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St Nicholas as a Public Festival in Java, 1870-1920

Articulating Dutch Popular Culture as Ethnic Culture

1. Folklore, ethnicity and colonial history

In the discipline of folklore (or European ethnology, or *Volkskunde*) the expression and construction of socio-cultural identities have formed major research topics over the last two decades.¹ Working from material objects or rituals and public festivals, folklorists, together with anthropologists and cultural historians, have shown how the study of the uses and functions of these elements of popular culture may illuminate the complex processes by which groups present themselves as distinct categories in society (see, for example, Voskuil 1987, Boissevain 1992, Rooijackers 1994, Van der Borgt, Hermans and Jacobs 1996). There proved to be oppositions between urban and rural identities, between national and regional or local allegiances, and between the many groups formed on the basis of religious affiliation and socio-economic status. The lines of division were and are not static. In consequence of changes in the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres, they are in constant flux – with new identities appearing and old ones losing their meaning – and subject to an ongoing process of reorganization and redefinition.

In recent years the emergence of a consumer society on a global scale and the popularization of information technology have led to a constant widening of cultural horizons. More and new opportunities for the definition of the self have arisen, increasingly querying and rendering obsolete older, purportedly more fixed, identification models. On the theoretical level, the ensu-

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ing fragmentation of culture and unpredictability of cultural behaviour stimulated the need to radically abandon all essentialist notions of the concept of identity. As in the real world, the autonomous individual entered the theoretical stage as a focus of observation and analysis. Scholars, especially sociologists, sought to account for his behaviour by proclaiming the 'post-modern' nature of contemporary culture (see, for example, Featherstone 1995). In an essay on the growing popularity in The Netherlands of the practice of giving presents at Christmas instead of at the more traditional festival of St Nicholas on 5 or 6 December, I tried to provide an empirical basis for the often highly abstract discussions about post-modern society. I interpreted this phenomenon as an aspect of the growing globalization of Dutch culture and a consequent reaffirmation of national identity (Helsloot 1996; see also Rooijackers 1997).

One of the criticisms directed at the theory of post-modernity is that it over-emphasizes the supposed singularity of the present cultural situation and overlooks historical parallels (Löfgren 1994:47-50, 1995:350-4). King drew attention to the fact that 'the first globally multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-continental societies on any substantial scale' were the colonial societies, in particular colonial cities. Thus a consideration of colonial history holds the promise of being theoretically relevant – King even describes it as 'an essential pre-requisite' – in providing a comparative empirical basis for current debates about cultural and ethnic identities in Europe (King 1991:8, 7). Not surprisingly, such a comparison is also advocated by colonial historians like Stoler (1995:198-200, 1997:214, elaborating on points of similarity and difference) themselves. European national cultures long ago became engaged in a process of cultural interaction, exchange and confrontation with 'other' cultures. An additional advantage – from the perspective of European ethnology – of turning to colonial history is that the study of colonial society and culture, because of their special nature, may yield insights into the nature of interethnic relations. The mass immigration of members of all kinds of ethnic groups to Europe and the violent ethnic wars of recent years have firmly placed the analytical category of ethnicity on the research agenda of folklorists and anthropologists in Europe (for surveys of the debate, see Eriksen 1993, Banks 1996).

As a Dutch folklorist with a special interest in festivals and rituals, I was prompted by the above considerations to study an element of ethnic folklore in a Dutch colonial society. As the most important of the Dutch colonies, I chose the Netherlands Indies. In line with my earlier studies, I concentrated on the festival of St Nicholas. Apart from a very brief note by De Graaf (1981), this Indies-style St Nicholas festival does not seem to have been studied before.

