significant that the famously small size of the Javanese horse, which would align it physically with the character of the coachman, is not mentioned here and the focus is instead placed on its vigorous spirit. From this framing, the man emerges as a target for ridicule, the suggestion being that he is doubly an interloper, both in the worlds of European culture and of good horses.

It is perhaps unsurprising then, that the generally smooth progress of travel on Java is frequently credited to the horses rather than those making them move. Occasionally there is wonderment in descriptions of the speed of travel that also tips a hat to the eagerness and vigour of the coachmen in attending to their beasts, but more frequently this is expressed in terms of concern for animal welfare. 'How often do we react with disgust upon seeing the native mishandle in all sorts of ways the willing horse, when it cannot at once move an unreasonably loaded car from its place!', is the rhetorical question posed in an 1871 article in the *Militair tijdschrift* (Military journal), followed by a suggestion that it is precisely this mistreatment that gives rise to the animal's stubbornness.²² Even Weitzel, after venting his frustrations as shown above, placed his sympathies squarely with the horse: 'What is more, the native coachmen have no skill whatsoever in dealing with horses; if one does not stand up to it, they will pull and push, beat and whip as long as they sit on the box. A native of the lower classes that shows any love for a horse is a real rarity.'²³

Similarly, the juxtaposition of a large Chinese family employing a Javanese coachman and drawn by a miserable, famished Java horse in the illustration from *Lectuur voor de huiskamer* (Readings for home), accompanying a description of Batavia's bazars, suggests a stark hierarchy incorporating both the colony's human and animal life, where suffering and deprivation occurs despite the European colonial presence rather than because of it. The presentation of human-animal



An illustration depicting a Chinese family on their way to the market in Batavia. From *Lectuur voor de huiskamer* 3 (1856), p. 221. Collection Leiden University Libraries.

relations in these and similar depictions provide examples of how these three-way encounters in the colonial ‘contact zone’, to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s term, frequently found resolution in a sort of imagined camaraderie between the European traveller (or reader) and the local animal, and a kind of rhetorical alliance against the supposed misdeeds of the Javanese, Chinese, or other local communities.²⁴ In her work on nineteenth-century European travel writing, Elizabeth Leane has noted how violence against the transport animal appears in those texts as both necessary and regrettable, reflecting the compromises of the human-animal relationship.²⁵ Yet, in a colonial context, the presence of the animal also provides the travel writer with an excuse to look away from the complexities of the simultaneous human encounter embodying the colonial relations of the time.

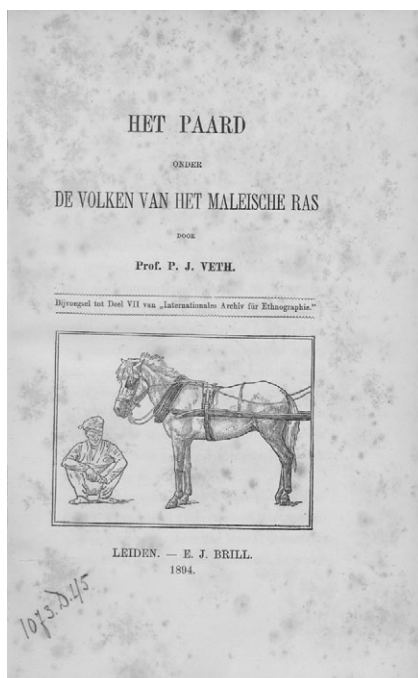
Local adaptations and ideas of race

The colonial traveller’s awkwardness with the encounter in the carriage perhaps explains why so many travel writers seem to prefer the more individualistic effort of riding to the passivity of sitting in a post coach. A particularly common scene is that of riding in mountainous terrain or up the side of a volcano, where the difficulty of the routes ruled out the use of four-wheeled conveyances. Some of these scenes display an unabashed romanticism, perhaps inspired by the lofty mountain environment. In his 1874 memoir, the physician Isaäc Groneman waxes lyrical

about the ‘small, but strong and reliable little mountain horses [...] as brave and fiery in the climb as they are careful and understanding in the descent’.²⁶ Indeed, Groneman goes so far as to describe the creation of a genuine emotional bond with his steed: ‘Through softness, but also steadfastness of will [...] the rider can make his horse into a friend.’²⁷ Notably, such a rapprochement would have been close to unimaginable with any of Java’s human inhabitants.

