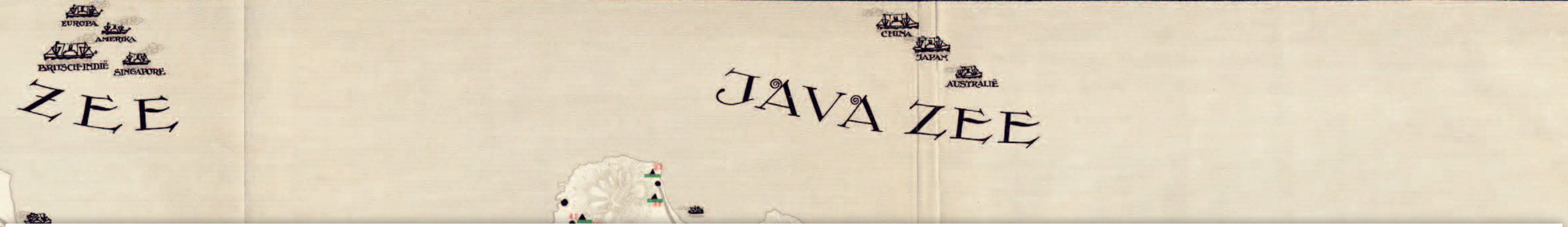


Other Pictures Vernacular (Hi)Stories from the Photo Albums of Dutch Industrialists in Colonial Java

Alexander Supartono

In 1905 a fifteen-page pamphlet with the title *The Life in a Sugar Factory in the Indies* was published in Rotterdam, the busiest harbour city in continental Europe at the time. Its rather alarming subtitle, "Severe Warning to Parents who Let their Sons Go to the Indies", was a synopsis of the moral degradation, "the many graves of human moral life," that awaited young white males who might decide to spend time in the Dutch East Indies, and particularly in the Javanese region of sugar factories and sugar towns.[1] The existence of such a publication, despite its debatable content, suggests the level of sophistication of the sugar industry in the Dutch East Indies that attracted regular visitors, encouraging young globe-trotters from the metropolis to travel to the colony.

The historical setting of the pamphlet was the heyday of the Dutch East Indies colonial state, which was to enter its second century at the dawn of the twentieth century. Exclusively located in Java, the Dutch introduction of the modern industrial scale of sugar production in the second half of the 19th century may be held responsible for the change of the rural scenery across the island. The well-established Javanese agriculture system in the densely populated island provided an ideal supply of fertile soil and a work force for the plantation and the factory, respectively. What is more, through a complex path of journeys and family networks, the rapidly evolving industry encouraged more skilled Dutch and European workers to go to work for the industry and eventually live in Java. This movement of people, together with existent Chinese migrants, local gentries and skilled labourers, was instrumental in the emergence, all along the island of Java, of a chain of new industrial towns in which the white, high sugar factory chimneys became landmarks in the area, and have remained so to the present day.[2]

Along with the industrial boom in the later part of the 19th century, contemporary literary and travel accounts on the Indies, and especially life in the burgeoning sugar towns in Java, had elevated the trip to the far away land to a kind of pilgrimage or rite of passage in the consciousness of metropolitan youngsters. Indeed many Dutch writers shared the indulgence of "our Indies hospitality" in the ritual of morning coffee, a midday siesta and the ceremonious exchanges of visits.[3] This heaven-on-earth narrative on the Dutch East Indies, promoted in the travel publications of the period,[4] was visually reinforced by photographic representations of life in the colony which circulated in the motherland and elsewhere in the form of postcards and commercial and private albums.

Although there is little historical information available regarding the photographic representation of the growth of the sugar industry, and what there is is fairly sketchy, there is evidence that there was a strong interrelationship between the rapid development of a market for commercial imagery and the colony's industrialization. The early 20th century map of Java's sugar factories and plantations[5] and the geographical location of the commercial photo studios operating on the island in the same period[6] indicates that the two were indeed interconnected, thus validating the assumption that the wealth associated with the sugar industry fuelled a concomitant industry in photography.

