“KOMEDI WITHIN KOMEDI”
Moving Pictures and Intermedial Crossings in Turn-of-the-Century Colonial Indonesia

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Abstract
In the past thirty years studies of early cinema, mostly focusing on the history of film production and exhibition in the West, have been preoccupied with examining the emergence of moving images within their intermedial sphere. The case of moving picture exhibition and consumption in turn-of-the-century colonial Indonesia, with its rich selection of itinerant indigenous and Western amusements on offer, thus presents an especially intriguing case. This article situates itself within this transnational stream of commercial entertainments, known in Malay by the generic term komedi. In the process, it examines stories adapted across different media and cultural contexts, which were consumed by local audiences of various ethnicities and social standing in colonial society, specifically highlighting the conditions that led to an exceptional 1906 local film production of the popular folklore story of Nyai Dasima. While no known footage from this production survives, this paper proposes an intermedial reconstruction by looking at surviving traces of the text in other turn-of-the-century media forms. By exploring the re-incarnations of Nyai Dasima, alongside other popular stories shared across media platforms in colonial Indonesia, the article fleshes out how early entrepreneurs of moving pictures were utilizing intermedial connections in order to embed the new medium within the local media landscape. Conversely, by drawing on contemporary newspaper reports in Dutch and Malay, this article aims to show that local spectators made sense of the new medium of moving pictures through negotiations with and in relation to established entertainment forms they were habituated in.

Keywords
colonial history, early cinema, Indonesia, movie-going
About the Author

Dafna Ruppin holds a PhD in Media and Performance Studies from Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Her research on the exhibition, consumption and production of early cinema in the Netherlands Indies was funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), as part of the research project “The Nation and its Other.” The book resulting from this research, *The Komedi Bioscoop: Early Cinema in Colonial Indonesia*, is forthcoming in the KINtop Studies in Early Cinema series published by John Libbey.
Since the 1980s, studies of early cinema, roughly referring to the period pre-1914, have been preoccupied with examining the emergence of moving pictures within their intermedial sphere. The case of moving picture exhibition and consumption in turn-of-the-century colonial Indonesia (or the Netherlands Indies, as it was known at the time), with its rich selection of itinerant indigenous and Western amusements on offer, thus presents an especially intriguing case. Among these are literary works in Dutch and Malay; traditional performance arts such as Javanese shadow play (wayang kulit); popular Malay opera (bangsawan and komedi stambul); traveling theater, opera and circus acts from Europe, the United States, and India; and new technologies, such as photography, the gramophone, and moving pictures. An intermedial study of moving pictures in colonial Indonesia must therefore situate itself within this transnational stream of commercial entertainments (known in Malay by the generic term komedi). Furthermore, it needs to consider the kinds of stories adapted across different media and cultural contexts, which were consumed by local audiences of various ethnicities and social standing in colonial society.

While the overwhelming majority of moving pictures screened to audiences in colonial Indonesia would have been imported from Europe or the United States, for this article I have chosen to highlight the conditions that led to an exceptional local film production of the popular folklore story of Nyai Dasima. This tragic tale of an Indonesian nyai (concubine, or informal “Native” wife) of a European man has been in circulation in the Indonesian archipelago for at least 250 years. First committed to paper in 1896 by a Eurasian journalist and published by a Chinese-Indonesian publishing house, Nyai Dasima has since been re-written numerous times by Indonesian, Dutch and Chinese authors and poets, featured on the regular repertoires of every komedi stambul theater company, and later adapted to modern theater, ballet, opera, television programs, and cinema. While the earliest film version known until now has been the highly successful Njai Dasima by the Tan Koen Yauw film company from 1929, this research has discovered records of an earlier screen adaptation from 1906. The film, of which no known copy has survived, was advertised in the newspapers as “Njai Dasima. Specially recorded by the Royal Bioscope Company” (Advertisement, Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad, 26 June 1906).

Since the only clue to the existence of this film version is found in the advertisement, this paper proposes an intermedial reconstruction by looking at surviving traces of the text in other turn-of-the-century media forms. While recognizing that this exercise will not reveal much about the film’s cinematic style, or about how the story was treated in its adaptation from text/stage to screen, I believe that exploring the re-incarnations of Nyai Dasima, alongside other popular stories shared across media platforms in colonial Indonesia, can potentially tell us
something about the way in which entrepreneurs of moving pictures were utilizing intermedial connections in order to embed the new medium within the local media landscape. Conversely, by drawing on contemporary newspaper reports in Dutch and Malay, this article aims to show that local spectators made sense of the new medium of moving pictures through negotiations with and in relation to established entertainment forms they were habituated in.

The research approach here is thus in line with the “new cinema history,” a methodology which shifts the focus in the writing of cinema history “away from the content of films to consider their circulation and consumption, and to examine the cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange” (Maltby, “New Cinema Histories” 3). According to Richard Maltby, our attention as cinema historians should shine a spotlight on intermediary figures who may be embodied in “the small businessmen who acted as cultural brokers, navigators and translators of the middle ground constructing a creolized culture out of their community’s encounters with the mediated external world” (“On the Prospect” 91). As Thunnis van Oort writes, in the context of early film exhibition in the Catholic south of the Netherlands, the “cinema exhibitor acted as an intermediary, not only between the local, the national and international contexts, but also in drawing the novelty of cinema into the cultural and social life of the region” (148).