I restricted my enquiry to the island of Java, in particular its major towns

– the capital Batavia and the towns of Surabaya, Bandung and Semarang – as it accommodated the majority of the Dutch (or so-called 'European') colonial population. From some tens of thousands in the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of this population rose to about 200,000 in 1940. In the midst of the mass of tens of millions of native Indonesians they formed only a tiny minority. Contrary to what is the case in present-day Europe, this small group of immigrants constituted the apex of society in the colonial framework of power and cultural relations. As a group, it was not simply a copy of Dutch society transplanted abroad. Its members were predominantly middle-class, being employed in the civil service, large-scale agriculture or, what was socially a more isolated position, the colonial army. These three main groups in turn had an internal hierarchy on the basis of rank and wealth. The mass immigration of the first decades of the 20th century brought further social differentiation in its wake. In spite of this immigration, in 1930 still only some 25% of the European population had been born outside the Indies. The majority of this population – in 1860, 80% and in 1930, 57% – consisted of people of mixed Dutch and Indonesian descent, or Indo-Europeans (Stoler 1989:136; Van Doorn 1994:23, 37, 45-6, 55; De Jong 1991:27-30; Turksma 1987:39, 42-5; Drooglever 1980:6; Groeneboer 1993:476). Together with the Dutch, they formed the dominant European population in the juridical sense. The Indonesians and Chinese, though subjects of the Dutch government, were not Dutch citizens (Heijs 1994; Fasseur 1992). Between the Dutch (*totok*) and the Indo-Europeans, and between sections of the Indo-European population itself, there were all kinds of tensions. At the beginning of the twentieth century, thousands of Indo-Europeans – some 30-40% of the European community – were employed as junior clerks in the civil service, and their position was far from comfortable. Tolerated but not fully accepted by the *totok*, with their prospects for advancement blocked, their livelihood threatened by pay cuts, and in danger of in turn losing their jobs to less demanding Indonesians, they adopted a defensive strategy, over-emphasizing their allegiance to Dutch culture and Dutch rule (Bosma 1997: 135-6, 181, 232, 8-9).

All this makes it understandable that all the participants in overseas Dutch culture should have celebrated the festival of St Nicholas with equal zest. 'It is a strange fact that in this quite cosmopolitan society the celebration of St Nicholas overshadows all other celebrations; that [...] even those born in the land of the Sun and those whose European blood is mixed with Indies blood celebrate the festival with the same enthusiasm as the Dutch from Holland' (BN 3-12-1897).²

² See the list of abbreviations of names of newspapers consulted at the end of this article. Quotations from Dutch-language sources are given in English translation.

With Oring (1986:33), I take 'ethnic folklore' to mean 'folklore which plays a part in the definition of ethnic groups, which comments upon or governs the interaction between different ethnic groups, which contributes to the sense of an ethnic identity, or which constitutes and contributes to any ethnically based action', or, in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's words (1983:45-6), as 'folklore on and about cultural boundaries'. As Buckley and Kenney (1995:11) have underlined, it is in 'expressive culture, usually leisure activities' that ethnic folklore is most manifest. In Dutch ethnic culture the annual, nationwide festival of St Nicholas may justifiably be described, with Cohen (1993: 149), as a 'major articulating cultural form'. Here I interpret articulation, following Frijhoff (1997:112), to describe the process that 'gives a symbolic system a typical, particular meaning to a specific group'. In the name of St Nicholas, who comes from 'Spain' each year, children and adults are given presents, especially at home, the former in reward for good behaviour during the preceding year (Van Leer 1995). How, then, did this festival participate 'in the processes of ethnic classification, identification, and action' (Oring 1986:34) in the Netherlands Indies? Did it 'take on new meanings, serve additional functions, and affect members of the host society as well' (Georges and Jones 1995:206)?

As a heuristic analytical model – offering the additional advantage of linking the problem of Dutch interethnic relations in the present and in the past – I use a recent study on the Antillean summer carnival in The Netherlands by the anthropologist Tak (1996). When in the 1970s it became clear both to the Antillean immigrants themselves and to the Dutch government that the former were in The Netherlands to stay, this summer carnival was staged from the 1980s onwards, with a street parade as core element. It was intended to provide the Antilleans with a means of expressing themselves culturally; at the same time the hoped-for participation of Dutch nationals (and members of other immigrant ethnic groups) was expected to stimulate a general cultural integration. The summer carnival failed in this twofold objective. Antilleans resented the participation of other ethnic groups in their carnival, feared a loss in quality of the festival, and were keen to preserve its original Antillean character. As a result, Dutch natives lost interest and restricted themselves to remaining passive onlookers. From potentially open the festival changed to ethnically closed. A similar process is outlined by Wijers (1995) in her study of the postwar carnival in the Dutch province of Limburg. Carnival is emphatically defined by the people of Limburg as an element of their popular culture – and, one might add, of their ethnic culture. The celebration of carnival to them signifies, in Poppi's (1992) words, symbolically 'building difference' with Dutch mainstream culture, or the ways of the 'foreign', western provinces ('Holland'). To these broadly shared attitudes only a minority (about 25%), in particular young people,