These interconnections explain the socio-economic basis of the photographic industry in the colony, and at the same time elucidate the way in which the industry played an instrumental role in the creation and circulation of popular and typological imagery of the colony both in the Indies and The Netherlands. The mythologizing narrative of this imagery fed the colonial imaginary and knowledge of and about the colony, as indicated in the circulation of certain iconic themes in different photo albums and the shifting use of those photographs in different contexts and purposes.

Originally commissioned by industrialists as a token of their success, riches and comfortable life in the colony, the family and corporate photo albums in which such imagery has been preserved were to paint the bigger picture of the Indies.[7] Decades after losing their original use value, these photo albums have been providing valuable visual material to curators and scholars to contextualize Dutch colonial practices. However, despite the fact that photographic representations of the sugar industry constitute one of the biggest subject collections in the Dutch photo archives, *The Sweet and Sour Story of Sugar* is the first photography project to investigate in depth, historicize and contextualize old and new processes of globalization by combining the historical representations of the industry with new photographic assignments in The Netherlands, Indonesia, Suriname, and Brazil.

The inclusion of historical photographs in the project aims to present a paradigm shift in the contested notion of 'colonial photography', a generic term often indiscriminately used to describe photographic depictions and practices within and of colonial settings and subjects. Historically – that is, following the introduction of the medium of photography in the colonies – photographs were to describe, maintain and create knowledge of the colonial subject as well as to document diverse colonial projects, and thus verify and visually reinforce the supremacy and power of the colonizers over the colonized, as Edward Said would claim.[8] Revisiting family and commercial albums that belonged to industrialists active in Java in the period in question, this paper aims to show that such imagery did not simply document the ways that the fully-fledged industrialization of the colony changed its rural scenery, demographics, and social hierarchies. It also established a set of aesthetic and conceptual norms of imagi(ni)ng the colony and colonial regulation that were infiltrated into the vernacular and mainstream popular consciousness both in

the colony and the motherland and informed local and national (hi)stories.

Figure 1. Unknown, "In the rotunda of the General Manager's house, Mr. and Mrs. Pietermaat and Ms. Mulder, a lodger" (after 1914), from the album "Souvenir from Purwokerto and Kalibagor", Alb. 256 (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, Coll. Nr. 6004317), 5.

The photograph in figure 1 is a prime example of the stereotypical aesthetic, thematography and socially-informed choreography that characterized the amateur and professional portrait photographs that were to find their way onto the pages of those albums. The architecture, the ornamented wooden furniture, the sitters' outfits, and the surrounding plants are all, unmistakably, insignia of a tropical place. Sitting in the rotunda in the company of their dogs, the three white sitters seem to be enjoying the calm misty atmosphere that follows an afternoon rain in the tropics. The compositional apex of the photograph has placed Mr. J.A. Pietermaat-Soesman, manager of the Kalibagor sugar factory, at the top of an imaginary triangle with the two female sitters, his wife on the right and their lodger, Ms Mulder on the left, occupying rocking chairs at the bottom base.[9] This hierarchical structure along with the detailed information in the title provides further insight into the social relationships within the colonial society in the local sugar world, and between Western settlers and occasional travellers to and within Java.