In colonial Indonesia, several of the local exhibitors of moving pictures, who were essentially responsible for early cinema’s hybridization and embedding in the Indies, were often “hybrid individuals” (Burke 31). The Royal Bioscope, to be highlighted here, was owned by British-Indian entrepreneur Abdulally Esoofally, who traveled throughout Southeast Asia from 1901 to 1907, holding shows in Singapore, Sumatra, Java, Burma (Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). According to Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy’s work on the history of Indian cinema, “from 1908 to 1914 [Esoofally] continued his cinema travels in India. His tent was 100 feet long and 50 feet wide, propped by four posts, and could hold a thousand people. The short items shown [including comedy gags, operas, travel films, sports events, usually just a couple of minutes in length] were purchased outright by Esoofally, according to the practice of the time, and were used till the prints wore out” (8). In order to fill up roughly an hour long program, these imported films were evidently supplemented by shorts captured locally, mostly non-fiction actualities such as nature scenes or cityscapes. The fact that moving picture shows at the time were introducing a growing selection of imported fiction titles at the expense of non-fiction films marks a shift in audience preferences towards the latter. The Royal Bioscope’s film adaptation of the story of Nyai Dasima stands out among contemporary film programs as a locally produced fiction film.
From the perspective of early film exhibition and consumption, intermediality has been previously evoked in research that centers on locations in the West. For instance, Robert C. Allen writes that audiences in the United States would have first seen moving pictures not as an independent amusement, but rather as part of variety entertainment at vaudeville halls in urban centers, or on fairground and festival tents in rural areas or smaller towns (349). In Victorian Britain, Joe Kember shows that moving pictures “arrived within entertainments that already had fully developed exhibition and performance practices, and which had carefully cultivated the nuanced expertise audiences now habitually brought to their interpretation of moving pictures” (7). In other words, audiences for moving pictures “already possessed expert knowledge concerning the longstanding market for novelty. They had learned this from decades of exposure to spectacular images, bizarre performances, and other commodifications of alterity on the fairground, in the lecture theatre, and elsewhere” (212).

Early moving picture shows in colonial Indonesia were similarly “intermedially embedded” (Shail 5), and most spectators in the late nineteenth century, it is likely to assume, had their first encounter with moving pictures within the context of another mode of amusement, for instance: as a side show on the circus grounds, on stage as part of a variety act, as a bonus item at the Parsi theater, or as a new trick at a magic show. Likewise, spectators of moving pictures in the Indies would have come to moving picture shows with prior experience from other entertainments, both similar to and different from those of early movie-goers in the West. And while it is tempting to understand movie-going in colonial Indonesia within the framework of the earlier form of storytelling on a screen represented in the Javanese shadow play, it is crucial to remember that wayang kulit is mostly not performed to a paying audience. Thus, although early cinema shared certain elements with wayang kulit (for instance, the effect of light projected on a screen, or the suspension of disbelief inherent to the viewing process), entrepreneurs of moving pictures had to cultivate an audience of paying spectators in order to survive as a commercial entertainment form. The cultural practice of movie-going, or the act of consuming moving pictures, must therefore be located within the context of other turn-of-the-century commercial amusements. Among the itinerant commercial entertainments, which both preceded and competed against moving pictures, were American magicians, British and Indian circus troupes, soirées variées featuring such acts as féeries, tableaux vivants or Chinese dancers, visiting and locally-grown komedi stambul or bangsawan companies, Japanese and Australian acrobats, and French and Austrian operetta performers.

Since many of the films screened by moving picture companies would have been previously known to spectators in colonial Indonesia thanks to their earlier translations into Malay or their stage adaptations for the komedi stambul, the first
two sections of this article respectively offer a closer look at these two popular entertainment forms and their audiences. Turning our attention to early moving picture shows, the convergences of certain texts across Malay literature, popular stage adaptations, and films (for instance, stories from *The Thousand and One Nights, Faust*) will be examined in the following section. Finally, the various appearances of the Nyai Dasima story in different contemporary media will be studied, paying particular attention to whatever clues we can find about their modes of display and reception, thus proposing a study of intermediality in Southeast Asia through the prism of exhibition and consumption.