Such empathy was often afforded particularly to the horses in the mountains. Considered almost a different subspecies, their adaptation to the environment and understanding nature was widely praised. It was ‘an animal, that you must let take its own course, that takes care of everything for its rider’, as the popular author Justus van Maurik informed the reader, and if it wanted to stop to eat some grass on the way, why not just let it?²⁸ As a piece in *De Gids* suggests, the beast surely deserved a bit of leeway for its expert handling of the difficult terrain: ‘The Javanese horses have a reputation for being careful like cats and having the ability to climb like cats’ – a far more positive spin on the disparaging comparison already mentioned above.²⁹ It was this usefulness on mountain paths that placed the Java horse at the centre of that central trope of travel writing from Java: the climb up the volcano. Most writers chose to depict this scene as a contemplative journey of the adventurous rider alone on his horse, although it goes without saying that such tourists generally brought local guides and helpers along, benefitting immensely from their intimate knowledge of the environment.

The narrative function of the mountain horse draws attention to the question of local adaptations. Generally speaking, mountain life was unfamiliar to the travelling Dutchman whereas the Java horse was born into it and therefore proved exceptionally useful to the former. Moreover, altitude was just one of the many potential complications of colonial life: The tropical heat and local foodstuffs were also treated with suspicion by arriving Europeans, and there were genuine fears that life in the tropics was quite simply unsuited to their European constitution.³⁰ These concerns had the potential to subvert otherwise unquestioned norms. ‘To make a comparison between a European farmer and a Javanese one is as absurd as to compare a Javanese horse to a European one’, the Indisch Genootschap pronounced in 1866 in calling for more European settlers on the island to improve its economy.³¹ However, taking the simile at face value, if the strong and agile Javanese horse was actually far better suited to the local environment than lumbering imported animals ever could have been, as was evidently the case, attested to by numerous travellers and writers, then did that not also call into question the assumed superiority of the European settler? Such an admission raised the possibility that there were perhaps better ways of doing things, ways unknown to the coloniser’s mindset – that perhaps the solution was less, rather than more, colonisation.

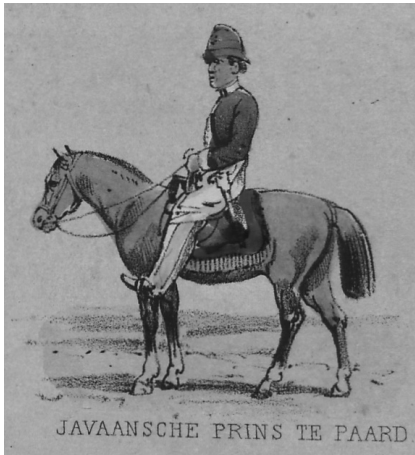


A Sumbawa horse, considered superior to the Java horse and imported to the island. From the title page of P.J. Veth, *Het paard onder de volken van het maleische ras* (1894). Collection Leiden University Libraries.

It goes without saying that such doubts were rarely openly entertained in travel writing. There were ways around the issue, and it is here that the overlap between racial theories and ideas of animal rearing becomes apparent. Rather than acting as proof of the value of local adaptations, the usefulness of the Java horse in the mountains was instead ascribed precisely to its distance from local human culture and supposedly uncorrupted,

natural state, as opposed to the horses used in the more densely populated lowlands. The prettiest horses were to be found 'especially in the mountains', according to one observer.³² In contrast, the lowland or *sawah* horse was considered 'small, ugly, with hanging loins and bad hooves'.³³ This division was also mirrored on a macro scale, where accepted wisdom identified a stark contrast between the Java horse on the one hand, and the highly valued animals imported from the outer islands of the archipelago on the other. The latter were seen as self-evidently superior, with the former considered less energetic and less vital due to their greater familiarity with humans.³⁴ The stereotype is also conveyed in the illustration of the Sumbawa horse from the Sunda Islands, selected for the title page of the famous scholar P.J. Veth's 1894 book on horses in the Indies, towering over a crouching human figure.

This taxonomical differentiation was closely aligned with nineteenth-century colonial thinking about race, as Jagjeet Lally has also argued for British India.³⁵ Similar to the case of the horses, the Dutch actively promoted a racial stereotype that ascribed greater physical vitality to the inhabitants of the islands beyond Java. As in other imperial contexts, highland communities were prized for their supposed martial virtues. Those from the island of Ambon, in particular, were increasingly singled out for the value of their service in the Dutch colonial army over the course of the nineteenth century.³⁶ It has been shown, however, that this was more on the level of propaganda rather than actual numbers, with the (supposedly untrusted)



A Javanese prince on horseback.
Illustration from J.J.A. Goeverneur,
*Nederlandsch Indie, of de bewoners dezer
streken, geschetst in tafereelen* (1870).
Collection Leiden University Libraries.