add an active hostility to 'westerners' and would try to prevent them from participating in the carnival. Interestingly, these 'foreigners' on the whole were grossly stereotyped, with their innate inability to carouse according to Limburg standards being stressed (Wijers 1995:33-4, 298, 356-7). To what extent can processes like these, which may point to some general features of inter-ethnic relations as highlighted in festive behaviour and thought, be detected in the history of St Nicholas in the East Indies?

Like most festivals, St Nicholas' Day in the East Indies was celebrated on three mutually distinguishable, but of course not unrelated, social levels: in the private sphere, the public sphere, and the intermediate sphere of institutions like social clubs (*soos*), associations and schools. In this article I will concentrate on the public level, as being – obviously so in the colonial situation – most likely to provide clues about interethnic relations.³ This focus is also a consequence of my choice of main sources, namely Dutch newspapers from Java.⁴ Of the approximately 1200 volumes preserved in libraries in The Netherlands, I have consulted some 600, namely the issues appearing a few days before and after December 5th each year. For the sake of my argument I will limit myself initially to a synchronic presentation of the material, placing an emphasis on the period between the 1880s and 1920s.

2. St Nicholas in Java

Outdoor celebration of a domestic festival

'Come out of your houses, ye timid, and enjoy life and freedom!' With this slogan the citizens of Batavia were urged to join a St Nicholas party in a local bar, 'alone or with [their] children' (BN 3-12-1926). The cry did not fall on deaf ears. It was widely recognized that 'under the palm trees' the festival had become transformed into an 'occasion for outdoor merrymaking' (L 10-12-1913). 'As times and climates change, so do manners and customs. Thus nowadays in the Indies, the festival of St Nicholas is increasingly celebrated outdoors by adults and children alike' (BN 3-12-1892). Every fresh arrival from the mother country was struck by this departure from the typically Dutch way of celebrating St Nicholas' Day. 'In Holland a *gezellig* (cosy, cheer-

³ I have, however, excluded the festive St Nicholas processions to the *soos* and to schools here because, although they clearly had a public aspect, they formed part of an essentially private celebration of the festival.

⁴ I am quite aware of the limitations of this kind of source, which hardly provides the essential insight into 'the experiences through which it (ethnic identity) is formed' (Barth 1994:14). In the near future I hope to publish a study on the subject which will have a broader scope and will be based on a greater variety of sources.

ful, convivial) celebration in the intimacy of the home, here a noisy, festive hustle and bustle in the streets' (JB 6-12-1912). Here the festival was held 'outdoors and with a crowd of other people, in the old country in the close family circle at home' (JB 6-12-1910). The 'typical street festival' generated 'a general St. Nicholas jollity' (SH 8-12-1917; JB 6-12-1916). This phenomenon might be cherished as a self-confessed 'silly habit' (L 8-12-1921) or looked down upon as an 'imitation' (JB 7-12-1909), an 'Ersatz' (BB 8-12-1934), or a 'parody' (M 7-12-1912) of the original.⁵ It was clear to all, however, that this – spontaneous, unorganized – outdoor form of celebration was typical of the 'Indies way of life' (BN 6-12-1915). St Nicholas celebrations in the home, as in The Netherlands, were reported as exceptions, at least in the cities (JB 5-12-1902, 6-12-1910; SH 8-12-1921).

