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

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

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Abstract:

Following the Great Depression, colonial Indonesia was in a flux. The economic shift from a rural agrarian to an urban manufacturing economic base led to increasingly rapid urbanization and the accompanying societal woes. This shift in societal make-up influenced various forms of popular culture, which writers and other creative professionals used to express their opinions – both positive and negative – of the cultural shift.

The reporter turned screenwriter Saeroen, a keen social observer who wrote under the name Kampret and was several times arrested for his writings, was no exception. Attached to four film production houses in his four-year screenwriting career (1937–41), Saeroen's oeuvre included some of the biggest commercial successes of the period and often involved 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, including *Terang Boelan*, *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*, *Asmara Moerni*, and *Ajah Berdosa*, 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 in an ambiguous manner – as both full of the possibility for further development and replete with dangers not found in the villages – whereas villages are stagnant, rarely changing, yet offering 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.

Keywords: *Saeroen, cinema of the Dutch East Indies, post-colonialism*

Background: A Colony in Flux

In order to escape an economic downspiral following the Great Depression, in the mid-1930s the Dutch East Indies government promoted the transition from a primarily agrarian based economy to an economy based predominantly on manufacturing. This increased urbanization meant that the drive towards modernization, which had been reflected in political discourse of 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 chance their futures in the city?

Although extensive discussion of the drive of the relationship between modernity and tradition rang throughout the colony, it generally was in mediums 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, and many had limited circulation; one of what would prove to be the most influential publications of this time, *Poedjangga Baroe*, never had more than 150 subscribers. 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 an education since the early 20th century, this was predominantly limited to those from rich families and those of noble decent. 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 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 than had been produced since the domestic industry first arose in 1926. Furthermore, owing to the primarily audial nature of these talkies, viewers did not need to be well educated to understand the main storyline – or to 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 indigene individual in the Dutch East Indies – not that understood by the academic elite, but that understood by the average resident – it is thus 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, selected for both being the first professional indigene screenwriter and having a significant cultural impact through his two films – *Terang Boelan* and *Fatima* – which Biran (2009: 182) credits with revitalizing and providing a formula for the cinema industry of the Indies. Through

this analysis it is expected that Saeroen's positioning of tradition and modernity, represented through 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.

The Indonesian Batman: Saeroen, alias *Kampret*

Although his year of birth is uncertain, it is known that Saeroen (Figure 1) was born in Yogyakarta. The son of an *abdi dalem* named Mangoendigdo,¹ he had the opportunity to study at two schools, but ultimately failed 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



Figure 1: Saeroen

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 ("Congres Inlandsche Journalisten") and a 1932 advertisement in *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* indicates that he was that newspaper's editor.

Having made a name for himself, Saeroen worked with Raden Hajji Djunaedi to establish the Senen-based daily *Pemandangan* in March 1933 ("Een Nieuw Inlandsch Periodiek"). 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 was a staunch nationalist, calling 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 Parada Harahap and Ki Hadjar Dewantara (I.N. 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

¹ In an article regarding a press violation (*persdelict*) while he was working at *Siang Po*, Saeroen is referred to as "Saeroen bin Mangoendigdo" ("Een persdelict"). As *bin* indicates a patronymic, from this we can infer his father's name.

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-omroepmaatschappij) on European audiences; Saeroen pushed for the company to stop drawing comparisons between Europeans and Asians (“De Nirom”), and in 1936 he became part of a committee to promote education for Native Indonesians (“Inheemsche Onderwijsbelangen”). 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 (“Boeken en brochures”). Despite this new position, he also continued writing for *Pemandangan*; Biran (2009: 232) attributes several 1940 film reviews 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, his involvement in the press became more controversial. The colonial government began investigating possible connections between Saeroen and the Empire of Japan² through his role in the acquiring of the newspaper *Warta Harian* and printing press Tjaja Pasundan (as well as possible embezzlement of 3,600 gulden during said acquisition) in May 1939 (“Geknoei in Inheemsche Pers”; “Oneerlijkheden Drukkerij”); 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, instead accepting the funds as a “donation” for the welfare of the Indonesian populace (“Japanners bieden”). Ultimately, Saeroen spent nine months in prison awaiting trial for embezzlement; he was released in mid-February 1940 until he could stand trial (“De Zaak-Saeroen”). 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 (“Kort Indisch nieuws”).³

² 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.