Javanese always forming the backbone of the force.³⁷ The Dutch found it useful to favour communities without an independent base of support in the heart of the colony, and to promote them as a counterweight to the influ-

ence of the Javanese nobility, which had in the early part of the century given rise to the rebels of the Java War.

The promotion of the vitality of the *overwalsche* (overseas) horses went hand in hand with the notion of the long-term decline of the Java horse. Here the allusions to the rise and fall of civilisations were barely disguised. 'From one year to the next, the Javanese race of horses declines in usefulness and appearance', was the harsh judgment of one article, which goes on to point out that even in places that used to be famous for their steeds, good horses were now nowhere to be found.³⁸ This calls to mind similar discourses around, for example, local architecture and culture, with European-educated experts in newly developed branches of scholarship proclaiming their puzzlement at the disappearance of the civilisations that once gave rise to temple complexes like the Borobudur or Prambanan. As with the self-appointed mission of the archaeologists, the horse soon became something to rescue, a symbol for the supposed benefits of colonial rule. In a clear call for colonial intervention, the above-cited article goes on to demand that 'appropriate measures' be taken to stop the 'deterioration' of the island's horse stock.³⁹

Towards the end of the century, the Java horse became a site for technical debates around how best to rear horses. Summarising the conventional view, the 1881 compendium *Het paard* (The horse) suggested that the Javanese simply did not have the necessary knowhow, either putting the animals to work too young or allowing them to breed in an uncontrolled manner.⁴⁰ Somewhat contradictorily, the work then goes on to praise their natural affinity with horses, appreciation for good steeds, and remarkable skill in riding and performing daring feats on horseback. In the colonial context, these affective and individualist inclinations are presented as categorically different from the kind of good, modern, and rationalised animal husbandry that supposedly only Europeans could be expected to introduce to Java.

Mobility, technology, and progress

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Java horse became a project of colonial technocracy – something to be salvaged via careful and scientifically informed breeding from its supposed state of terminal decline. Yet there were also other ways in which representations of the horse came to revolve around questions of modernity and progress. Transport technologies are constitutive of the experience of travel, and the proliferation of steam technology and especially the railways came to symbolise the rapidly changing world of modern tourism in the nineteenth century. It has been argued that many of the transformations conventionally ascribed to the railways – regular, punctual schedules and the homogenisation of life on the road – were instead introduced gradually and had their roots in the previous century, embodied in systems such as the post coach. Yet despite the importance of systems such as these, the symbolic centrality of the railway in nineteenth-century culture remains unchallenged.

We have already remarked on La Motte's admiring characterisation of the Java horse as 'the steam-power and the railway of the Indies', and the pride expressed by that statement was widely shared at the time. 'There is no country where one rides as fast with the post as on Java', claimed J.B.J. van Doren, an officer of the colonial army, in his 1854 travel book.⁴¹ Adding a touch of competitive imperialism to this boast, he asserts that no Englishman has travelled on Java without once or twice 'clinging fast to the walls of their wagon'.⁴² Indeed, visitors from the neighbouring British colonies were frequently impressed. The Bengal official Charles Walter Kinloch assured that 'if this be the usual rate of travelling on the island, there is little grass can grow beneath the hoof of a Java pony'.⁴³ Yet as time wore on, the specific phrasing employed by La Motte in what he intended as praise could also increasingly be interpreted as the opposite: a contemptuous reminder that as Europe moved forwards technologically and embraced the railways, the Dutch colonies, even if only temporarily, lagged behind.