This only stood to reason. Regrettable though it was, 'the Indies were no place for indoor festivities' (JB 7-12-1911; compare PB 5-12-1907). There was the obvious difference in climate. It was simply too hot there to recreate the cosy atmosphere of the period surrounding St Nicholas' Day in The Netherlands (M 25-11-1907). St Nicholas demanded cold weather and a blazing stove (L 10-12-1923). In the heat of the tropics the idea of 'privacy of the home' was an impossibility. When children sang the traditional St Nicholas song about the 'moon shining through the trees', the moon shining through *asem* and *kanari* trees was not the same as that seen shining through the leafless, snow-covered branches of chestnut trees (L 2-12-1911). Van Wermeskerken ([1933]:101-2) notes that more often than not it was the adults who were singing and points to the disillusionment created by an indoor celebration, if one was held at all: it had no meaning for children born in the Indies, who 'do not know the Dutch fairy tale' of St Nicholas. If a St Nicholas figure visited a home, he was treated with disrespect by the children, who would pull his beard and snatch his staff. To these circumstances should be added the fact that until the 1920s or 1930s Dutch *totok* society consisted predominantly of unmarried males (Turksma 1987:58). It was only natural that this should have a profound effect on recreational behaviour and the pattern in which it crystallized.

In order to understand more fully why adults were so eager to seize the opportunity to celebrate a festival like St Nicholas – in the Indies considered, perhaps, the pleasantest festival of the year, 'the evening of evenings' (BN 6-

⁵ The idea of 'imitation' was perhaps a regular theme in Dutch East Indies discourse. This is borne out by statements such as that 'social life in the Indies [...] is a fake, a simulacrum' (Veth 1900:3); that the social circles formed by women in the principal towns, despite the frequent transfers, provided at least a pleasant substitute (*surrogaat*) for Dutch conviviality (Van Helsdingen-Schoevers 1914:18); and, with reference to the December celebrations, that 'It is a common saying that part of Western life in the Indies is only a surrogate, a sham, a fake' (AID 7-12-1935).

12-1902) – one should look at two additional favourable conditions. One of the common complaints about life in the colony, repeated over and over again, was that it was dull and boring. There were few events to break its daily monotony. The lack of public festivities was keenly felt (see, for example, Weitzel 1860:143, Peripateticus 1874:39, Van Rijckevorsel 1878:295, Heering 1897:123-4, 225-6, Brons Middel 1891:47, Buitengeweg 1965:9, Termorshuizen 1988:142-3, 166, 272, 293, Bosma 1997:23; for contrary views, see Pruys van der Hoeven 1894:268, Van Vleuten 1900:26-8). King's or Queen's Birthday and New Year's Day, because of their more official character, did not qualify as festivals in the same way as St Nicholas' Day. They generated a different, less general kind of enthusiasm (JB 5-12-1882; BN 5-12-1898; Da Matta 1977). For the Indo-European population, moreover, this public celebration of St Nicholas must have held a special attraction. *Totok* prejudice against them, as well as their limited resources, generally prevented their participation in 'European' cultural life (Termorshuizen 1991:23). At the turn of the century these tendencies had not yet become fully manifest, however. We are told how on festive occasions in the European community 'all went united together and no one was excluded, as long as he had any right to assert his position as a European – even if skin colour in nine out of ten cases betrayed native descent' (Booms [1900]:213; see also Gouda 1995:164). The open-air St Nicholas celebration presented even fewer barriers and obstacles. Indo-Europeans, whose relation to Dutch culture was uneasy and precarious, must have eagerly sought opportunities for participating. For there was always the lurking fear that if they did not effectively claim and underline their status as Europeans, they would be treated as Indonesians (Bosma 1997:304).

Secondly, a constant deep longing for the mother country was a prominent and pervasive mental characteristic of those who saw their stay in the Indies as temporary (the so-called *trekkers*; see, for example, De Vries 1996:47, 120; for an ambivalent attitude, see Reitsma-Brutel de la Rivière 1920:66). By its very nature a typically Dutch occasion for merriment, St Nicholas was excellently suited to satisfy both needs. It was one of the very few 'truly European' festivals (L 6-12-1923). It is difficult, of course, to get a clear idea of what the celebration of this festival meant to the European population. Incidental newspaper comments give us something of an impression, assuming that these reflect a broader public opinion.⁶ A favourite theme was the pleasant memories of the mother country that were aroused on this day, as well as the contracting sense of distance, both in space and in time. 'Is there anyone who, coming to the Indies from Europe, does not like to call his past in the West to mind?' (BN 3-12-1892). Even those who had been in the Indies 'too long' (Stoler 1991:76) and whose orientation to the mother country was

