

Between the Village and the City Representing Colonial Indonesia in the Films of Saeroen

Following the Great Depression, colonial Indonesia underwent a shift in societal make-up, which influenced various forms of popular culture. Writers and other creative professionals used popular culture to express their opinions on the cultural shift. The reporter turned screenwriter Saeroen was no exception. Attached to four film production houses in his four-year screenwriting career (1937–1941), Saeroen's oeuvre included some of the biggest commercial successes of the period, and often involved the theme of migration from the villages to the cities. Though the majority of Saeroen's films are now thought lost, enough evidence survives in the form of film reviews, novelizations, and promotional material for a textual analysis of his works and the views contained within. As will be shown, Saeroen's works represent a testament to the experience of abandoning the villages and embracing the cities. Using post-colonial theory and Upstone's concept of space, we argue that Saeroen represented colonial cities as both full of the possibility for further development and replete with dangers not found in the villages, and villages as stagnant and rarely changing with few intrinsic dangers. We further argue that cities and villages in these films become embodiments of the oft-contrasted concepts of modernity and tradition. Ultimately, we conclude that Saeroen's representation of colonial Indonesia is intended as both a warning against embracing modernity at the expense of tradition, as well as a call for further modernization.

BACKGROUND: A COLONY IN FLUX

In order to escape an economic downward spiral following the Great Depression, the Dutch East Indies government, in the mid-1930s, spearheaded an increase in the colony's manufacturing capabilities (Van Zanden and Marks 2012, 196–98). This increased urbanization meant that the drive towards modernization, which had been reflected in political discourse among much of the early 20th-century Indies intelligentsia, became increasingly important in the lives of the average indigenous residents of the Indies. Those migrating to the cities were not the schooled children of noblemen looking for government work, but unskilled laborers intent on finding work as part of the manufacturing process or serving the needs of wealthier residents of the increasingly urbanized cities. However, in migrating to an urban environment, these unskilled laborers faced the question of the role of tradition and village life in a modern society. To what extent should it influence their decisions and day-to-day lives? Were they mistaken in leaving their villages to take their chances in the city?

Although extensive discussion of the drive of the relationship between modernity and tradition rang throughout the colony, it generally was in media used by the educated elite. Polemics in the press, be they newspapers and magazines owned by the Chinese or indigenes, could only be accessed by those who could read. Many had limited circulation. For example, one of what would prove to be the most influential publications of the time, *Poedjangga Baroe*, never had more than 150 subscribers (Sutherland 2012, 102). The same limitation held true for depictions of modernity and tradition in literature, such as Hamka's 1939 novel *Tuan Direktur*. Though the indigene had received government-sanctioned opportunities for a Western education since the early 20th century, the system was classist, favoring those from rich families and those of noble decent (Adam 1995, 87). As such, the literacy rate did not support the involvement of the general populace in examining the role of modernity.

Rather, the most popular medium of the time, and that which had the possibility of reaching the greatest number of people, was film. Following the fall of stage dramas in the mid-1930s and the commercial success of journalist-turned-director Albert Balink's *Terang Boelan* (1937), the film industry underwent a massive

expansion between 1938 and 1941. More films were released in these four years (53, to be exact) than the 38 works produced since the first domestic fiction film was released in 1926 (Biran 2009, 379–81). The colony was home to hundreds of cinemas, mostly located on Java and Sumatra. Furthermore, owing to the primarily aural nature of these talkies, viewers—most of whom were lower-class residents of the urban portions of Java and Sumatra—did not need to be well educated to understand the main storyline or have their understanding of the positions of modernity and tradition subliminally shaped by the medium.

In order to understand the positioning of modernity and tradition received by the average indigenous individual in the Dutch East Indies—not as understood by the academic elite, but as understood by the average resident—it is important to explore the representation of modernity and tradition in the films of the Dutch East Indies. This research project endeavors to do so by examining the oeuvre of the most significant screenwriter from this period: Saeroen. This author has selected Saeroen for both being the first professional indigenous screenwriter and having a significant cultural impact through his two films, *Terang Boelan* and *Fatima*, which Biran (ibid., 182) credits with revitalizing and providing a formula that was followed by the popular cinema industry of the Indies and independent Indonesia. Through this analysis, it is expected that Saeroen's positioning of tradition and modernity, represented by the village and the city, can be identified, and through this, the positioning of modernity and tradition conveyed to the uneducated indigenes of the Dutch East Indies can be understood.

SAEROEN: JOURNALIST AND SCREENWRITER

Although his year of birth is uncertain, it is known that Saeroen (see figure 1) was born in Yogyakarta. The son of an *abdi dalem* named Mangoendigdo, he had the opportunity to study at two schools, but ultimately dropped out, resorting to selling newspapers and washing vehicles to earn a living. After a written-test equivalent of an elementary school diploma, he moved to Batavia and worked at a train station; he was introduced to journalistic writing here, writing for the railway employees' news publication, *Vereniging van Spoor-en Tram Personeel*. Saeroen soon left the company and began writing

for more mainstream publications, such as *Siang Po* and *Keng Po*. Coverage of the Congress of Native Journalists in July 1931 places Saeroen as being with *Siang Po* at the time (*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 1931), and an advertisement on 24 August 1932 in *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* indicates that he was that newspaper's editor.