The semi-circular symmetry of the ornamental flower pots that punctuate the perimeter of the rotunda circles the triangular schema accentuating its visual effect, as does the repetition of a set of empty rocking chairs in the background replicating the formation of the ones in the foreground.
The fairly large size of the print in the album, measuring 21 x 27.5 centimeter, affords the viewer with detailed material information that would not be accessible should the print have been a standard *carte-de-visite* portrait.
Thus, for instance, one is able to discern the rain puddles on the pebbled foreground, which indicate that the picture was taken just after the afternoon tropical rain. It is not unlikely that the photographer had to wait for the rain to stop to compose the scene and stage his sitters; a prolonged time frame that allowed for the meticulous composition. In the same vein, the details of the subjects' outfits and postures are revealing of their *modus vivendi* in the colony. Mr. J.A. Pietermaat-Soesman, in an all-white outfit, particularly popular among Westerners for keeping cool in the heat of the tropical sun, is sitting cross-legged on the steps of the rotunda in the manner local Javanese men sat at the time, while the two women also combine local Javanese batik sarongs and white *kebaya* blouses with leather shoes, a luxury that only Westerners and the Javanese gentry could enjoy. These crossovers in dress code and mannerisms overtly manifest, and celebrate through photographic representation, a way of life informed by a partial assimilation of indigenous life and culture.

Another example of how the layered composition, the technical execution and size of a photograph may have reflected and fed the colonial project is the photograph below.

Figure 2. Kassian Cephas, "The bridge over the Progo River near the Sewoe Galoor Sugar Factory" (1896), from the album "Views from Different Places", Alb. 362 (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, Coll. Nr. 60030023), 23.

Meticulously staged and composed, the picture depicts a seemingly idyllic scene that imitates the aesthetics and iconography of Romanticism: a painterly sky reflected on a slowly-flowing expanse of water; identical patches of woodland on both banks of the river in the far background and dense coconut foliage on the left side graphically outlining the sole, clearly discernible human figures. On the horizon line, the bridge, a magnificent piece of civil engineering, divides the sky and the water, connecting one bank to the other; a barely visible minuscule figure standing on the middle of it enhances its monumental scale. In the foreground the wet soil of the riverbank, punctuated by wildly grown bushes, interrupts the serenity of the otherwise fully-controlled picture plane.

This picturesque rural view purposefully exploits the tropical landscape and ambience to express a romanticized idea of the wild East that is harmoniously fused with the vision of modernization, in this case represented by the construction of an effective transportation system. However, there is an interesting twist in this picture, as the viewer's attention is directed toward the overtly posed and carefully choreographed figures in the left hand corner. A man in the stereotypical white colonial outfit, but barefooted, is standing holding a cane. With his back to the camera, he seems to be gazing at the bridge. His reflection on the water highlights his bare feet. Two scantily dressed Javanese men accompany him. They are squatting down before him, looking up to him, literally and metaphorically. The picture epitomizes the visual dialogue between the pristine Javanese landscape and industrialization, between nature and culture, between the locals and the outsider. Although the caption informs us that the context is the sugar industry and the subject matter is the bridge, the focal point in this photograph is undeniably a hierarchical logic implied by the ideologically imbued staging of the three figures in the foreground – a very similar logic to the one that dictated the positioning of Mr. Pietermaat-Soesman, his wife and Ms. Mulder in Figure 1. Only in this case the orchestration of the scene is informed by racial and social presuppositions rather than gender.

This photograph is a fine example of the work of Kasian Cephas, the celebrated first Javanese photographer.[10] In the album entitled "Views from Different Places" in the Pietermaat-Soesman collection, from which the photograph in question was taken, there are in total nine photographs depicting bridges, five of them were photographed by Cephas around Yogyakarta.[11] Presumably, the compilers of the album bought Cephas's photographs when they visited Yogyakarta to add them to the family photo album. This was a fairly common practice among elite members of the colonial society, who purchased photographs as tokens of their visits to different places and compiled them into albums. Having photographs of modern bridges together with topographic views ready for sale in his studio meant that Cephas had identified a market demand for imagery that verified the successes of the colonial rule in local infrastructure and society, and more specifically the engineering achievements[12] and the large-scale social and economic mobility made

possible by the sugar industry. The central role that local commercial photo studios played in the conceptualization, production and dissemination of typological imagery of the colonial industry is also verified in one of the iconic themes in the photographic representation of the sugar industry: the epic photographs of industrial machinery, an example of which is discussed below.