⁶ On the 'self-reflective role' of ethnic folklore, see Oring (1986:40).

believed to be slackening were still haunted by exaggeratedly happy and unrealistic memories of their youth at home (Wagenvoort 1910:161-5, especially p. 164), among which their memories of St Nicholas must have figured prominently. Where this was the case, it was unwise to stay at home on St Nicholas' Day. For there one was 'too lonely'. Only in the midst of a crowd of others could one banish the 'spectres from the past' from one's mind and forget, and avoid melancholy (Van Wermeskerken ([1933]:103-4). Another theme was the uniqueness and the specifically Dutch character of the festival. 'Without the St Nicholas festival, Holland would not be Holland' (N 4-12-1930). It was a national festival, too, in view of 'the participation of the entire population', irrespective of religious and political affiliations (BN 5-12-1894, 5-12-1896).

At the turn of the century, the combined effects of all this in editorials (by 'M.B.') in the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (in the 1890s the largest newspaper in the Dutch East Indies, see Termorshuizen 1988:300) were to give the festival an ideological, almost political meaning. 'When we celebrate St Nicholas' Day we are honouring our Dutch past, our Dutch nationality' (BN 5-12-1894). It was thought that the festival might help 'to cement the bonds between Holland and the East Indies' and at the same time 'prevent an effacement and confounding of the national imprint' (BN 5-12-1900, 5-12-1896). These sentiments were expressed at a time of intense nationalism in The Netherlands and the Indies alike, however, and what is more, in a newspaper mainly written and read by Indo-Europeans keen on stressing their affinity with Dutch culture (Te Velde 1992:144; Bosma 1997:vii, 40). It may even so be assumed that a sense of Dutchness was certainly felt on this occasion in quieter times as well, though perhaps in a more diffuse way. Apparently there was no need then to put what was taken for granted into writing. Interestingly, when in 1901 St Nicholas was paid tribute by the playing of the Dutch national anthem, another Batavian newspaper, the government mouthpiece the *Java-Rede* (Bosma 1997:63), took offence (JB 6-12-1901). This had more to do, however, with the nature of the festivities staged in his name, to which I will now turn.

As was said above, in the Indies outdoor celebrations were considered to be peculiar to St Nicholas' Day. However, this was not uncommon in the major cities in the mother country, either. There, too, the public could join St Nicholas parties with all kinds of frivolous entertainments in halls and cafés everywhere. All kinds of shops, in particular confectioners', would run tombolas – a kind of lottery in which a cheap ticket might win a big prize (Helsloot 1987:245-6; Van Leer 1995:59-60). This element of surprise fitted in well with the spirit of St Nicholas. These practices were paralleled, and even intensified, in the East. At least from the 1860s on, confectioners in Batavia, later followed by their colleagues in other cities, organized buffet parties in

their shops on 5 and 6 December, and sometimes even on the days before that. They would serve all kinds of drinks, ice-cream, cakes, pastry and food to the public till late in the evening. To attract customers and heighten the festive atmosphere, their shops and the surrounding pavements would be illuminated at night by fairy lights, Chinese lanterns, and electric lamps. Hired bands would play music, and from the 1910s onward – though in Batavia already incidentally from the 1870s (JB 5-12-1876, 5-12-1878) – the saint whose day it was would make a personal appearance, sometimes mounted on his traditional grey horse and accompanied by his servant, Black Peter, who would distribute presents to the children. A visit to a confectioner's on St Nicholas' Day was the 'in thing' (SH 6-12-1886). These shops might attract hundreds of customers, sometimes even up to an incredible two thousand (JB 7-12-1931). Consequently, their interiors and surrounding pavements were densely packed. As a result of their special efforts on this particular day, some of these confectioneries, later restaurants – in particular Kuijl & Versteeg and Vogelpoel in Bandung, Versteeg, Leroux and Stam & Weijns in Batavia, and Grimm and Hellendoorn in Surabaya – won a great reputation not only in their respective cities, but throughout the Indies as a whole. Especially in smaller towns the absence of this kind of entrepreneurs was deplored and was held responsible for the general lack of gaiety there.