Motte's statement was correct in a very literal sense in 1858, when his book was published, but in less than a decade the animal had had to make way for the railway. The first connections in the Dutch East Indies railway date from the 1860s, and the network expanded steadily from that point.⁴⁴ The glorification of the horse increasingly came to feel as if it belonged to another, bygone era. By 1872, P. van Diest had little patience for the *ellendig* (miserable) horse-drawn coaches linking Batavia with the nearby resort town of Buitenzorg (now Bogor) and could barely wait for it to be replaced by a railway connection: 'For half the price one can soon steam to Buitenzorg in an airy second-class compartment, comfortably and with four times the speed. What a difference!'⁴⁵ There was no stopping



Page from J.J.A. Goeveur, *Nederlandsch Indie, of de bewoners dezer streken, geschetst in tafereelen* (1870). Collection Leiden University Libraries.

modernity for travellers like Van Diest, who were quick to forget the virtues of the horse that until recently had been so essential to their journeys. In contrast, the Java horse was increasingly reduced to a figure of condescension, or at least something distanced from the European colonial experience, as in the illustration of a Javanese

prince on horseback that again draws attention to the horse's small size relative to the human figure.

Two quotes from the latter decades of the century underline the change of perspective in Dutch travel writing that saw the Java horse relegated to the status of a mere curiosity – an affectionately treated heirloom of a distant past. In the account of his five-year placement in the Indies, published in 1873, L.E. Gerdessen, an officer in the Dutch colonial army, describes the hustle and bustle of a coach ride on Java's post roads: 'That was real riding, riding as perhaps our grandfathers can still remember it from the days before the railways and steamboats made [post coach operator] Van Gend & Loos decline into a miserable omnibus service.'⁴⁶ This excerpt, from a time when railway travel was only just beginning on Java, already places the horse-drawn coach firmly into the realm of nostalgia, a reminder from the time of 'our grandfathers' whose legacy still lingered in the colonies, but were sure to be soon swept aside. Unlike his contemporary Van Diest, Gerdessen romanticises the strength of the horse and the open road, but in a way that only serves to emphasise their supposed anachronism in the bigger picture.

The second passage dates from the end of the century in 1895, from an account in a missionary magazine in which the narrator describes travelling by tram from Semarang to Kudus and observes the lively traffic from the window of his car:

Imagine a wooden box [...] in which the Javanese, sitting with his legs under him or casually stretched out along the side or over the back, is drawn by the small but brave and tough Java horse. Such a sight is worth a drawing or a photograph. And when our good, mild-mannered, patient Javanese brother observes the tram catching up with him and whirring past, he thinks: 'it is only a tram, I'll get there too;' and indeed he will.⁴⁷

At the cusp of the new century, this scene bears witnesses to the European commuter, comfortably seated and casually observing the world around him from the vantage point of his modern tram, quite literally leaving the Java horse behind as they enter into a different era and a different world of travel transformed by technology. There is still a measure of empathy for the 'brave and tough' horse, but its infamous stubbornness and unpredictability – traits that travellers once feared could leave them stuck in place or thrown headfirst into the bushes – now seem improbable to the point of being wholly erased from memory. Instead, the horse trundles along mildly with its Javanese master, the two figures – made out to be slightly ridiculous – receding into the distance as the tram approaches its destination. Whilst perhaps they will get there too one day, their path and the experience of the journey will be a different one, barely comprehensible to the Dutch coloniser.

Conclusion

The Java horse, whether employed singly or in teams to pull a carriage or ridden alone, was central to travel on Java in the early nineteenth century. As such, it comes as no surprise that the animal features heavily in Dutch travel writing from the island, starring in little guest cameos here and there that often count amongst the most memorable scenes of the genre. The narrative functions of these snippets were diverse, reflecting the horse's multifaceted role in the Dutch imperial imagination. It is perhaps best to think of it as a canvas on to which a range of desires and anxieties could be projected, depending on context and the specific situation of the writer. For travellers freshly arrived from Europe, the horse was an apt symbol of the new land in which they found themselves: somehow familiar, a horse like any back home; yet also so very different, physically strange in ways that left writers grasping for points of reference from cats to goats to donkeys. What better way to signal to your reader the transition from one world to another? Yet the horse also

came to stand for more than mere tropical exoticism, with anecdotes and jokes circling – sometimes explicitly, often awkwardly and implicitly – around the many contradictions that were central to colonial life.

The unpredictability of the horse imposed limits on the traveller's agency and thus challenged the coloniser's arrogance. Yet this can also be seen as a bargain of sorts: an admission of weakness, couched in good humour, vis-à-vis the animal served to displace from the narrative the awkwardness and instability of the human relations colonialism depended on. A similar point has been made for the contemporary era by Debbie Lisle, who notes how celebrity travel writers employ self-deprecating humour as a strategy to avoid and defuse more fundamental questions of structural inequality.⁴⁸ For colonial-era travellers, the stubborn beast was perhaps unreliable, but even at its worst, its unreliability held no prospect of rebellion. Furthermore, apart from displacing human actors, the horse served as a site for a different kind of displacement, whereby characteristics ascribed to the people of Java or imagined features of their entire civilisation came to be written on to the body and into the history of the animal.