The photograph in Figure 3 depicts an interior view of a sugar factory in Java in the early part of the 20th century, taken by Kurkdjian and Co. Studio, another prominent photo studio in the Dutch East Indies. The main subject of the photograph is without doubt the factory machine, whose epic scale dominates the picture plane. Intersected and interconnected pipes in different sizes, together with iron wires attached to the roof, point to the complex technology and structure of such machinery, at the same time showcasing a visually enticing geometric pattern. The gigantic dark cylindrical containers are awe-inspiring and rather unwelcoming, but the iron stairs in the foreground invite a close inspection. The big steel wheels indicate a relentlessly moving machine, but they are not turning. The work has been interrupted for the photograph to be taken, but the machine operators and their supervisor were

Figure 3. Kurkdjian and Co. Studio, "The Cooking and Evaporation Station in a sugar factory in Java" (c. 1900), from the album "Algemeen Syndicaat van Suikerfabrikanten in Nederlandsch-Indie", Alb. 529, page 20, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, Coll. Nr. 60007226

not simply paused but posed in rather unexpected poses. The only employee who is engaged in action is an administrator in an all-white outfit, who, seated at a small table facing the machine, appears to be writing. There are a number of reasons behind the paradoxical manner in which the scene was composed and orchestrated.

First and foremost, this photograph was constructed as an ode to the unique technological advancements in sugar manufacture. Being among the more advanced machinery in the world of industrial sugar manufacture, the multiple effect condensers, in use in Javanese sugar factories since the 1870s,[13] were a technological wonder, and as such were glorified in photographs that pictorially emphasized their monumental size, complexity and efficacy to impress the viewers. Such photographs of factory machinery constituted the ultimate representation of the advanced status of sugar production in colonial Java, and the independence of the colonial sugar industry from the metropolitan sugar refineries. Thus, for instance, in the album of the General Syndicate of Sugar Manufacturers in the Dutch East Indies from which the photograph is taken, out of 91 photographs there are 18 photographs depicting machinery and activities in the factory, 15 photographs of factory housing, but only one photograph depicting cane harvesting.[14]

The figures of employees featuring in photographs of factory interior views often serve the compositional purposes of the image, merely as comparative indicators of scale, rather than attest to its truth value or enhance its realism. This is why in depictions of factory interiors there are no heroic, highly-skilled machine operators in action, in the manner that Lewis Hine would glorify them in his study of man and machine in the 1920s. These workers are almost always posed either standing informally in the middle of the machinery or leaning casually over it, but never acting as if they operate it. The theatricality of the setting of the photograph in Figure 3 appears even more paradoxical once one realizes that the seated supervisor in the foreground is seemingly at work before supervisees and a machine that is idle. Yet, the directed postures are meant to point to metaphorical rather than literal connotations: the supervisor retains overall control of modern technology, whilst the operator, in his relaxed pose, manifests his familiarity with the machine, which, effectively, on the second level of signification, recedes in the background making way for the proud and in-control workers.

This idiosyncratic *mise en scène* seems to have become a commonplace among standard depictions of sugar manufacture machinery in colonial Java that were widely circulated through, and now survive in family and company photo albums.[15] As was the case with Cephas's photograph discussed above, the local commercial photo studios adopted and adapted different pictorial styles and idioms to cater to the aesthetic and cultural aspirations of a diverse, socially heterogeneous clientele. At the same time, the typological traits of those standardized styles set the aesthetic norm for the photographic representation of the industry. The photograph in Figure 3 is found in various photo albums, as well as loose prints in different archive centres in The Netherlands,[16] while it was also reproduced in a postcard series representing the sugar industry in Java. On the back of the postcard, the text is written in Dutch, Malay and Javanese, suggesting the diversity of the target market.

Figure 4. "The Java Sugar Industry in Pictures" (1900-1910), Postcard series on the theme of the sugar industry in Java based on photographs of the Kurkdjian and Co. Studio, Alb. 2460 (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, Coll. Nr. 30054609 and 30054621).