Figure 1. Saeroen.

Having made a name for himself, Saeroen worked with Raden Hajji Djunaedi to establish the Senen-based daily *Pemandangan* in March 1933 (*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 1933). In *Pemandangan*, Saeroen wrote numerous editorials under the pen name Kampret (“microbat”). At the time, editorials were mainstays of minor publications, and several reporters were better known by their pen names than their birth names. As Kampret, Saeroen staunchly called for an independent Indonesia. One of his editorials, for instance, outlined a “United Indonesian Republic” led by Prime Minister Mohammad Husni Thamrin, with ministers including the journalist Parada Harahap and educator Ki Hadjar Dewantara (Soebagijo 1981, 146). Saeroen was on good terms with all of them, and had worked closely with Harahap. His editorials, although quite popular, meant *Pemandangan* attracted the attention of the censorship bureau. It was closed several times, and Saeroen was fined for such offenses as using the term “harassment” to describe police management of a case involving the Bandung daily *Sipatahoenan*.

Outside of *Pemandangan*, Saeroen was an outspoken advocate for indigene rights. In 1933, he was part of a committee that

challenged the focus of NIROM (Nederlandsch-Indische Radio-Omroep Maatschappij) on European audiences. Saeroen pushed for the company to stop drawing comparisons between Europeans and Asians (*De Indische Courant* 1934), and in 1936, he became part of a committee to promote education for Native Indonesians (*Soerabaijasch Handelsblad* 1936). Later he was asked to head the native desk at the Aneta news agency, sponsored with Dutch capital. He was reported to be attached to the company by the time he published his book *Dibelakang Lajar Journalistiek Indonesia* in November 1936 (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* 1936). Despite this new position, he also continued writing for *Pemandangan*. Biran (2009, 232) attributes several 1940 film reviews in that newspaper to him. In 1936, Saeroen became the first professional screenwriter in the Indies. His career in this role is discussed in the following section.

By 1939, however, Saeroen's involvement in the press became more controversial. The colonial government began investigating possible connections between Saeroen and the Empire of Japan through his role in the acquisition of the newspaper *Warta Harian* and the printing press Tjaja Pasundan (as well as possible embezzlement of 3,600 gulden during said acquisition) in May 1939 (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* 1939; *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 1940b). He was arrested later that month. Saeroen argued that, although he had known the Japanese since meeting a trade delegation in 1934, he had never intended to undermine the Dutch government, and instead accepted the funds as a "donation" for the welfare of the Indonesian populace (*Het Vaderland* 1939). Ultimately, Saeroen spent nine months in prison awaiting trial for embezzlement. He was released in mid-February 1940 until he could stand trial (*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 1940a). After his release, he returned to screenwriting. He was later convicted, but went through the appeals process, and ultimately the charges were dropped in February 1941 (*Soerabaijasch Handelsblad* 1941).

Saeroen's activities during the Japanese occupation and National Revolution are unclear (Soebagijo 1981, 150). By 1953, he had returned to journalism, and is recorded as writing, again under the name Kampret, in newspapers such as *Lukisan Dunia*, *Dewan Rakjat*, and *Warta Bogor*; he also served as publisher for the last of these. To augment his income, by 1953, Saeroen had opened several hotels in Cipayung. All had bat-themed names, including Kampret, Kalong, and Kelelawar. Saeroen died in Bogor on 6 October 1962.

THE FILMS: FROM *TERANG BOELAN* TO *AJAH BERDOSA*

During his four-year screenwriting career, Saeroen is known to have written at least ten films for four different production houses. Alas, we have yet been unable to consult the original films. Instead, for the purposes of this research, we have selected a sample of four films from different periods in Saeroen's career based on the availability of documentation, i.e., advertising material, reviews, and novelizations. From the intrinsic narrative elements of these four films, we draw conclusions of the views which he presented through cinema. Owing to the lack of access to the films themselves, as well as Saeroen's position as a screenwriter—which gave him no creative control over stylistic or technical aspects of the production—non-narrative elements are not discussed.

Saeroen's first film, *Terang Boelan*, was written for Albert Balink and the Dutch Indies Film Syndicate (Algemeen Nederlandsch Indisch Filmsyndicaat, or ANIF). In this feature film debut, he drew inspiration from the Dorothy Lamour vehicle *The Jungle Princess* (Paramount, 1936). Ultimately, the commercial success of this jungle formula (the greatest success of any film of the colonial Indies) launched Saeroen's writing career, and was a direct influence in Tan's Film signing Saeroen. As will be explored further below, in *Terang Boelan*, Saeroen already displays a pro-modern stance, though ultimately the village is represented more positively than in his later works. The following plot summary is derived from promotional material reproduced by Biran (2009, 169–70):

Rohaya and Kasim are separated after Rohaya's father arranges for her to marry the disreputable (but rich) Moesa. The night before the wedding, they agree to elope, and the following day they escape from Sawoba Island. Arriving in Malacca, Kasim takes a job at a drydock; Rohaya, meanwhile, keeps busy as a housewife. This peaceful life together is interrupted when Moesa—revealed to be an opium dealer—discovers them and informs Rohaya's father. The elder man comes to Malacca to take Rohaya. Kasim follows them back to the island, knowing of Moesa's illegal activities, and uses this information to rally the villagers to his side. He and Moesa fighting, and Kasim emerges victorious. Ultimately



Figure 2. Advertisement for *Sorga Toedjoe*.

the villagers and Rohaya's father agree that Kasim and Rohaya should be together.