POPULAR MALAY LITERATURE AND MODERN READERSHIP

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Malay newspapers appeared in Romanized script, for the most part, and were modeled on Dutch and English publications and edited by Europeans, Eurasians, and Indies-born (peranakan) Chinese (Maier 4). The advent of the vernacular Malay press is often seen as having directly contributed to the formation of Malay popular literature. On the one hand, the vernacular press developed a broad-based, mass market of readers in Low or Market Malay—the lingua franca, as opposed to High Malay of traditional court literature or regional languages, such as Javanese or Madurese. On the other hand, it produced a skilled workforce of publishers, editors, writers and translators (Tsuchiya 461). In general, the readership for the Malay newspapers, originating from the major urban centers and distributed across Java, Sumatra and Celebes (present-day Sulawesi), consisted mostly of Indies-born Chinese who were also leading tradesmen who advertised in such publications, native elite (priyayi) and Eurasian traders and officials (Adam 33). By the 1890s, the average number of subscribers for a popular daily Malay newspaper was between 600 and 800 (48).¹⁰

Malay newspapers contained reports and notices of various lengths, covering current events from near and far. In addition, they printed traditional prose literature, translations of stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* stories, various animal fables (including Aesop’s *Tales*), jinn and raja mythical stories, and occasionally Chinese stories as well as original material, often in serialized form (Watson 423-424). In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, printed schoolbooks, storybooks and poetry books in Malay began to appear more prominently (Maier 4). As opposed to the vernacular press, it was also hardly subject to censorship by the colonial authorities at this stage (see Jedamski, “The Vanishing-Act of Sherlock Holmes”). Books could be acquired by mail order or at shops, alongside notepads, cigars, and medications, umbrellas and shoes (Maier 7). Lending libraries were also available, sometimes with titles of a more “erotic nature” (Watson 421). Books were
by no means a cheap commodity: “Books of verse were in the lower price range, usually around \( f1.00 \); books of laws were the most expensive, often more than \( f3.00 \); and storybooks in prose were in between” (Maier 7).

Among the popular literature available in Malay at the time were publications coming in from Singapore and Penang in the Arabic script (Jawi), including print versions of earlier stories available as manuscripts, reproductions of Middle Eastern and Indian tales and serially published Malay versions of Chinese tales. There was also a local book market under development in Batavia, Semarang, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya which presented readers with texts in Romanized script, many of them adaptations of Chinese stories, historical narratives transmuted into works that were journalistic in style (Maier 5). Translations into Malay of bestsellers from both East and West included Robinson Crusoe in 1875, The Adventures of Sinbad in 1896, Around the World in Eighty Days in 1890, a Chinese historical work known as the Records of the Three Kingdoms (or by its Chinese title, Sanguozhi) in 1893, and Count of Monte Cristo between 1894 and 1899 (Tsuchiya 472).

Original Malay popular novels, known as Indische roman, then started appearing on the scene, continually growing in quantity (Tsuchiya 472). Reports on sensational stories in the newspapers involving crimes, such as murder, rape, infidelity and theft, influenced this body of work, serving as source material for authors of popular novels (Watson 424). It was a literary genre, written in Dutch and Malay, telling stories set in the Indies and targeting local readers (Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 277). Veering between the realist and supernatural, fiction and the retelling of true past and present crime stories, the Indische roman was peppered with “[v]irgin abductions, opium smugglers, last-minute rescues, treacherous concubines, desolate hideouts, stalwart heroes, inscrutable mandarins, robber barons, pirate chiefs, lascivious landlords, unscrupulous spies, and dark and stormy nights” (278).

The readers consuming such popular literary works, according to Tsuchiya,

constituted the first wave of a racially mixed group of “modern readers” that populated the colonial city. By “modern readers” I mean that they were a group able to communicate personally with the novels’ authors through the print media, which they read quietly in their living rooms and bedrooms. They were the first generation of the new “urban bourgeoisie”, who from the latter half of the nineteenth-century experienced a change in the form of their literary enjoyment from stories that were read aloud (the world of the storyteller) to stories that were read in silence. (476)

Throughout the following decades, literacy figures improved and the number of such “modern readers” increasingly grew. “Books were produced to be sold,” Maier
underlines, “and if they failed to create an audience, their producer could be forced to roll up his mats” (6). It was thus a modern book market, adhering to the laws of supply and demand.

**KOMEDI STAMBUL AND ITS SPECTATORS**

*Komedi stambul* and *bangsawan* refer to hybrid forms of popular Malay opera, drawing on local traditions while simultaneously influenced by Parsi theater, as well as European texts and stage techniques. Emerging in the late nineteenth century in the Indies and in British Malaya, respectively, traveling troupes crisscrossed the entire region with their shows, exchanging actors and managers, until they finally collapsed any real distinction between *stambul* and *bangsawan* (Tan 16-18; Cohen, “Border Crossings” 101-115; Cohen, *The Komedie Stamboel* 40-49). The Komedie Stamboel, a local troupe established in Surabaya in 1891 with a mixed cast of “Natives,” Indies-born Chinese and Eurasians, was the first and most prominent company in the Netherlands Indies at the turn of the century.\(^1\) By the early 1900s there were various such companies touring Java, performing mostly in tent-like structures, with repertoires comprised of stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*, adaptations of local tales, such as *nyai* stories, European fairy tales and operas, such as the *Faust* tale and *Bluebeard*, Shakespeare plays, and stories originating from Chinese legends (Cohen, *The Komedie Stamboel* 72).