Owing to transnational circulation through commercial channels and private albums, the popularity of such pictorial idioms from the sugar industry in Java reached audiences beyond Java. When the Dutch government in The Hague started a national campaign to promote Dutch colonial possessions in The Netherlands, they assigned institutions and individuals to produce visual representations of the different aspects of life in the colony. "A School Plate" project was launched in the early 1910s to produce a series of visual representations, both photographs and paintings, about the colonies for school children in The Netherlands. Impressively large in size (73 x 58 centimeter), four series of school plates were produced, each consisting of fifty plates. Not surprisingly, the photograph in Figure 3 was selected to represent (as its titles states) interior views of a sugar factory.

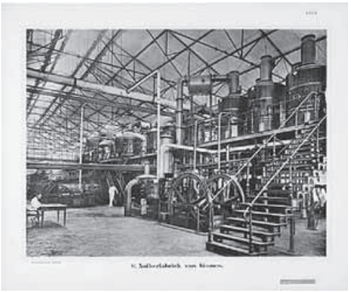
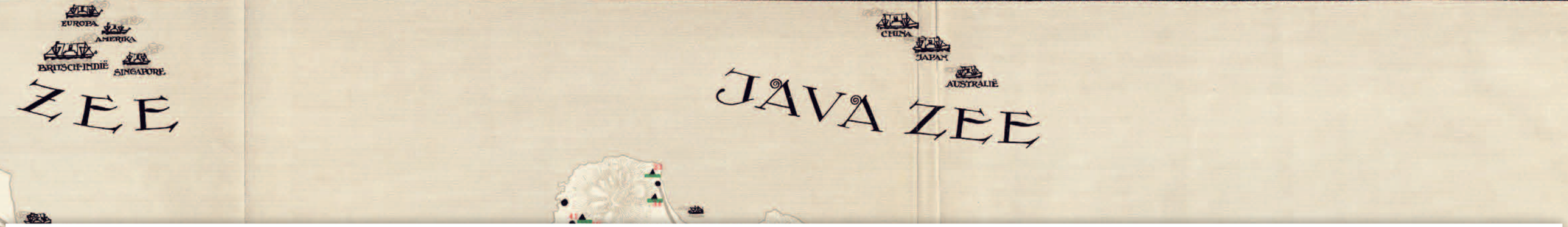


Figure 5. "Interior Views of a Sugar Factory" (before 1945), school plate series on the sugar industry in Java based on photograph of the Kurkdjian and Co. Studio (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, Coll. Nr. 4765-42).

All three photographs discussed above were taken from photo albums that now reside on the shelves of photographic collections in museums and archive centres in The Netherlands. As has



already been mentioned, the first two photographs in Figures 1 and 2 come from the photo albums of the Pietermaat-Soesman family, who donated the visual record of their life in the colony to the then Colonial Museum (today Tropenmuseum) in 1929. These albums are exemplary of how photo albums may be indeed be "books of specimens", as David Brewster would have put it,[17] including activities in the factory, the sugar plantation and the industrialized landscape as well as topographical views of local scenery and tourist sights. Still, they do retain the familiality and cult value of the family album as this was introduced in the mid nineteenth century. In contrast, the photograph in Figure 3 was taken from the official photo album for the General Syndicate of Sugar Manufacturers in the Dutch East Indies, which is also now part of the Tropenmuseum collection. The above analysis has shown that the family and corporate photo albums of Dutch industrialists may be equally paradigmatic of how photo albums can present a fairly comprehensive visual documentation not singularly of the industry, but of the colonial society at large. It is this vernacular side of colonial photographic practice that is often excluded from official histories of what is commonly identified as 'colonial photography'.