After ANIF refused to produce any more fiction films, Saeroen (as well as much of the cast and crew of *Terang Boelan*) joined the Batavia-based Tan's Film, beginning with 1938's *Fatima* and continuing into 1939. The last Tan's film with which he can be even tentatively identified with is *Sorga Ka Toedjoe* (1940). Although the screenwriter for this film is not recorded (including in advertising materials), and the novelization is simply credited to "L.," we argue that this was Saeroen's last contribution to the company. An illustrated advertisement (see figure 2) for the film was run in *Pemandangan* (on 19 October 1940; clipping accessed at Sinematek Indonesia), suggesting that it received a place of honor in this newspaper, with its strong ties to the writer. Owing to thematic similarities with works confirmed to be by Saeroen, it is probable that he wrote (at the very least) the first treatment of the film. The October premiere was sufficiently distanced from Saeroen's imprisonment that it is possible he completed the entire work, although (considering the anonymous novelization) it is also a possibility that other writers developed his treatment further after his imprisonment. A relatively lengthy production schedule, lasting several months, was not uncommon for Tan's productions starring their leading lady, Roekiah. A summary of *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*, derived from the novelization, follows (L. [Saeroen] 1940):

Rasminah lives with her blind aunt Hadidjah in Puncak; Hadidjah has been separated from her husband, Kasimin, for several years, ever since she accused him of adultery. Because a corpse resembling him was found soon afterwards, she thinks herself a widow, though he is actually alive and well. Rasminah leaves the village to look for work, attempting to avoid the rich and detestable Parta, who intends to take her as his second wife. When she returns to Puncak to pick up her aunt, Parta and his cohort Doel ambush her. She runs into the woods and finds shelter in a small house. There she rests the night, without seeing the owner.

The following morning, Rasminah is awakened by the house's owner, Hoesin. Fearing that he is working with Parta, Rasminah sneaks outside, but is confronted by the two.

Hoesin saves her then escorts her home. As time passes the two fall in love, and they move to Batavia with Hadidjah. When Hoesin asks to marry Rasminah, she tells him that she will only marry once her aunt is reunited with Kasimin. After a long search this is brought to fruition; Kasimin and Hadidjah are reunited, and Hoesin and Rasminah begin their preparations.

In 1940, Saeroen took work with Union Film, another Batavia-based company. He wrote three films for the company: *Bajar dengan Djiwa*, *Harta Berdarah*, and *Asmara Moerni*. This last film, released in April 1941, starred Adnan Kapau Gani (later known as a smuggler and politician) and the stage actress Djoewariah. Biran (2009, 260) has already mentioned how this film was targeted at the growing intelligentsia and indigene middle class. The following synopsis is based on the novelization (Saeroen 1941):

Dr. Pardi visits his family in Cigading, only to find that their maid Tati has grown to become a beautiful woman. He begins to fawn over her, although he does not tell her the reason. Tati's fiancé, Amir, is jealous of this attention, and begins plans to move to Batavia; Tati joins him. In the city they find work and save for their wedding. Pardi, meanwhile, has opened a practice in the city (though he is also searching for Tati).

Days before the wedding, Amir is asked to join Miss Omi's musical troupe, an offer which Amir refuses. A man then asks him to deliver a package, and soon the police soon arrest Amir and charge him with smuggling opium. When Amir does not return, Tati worries: as she saw Amir with Omi, she fears that they have eloped. Heartbroken, she plans to quit and return to Cigading. Unknowingly she passes Pardi—her boss's doctor; Pardi ensures that Tati is taken care of and educated.

Amir is released eighteen months later and, unable to find Tati, wanders the streets. Omi spots him, and Amir agrees to join her troupe. Advertisements tout his name. Seeing this, Tati goes to the concert, only to find that Amir has been hit by a car. At the hospital, Tati learns the truth behind Amir's absence. On his deathbed, Amir asks Pardi to take care of Tati; the two are later married.

Following *Asmara Moerni*, Saeroen left Union Film and joined Star Film, making his debut for the company with *Pah Wongsong Tersangka* (screened by December 1941). The last film which Saeroen is known to have written, *Ajah Berdosa*, was completed that year. A summary, derived from a contemporary review (*Soerabaijisch Handelsblad* 1942), follows:

A young villager named Mardiman has become a scribe, but has difficulty advancing because his wife, Warsiah, and her family are not influential. Not long after the couple has a son, Mardiman is promoted. He moves to the city to work, but falls for a sophisticated city woman, one who is more “modern” than Warsiah. Leaving his wife and sick son to be with this woman, Mardiman soon spends all of his money trying to give her a high-class lifestyle. Unwilling to abandon his infatuation or return to the village, Mardiman begins to embezzle money. When he is caught, he is jailed and loses everything. When he is released several years later, Mardiman is unable to find honest employment, and ultimately takes a job with an underground *arak* syndicate. When the police raid the facility, Mardiman is severely injured. Sent to a hospital, he is reunited with Warsiah—his nurse—and their son, a doctor; Mardiman repents his sins.

