

## Review

Farish A. Noor

### ***Data-gathering in colonial Southeast Asia 1800-1900: Framing the Other***

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*Reviewed by Fenneke Sysling*



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### **Data-Gathering in Colonial Southeast Asia 1800-1900**

**Framing the Other**

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At the outset, it is important to mention what this book is not: it is not a book about colonial censuses, about statistics in the service of Empire or about intelligence gathering in the sense of Chris Bayly's *Empire and information*. Also, most of the book is not about the Dutch colonies but about British presence in Southeast Asia. *Data-gathering in colonial Southeast Asia* is best described as a thorough re-reading of several British imperial classics in geography and anthropology. These publications brought to Europe information upon which the growing imperial presence in the region was built. Farish A. Noor analyzes six of these classics in more detail, taking the reader to Java, British Borneo, Burma, and the Malayan peninsula. His argument is by now a familiar one: these books opened up areas for Westerners to know and to rule, and as part of this process Indigenous people were framed as the essentialized colonial Other.

Chapter 1 is the most interesting for students and scholars of the Dutch colonies as it deals with Stamford Raffles' 1814 *Java regulations*, written during the British interregnum in the Dutch East Indies that began in 1811 and lasted until 1816. While Raffles' *History of Java* (1817) is better known, his *Regulations for the more effectual administrations of justice in the provincial courts of Java* were perhaps even more important for the colonial governance of Java. The 173 regulations, from which Noor quotes extensively, show how Raffles planned to rule Java. The importance of information for Raffles becomes apparent in regulations such as number 15, which ordered a village head to provide the colonial officers with all details of strangers who arrived to settle in the village. According to Noor, this meant that village heads were to "keep an eye on their own people and to provide the British authorities with as much information as they could gather on their friends and neighbours" (41). Another argument of Noor in this chapter is that the Javanese were featured in the regulations as both useless and useful people: they were useful in the agricultural sector and as revenue collectors, but at the same time they were seen as lazy natives with no interest in science and technology.

Chapter 2 analyzes John Crawfurd's *Journal of an embassy from the Governor-General of India to the court of Ava* (1829), a report of his visit to Burma. Crawfurd's report was "a prelude to an invasion" (72), with its information about the strengths and (military) weaknesses of the kingdom of Ava. What makes this chapter worthwhile is that Crawfurd published, as an appendix to his book, the interviews on which it was based, again quoted extensively. Crawfurd's informers were mostly Europeans and Americans, taken prisoner by the Burmese, and their stories give us a glimpse of the life of European and American commercial agents, missionaries and translators who happened to spend part of their lives in a Burmese prison. These informers portrayed the Burmese as a degenerate people

living under tyranny, but they were themselves regarded by Crawford as “worthless characters of the lowest order” (81).

Chapter 3 follows Hugh Low’s *Sarawak: Its inhabitants and productions; being notes during a residence in that country with H.H. the Rajah Brooke* (1848) and Spenser St. John’s *Life in the forests of the Far East* (1862), both about the geography and society of Sarawak in British Borneo. Chapter 4 deals with Dominick D. Daly’s *Surveys and explorations in the native states of the Malayan peninsula* (1882) and Hugh Clifford’s *A journey through the Malay states of Trengganu and Kelantan* (1897), which both focus on the Malay states and Malay people of what is now Malaysia. The aim of these books was again, writes Noor, to secure British power of the Malay lands.

Chapter 5 functions as a conclusion in which Noor argues that a close reading of these books reveals several things: the building of an all-seeing and all-knowing colonial apparatus, the way in which these books sanitized their own involvement in the colonial affair, the lack of Indigenous voices, the framing of Indigenous Asians as the Other of the West and the importance of pseudo-scientific racial science in these books.

One of the merits of this book is that it is based on a close reading of texts that today are only read cursorily by a handful of scholars. Noor himself, he admits, finds “strange comfort in staying up late at night reading the appendices of books that nobody reads anymore” (31). This kind of reading is the basis of good scholarship. It is a pity then that Noor really hammers home his arguments. This repetition does not make his claims more convincing but leaves open questions such as how these books each functioned differently in the different phases and geographies of Empire-building. The book would also have benefitted from a better definition of oft-repeated terms such as racialized colonial-capitalism, data (versus information and knowledge) or echo chamber. Apart from that, the book is a careful re-reading of fascinating material.

### **About the reviewer**

Fenneke Sysling is a historian specializing in the history of science and Dutch colonialism and works as an assistant professor at the University of Leiden (Netherlands). Her interests include colonial heritage, museum objects, race, the body and natural history. Earning her Ph.D. from the VU University Amsterdam in 2013, she is the author of *Racial science and human diversity in colonial Indonesia* (NUS Press, 2016).