*Komedi stambul* troupes also drew on European theatrical technology, introduced in the shows of traveling European opera and theater groups performing in the Indies during the second half of the nineteenth century, including: “The proscenium stage, wing-and-drop set, focused stage lighting, emotive character-based acting, musical orchestra accompaniment, division of plays into scenes and acts, makeup and costumes” (Cohen, *The Komedie Stamboel* 41). Another source of influence was the Parsi theater, delivering a repertoire of songs and stories from Persia and India to Southeast Asia in the same period. Therefore, the *komedi stambul*, whose cast would have been made up of a mix of Indonesian, Chinese and Eurasian performers, may have used European dramaturgy and theatrical technology, but by doing so in their own language and idioms they were in fact appropriating and localizing it, presenting “an indigenized form” of European theatre (Cohen, *The Komedie Stamboel* 185). Cohen writes: “*Stambul* staged a modern model for representation, both in theatre and in real life. As commercial entertainment performed in readily accessible Malay language in public theaters, depicting characters mechanically reproduced or re-presented from social life, it was not contingent on expert spectators, local religious practices, or place spirits.
[...] It was a place for exploration of possibilities, including ones overtly forbidden by the colonial regime” (The Komedie Stamboel 345, emphasis added).

At the turn-of-the-century, the Komedie Stamboel began performing what Cohen designates as “the theatrical equivalent of an Indische roman” (Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 277, italics in original). Unlike the adaptations of Western plays or of stories from The Thousand and One Nights, Indische roman plays offered something different to stambul spectators:

Stories of this sort played on motifs that are familiar to Javanese more from Indic tales enacted as wayang and topeng than from the Arabian Nights. Magic arrows, men posing as women and women as men, hand-to-hand combat with rakasa, deposed kings posing as beggars, bodies cast adrift at sea. All these are devices found in tales that have existed in Java for at least a thousand years. With a bit of tweaking, the same plot could be transposed to the mythical universes of the Mahabharata or Panji. (Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 286)

Among the Indische romans adapted were: Secrets of Batavia; Nyai Dasima; Rosina; Si Conat, the Bandit Chief of Tangerang; Siti Rohaya: A Tale from Batavia; and Revenge, or Oei Kim Nio and Lie Koen Njan. These became part of a growing effort “to indigenize the stambul form” and appeal to rural audiences on Java (Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 286, emphasis added). On top of the Indische roman plays, repertoires continued to represent highly diverse source materials, including plays from Parsi theater and bangsawan, and adaptations of European operas, such as Faust and Aïda. “There was a play based on a Siamese chronicle, The Battle of Achmad Mohamad: The Origin of the Genie King, also known as The Monk King, or a War Tale Concerning the King of Siam” (Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 302).

European spectators were often curious to see how the Komedie Stamboel adapted operas like Gounod’s Faust, Bellini’s Norma and La sonnambula, and Verdi’s Aida. However, stambul treatments of these texts were often not accepted by Europeans as “the genuine articles” (Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 175). By comparison, non-European spectators had different expectations when coming to watch the company’s appropriations of Western operatic classics. Komedie Stamboel might have performed its operas on improvised makeshift stages, rather than at colonial theater buildings used by visiting European opera companies. However, Cohen writes, “the masses accepted the Komedie Stamboel uncritically and without reserve as De Oost Indische Opera – the opera of the East Indies” (Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 176).

In his extensive study of the Komedie Stamboel, and drawing on Tom Gunning’s work on early cinema’s “Aesthetic of Astonishment” (114-133), Cohen (2006) finds
that spectators at the komedi stambul were intended to react with “astonishment, rather than mystification”:

In European terms, komedi involved ‘modern magic’ and not ‘sorcery’; in Malay terms, komedi was a cultural form of the heran and not the aneh. Heran was an attitude toward the world that encompassed confusion; surprise, astonishment, and amazement; and mystery and wonder. Appreciation of attractions presupposed a degree of sophistication, an ability to recognize and appreciate illusionism and technological prowess, and not confuse the wonders of the komedi stage with the genuine magic of spirit possession in hobbyhorse dancing. . . . (The Komedie Stamboel 12, italics in original)

Stambul shows attracted avid and capable spectators comprised of “drunken European men, middle-income Muslim families, Chinese store owners, prostitutes, sailors and soldiers, Eurasian clerks, and nearly everyone else” (Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 1). The make-up of movie audiences was probably quite similar, reflecting a wide range of ethnicities, socio-economic statuses and genders in colonial society who were interested in consuming attractions.