To come back to Sujit Sivasundaram's work on 'the intersection of the human and the animal', it can be seen that in the Dutch empire, too, the Java horse functioned as a proving ground for the rapidly evolving discourse on the racial categories of the Indies.⁴⁹ The supposed physical superiority of highland populations compared to that of lowland areas – starkly ironic in the colonial discourse of the Netherlands – was applied to horses as well as humans. Similarly, both horses and humans were imported to Java from the outer islands to buttress Dutch colonial rule with the vitality of their supposedly 'uncorrupted' bloodlines. The supposed fall of the Javanese civilisation found its counterpart and putative proof in the decline of the island's horse breeds.

The Java horse appears in many guises in the travel books of the nineteenth century: as a nuisance; a target for ridicule; an indispensable help; and even as a friend. Yet ultimately its fate was to be left behind by fashion and technology. The onward march of progress is rarely as smooth and transformative as the ideologues of modernisation would have us believe, but for travel writers the temptation to cast the memorable, sympathetic figure of the cat-horse as a symbol of the changing times was all too strong. As the century approached its end, the horse, once a useful site of many discursive displacements, was itself increasingly relegated to the margins. From a central feature of travel in the Indies and a problem one simply had to learn to live with, the plucky pony gradually receded into the world of yesterday. Whilst its romanticised figure remained fondly remembered, its actual functions for the colonial tourist were overtaken by steam-powered machines. The story of the troublesome Java horse in nineteenth-century Dutch travel writing is one of guarded and occasionally accidental admissions of the limits of colonial rule, a

hesitant probing of the extent of its reach into the worlds of the human and the non-human. Yet it is also, fundamentally, a story of imperialism as triumph: The horse, however stubborn, cannot speak as a human could. It is only given meaning through the eyes of the traveller-coloniser. It is a challenge set up to be conquered, something to reassure and entertain the reader, whilst the real problems pile up backstage.

Notes

- ¹ Clarence-Smith, 'Breeding and Power', 34; Wade, 'The Horse in Southeast Asia', 173-174.
- ² Bankoff & Swart, *Breeds of Empire*, 35.
- ³ Boomgaard, *Southeast Asia*, 186.
- ⁴ Burton, 'Introduction', 1.
- ⁵ Deb Roy, 'Introduction: Nonhuman Empires', 67.
- ⁶ Guha, 'Not at Home in Empire', 484.
- ⁷ Sivasundaram, 'Imperial Transgressions', 157.
- ⁸ Prange, 'De eerste dagen', 68: "'Beware!'", dacht ik of zeide het, dat weet ik niet meer, "wat zijn dat voor katten van paarden!"". Translations from the Dutch here and throughout the chapter by the author.
- ⁹ Van Diest, *Een reistochtje*, 7: 'Ze zijn broodmager en stijf als bokken, waarop ze al evenveel gelijken als op katten, doch wel het minst op hetgeen de nieuweling op Java zich voorstelt een paard te zijn.'
- ¹⁰ Gevers Deynoot, *Herinneringen eener reis*, 56: 'Naauwelijks was ik in het rijtuig gezeten, of de als gewoonlijk weinig gedresseerde paarden weigerden te vertrekken en waren zoo weerbarstig, dat ik dacht met wagen en al weder in mijne logeerkamer te zullen belanden.'
- ¹¹ Rogge, 'Eene dienstreis in de binnenlanden van Borneo', 99: 'Nauwelijks [...] was het paard eindelijk in den draf gebracht of een lichte schok van het rijtuig door een kuil in den weg deed het dier schrikken, dat in één op zijde sprong en mij met rijtuig en al in een sawah deed ombuitelen.'
- ¹² Weitzel, *Batavia in 1858*, 18: 'Soms blijven zij te midden van den weg of ook wel dwars daarover stil staan. Al was uwe eer, uw leven of uwe fortuin er mede gemoeid en al deedt gij uw best hun dit, door een hagelbui van vloeken en zweepslagen, aan het verstand te brengen, zij verzetten geen voet.'
- ¹³ Gramberg, 'De vallei van Pelantoengan', 364: 'de ziekenwagen had blijven steken en de paarden stonden dwars over de weg. Een Javaansch paard is koppig. Als het meent genoeg gelopen te hebben, blijft het staan.'
- ¹⁴ Toivanen, 'Colonial Tours', 149-160.
- ¹⁵ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 116-117; Toivanen, 'Colonial Tours', 174.
- ¹⁶ Van Erlach van der Bilt la Motte, *Java*, 58: 'Dat is de stoomkracht en de spoortrein van Indië.'
- ¹⁷ Wijnmalen, 'Levensbericht', 206.
- ¹⁸ Nas & Pratiwo, 'Java and De Groote Postweg', 709-712.
- ¹⁹ Nagel, *Schetsen uit myne Javaansche portefeuille*, 60: 'Groote zorg word door de opzieners der posterijen (meestal Europeänen) voor deze nuttige dieren gedragen, en het is een zeer zeldzaam geval, dat de reiziger op Java reden heeft, over de hem verstrekte postpaarden te klagen.'
- ²⁰ Van der Chijs, *Mijne reis naar Java in 1869*, 26: 'terwijl de koetsiers dit met de Nederlandsche gemeen hebben, dat zij in dien tusschentijd gaarne een uiltje knappen'.
- ²¹ [Anonymous], 'Djokdjokarta', 301: 'Zulk eene verschijning was mij nog nimmer voorgekomen [...] Een koetsier als Javaan gekleed, met den gewonen doek om 't hoofd, maar op dien doek een Europeesche koetsiers-hoed, en voor de oogen twee groote groene brilglazen! Overigens een klein tener mannetje, die de teugels van vier moedige Javaansche paarden in de magere handen had.'