Another kind of (semi-)public space that offered easily accessible entertainment at the turn of the century was the so-called 'city garden'. These gardens were associations with a relatively low membership fee, especially in Batavia (Planten- en Dierentuin, Deca-Park). They, too, attracted large numbers of customers, notably from among the less well-off Indo-Europeans (see Termorshuizen 1988:295). In the 1910s, to lure customers, a festive procession was held through that city each year, led by a mounted St Nicholas preceded by a band and the national flag and followed by thousands of people (JB 6-12-1918).

After a usually slow start at the beginning of the evening, and in Batavia, Surabaya, Bandung and Semarang always threatened by the proverbial rain-falls of this season (which in some years spoiled the celebrations), the festive fervour would quickly mount. As the dark crept in, the streets would become thronged with people. It seemed as if everyone in town was bent on having a good time. The air would be filled with all kinds of sounds. The festivities were usually restricted to a limited area surrounding the most popular confectioners' shops, which had their bands playing. In this small social space people, many of them in small groups, would wave to each other from one restaurant to another.

St Nicholas as a carnival

For a community of Dutch, or 'European', citizens, this behaviour was rather unusual. The earlier comparison with Antillean and Limburg carnivals is less far-fetched than it might seem at first sight. For people would be laughing, shouting 'hi-ha-hi-ha!', dancing, jigging and singing popular tunes (of the type 'We gaan nog niet naar huis, nog lange niet' (BN 6-12-1913) and 'Rije, rije, rije in een wagentje ... hi-ha-ho!' (Van Wermeskerken [1933]:104)), at the same time throwing great masses of confetti and paper streamers, and sometimes coasters, hat brims, or even firecrackers at one another (in the restaurants upsetting food and drinks), fighting mock battles, and beating each other with pigs' bladders or fans – in fun or more in earnest. All this took place between complete strangers, with total disregard for respective rank. Van Wermeskerken ([1933]:104-5) observed the participation of 'some lesser gods' from the civil service – clearly Indo-Europeans – and their superiors, the clerks of trading firms and some 'big bosses of the Kali Besar', 'who under normal circumstances regarded each other as being either too low or too high in rank to make fun together ... But now they felt no embarrassment in behaving improperly towards and undergoing such behaviour from each other. They are carried away ...'. The respect and deference demanded in ordinary life were temporarily put aside and lost their meaning (BN 6-12-1898, 6-12-1910; L 9-12-1908; JB 6-12-1913). Some people would be masked (JB 6-12-1883, 7-12-1908; SH 6-12-1904) or wearing fancy dress, sometimes even clothes of the opposite sex (L 12-12-1881; PB 6-12-1909). People who were normally extremely formal might now be seen walking around carrying a party trumpet. It was considered funny to see young men with notes with the words 'à la carte dinner' and 'beer on tap' attached to their pants (JB 7-12-1903). Respectable gentlemen might be seen balancing a glass of beer on their head or a piece of St Nicholas cake on their hat or heard singing a St Nicholas song for children in a high voice (BN 6-12-1928, 6-12-1912). Whereas the rest of the year adult males occupied a dominant position, now women – setting aside etiquette (JB 6-12-1906, 6-12-1913) – and especially children played an equal, or even a dominant part in the festivities. These youngsters, too, would be masked and dressed up in fancy costumes (SH 6-12-1883, 6-12-1890; BN 6-12-1901; L 7-12-1908, 6-12-1913). Forming small gangs, they would attack everybody who got in their way – whether these were other gangs or ladies and elderly persons (JB 6-12-1907). To complete the picture, there are indications that the celebrations encouraged a degree of sexual licence, as when 'curious native *marchandes de sourires*' would enter the stage (BN 6-12-1912) or, in a milder form, when some 'sweet *nonnaatje*' would kiss and beat 'elderly gentlemen' (Van Wermeskerken [1933]:105).