MOVING PICTURE SHOWS AND MOVIE-GOERS

The time period in which Abdulally Esoofally’s Royal Bioscope was active in colonial Indonesia (1901-1906) was at the height of itinerant moving picture shows. Following the introduction of the new technology in the late 1890s, moving pictures were rapidly moving out of the more elitist European-style theaters or Club houses that were used for the very first shows, and into canvas tents and later so-called bamboo tents, which were often located in and around the main town or village square. Musical accompaniment for film shows would have been provided by a gramophone playing a Western, Chinese or Malay repertoire, a piano player or orchestrion, a string orchestra or gamelan ensemble. A lecturer commenting on the images on screen would have also been present in most venues, although the language spoken cannot be determined. In some venues, where the cheaper seats designated for “Native” spectators were relegated to the space behind the screen, there might have even been two lecturers—one on either side of the screen. Several touring companies were running along similar travel routes in the region with their own cinema tents, seating thousands of spectators, and performing shows two to three times a day. They were competing over audience sympathies, at times even in direct competition with one another in the same town. Their film programs contained a series of short—fiction and non-fiction—films, almost exclusively imported from the West and changed once or twice per week.
Similar film titles were often screened at several cinemas simultaneously, further repeating familiar titles from Malay literature and the *stambul* stage. For instance, versions of *Faust*, the first Western text adapted by the Komedie Stamboel in 1891, were screened by the Royal Bioscope (“Betawi 22 Juli 1905,” *Taman Sari*, 22 July 1905) and the Netherlands Indies Biograph Company (Advertisement, *Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, 4 August 1905) during their runs in 1905, and by the Chrono (Advertisement, *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 3 March 1906) and the General Bioscope Company (Advertisement, *Taman Sari*, 4 January 1906) in 1906. Newspapers immediately drew the connections between stage and screen, for example: when *Faust* was shown in Semarang by the Royal Bioscope in May 1905, Selompret Melajoe noted that this is a case of “komedi within komedi” (“Royal Bioscope,” *Selompret Melajoe*, 6 May 1905, emphases added). Another report provided more information about the film’s reception:

The Royal Bioscope’s tent was packed full with curious spectators yesterday evening; we must assume that the main reason to do so was to wait a minimum time to see the performance of the famous opera Faust as the public [normally] gets on the big stages. This film . . . evidently had the large auditorium greatly satisfied. There was good reason [for rushing to see it]. (“De Royal Bioscope,” *De Locomotief*, 8 May 1905)

In Batavia, where it was referred to by the name used for the stage adaptation “Fatoel Achmad,” it was admired for its entertainment and educational value (“Betawi 24 Juli 1905,” *Taman Sari*, 24 July 1905; “Pertoendjoekan Gambar Idoep,” *Taman Sari*, 25 July 1905).

Other films in this vein, screened by the Royal Bioscope and several of its competitors, were *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, *Bluebeard*, and *Robinson Crusoe*.

Some reports went as far as claiming that the film versions surpassed the *komedi stambul* plays, although in what way was invariably left unmentioned. For instance, *Pembrita Betawi* found the Royal Bioscope’s version of “Aladdin and his magic lamp in 45 tableaux” to be better than its *stambul* stage performances (“Gambar Hidoep,” *Pembrita Betawi*, 28 January 1905). “Readers [and, thus, spectators] are already familiar with the story of Aladdin and the Wonder Lamp, which is often staged by the *komedi stambul* and many other Malay *komedi* troupes,” noted *Bintang Betawi* (“Kabar sehari-hari dari Betawi dan laen-laen negri,” *Bintang Betawi*, 13 May 1903, emphases added). It was singled out already in Esoofally’s earlier run in Medan as the “most beautiful series […], the captivating magic fairy tale, which especially captured the attention of the Orientals,” presumably referring to Chinese and Indonesian spectators (“De Bioscope-voorstelling,” *Deli Courant*, 7 October 1901). “The more fantastic, the better,” claimed another report a few days later, noting that “Aladdin and the magic lamp won [spectators’] full attention. Then they sit quietly huddled, dreaming with big open eyes and enjoying” (“De afgeloopen week,” *Deli
The above quotations, published between 1901 and 1905, reveal that spectators were fascinated with the content of these fairy tales, which were repeatedly performed on stage and screened at cinema tents over the years.

Yet, the case of the Royal Bioscope’s production of *Njai Dasima* stands out among the stories shared across different media in colonial Indonesia. “Njai Dasima. Specially recorded by the Royal Bioscope Company,” was included in the line-up for the company’s upcoming tour of Batavia in June 1906, alongside other non-fiction local views of Yogyakarta and Surabaya and many fiction and non-fiction scenes of Western origin, such as stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*, the San Francisco earthquake, the wedding of King of Spain Alfonso, British Navy maneuvers, Esmeralda—“the latest drama by Victor Hugo,” a boxing championship which took place two months earlier, and others (see Figure 1). While the previously
discussed film adaptations were imported Western productions, *Njai Dasima* was a local film of a quintessentially *Indische* folklore tale.

The institution of the *nyai*, the colonized woman living as a concubine to a European man, has been a topic of interest drawing much literary, theatrical, cinematic and scholarly attention. Since for hundreds of years the Dutch restricted the migration of European women to the colonies, colonial men—employees of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), recruits to the Royal Army, imperial government workers and plantation owners—were expected to rely on the company of local women as housekeepers and sexual partners (Stoler 637). One outcome of this widespread practice was the proliferation of Eurasian children, which led to anxieties about the future of European society and the Dutch race in the colonies. As Dutch families began arriving from the 1870s, European women were “charged with regenerating . . . the metropolitan affinities and the imperial purpose of their men” (Stoler 649). Keeping a *nyai*, who would often be a figure holding some power in the domestic space, was becoming less prevalent.