- ²² D.d.G. [pseudonym], 'Het Indische paardenras', 150: 'doch hoeveel malen werd onze afkeuring niet opgewekt, wanneer man den inlander datzelfde gewillige paard op allerhande wijze zich [sic] mishandelen, wanneer het de onmatig bezwaarde kar, niet op eens van de plaats konde trekken!'
- ²³ Weitzel, *Batavia in 1858*, 19: 'Hierbij komt nog, dat de inlandsche koetsiers er hoegenaamd geen slag van hebben met paarden om te gaan; verzet man er zich niet tegen, dan rukken en trekken, dan klappen en ranselen zij zoo lang zij op den bok zitten. Een inlander uit de geringe klasse, die liefde voor een paard toont, behoort tot de uitzonderingen.'
- ²⁴ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6-7.
- ²⁵ Leane, 'Animals', 313.
- ²⁶ Groneman, *Bladen uit het dagboek*, 119: 'de kleine, maar sterke en vertrouwde bergpaardjes [...] even moedig en vurig bij 't opstijgen, als voorzichtig en verstandig bij 't afklommen'.
- ²⁷ Groneman, *Bladen uit het dagboek*, 47: 'Door zachtheid, maar ook vastheid van wil [...] kan de ruiter zich zijn paard te vriend maken.'
- ²⁸ Van Maurik, *Indrukken van een Tòtòk*, 356: 'hij heeft me geleerd, dat een Javaansch paard een dier is, dat men zijn eigen gang moet laten gaan, dat alles voor zijn berijder overheeft'.
- ²⁹ Croockewit, 'Zes weken in de Preanger-regentschappen', 297: 'De javaansche paarden hebben de renommée van voorzichtig te zijn als katten en als katten te kunnen klauteren.'
- ³⁰ Kennedy, 'The Perils of the Midday Sun', 118-141.
- ³¹ Indisch Genootschap, 'Algemeene vergadering van 17 November 1865', 194: 'Eene vergelijking tusschen den europeeschen landbouwer en den Javaan te willen maken, is even ongerijmd als een javaansch paard met een europeesch te willen vergelijken.'
- ³² Goeverneur, *Nederlandsch Indie*, 28: 'intusschen vindt men er vaak recht fraaie dieren onder, vooral in het gebergte'.
- ³³ Veth, *Het paard*, 30: 'Het eerste is klein, leelijk, met afhangend kruis en slechte hoeven.'
- ³⁴ Veth, *Het paard*, 30.
- ³⁵ Lally, 'H Is for Horse', 84.
- ³⁶ Chauvel, *Nationalists, Soldiers and Separatists*, 40.
- ³⁷ Moor, 'The Recruitment of Indonesian Soldiers', 64.
- ³⁸ Noordijk & Van der Weide, 'Staat van de veestapel', 191: 'Het Javaansche paardenras neemt van jaar tot jaar in deugzaamheid en schoonheid af.'
- ³⁹ Noordijk & Van der Weide, 'Staat van de veestapel', 191: 'Worden geen gepaste maatregelen genomen, om en grooten achteruitgang tegen te gaan, dan zal zich binnen weinigen jaren [...] een schaarste, ja gebrek aan bruikbare paarden [...] doen gevoelen.'
- ⁴⁰ Winkler, *Het paard*, 81.
- ⁴¹ Van Doren, *Fragmenten*, 273: 'Er is geen land, waar men zoo snel per post rijdt, als op Java.'
- ⁴² Van Doren, *Fragmenten*, 273: 'De Engelsen, die daarin aan de beschaafde natiën het voorbeeld geven, en de *matadors* in het hardrijden zijn, moeten zelven bekennen, dat zij even als anderen nimmer eene reis over Java hebben gedaan, zonder zich nu en dan aan de wanden der wagens vast te klemmen.'
- ⁴³ Kinloch, *De zieke reiziger*, 50.
- ⁴⁴ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 154.
- ⁴⁵ Van Diest, *Een reistochtje*, 5: 'Voor de helft van dezen prijs zal men weldra in een luchtige coupee der 2^e klasse gemakkelijk en viermaal sneller naar Buitenzorg kunnen stoomen. Wat een verschil!'
- ⁴⁶ Gerdessen, *Vijf jaar gedetacheerd*, 41: 'Dat mocht eerst rijden heeten, rijden zooals misschien onze grootvaders zich nog herinneren uit de dagen, toen spoorwag en stoombooten van Gend & Loos nog niet tot 'n ellendigen omnibus-rijder hadden doen dalen.'

