The unbearable absence of parasols: the formidable weight of a colonial Java status symbol

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The Dutch East Indies colonial administration employed both Dutch and Indonesian civil servants. Status symbols among Indonesian officials included snuffboxes and spears, but the payung was a status symbol only on the island of Java. Carried exclusively on ceremonial occasions, such as holidays or for an important official’s visit, it distinguished the highest echelons, and its particular colour and decoration expressed its owner’s rank.

Among civil servants in 19th century Java, the payung was carried by three groups: indigenous supervisors of waterworks, coffee plantations, vaccinations, and other sectors important to the colonial government; indigenous administrators, such as regency and district heads; and the high-ranking Dutch administrators, provincial heads and deputies who wished to show off by carrying these original indigenous status symbols. Among these three groups the dokters djawa were not to be found.

Dokter djawa vs. dukun

Since time immemorial the indigenous population consulted the dukun, the traditional medicine man or woman, to address personal health problems. Dukan- ni had no formal medical training, their medical knowledge was both practical and technical but also included methods of invoking cosmic and spiritual powers. The Dutch looked down on dukuns (even though many consulted them) and this negative attitude was one reason why, in 1871, the colonial government established in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) the School for the Education of Indigenous Doctors. Upon graduation each student earned the title dokter djawa, literally, ‘Javanese physician’.

The government hoped especially boys from decent families – that is, from indigenous society’s higher classes, where the use of a payung was common – would enrol. Thus it might seem logical that a dokter djawa would have the right to carry a payung. So thought Dr Willem Bosch, the school founder and head of the Military Health Service, who had served as a health officer in Java for more than 25 years. Knowing how important symbols like the payung were to colonial society, Bosch wanted every graduate to receive one, not only because he hoped to enrol boys from decent families but also because he wanted the dokter djawa to hold high status in indigenous society. His government superiors, providing no explanation, did not agree and, of course, had the final say. Thus graduates were sent payung less than back to their villages, ostensibly to replace the dukuns. In reality most became vaccinators and some worked as assistants to European doctors.

Life without a payung

Dokters djawa weren’t the only ones who were denied a payung. So were indigenous teachers, whom the colonial government also began to educate in 1855. These were the first ever such vocational trainings for Javanese, and perhaps the colonial government wanted to wait and see what became of their investment before empowering them with the symbols of their indigenous authority, as in those days endowing the indigenous with a Western education was indeed a novelty. Ten years later, in 1861, for a reason unknown to me, teachers earned the right to carry a payung, but not dokters djawa. Most of the latter, as vaccinators, served vaccination supervisors – bosses and as bosses they already had the right to carry a payung.

In 1865, Bosch’s successor as head of the Military Health Service, Dr G. Wassink, wanted to improve the curriculum of the School for the Education of Indigenous Doctors, mainly by lengthening the program of study from two to three years, and to enhance graduate status by awarding each a salary and the right to carry the cov- 45 eeted payung. Until then dokters djawa only received an allowance. The government agreed to all of these proposals but one, and this time it did provide an explanation: it feared that a payung-carrying dokter djawa would alienate the population.

The government’s argument of aliena- tion is quite strange: one wonders why it wasn’t valid only for dokters djawa and not for teachers. More odd, the government’s actions didn’t reflect its argument, as it simultaneously empowered dokter djawa in other ways. For example, class divisions, extended throughout society, determining where passengers sat on trains and boats and how patients were treated in hospitals. In 1866, the government decided that dokter djawa school students who fell ill should be treated as second-class patients because that was more in line with their status; previously, they were treated as fourth-class. That same year the govern- ment began issuing each graduate a box of medicines with which to treat patients; prior to that, they were issued nothing and were forced to ask European doctors for medicines. This shows the government was well aware of the students’ status and was investing in them; issuing medicines, in particular, was a government expression of trust when many Europeans still feared that dokters djawa could not handle responsibility. Although these measures were costly materially, they might also have been perceived as socially frugal: the government still viewed dokters djawa as mere vaccinators – which in reality 50% of them were – and thus perhaps thought they were simply unworthy of the payung.