It is abundantly clear, of course, that what people were doing here was

turning the world upside down, enacting a true rite of reversal (Abrahams and Bauman 1978:194; Falassi 1987:4). A festival is characterized 'by role play involving dressing up or dressing in rags; by making a lot of unusual noise and large-scale movement, including singing and dancing; by [...] developing [...] notions of chance taking [the tombola! JH]; and by invoking a spirit of nonsense and topsy-turvy' (Abrahams 1987:180). To this list should be added the element of condoned aggression. The similarity in ritual carnival repertoire between European urban Java and a remote place like the Spanish town studied by Gilmore is striking. In the latter case, too, 'the main object of the fiesta, according to most people, was to "molest" other townsmen' (Gilmore 1975:339). This festival of St Nicholas in Java's principal cities really possessed all the characteristics of a carnival.

Not surprisingly, this was also noted by contemporary observers. The festival indeed was often explicitly compared in the sources to a carnival – perhaps not so much the kind staged in The Netherlands, where carnival was still a phenomenon peculiar to a few towns in the southern provinces at the time, as those held in European cities like Vienna or Nice (SH 8-12-1909) – or to the more familiar fairs (JB 7-12-1910; L 6-12-1915). Interestingly, the carnival ideology was also adopted and expressed, St Nicholas' Day being described as 'a festival of fraternization' (JB 6-12-1907) 'among people who before that could not stand each other' (NSC 7-12-1914), which was 'alien to Batavia'. 'Today the dead town of Batavia is alive, and aristocratic Weltevreden is democratic' (Van Wermeskerken [1933]:104, 105). The general licence and irreverence not only were condoned but were welcomed and even defended. 'We understand the slightly cruel pleasure taken by a simple clerk or other inferior person in beating with a fan some pompous gentleman who always treats him coolly and condescendingly, who never unbends, and who receives a salary ten times that of his assailant, in crushing his hat, or in scattering confetti over that person's lady companions. There's satisfaction in that' (JB 6-12-1906). Van Wermeskerken ([1933]:105) describes a similar situation, though with more layers of meaning, where a simple clerk was seen throwing confetti on the head and into the mouth of his superior, whom he mistook for someone else. There was a painful moment when the clerk realized that his future and career were at stake. But then the superior suddenly began to laugh, the situation being saved by the 'warm eyes' of the clerk's wife. The outcome of the incident perhaps even was the prospect of promotion!

Contrary views on the character of the St Nicholas festival were not altogether lacking, either. In these cases the words 'celebrating' and 'fun' are placed in quotation marks, being regarded as synonyms for 'sheer licence' (JB 6-12-1907). As in the case of the carnival ideology, the unwritten rules of this festival were only broken by persons who drank too much or who could not

tell the difference between a mock and a real fight – as victims or as culprits (in the latter case for example those 'practical jokers' who hit ladies with the hard end of a fan or with a paint-smeared fan (*BN* 6-12-1912)). Nevertheless, the extreme blind force of the blows, causing black eyes and bleeding noses, led *De Locomotief* to ask 'where the festival ended and civil war began' (*L* 9-12-1908; *SH* 9-12-1908). But in general the youngsters' rough behaviour was accepted and treated as trivial compared with that of their peers at public festivals in the mother country (*BN* 7-12-1908). Only when they threw stones at St Nicholas did they clearly go too far (*PB* 6-12-1918)!

This carnivalesque celebration of St Nicholas is perhaps not what one would have expected in the Indies. Even so, like the visits to confectioners' and cafés, the festive elements of dressing up and condoned aggressive behaviour on the part of youngsters were not alien to the festival as celebrated in The Netherlands, either. Data provided by a questionnaire put out in 1943 by what is now the Meertens Institute give ample evidence of the observance of these customs in The Netherlands (at least) at the turn of the century, particularly in rural areas.⁷ They gradually disappeared in the 1930s under the influence of the efforts of teachers organizing quieter celebrations in schools and placing the venerable figure of the bishop St Nicholas at the centre of what now became foremost an educational ritual. The dressing up and aggressive behaviour were preserved in a modified form on the rather isolated island of Texel (Van Ginkel 1995:55-78). At 19th-century fairs transvestism, rightly interpreted as a symbol of a world temporarily turned upside down, was not uncommon either (Stokvis 1984:157). Dutch people coming to the Indies may have been familiar with these customs and transplanted them to the colony. Resemblance in outward form does not automatically imply identity in function, however. The participation particularly of respectable adults in the Indies St Nicholas carnival points to an adaptation of these customs to their new environment, imbuing them with special, if partly derived, meanings.