*Nyai* stories in general, which feature a colonial man and his *nyai* were some of the most popular tales of the *Indische roman* genre (Watson 428). Among these *nyai* stories, Watson rates Gijsbert Francis’s novella of 39 pages *Cerita Njai Dasima* (The Story of Nyai Dasima: A Victim of Seduction) from 1896 as “far superior in style” thanks to the “smooth progression of the narrative, and lively dialogue” compared to other stories fitting this formula (421). It was, according to Tsuchiya, “a literary work born from definite ‘hybrid’ conditions”: written in Malay by a man of mixed European and Asian descent, distributed through a Chinese publishing house, and circulating in an ethnically mixed late nineteenth century Dutch colonial society (467). Supposedly based on a true story that occurred around 1813, Francis’s novella was written at a time of rapid modernization, when the keeping of a *nyai* in the domestic space was being perceived as ever more scandalous in the public sphere. Nevertheless, and possibly due to this, news stories about the lives of these women were often reported in the vernacular press, finding their way into so-called “*nyai* tales” in book form, which were consumed voraciously by the newly rising modern reading public in the Malay language (Tsuchiya 474).

The plot summary of *Cerita Njai Dasima* is as follows. Edward W, an English administrator in Western Java, forms a relationship with a Muslim woman by the name of Dasima as his *nyai*. Dasima, a beautiful and intelligent woman, is entrusted with the care of all of Mr. W’s property, and they also have a daughter together. Mr. W would buy Dasima all sorts of luxury items, on top of giving her generous amounts of money to spend, which she would set aside and save. Once they move together to Batavia, the wealth and beauty of Dasima becomes the talk of the Muslim community. One Muslim man named Samiun decides to seduce her and...
manages to infiltrate the household by sending in an old lady named Ma Buyung as his spy. After becoming Dasima's housekeeper and gaining her trust, Ma Buyung uses a magic potion produced by a witch doctor to convince Dasima to leave Mr. W and their daughter, marry Samiun, and fully embrace Islamic life. Mr. W is hurt and bewildered, but allows Dasima to leave with her money. Once Dasima realizes that Samiun is not going to leave his first wife, she begs him to let her go and return her possessions. Samiun then contracts a man to murder Dasima. Her body is thrown into the river and washes up on the river banks of Mr. W’s house. The story ends with all parties involved in the murder arrested and imprisoned.

According to Tsuchiya, the re-incarnation of the Nyai Dasima story over decades, in various forms and beyond print media, is “a rare occurrence in the literary history of Indonesia, and shows well how deeply the story of Dasima, the fated concubine, permeated popular culture during that period” (477). While later versions often played down the anti-Muslim commentary, and Mr. W’s ethnicity was subject to change—sometimes presented as Dutch and at other times as a member of the native elite class or a Chinese—the figure of Dasima as victim would remain constant (Taylor 247-248). These include a verse poem in Chinese published by Tjiang in 1897, a novel written in 1926 in Dutch by possibly another Eurasian by the name of Manusama (who also contributed scripts to the komedi stambul), the 1929 film produced by Tan Koen Yauw film company, and a post-independence script written by S. M. Ardan in 1965. It was also referenced in This Earth of Mankind, the first book of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Buru Quartet.

As mentioned above, komedi stambul troupes embraced Nyai Dasima, as did their mixed audiences. Matthew Cohen quotes at length from a review in a Malay-language newspaper of a komedi stambul adaptation of Nyai Dasima which was performed in Batavia in 1900 performed by the Sinar Hindia company, stressing the visceral response of spectators:

People work in the city of Batavia for the sake of their physical sustenance—that is, to pay for food, clothes, and accoutrements. [...] but I feel that Mahieu’s performances are a sort of new sustenance serving to reinvigorate the nerves and elevate thoughts from the commonplace.

Starting from the performance of Nyai Dasima, a story that causes tears to flow from the eyes of girls and women, Sinar Hindia has continually healed the ailing souls of the people who live here. ... Over the last nights, I have seen spectators from all parts come to the theater, where this community [kaum] is treated by the performing ensemble onstage, which is so lively and attractive in all aspects, including the smallest details, so that in the melancholic sections all the spectators look for a handkerchief to dry their eyes, and when it is animated [onstage] everyone feels that they live in fellowship.

(Primbon Soerabaia, 19 October 1900, quoted in Cohen, The Komedie Stamboel 303)
As Tsuchiya suggests, modern readership of newspapers and books, torn between tradition and modernity within the cultural plurality of the colonial city, “was drawn emotionally into a literary world of things which could be understood by neither the modern intellect nor modern rationalism” (474). A similar emotional attachment seems to have been at work for the komedi stambul audience, which was even larger and farther-reaching due to the fact that enjoying the stage performance was not limited to a literate audience and could be consumed collectively, as suggested in the review above, rather than in the private confines of one’s home.

Unfortunately, we can only imagine the response of Indies spectators in a similarly shared viewing situation to seeing the Royal Bioscope’s Njai Dasima on screen. Apart from several advertisements in the Batavia newspapers leading up to Esoofally’s upcoming visit, this research has not been able to find any mention of an actual screening of the film, either in Batavia or elsewhere, in the Dutch- or Malay-language press. Since the only clue to the existence of the film is found in the advertisements, it has in fact proven to be as ephemeral as its stage adaptations. While it is highly likely that the filmed version featured a performance by local komedi stambul actors, we cannot say for certain which troupe might have been filmed. In fact, it is entirely possible that the recording by the Royal Bioscope did not produce a projectable copy, as occurred to various contemporary entrepreneurs in the Indies experimenting with capturing and developing films locally.