Yet the payung continued to be withheld, the consequences of which one former dokter djawa school teacher, Dr J. Alken, made clear: ‘When graduates are sent back to their villages to work as a vacci- nator they lack any status symbol, such as the payung, and therefore they are equal to a simple villager. They see their equals placed in positions as supervisors or assistant district heads or even higher positions. When they arrive in the villag- es, they are not like these others who are received with music, because it is not nec- essary for them to possess high status in indigenous society, because they have no claim to a payung’.

From a symbol of ‘ostentatious pomp and personal vanity’...

In 1868 two dokten djawa officially applied to carry the same status symbol that vacci- nators supervisors carried. Refusing their request, Governor General Mr. Pieter Mijer explained he saw no reason to ‘give the dokter djawa esteem in indigenous society by artificial means. Through useful activi- ties they should themselves strive for an honourable position. Ostentatious pomp and personal vanity were not in keeping with their calling. During their stay at the school in Batavia they surely must have learned that being truly magnanimous did not depend on vanity but on true knowl- edge and diligent devotion to duty’. That the Governor General considered the payung a manifestation of vanity is ironic, given the government’s previous efforts to recruit students for the dokter djawa school from among the payung-carrying class, whose members were among the few literate Indonesians, and literacy was a prerequisite to enrolment. Quite often a dokter djawa’s father, brother or nephew held a position with a right to a payung while the dokter djawa was denied one, which could not only arouse envy within a family but make the dokter djawa’s position in indigenous society unclear according to his social class he was a payung-carr- rier, but in practice he wasn’t allowed to be one. Why wasn’t it vain of high Indo- nesian to seek such dignities to carry the payung? It was as though the government regarded the dokter djawa as an exception from whom it expected a higher moral standard.

In 1871, after the Dutch and Indonesian press discredited the educational level of the School for the Education of Indigenous Doctors as substandard, more curriculum changes were made. Dutch became the language of instruction and of communi- cation between students, and the course was lengthened to seven years. The pay- ung, however, was not addressed, prob- ably because the director, T.K. Semmelink, wanted to Westernise the course, instead of educating many doctors at a low tech- nical level, Semmelink opted to educate a few at a high level, ‘which required Dutch- language textbooks and instruction. Thus he inevitably steered clear of indigenous symbols like the payung.

...to a symbol that increases ‘faith in their skill and competence’

The payung debate fell silent for several years. In 1885, when the dokter djawa Mas Prawoto Atmodjo stirred it up again by requesting the privilege from his superior, the Dutch provincial head, who passed the request on to the director of the Depart- ment of Education, who in turn passed it on, with a favourable recommendation, to his superior: the Governor General. This time, three decades after his creation, the dokter djawa finally got his hands on the payung. In his decision, Governor General Frederik S. Jacob wrote that it was impor- tant ‘for the government to cooperate in raising the prestige of the dokters djawa as considerable money and effort was put into their schooling. In this way the faith in their skill and competence will increase. Furthermore, officially granting the payung to dokter djawa will stimulate young people from distinguished families to become a physician’.

The Governor General’s justifications expressed nothing new. Over three decades after having come up with the idea, the gov- ernment had simply finally convinced itself of the usefulness of their own creation – dokters djawa – as medical practitioners. Why would the government waste 30 years of ‘considerable money and effort’ to train boys solely in order to give the payung as a tool to help make their investment worthwhile? It remains an unanswered question.

Over the dokter djawa’s professional position improved, but until the end of the colonial period his social position was ambiguous both to himself and in the eyes of others. Because of his education many a dokter djawa felt part of the Western world, he was fluent in Dutch and wanted his children to receive a Western educa- tion. His salary, however, was not Western: for the same work, he earned far less than his European colleagues. Meanwhile, he belonged to the archipelago’s 44 million inhabitants, had no one to turn to but the dukun.

Thus, from the very beginning, the dokter djawa faced an uphill battle when it came to having his authority recognised in vil- lagers’ eyes, which must have made him see the payung not as an accoutrement but as an indispensable wand that he simply couldn’t do without. For 30 years the gov- ernment had left it just beyond his hand, even placed it in the hands of lesser men. Which is why the ultimate irony of its long-awaited professional bestowal seems so cruel: by the time the dokter djawa was finally grant- ed the right to carry the payung, its heyday as a status symbol was over.

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