- ⁴⁷ Bieger, 'Uit een schrijven van Br. Bieger', 10: 'Stel u voor een' houten bak [...] waarin de Javaan, zittende met de beenen onder 't lijf of rustig langs zijde of naar achteren heen gestrekt, getrokken wordt door 't kleine maar moedige en taaie Javaansche paard. Zulk een gezicht is eene teekening of photographie waard. En al ziet onze goede, zachtmoedige, geduldige Javaansche broeder zich door de tram ingehaald en voorbij gesnord, hij denkt: "t is maar een tram, ik kom er toch ook," en hij komt er ook.'
- ⁴⁸ Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, 106.
- ⁴⁹ Sivasundaram, 'Imperial Transgressions', 157.

Bibliography

- [Anonymous], 'Djokdjokarta. (Fragment uit een Reisverhaal.) Garebek Moeloed', in: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch Indië* 19 (1857) 5, 301-328.
- Bankoff, Greg & Sandra Swart, *Breeds of Empire: The Invention of the Horse in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa 1500-1950* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008).
- Bieger, 'Uit een schrijven van Br. Bieger', in: *Maandbericht van het Nederlandsche Zendelinggenootschap* 97 (1895) 1, 9-11.
- Boomgaard, Peter, *Southeast Asia: An Environmental History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007).
- Burton, Antoinette, 'Introduction: Animals, Disruptive Imperial Histories, and the Bestiary Form', in: Antoinette Burton & Renisa Mawani (eds.), *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1-16.
- Chauvel, Richard, *Nationalists, Soldiers and Separatists: The Ambonese Islands from Colonialism to Revolt, 1880-1950* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
- Chijs, J. van der, *Mijne reis naar Java in 1869 en terugkeer over Engelsch Indië, Palestina enz. in 1870* (Utrecht: C. van der Post Jr, 1874).
- Clarence-Smith, William G., 'Breeding and Power in Southeast Asia: Horses, Mules and Donkeys in the Longue Durée', in: David Henley & Henk Schulte Nordholt (eds.), *Environment, Trade and Society in Southeast Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 32-45.
- Croockewit, A.E., 'Zes weken in de Preanger-regentschappen', in: *De Gids* 30 (1866), 290-328.
- D.d.G. [pseudonym], 'Het Indische paardenras', in: *Militair Tijdschrift* 2 (1871), 137-161.
- Deb Roy, Rohan, 'Introduction: Nonhuman Empires', in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35 (2015) 1, 66-75.
- Diest, P. van, *Een reistochtje van Batavia naar Buitenzorg en omstreken* (Amsterdam: C.F. Stemler, 1872).
- Doren, J.B.J. van, *Fragmenten uit de reizen in den Indischen Archipel, enz. Eerste deel.* (Amsterdam: J.D. Sybrandi, 1854).
- Erlach van der Bilt la Motte, Cornelis van, *Java: Schetsen en omtrekken uit de portefeuille* (Dordrecht: H. Lagerweij, 1858).
- Gerdessen, L.E., *Vijf jaar gedetacheerd: Indische schetsen* (Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen & Zoon, 1873).
- Gevers Deynoot, W.T., *Herinneringen eener reis naar Nederlandsch Indië in 1862* ('s Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1864).
- Goeverneur, J.J.A., *Nederlandsch Indie of de bewoners dezer streken, geschetst in tafereelen uit hun dagelijksch leven, zeden en gebruiken* (Leiden: D. Noothoven van Goor, 1870).
- Gramberg, J.S.G., 'De vallei van Pelantoengan', in: *Nederland* 1 (1869), 347-376.
- Groneman, Isaäc, *Bladen uit het dagboek van een Indisch geneesheer* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1874).
- Guha, Ranajit, 'Not at Home in Empire', in: *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997) 3, 482-493.