At the same time, whether or not the Royal Bioscope’s filmed version of Njai Dasima was ever shown to the public seems almost beside the point. What is interesting is the way in which Esoofally was attempting to integrate the content of his Royal Bioscope shows into the canon of stories offered by popular commercial entertainment in the Indies. His strategy of appealing to local audiences combined localization of content and technology or, in Peter Burke’s terms, “hybrid texts” and “hybrid practices” (17, 21-25). As an outsider to both Dutch an Indonesian culture, Esoofally appears to have served as an ideal cultural mediator, adapting a foreign modern entertainment form to blend in with the local culture, making it ever more relevant for local audiences.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The three cultural forms which were the focus of this article have been literature, the stambul theatre, and moving pictures. Significantly, these forms as they developed into the 1920s and 1930s, according to Jedamski, have also “laid the foundation for modern Indonesian culture” (“... and then the lights went out” 484). As she further argues:
Not only did they introduce novel topics and discourses, but they also implemented Western forms of perception: a totally stage-centred and firmly guided theatre reception; individualized text reception introduced by the ‘silent reading’ of a book; and the camera-guided gaze at the film screen. In all three cases, the recipient, reader and spectator alike are supposed to experience a certain detachment from reality and to be entirely absorbed in the narrative for the duration of the reception process. (484)

It certainly appears that modern readers of Malay novels and modern spectators of stambul in the Indies were identifying something that met their leisure expectations in moving picture shows at the turn-of-the-century. Moreover, whereas written texts were restricted to literate readers and stambul shows, consisting of dozens of actors and requiring transport of copious stage sets, was a costly apparatus that could not be easily transported everywhere, moving pictures, as a visual medium performed with musical accompaniment, had the potential of bridging literacy gaps and overcoming certain obstacles of other touring shows, even with its cumbersome equipment and film stock.

Although most films screened at the time, imported from Europe or the United States, were presumably made with Western audiences in mind, it is striking that many film titles mirrored stories which would have been familiar to local Indies spectators from their previous translations into Malay or from their earlier adaptations to the stambul stage. The emphasis in advertisements for moving picture shows was placed on recognizable film titles, such as Faust or Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, reflecting frequent program changes that were to attract repeat visitors over the course of however many days or weeks the cinema tent was stationed in each town. The recording of a local folk tale such as Nyai Dasima is further proof of Abdulally Esoofally’s efforts to tailor the Royal Bioscope’s programs to the tastes of his local audiences. In fact, movie-going became so prevalent on the commercial entertainment scene, referred to in Malay by the term komedi, that the language used for describing moving picture shows was vernacularized as komedi gambar hidup (literally, living picture, which parallels the Dutch term levende beelden), in the process positioning moving pictures on an equal footing with the komedi stambul or komedi kuda (referring to the circus, literally meaning horse show).

In sum, Abdulally Esoofally’s Royal Bioscope and other contemporary exhibitors of moving pictures contributed to shaping the highly dynamic and evolving local movie-going scene within the intermedial popular entertainment landscape of colonial Indonesia. In turn, the spectatorial experiences of consumers of moving pictures were informed by their engagements with media forms that preceded the new technology, including literary texts and komedi stambul plays, as well as other commercial entertainments like circus outfits, acrobats and magicians, and
other technological novelties. The turn-of-the-century intermedial entertainment scene that preceded as well as posed competition to moving picture shows made spectators from all levels of colonial society into potential movie-goers, who would be willing to spend their leisure time and money on various attractions. Intermedial convergences of certain texts across literature, stage and screen further facilitated the process of institutionalizing the cinema as a popular entertainment option for a new mass audience of spectators in the Indies.
Notes

1. For an overview of intermediality in the study of early cinema, see the special issue of *Early Popular Visual Culture*, particularly the introduction (Shail 3-15). Earlier versions of this article were presented at The Dynamics of Early Popular Print and Visual Media workshop (November 2011) and the Early Cinema Colloquium (March 2014), both held at Utrecht University. The author wishes to thank the participants in these forums, as well as the anonymous referees of this journal, for their valuable comments.

2. The colonial census system split up society into three categories: “Natives” referred to all indigenous-born Indonesians, “Foreign Orientals” was used for Chinese, Arabs, Indians, and other Southeast Asians, while “Europeans” covered Europeans of various nationalities, as well as an unidentified number of Eurasians (mostly descendants of mixed unions between a “European” father and Indonesian mother). In 1905, there were nearly 30,000,000 “Natives,” 317,000 “Foreign Orientals” and about 65,000 “Europeans” living in Java and Madura (Furnivall 347). Many moving picture venues mirrored these colonial categories by offering tickets in various pricing tiers and seating specifically to “Native” spectators, at times singling out “Foreign Orientals” as well.

3. As to my knowledge, no copy of the 1929 version has been retrieved either. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Dutch and Malay are my own.

4. Peter Burke writes that “hybrid individuals, whether they were born into this situation because their mothers and fathers came from different cultures, or entered it later, willingly or unwillingly” can serve as cultural mediators (31).