BETWEEN THE VILLAGE AND THE CITY: REPRESENTING COLONIAL INDONESIA IN THE FILMS OF SAEROEN

The city space, that is, the city and all of its power structures, hierarchies, and (written and unwritten) rules, has long been used as a representation of the nation (be it a realized or unrealized one), and as with the nation itself it is a colonial construct, an attempt at ordering the unordered in order to obtain greater control. Thus, city space begins to “act metonymically as a reflection of national tensions” (Upstone 2009, 85), simultaneously becoming a city and a mini-nation through which the individual moves and in which the individual earns a living. As the city is a metonym, the issues of city space become representative of those in national space, reaching beyond the borders of the city itself.



Figure 3. Tati and Amir, awestruck upon arriving in the city.

This general trend holds true in Indonesian literature as well. As shown by Fuller (2012, 79), the city space, as early as the 1910s, has been used in Indonesian literature as a genesis of social criticism, as in the contrast between the rich and poor in the works of Marco Kartodikromo. Even in these short stories, published over two decades before Saeroen became active in the cinema, the city was inexorably linked with modernity, with its street lamps and tram stops featuring prominently in the narrative. Though the negative or positive representation of city space has varied from author to author, this tendency to identify cities with modernity has held true throughout the passing years, and by the 1930s and 1940s, the city space had become a source of fascination for the modern individual.

As the cities are held as pinnacles of modernity and modernization, the village—a pseudo-city space, a non-urban settlement—has often become representative of traditional culture. The village is a space where the individual is close to nature, considers him- or herself to be close to the existence of the Indonesian people before the arrival colonizing influences, and is subject to traditional authoritative structures; yet it is also a space which cannot be separated from the wider geopolitical space in which the village is located. Although the role of the village as a stand-in for the nation became most prominent in Indonesia during

the 1980s, as part of what is often termed the movement towards *warna lokal* (local color), portrayals of villages as traditional space date much earlier.

Focusing specifically on the works of Saeroen, there are consistent representations of both the city space and the village space. The city space, most commonly represented by Batavia but also including Malacca in *Terang Boelan*, is ubiquitously modern: it is the location of cars, major ports, *keroncong* music, and technology. It is overwhelming, shocking, and attention-grabbing. When Tati and Amir arrive in Batavia, for instance, their first impression is of the towering buildings and powerful architecture. Tati points at them, awe-struck (see figure 3). Such is the modernity introduced by Europeans: powerful and awe-inspiring, at least on the outside.

This same modernity of the city space allows the characters to grow, or at least find the agency to assert themselves. By migrating to the city, characters release themselves from the limits imposed by the village. Rohaya and Kasim of *Terang Boelan* are able to live happily as a married couple; Rasminah is able to find work to support her aunt and, later, marry Hoesin; Tati finds employment and prepares for her wedding; and Mardiman finds greater employment opportunities. The city space, and thus by connection modernity, offers possibilities for self-fulfillment and personal growth which are unavailable in the village, and thus the city becomes a worthy destination.

However, the possibilities offered are not without their risks, and this is where the ambiguity of the city is introduced. In the four works analyzed, not a single death occurred in the village space. Rather, death becomes an integral part of the city. A major plot point in *Sorga Ka Toedjoe* begins with a misidentified dead body found in Noordwijk Stream. This leads to Hadidjah having an accident—also in the city—which blinds her. In *Asmara Moerni*, meanwhile, Amir is killed in a car accident after becoming a *kecapi* player for a *keroncong* troupe, and in *Ajah Berdosa*, Mardiman is almost killed by the police after becoming an *arak* smuggler in the city, and is only saved when his wife and son nurse him back to health in Centraal Burgerlijke Ziekenhuis (now Dr. Cipto Mangunkusumo Hospital). The modernity and possibilities offered by the city space comes with a price: the omnipresent possibility of death. Progress is dangerous, even deadly, although it offers many possibilities.

If the city space represents the dangers and opportunities of progress, then the village space in Saeroen's work is representative

of a more peaceful stagnation. In a village setting, separated from the influences of the city, there is no inherent danger. Hadidjah and Rasminah of *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*, for instance, live peacefully together; their arrangement is only disturbed upon the arrival of an outside force, Parta, the son of a rich landlord based in the city. Kasimin and Rohaya of *Terang Boelan* are likewise able to enjoy a sense of peace in their island village of Sawoba, sitting and playing music together, simply enjoying each other's company. The only threat is that of an outsider, Moesa, who smuggles his city-gotten vices and enriches himself at the detriment of other people.