Often loosely categorized under the history of non-Western photography, 'colonial photography' mainly refers to Western photographers who worked following colonial paths that traversed those of adventurism, science and imperialism. Various studies have discussed the camera's role, in the hands of professionals and amateurs alike, in creating imaginative geographies by surveying the land and constructing ideological landscapes as well as classifying and illustrating race and tribes in the colony according to "belief, need and expectation" in the Western world.[18] The circulation of such ideologically dense imagery from the colony was instrumental in shaping European identities by defining the colonized people and place as the 'other.'[19]

In this light, the material selected from the photo albums of Dutch sugar industrialists in Java provides a very different type of photographic representation of and for the colony. Not only do these photographs move away from the oft-cited official documentation and the blunt colonial construction of racial, cultural and geographic difference, they also efficiently contest popular notions of 'otherness', which traditionally involved mainly native populations, by affording the viewer an insight into colonial practices through the eyes of the colonizer presenting themselves as 'other'. As the self-representation of those who were in charge of the colonial industry, these albums exemplify a culture of imagi(ni)ng the colony that served and glorified the aspirations of the colonial upper middle class and in which the various pictorial genres included in the albums, from portraits and landscapes to photographs of machinery, are but the cultural expressions of specific necessities within the colonial society.

In this narrative, colonialism is the taken-for-granted historical setting; it becomes part of everyday life and is, in essence, naturalized. This explains why colonial references in these albums appear much subtler than the exoticizing overtones in ethnographic or anthropological photographs. The colonial spirit is manifested in the way that the sitters embraced local culture by adopting a hybrid dress code, in the colonial social hierarchies that punctuated the rapidly industrialized landscape, and in the popular aesthetic that was formulated out of and circulated through standardized depictions of sugar manufacture machinery. Such a claim is not to deny issues of racial discrimination and exploitation of native populations within the local colonial society. On the contrary, by looking at alternative representations of 'otherness', that is, with the colonizer as the 'other', we can understand how race relations worked on a day-to-day basis and how class would eventually prevail over race in the course of the establishment of capitalism in the colony. In this respect, the images of colonized subjects exploited within the sugar industry that are missing from these albums are contextualized in the very details of the daily life in the colony, their absence elucidating their presence in the factory and plantation.

The reinterpretation of this historical material from Indonesia, Suriname and Brazil in the present project signals an attempt to restore a missing part in the official accounts of the sugar industry and the personal stories of the protagonists in this history that is equally absent from the history of photography at large. By incorporating official and vernacular material and practices, colonial and post-colonial, historical and contemporary, it aims to visualize a sometimes sweet, other times sour (hi)story of sugar that is "materially grounded and conceptually expansive, just like the medium [of photography] itself."[20]

[1] Kentongan, *Het Leven op Een Suikerfabriek in Indië: Ernstige Waarschuwing Aan Ouders, die Hunne Zonen naar Indië Laten Gaan* (Rotterdam: Masereeuw & Bouten, 1905), 1.

[2] For further analysis of the history of the sugar industry in Java, see Auke Hulst in the current volume.

[3] Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: Europeans and Eurasians in Colonial Indonesia* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009 [1983]), 136.

[4] The list of English publications cited here should indicate that the relevant Dutch publications had already been well circulated. See, for example, Augusta de Wit, *Java, Facts and Fancies* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1905); Antoine Cabaton, *Java, Sumatra, and the Other Islands of the Dutch East Indies*, translated and with a preface by Bernard Mill (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911); Arthur S. Walcott, *Java and her Neighbours: A Traveler's Notes in Java, Celebes, the Moluccas, and Sumatra* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1914).

[5] This map was published in the two-volume post-factum catalogue of the *Semarang International Colonial Exhibition* in Central Java in 1916. See *Gedenkboek van de Koloniale Tentoonstelling Semarang, 20 August-22 November 1914* (Batavia, Dutch East Indies: Handelsdrukkerij en Kantoorboekhandel Mercurius, 1916), 96a.