³ A letter from Kaneko Keizo (reproduced in *Ten Years of Japanese Burrowing in the Netherlands East Indies* [66–67] in 1942) 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-Prospersity Sphere and the Japanese promise to be as “big brothers” to the Indonesian people. However, it is also

Saeroen's activities during the Japanese occupation and National Revolution are unclear (I.N. 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.⁴ 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: advertising material, reviews, and novelizations.

Saeroen's first film, *Terang Boelan*, was written for Albert Balink and 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 pre-independence Indonesian film) 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 in 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

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.

⁴ 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 are 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 has yet been made. Of the films of Saeroen, we are only aware of one extant one, 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.

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 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 Tan's Film, in Batavia, 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.⁵ An illustrated advertisement (Figure 2) for the film was run in *Pemandangan*, suggesting that it received a place of honor in this newspaper with its strong ties to the writer. Owing to



Figure 2: Advertisement for *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*

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 more likely that other writers developed his treatment further after his imprisonment. A long production schedule, lasting several months, was not uncommon for Tan's productions starring Roekiah. A summary of *Sorga Ka Toedjoe*, derived from the novelization, follows:

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

⁵ 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*.

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, apparently having left Tan's Film owing to his incarceration. 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 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:

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 Wongso Tersangka* (screened by December 1941). The last film which Saeroen is known to have written, *Ajah Berdosa*, was completed later that year. A summary, derived from a contemporary review (“Sampoerna-theatre”), 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),⁶ 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.

This general trend holds true in Indonesian literature as well. As shown by Fuller (2012: 79), as early as the 1910s the city space has been used in Indonesian literature as a genesis of social criticism, as in the contrast of 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

⁶ 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.

true throughout the passing years, and by the 1930s and 1940s the city space had become a source of fascination for the modern individual.⁷

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 his 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),⁸ 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 (Figure 3). Such is the modernity introduced by Europeans: powerful and awe-inspiring, at least on the outside.



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

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

⁷ 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.

⁸ See, for instance, Ahmad Tohari's trilogy *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* (1982, 1985, 1986) and Umar Kayam's *Para Priyayi* (1992).

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, than the village space in Saeroen's work is representative of 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 the smuggler, 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, as 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 Saeroen's thinking. 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, this is not realized 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 above, 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 notions 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, but ultimately suffers for it; his happiness only returns once he has given up these foreign ways and returns to his wife – and thus, symbolically, reincorporates 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 – 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 by Tati owing to Omi being a beautiful *keroncong* singer: not only was the employ considered full of promiscuous women,⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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”.¹¹ 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.

⁹ It is not a coincidence, after all, that Yah in *Belenggu* was also a *keroncong* singer.

¹⁰ Original: Ia poenja soeara tidak seberapa. Tjoema lèrèkan matanja ada sangat berbahaja. Banjak orang laki² tergila-gila kepadanya.

¹¹ In comparison, despite hating Parta, Rohaya in *Sorga Ka Toedjoe* continues to call him “tuan”.

Rather, the ideal woman in Saeroen's films – that is, the women to whom the audience can aspire – 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. Even when women 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. As shown above, the expectations for male and female characters show an (admittedly disparate) demand to find a between space, in 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",¹² 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 Tuti, and as such denies agency to the couple; this indirectly leads to Amir's death.

¹² Original: "Boeaja² dan toekang-toekang tjopet."

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 ultimately 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 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. 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 (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



Figure 4: Pardi and Tuti after marriage

agency – in later films, even after leaving the village.

Again we see that, although the city (recognizably a European 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 a primarily 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, whereas the cities were dangerous and corrupting, with death always a possibility, yet they offered opportunity for growth and personal development. These starkly contrasting spaces offered the choice between safety and progress. Saeroen ultimately pushed 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.

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. He 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; he 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 clear 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 combined it with traditional morals. Saeroen encoded this message through his screenplays, covertly conveying this 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 be if indigenous Indonesians had the independence to grow: a hopeful, dynamic, and strong nation, which combined European-inspired progress with traditional values in order to guarantee the welfare of the people.

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