However, this peace has its own cost: stagnation. Tati, at the beginning of *Asmara Moerni*, has worked for Pardi's family all of her life, at least 15 years. She, as with her mother before her, has worked as a housemaid for the rich family, and has thus never been able to find her own fortune. Rasminah of *Sorga Ka Toedjoe* is likewise in a stagnant position; Rasminah must support her blind aunt, yet is financially incapable of doing so while living in the village. For these characters, the village offers no chances for self-development, no chances for a better life, only mere survival, and the accompanying despair. This becomes a driving force for said characters to find work in the city.

Significantly, the journey between the village and the city—and vice versa—is depicted as less important than the experiences in both spaces. Of the four works analyzed, three do not give the journey any emphasis at all. The novelization of *Asmara Moerni*, for instance, goes from Tati saying that she will go to Batavia in one paragraph to her and Amir arriving in the next. Only *Sorga Ka Toedjoe* gives any prominence to the journey. Significantly, in this scene Rasminah is returning to the village to pick up her aunt (a symbol of the familial authoritative structure dominant in the village) so that they can go to Batavia and find a better life together. This is interrupted when Rasminah is attacked by Parta—the greedy, capitalist son of a city-based landlord—who wants to take her as a wife. Ultimately, the city-educated (but not capitalistic) Hoesin saves her. Here, the only prominent depiction of a journey found in these works, the journey becomes one in which capitalistic temptation challenges a traditional individual, who is ultimately rescued by an individual who has the benefits of a modern education but still recognizes tradition. In other words, the journey becomes a warning regarding the difficulties of becoming modern without succumbing to the temptation of Western morals.

Indeed, as shown above, although the city space and village space are defined separately, and physically separated by great distances, they are mutually influential. Individuals migrating to the city from the village bring elements of the village system, including values and authoritative figures (such as Hadidjah in *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*), adding a calming traditional influence to the modern city. Meanwhile, elements of the city space—inescapably capitalists, who abandon morals for personal gain—are able to influence the village space and introduce disorder: the presence of an opium smuggler causes heartbreak in *Terang Boelan*, for instance, and the rich landlord of *Sorga Ka Toedjoe* uses his money to evict Kasimin, despite the latter already having the right to tend the land. The border between city and village space is a porous one, and, as such, individuals can move in between the two with relative ease.

That these general trends can be seen does not, however, mean that there is no development in the presentation of spaces. Rather, over Saeroen's career, a shift towards increasingly positive portrayals of the city space can be seen. Significantly, his first film, *Terang Boelan*, concluded with the protagonists remaining in their village. The agency offered by the modern city space was enough for Kasim and Rohaya to challenge the disruptive capitalism of Moesa, and with the help of the villagers—an intrinsic part of the village space—they were able to eliminate his influence. The village, though recognizing that aspects of modernity (the city space) such as true love can be beneficial, remains dominant.

By the time he had written *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*, however, Saeroen had clearly positioned the city in a more positive manner. Many (though not all) of his works released after late 1940 conclude with the protagonists settling in the city. *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*, for instance, concluded with both couples settling in Batavia and establishing their own lives together. However, in order to achieve this, a return to the village was required—a trip in which Rasmina retrieved her aunt, the traditional familial authority, while Hoesin removed the disruptive influence of capitalism (personified through Parta) from her life.

By the end of Saeroen's screenwriting career, even this return trip was unnecessary. In *Asmara Moerni*, Tati, Amir, and Dr. Pardi never return to Cigading. Though Tati intends to do so once she fears the city's corruption has taken Amir from her, she does realize this intention because Dr. Pardi arranges an alternative which both keeps her in the city and offers her the education necessary to grow further.

The city space, through the manipulations of an educated indigene (or, rather, the manipulations of an Indonesian) has offered the possibility of agency necessary for her to overcome her problems.

Though we have mentioned characters and their actions, so far we have focused on the city and village as places, as locations with geographic properties. However, as discussed earlier, city and village spaces are more than simple geographic entities, more than places: they are spaces, which have their own culture, order, and hierarchies. The culture, hierarchies, and structures, inherent to the limited city and village space, are—in the works of Saeroen—also the location for individuals to assert their agency, and it follows that they become a site for Saeroen's resistance to the colonial construct.

The position of the male characters in village space and city space, in the works of Saeroen analyzed here, differs from the position of female characters. As such, they are to be discussed separately. Aside from Kasim of *Terang Boelan*, Saeroen's main male characters are consistently presented as amalgamations of tradition and modernity. Hoesin of *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*, for instance, was born in Batavia and is well educated, yet has no qualms with living in a *gubuk* (hut) and enjoys nature. Despite the two eventually living in Batavia, their dates are to lakes and other natural features. Dr. Pardi of *Asmara Moerni*, as evidenced by him being a doctor, has received an education, yet is unwilling to embrace the European notion of capitalism. Mardiman of *Ajah Berdosa* is a bit of an exception, in that he attempts to wholly embrace the city space and become a capitalist, forsaking all but money. Ultimately, he suffers for it; his happiness only returns once he has given up these foreign ways and returned to his wife—and thus, symbolically, reincorporated the village into himself.