[6] If we superimpose Steven Wachlin's mapping of the 540 commercial photo studios operating between 1850 and 1940 in 77 cities and towns in the Dutch East Indies – 46 of which were located in Java – on the aforementioned sugar map, we discover a geographical interconnection between the development of sugar industrial centres and the blossoming of commercial photo studios around them. Steven Wachlin, "Commercial Photographers and Photographic Studios in the Netherlands East Indies, 1850-1940: A Survey", in Anneke Groeneveld, et al., *Toekang Potret: 100 Years of Photography in the Dutch Indies, 1839-1939* (Amsterdam: Fragment Uitgeverij, 1989), 177-192.

[7] The circulation of those photo albums in The Netherlands may be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century when the Colonial Museum received numerous donations of photo albums from families of entrepreneurs and industrialists who had lived and worked in the colonies, mainly in the Dutch East Indies. See Steven Vink and Janneke van Dijk, "From Colonial Topicality to Cultural Heritage: The History of the Photograph Collection", in Janneke van Dijk et al., *Photographs of the Netherlands East Indies at the Tropenmuseum* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2012).

[8] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). See also Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, eds, *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[9] Mr. J.A. Pietermaat-Soesman became the general manager of the Kalibagor sugar factory in Southwest Java in 1914 at the age of 46. His grandfather Daniel Francois Willem Pietermaat was the resident of Semarang and later of Surabaya. His father and siblings belonged to that generation of Indies-born European entrepreneurs who constituted the elite members of the colonial society at the turn of the 20th century. Central Bureau for Genealogy, The Hague, collection Nederlandsche Leeuw – Polvliet, Family file Pietermaat and collection of East Indian sources.

[10] Mostly associated with portraits of the court of the Sultans of Yogyakarta and the representation of Hindu-Javanese antiquities, Cephas's work beyond his official commissions is less known. For further analysis of his body of work, see Gerrit J. Knaap, *Cephas, Yogyakarta: Photography in the Service of the Sultan* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1999).

[11] Cephas was the only photographer whose name was printed onto the decorated pages of this album, a fact that suggests that he had a prominent place among his contemporary counterparts in Java.

[12] For Dutch engineers, building bridges in the East Indies was a very challenging task. This explains why the photograph of a bridge in an album was often accompanied by a description of the bridge's technical details. See for example *Souvenir van Poerwokerto en Kalibagor*, (after 1914) Alb-256 (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam), 28, 57.

[13] Roger Knight, "Sugar, Technology and Colonial Encounters: Refashioning the Industry in the Netherlands Indies, 1800-1942", *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12 (1999), 226-229.

[14] A smaller album from the same collection contains ten photographs of factory machinery but only one photograph (out of 24 pictures) of a cane field ready to be harvested, see "Suikerfabriek Sedatie 1914", Alb-485 (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam).

[15] Similar compositional arrangement and poses are to be found in other photographs of sugar manufacture machinery in which neither the machine, nor the people, whether supervisors or operators, are ever presented in action. See for example "Souvenir van Poerwokerto en Kalibagor" (after 1914), pages 20 and 21, Alb-256, and "Maron Suikerfabriek" (1917), page 12, Alb-1803 Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam; "Suikerfabriek Tjomal op Java" (c.1919), (Alb-NG-C-2004-1-A Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), 10-17.

[16] See for instance "Algemeen Syndicaat van Suikerfabrikanten in Nederlandsch-Indie. Suiker op Java" (nd), (Alb-529, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam), 20; and "Suikerfabriek Ketagen bij Modjokerto" (1912), (Alb -475, KITLV, Leiden).

[17] Graham Smith, *Disciples of Light, Photographs in the Brewster Album* (Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1990), 12-13.

[18] "The Geography Lesson: Photographs and the Construction of Imaginative Geography", *Journal of Historical Geography* 22, 1 (1996), 30, and James Ryan, *Picturing Empire. Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[19] Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photographs and Exhibitions. Representations of the 'Native' and the Making of European Identities* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999).

[20] Geoffrey Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies", *History of Photography* 24:3 (2000), 262-271.