5. This research has found that Esoofally traveled by various stage names in Java and Sumatra at the beginning of the twentieth century. At first he went by the Anglicized name John Joseph, with a tent show set up in Medan’s Esplanade and advertised in October 1901 as the New Bioscope (Advertisement, *Sumatra Post*, 18 September 1901). It was only during the last week of the New Bioscope’s tour that the shows were advertised under the management of “A. A. Esoofally” (Advertisement, *Deli Courant*, 23 October 1901). Esoofally apparently returned again to the Indies only in March of 1903, giving shows at the Manège in Tanah Abang under a new company name: the Royal Bioscope (Advertisement, *Bintang Betawi*, 24 March 1903). I would like to thank Rianne Siebenga for helping me in identifying Esoofally.

6. Originating from the Parsi minority of Bombay and touring the Indies as of the 1880s, the repertoire of Parsi theater troupes was incredibly mixed, appropriating and localizing Sanskrit epics, Shakespearean plays, and stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*. See Cohen, “On the Origins of the Komedie Stamboel” 316-317.

7. Tofighian’s findings regarding early moving picture shows in the entire region further support this assertion (46-52). See further discussion of the arrival of moving pictures in colonial Indonesia in Ruppin.
8. The wayang kulit, originating from the Javanese royal courts and accompanied by a gamelan ensemble, enables spectators to watch the show from both sides of the screen: either in front of the canvas, enjoying the shadow effect, or behind the screen, watching the dalang working the puppets (see Mrázek).


10. For the sake of comparison, the Dutch-language daily Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië published in Batavia but distributed outside of the capital too, had about 1,000 copies in circulation in 1901 (Adam 48, footnote 53).

11. In his book The Komedie Stamboel, Cohen uses spelling to differentiate between the Komedie Stamboel, referring to the specific troupe under investigation in his study, which was established in Surabaya in 1891, and komedi stambul in reference to the genre of Malay popular opera. I have retained this differentiation here.

12. For a list of plays and tableaux performed by the Komedie Stamboel between 1891 and 1901, see Appendix to Cohen’s The Komedie Stamboel (381-390).

13. According to Tom Gunning, writing with an aesthetic concern, even if early audiences in the West reacted with “astonishment” to moving images, this was very much part of the “aesthetic of attraction” characteristic of early cinema and often encouraged by exhibitors, in which the spectator was to remain “aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfilment” (121).

14. First introduced in the early nineteenth century, an orchestrion is an automatic musical device playing from a perforated music roll and intended to sound like a band or orchestra. The pianola, a self-playing piano worked by the player controlling the pneumatic mechanism, was another popular option. According to Tofighian, “Piano was the most common live accompaniment to film exhibitions [in Southeast Asia], especially if the exhibition took place in the ‘Town Hall’ rather than in a tent” (107).

15. Gamelan is a traditional musical ensemble mostly made up of percussive instruments and popular on Java and Bali. It is often used to accompany dance or wayang.

16. For instance, an exhibitor identified as English might have spoken German when screening French films, while an Armenian manager could translate German intertitles into English (“Nederlandsch-Indië,” Advertentieblad voor Tegal en Omstreken, 11 December 1897; “De Chronofoon,” Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad, 20 July 1905).

17. For further discussion of the practice of segregated seating at moving picture venues in urban colonial Indonesia, see Ruppin, “From ‘Crocodile City’ to ‘Ville Lumière’” and Ruppin, The Komedi Bioscoop, 32–38, 146–155.

18. Versions of “Ali Baba” were screened by N. V. Biograph (Advertisement, De Locomotief, 21 January 1904), the Netherlands Indies Biograph (Advertisement, Bintang Soerabaia,1 October 1904), the Royal Bioscope (Advertisement, Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië,7 January 1905), Phono Animatograph (Advertisement, De Locomotief, 2 April 1906), S. M. Aidid’s Royal Optigraph Advertisement, Kabar Perniagaan,10 December 1906) and

19. According to Burke, translations are the clearest examples of “hybrid texts, since the search for what is often called ‘equivalent effect’ involves the introduction of words and ideas that are familiar to the new readers but might not be intelligent in the culture in which the book was originally written” (17). “Hybrid practices may be identified in religion, music, language, sport and other cultural domains,” wherein one culture adopts and adapts the cultural forms of another culture (21-25).

20. According to James T. Siegel, based on a contemporary film review, the 1929 Tan Film adaptation of Nyai Dasima, competing against American films featuring foreign stars, was geared to appeal to the tastes of Indonesians of the lower income class (68). He further attempts to unpack the possible sources of the film’s attraction for these spectators (68-75). See also Salim Said’s discussion of the film production and the Tan Film Company (19-22).

21. The earliest use of “komedi gambar” I came across was made in reference to the Kenotograph show in Surabaya (“India Ollanda,” *Bintang Soerabaia*, 28 April 1897). Since then it appears that it was not in use until 1903, when referring to Esoofally’s shows (“Kabar sehari-hari dari Betawi dan laen-laen negri,” *Bintang Betawi*, 27 April 1903).
Works Cited