Meanwhile, men who are unable to incorporate aspects of both the city space and the village space are either portrayed negatively or end up suffering. Men who exclusively assume traits considered related to the modern—i.e., European—city space, such as the capitalist landlord Hassan in *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*, are portrayed as villains, drawing the audience's sympathies away from them and thus condemning their beliefs. Other men, such as Amir of *Asmara Moerni*, are incapable of realizing their agency in the city as their traits are predominantly suited to the village space. The uneducated Amir can only find work as a pedicab driver, which ultimately allows him to be manipulated by opium smugglers. Amir is trusting, such that he does not become suspicious when his customer insists on taking another vehicle. These

traits, acceptable or even positive in the village space, are ultimately the cause of his downfall.

As with male characters, female characters who completely abandon the village space are vilified. The temptresses in Saeroen's films which have one (*Asmara Moerni* and *Ajah Berdosa*) are both modern, independent women, who have positioned themselves entirely with the city space, almost abandoning traditional morals. Miss Omi of *Asmara Moerni*, though she intends merely to have Amir play for her troupe, is viewed as a temptress as she is a beautiful *keroncong* singer. Not only was the employ considered full of promiscuous women, but Omi herself is known as a heartbreaker. "She doesn't have that good of a voice," Tati's aunt says, "It's just her flirting eyes that are dangerous. Many men simply go mad for her." Her willingness to talk to strange men is followed by a familiarity, considered quite rude at the time. She uses the familiar form "kau," rather than "Amir" or "Tuan." The temptress in *Ajah Berdosa*, meanwhile, is willing to steal another woman's husband, and insists on a high-class lifestyle; her Western-style freedom and materialistic drive are ultimately what leads to Mardiman's downfall.

Rather, the ideal woman in Saeroen's films—that is, the woman to whom the audience can look up—has more traits identified with the village space than the city space. Characters such as Rohaya, Rasminah, and Tati, though they marry for love—at the time, a trait considered modern and European—extoll traditional virtues such as demureness, politeness (even when faced with individuals they do not like), and deference. When women do receive an education (Tati in *Asmara Moerni* and Warsiah the nurse in *Ajah Berdosa*), they are almost incapable of rejecting orders and suggestions from individuals who, in the village space, they would be required to obey. Warsiah, for instance, allows her husband to return even after he had an affair and became a criminal, and Rohaya cannot marry Kasim for love except with her father's blessing. As shown above, the expectations for male and female characters show an (admittedly disparate) demand to find a between space, one between the city and the village. Though they should ultimately live in the city, they must not entirely abandon the village space.

Resistance to Dutch colonial forces (and the European-centric narrative in general) is further manifested in Saeroen's representation of law enforcement. Although these individuals may be (but are not always) indigene in their physical appearances, they serve as proxies

of the European government by nature of their empowerment: law enforcement gains its legitimization through the European rule, and uses this legitimization to apply European law to the main characters (always indigene). The ethnicity of these characters has less impact on their representative role than their position as the proxies of the oppressive Europeans. They work in the city space not to further their own goals, but strengthen the position of the European colonialists.

Law enforcement officials in Saeroen's work are generally incompetent or corrupt, prone to using violence to settle their goal. This is most prominent in *Asmara Moerni*. After rejecting Miss Omi, Amir is approached by an unknown man who pays him to deliver a package. Before Amir can deliver this package, he is intercepted by a police officer and arrested. After several days in a cell with "thugs and pickpockets," he is taken to Strujswijk prison, stripped for processing, and held for eighteen months without trial—all because he is mistakenly thought to be part of an opium smuggling ring. By holding him under false pretenses and against his will, law enforcement prevents Amir from marrying Tati, and as such denies agency to the couple; this indirectly leads to Amir's death.

In the later film *Ajah Berdosa*, the corruption and violence of law enforcement is made more prominent. The main character, Mardiman, is made a police *mantri* owing to his performance as a clerk. Significantly, his fall into disgrace—the titular sins of the father—begins only after he takes this position, when he takes up a mistress and embezzles money to support her. Although he is fired from this position and imprisoned, the corruption which began when he was a police *mantri* remains: upon release, he is unable to find a job and thus becomes an *arak* runner. It is after he has reached this peak of corruption that the police violence is manifested: he attempts to resist arrest when police officers raid the operation, and is severely injured in the struggle—such that he requires hospitalization. In both instances, the police, the manifestation of colonial rule, initiate events which lead the otherwise content Indonesian characters to their destruction.