- Indisch Genootschap, 'Algemeene vergadering van 17 November 1865', in: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 4 (1866) 2, 169-206.
- Kennedy, Dane, 'The Perils of the Midday Sun: Climatic Anxieties in the Colonial Tropics', in John M. MacKenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and the Natural World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 118-140.
- Kinloch, Charles Walter, *De Zieke Reiziger, or Rambles in Java and the Straits, in 1852* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1853).
- Lally, Jagjeet, 'H Is for Horse', in: Antoinette Burton & Renisa Mawani (eds.), *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 79-86.
- Leane, Elizabeth, 'Animals', in: Alasdair Pettinger & Tim Youngs (eds.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Travel Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 305-317.
- Lisle, Debbie, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- Maurik, Justus van, *Indrukken van een 'Tòtòk': Indische typen en schetsen* (Amsterdam: Van Holkema & Warendorf, 1897).
- Moor, Jaap de, 'The Recruitment of Indonesian Soldiers for the Dutch Colonial Army, c. 1700-1950', in: David Killingray & David Omissi (eds.), *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers c. 1700-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 53-69.
- Nagel, G.H., *Schetsen uit myne Javaansche portefeuille* (Amsterdam: C.G. Sulpke, 1828).
- Nas, Peter J.M. & Pratiwo, 'Java and De Groote Postweg, La Grande Route, the Great Mail Road, Jalan Raya Pos', in: *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 158 (2002), 707-725.
- Noordijk, P. & J. van der Weide, 'Staat van de veestapel in de 1^e en 3^e afdeeling op Java', in: *Tijdschrift voor Nijverheid in Nederlandsch Indië* 3 (1856), 166-206.
- Prange, H., 'De eerste dagen te Batavia', in: *Warnasarie* 11 (1858), 64-74.
- Pratt, Mary Louise, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- Ricklefs, M.C., *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1300* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).
- Rogge, C. 'Eene dienstreis in de binnenlanden van Borneo', in: *Tijdschrift van het Aardrijkskundig Genootschap* 4 (1887), 88-103.
- Sivasundaram, Sujit, 'Imperial Transgressions: The Animal and Human in the Idea of Race', in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35 (2015) 1, 156-172.
- Toivanen, Mikko, 'Colonial Tours: The Leisure and Anxiety of Empire in Travel Writing from Java, Ceylon and the Straits Settlements, 1840-1875' (PhD Thesis, European University Institute, 2019).
- Veth, P.J., *Het paard onder de volken van het maleische ras* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1894).
- Wade, Geoff, 'The Horse in Southeast Asia prior to 1500 CE: Some Vignettes', in: Bert G. Fagner (ed.), *Pferde in Asien: Geschichte, Handel Und Kultur / Horses in Asia: History, Trade and Culture* (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 161-178.
- Weitzel, A.W.P., *Batavia in 1858: Schetsen en beelden uit de hoofdstad van Neêrlandsch Indië* (Gorinchem: J. Noorduijn & Zoon, 1860).
- Wijnmalen, T.C.L., 'Levensbericht van Cornelis van Erlach van der Bilt la Motte', in: *Handelingen en mededelingen van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1869), 197-215.
- Winkler, T.C. *Het paard* (Haarlem: De Erven Loosjes, 1881).