Forces representing traditional hierarchies, meanwhile, are almost inexorably tied to the family hierarchy, yet represented as more dynamic. They are capable of change in response to shifting conditions, and thus make further development possible. The villagers of *Terang Boelan*—particularly the main character's father; in patriarchal Javanese culture, the ultimate familial power—are initially unwilling to allow Rohaya to take Kasim as her husband, forcing her instead to marry the wealthy

Moesa. They assert the importance of the social structure over the young lovers' agency. However, after the revelation that Moesa obtained his wealth in an immoral manner, as an opium smuggler, they support Kasim openly, and grant their blessings to the union. Only then, do the two lovers marry. In *Asmara Moerni*, meanwhile, the family structure, Dr. Pardi's family, is no longer resisted, but its limitation is no less real: the family's objection to Pardi's love for his former maid Tati is simply already understood by the main characters. Dr. Pardi knows he will be allowed to marry her if she has an education. Once Tati receives an education (unknown to her, funded by Dr. Pardi), it is implied that the family blesses their union, for at the conclusion of the film, Dr. Pardi and Tati are presented as husband and wife (see figure 4). In all cases, the social structure in village space is capable of recognizing when it is beneficial to modify the borders it has established, to expand them or redraw them, allowing the characters to assert their agency—in later films, even after leaving the village.



Figure 4. Pardi and Tuti after marriage.

Again we see that, although the city (recognizably a Western construct, with its European and American technology) is portrayed as a dangerous yet positive space where characters can exercise their agency and grow personally, aspects considered European—law enforcement, in this case—serve primarily to limit this agency. It is the European law enforcement which stunts characters' personal growth or introduces complications which drive the plot, leading to death and despair for the characters they interact with. The village structures, though also limiting, are also more dynamic, capable of changing to suit new conditions. These structures are linked closely to the family,

indicating the importance of said structure in Saeroen's ideal Indies. As with the adaptable yet always faithful village women, structures in village space offer the possibility for continued happiness—continued happiness which is best realized in the city.

CONCLUSION

During the dynamic evolution of the Indies from a primarily rural, agrarian society to an increasingly urban, industrial society, authors wrote extensively on the issue of modernization, often using cities as a stand-in for the colony itself. The prominent journalist-turned-screenwriter Saeroen brought this trend to films, and in doing so conveyed his own ideals regarding the relationship between traditional Indonesian society (represented through the villages) and the modern Indonesian society (represented through the cities). Although his position on this relationship changed over time, two things held constant: the villages were safe yet stable to the point of being stagnant, while the cities were dangerous and corrupting, with death always a possibility, but offered opportunity for growth and personal development. These starkly contrasting spaces presented offered the choice between safety and progress. Saeroen's films ultimately presented a push for progress, reinforcing the call for urbanization and urging audiences to embrace modernization despite its inherent dangers. He warned, however, that leaving tradition and traditional mores entirely would have devastating consequences. As such, these films suggested that urbanization was required, but it had to be tempered by the maintenance of traditional values.

Although his message was similar to that promoted by the Dutch East Indies government, Saeroen's goal in promoting urbanization and modernization was different. Where the Dutch colonial government initiated and viewed the trend for modernization as a means of promoting the growth of their own wealth and the wealth of the Dutch nation, Saeroen—a nationalist recognized for promoting indigene rights—was primarily concerned with the welfare of the Indonesian populace. His films emphasized the need for personal development in order to obtain happiness—development which was best realized in the cities—rather than the purely economic growth which the Dutch favored; they further recognized the continued need for traditional morals and a sense of family. This personal development, combined

with a recognition of the importance of tradition and one's recognition by society, allowed individuals to assert their agency and live full, happy lives.

Drawn to the macro level, and keeping in mind Saeroen's negative depiction of those forces which supported Dutch interests, it becomes evident that the writer recognized the need for a sovereign Indonesian nation, one which obtained a strong economy through urbanization and self-determination, allowing the nation to support the welfare of the people, and which combined it with traditional morals. This message was encoded in Saeroen's screenplays, covertly conveying a nationalist agenda to the mass audiences. By representing the Dutch East Indies through the duality of dynamic cities and stagnant villages, in which the forces of colonial law and order created more conflict than they solved, and in which materialistic women led to devastation, Saeroen resisted its status as a colony. Rather, he represented the Indies as he hoped they would become under independence: a hopeful, dynamic, and strong nation, which combined European-inspired progress with traditional values in order to guarantee the welfare of the people.

These findings, as with previous research which has found portrayals of an Indonesian identity—one of a united people not delineated by ethnic heritage—in Indies cinema, indicate that the canon of Indonesian cinema, in which Usmar Ismail's *Darah dan Doa* is considered the first “Indonesian” film owing to its sense of national identity (Biran 2009, 45), must be reexamined. Recent scholarship makes it increasingly clear that a national identity was encoded within the popular cinema of the Indies in a hidden manner to avoid censorship. This presented identity had the possibility to shape the beliefs of the viewing public, particularly in Java and Sumatra. The canonical “Indonesian” cinema industry, with its depictions of a national identity and continuation of themes popular in the Indies cinema, must not be defined as excluding the archipelago's previous film industry; the contributions of the Indies' cinema must be recognized.

NOTES

- 1 A 1936 list of the cinemas in the Indies (reproduced in Biran 2009, 403–19) gives 227 cinemas in the colony, spread throughout major urban centers such as Bandung and Batavia, as well as smaller towns such as Ambarawa, Bengkulu, and Manado. Though no record of the total number of domestic cinemas in subsequent years is available, it is probable that the number would have increased during the boom in the film industry and the economic recovery after the Great Depression.
- 2 Different studios had different target audiences, particularly in the early Indies cinema. However, by the time Saeroen was active, studios focused predominantly on indigene audiences. Though they tried to make their films attractive to both the intellectual elite as well as the general public, their main lifeblood remained the lower-class audiences. The elite, though they initially held high expectations for the industry, became dismissive when said hopes were not realized (Biran 2009, 268).
- 3 Biran was, however, disapproving of such formulaic popular cinema, preferring films with artistic and nationalistic aspirations. The director Teguh Karya was likewise critical of this “*Terang Boelan*” formula,” stating in 1983, “The legacy of ‘*Terang Boelan*’ has been a stereotype film story for the industry, and an established technique which has remained undeveloped and static” (quoted in Heider 1991, 16).
- 4 In an article regarding a press violation (*persdelict*) while he was working at *Siang Po*, Saeroen is referred to as “Saeroen bin Mangoendigdo” (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* 1933). As *bin* indicates a patronymic name, his father’s name can be inferred.
- 5 The Japanese government was known to have its eyes on the natural resources of the Indies, which would be necessary for industrial expansion and possible war efforts. As such, the Dutch colonial government was on the lookout for possible spies and/or compromised individuals.
- 6 A letter from Kaneko Keizo (reproduced in *Ten Years of Japanese Burrowing in the Netherlands East Indies* [66–67] in 1942, published by the Netherlands Information Bureau) confirmed that the Japanese men behind the *Warta Harian* case (Kubo Tatsuji and Kaneko Keizo) had been using Saeroen and were aware of his importance, particularly his relationship with the nationalist movement. It is not clear, however, whether Saeroen was aware of these men’s goals. It is not unthinkable that, being friendly with the Japanese, he could have accepted the idea of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the Japanese promises to be as “big brothers” to the Indonesian people. However, it is also possible that he was never told or that he did not believe such promises. This question, whether or not Saeroen was aware of the true intent of his sponsors, warrants further research.
- 7 Though Heider (1991, 14) is incorrect in stating that all Indonesian films from before 1950 are lost, it is certainly clear that the vast majority of films from this period remain unaccounted for. The use of flammable nitrate film (and the resulting warehouse fires [Biran 2012, 291]) led to many of them being destroyed. Documentation of surviving materials is sparse. Though extant films are known to be held in the Netherlands, Indonesia, and Japan, no catalogue of these films has yet been made. Of the films of Saeroen, we are only aware of a copy of *Gagak Item* in the collection of Sinematek Indonesia. However, when we attempted to consult the film, we were told that it was not in viewing condition.
- 8 Such elements were, in the colonial film industry, under the control of the film’s producer and cinematographer. The director Usmar Ismail, whose work *Darah dan Doa* Biran (2009, 45) considers the first canonical Indonesian, disowned two of his productions which he had directed, as the majority of creative control had been with the ethnic Dutch cinematographer (Ismail 1983, 165). Ismail, as with other directors at the time, had served more as a dialogue coach.
- 9 Khoo (2006, 90) credits the success of this film and The Teng Chun’s *Alang-Alang* (1939) in Malaya with inspiring the Shaw Brothers (Run Run and Runme) to open their studio Malay Film Productions in Singapore. This studio, as with Tan’s Film in the Indies, targeted ethnic Malay audiences and found considerable success in its colony. We are, however, unaware of any research into any thematic similarities which may be found in the two studios’ work.
- 10 The same pseudonym is used for the writer of the novelization of *Roekihati* (also by Tan’s Film). It is possible that, with Saeroen under public scrutiny owing to his involvement in the *Warta Harian* affair, Tan’s attempted to distance themselves from him through the use of this pseudonym. Based on entries in the online catalog WorldCat, pseudonymous publications were rare for novelizations. Generally, the screenwriter was credited, such as Ferry Kok for *Rentjong Atjeh* and Roestam Soetan Palindih for *Dasima* and *Panggilan Darah*.
- 11 The city here is not understood as a geographically bound place, but rather as an abstract space—though one possibly influenced by reality. As such, it encompasses more than location.

- 12 See, for instance, Sukartono's length trips through the city in Armijn Pane's *Belenggu* (1940), during which he takes the position of the outsider, separated from the city life by his car, and simply witnesses life throughout the city.
- 13 See, for instance, Ahmad Tohari's trilogy *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (1982, 1985, 1986) and Umar Kayam's *Para Priyayi* (1992).
- 14 It is not a coincidence, after all, that Yah in *Belenggu* was also a *keroncong* singer.
- 15 Original: la poenja soeara tidak seberapa. Tjoema lèrèkan matanja ada sangat berbahaja. Banjak orang laki2 tergila-gila kepadanya.
- 16 In comparison, despite hating Parta, Rasminah in *Sorga Ka Toedjoe* continues to call him "tuan."
- 17 Original: "Boeaja dan toekang-toekang tjopet."
- 18 See, for instance, Setijadi-Dunn and Barker (2011), in which an examination of narrative elements of ethnic Chinese-produced films such as *Kris Mataram* (1940) finds a national identity present.

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