Abrahams and Bauman (1978) are quite right in characterizing as rather simplistic the traditional interpretation of carnival as an occasion for the release of underlying tensions in society. Nonetheless, it should not, in my view, be dismissed too soon or altogether. The rigidly hierarchical European society of the Indies was indeed rife with tensions, with many people feeling frustrated as a result (Termorshuizen 1988:83). The colony was firmly ruled by civil servants and until the 1920s had a poorly developed political life. Almost the only channel for airing grievances was a letter to the editor of one of the consequently numerous newspapers (Bosma 1997:4). Adding weight to this common view is the fact that the 'St Nicholas carnival' (*L* 6-12-1913) at

the time itself was regarded, and welcomed, as a 'rare occasion for blowing off steam' (*BN* 6-12-1901). In a typically functionalistic way, this was regarded as beneficial for the mental health of the individual as well as society in general (*BN* 5-12-1887; *JB* 6-12-1917). This applied to the relations among *totok*, as well as between *totok* and Indo-Europeans (as in the above-recounted incident involving a junior clerk). In view of the general invisibility of Indo-Europeans in the sources (Willems 1991) – 'every document in a colonial archive' bears witness to 'the cultural semantics of a political moment' (Stoler 1997:17-8) – it is not surprising that their presence and participation are hardly ever explicitly mentioned in newspaper accounts of the St Nicholas festival. A predictable exception was formed by 'quarrels' – fights that apparently went beyond the carnival framework – between young Indo-Europeans and sailors (*SH* 9-12-1911; *JB* 6-12-1911, 6-12-1912), like that between the friends of a clerk employed on a sugar plantation and the friends of a lieutenant, 'in which the one party, alluding to the dark complexion of the other – to which he added all kinds of charming pleasantries – provoked that party, over-sensitive as it was in this respect, to the utmost' (*NSC* 7-12-1908).

An analysis of the festival can, of course, be taken further. Turner's well-known work (1974) has drawn attention to the continuous interplay between 'structure' and 'communitas' at festivals. Precisely the sense of community was strong at St Nicholas, ideologically as well as in practice. The European community presented itself as a whole on this occasion. And by indulging in unrestrained, disorderly behaviour and ritual violence in this typical rite of reversal, it demonstrated and re-affirmed the stability of the structure of society, as Gilmore (1975:339-34), Handelman (1990:52-4), and others have shown. A specialist on the Roman Catholic carnival like Moser (1986, 1993) has argued that the purpose of this carnival was deliberately and intentionally to set a negative example of the faith. In a slightly weaker sense this holds true for the Indies St Nicholas as well. The outdoor celebrations here represented a temporary radical denial of all forms of prescribed behaviour associated with the home, the area most strongly charged with symbolic meanings pertaining to the essential standards of colonial rule such as those prescribing self-control and self-discipline (Stoler 1995:8, 108). Moreover, a direct contrast was created, consciously or otherwise, with festivals of the colonized people. This may be illustrated by a description of a random example, the Chinese Tjap-Gomé festival in Batavia, which was also attended by thousands of Indonesians. Here there was 'no shouting, no jiggling, no quarrelling, no bragging, no drunkenness, even no boisterousness' (Elout 1926:220). By negating and reversing essential standards of behaviour, the true nature of Dutch culture was exposed, emphasized and articulated. 'Festivals thus draw their own boundaries', Abrahams (1987:178) rightly states, the boundaries in this case being ethnic boundaries. A revealing state-

⁷ I am currently preparing a publication on these data.

ment in this connection is the observation that Surabaya on the eve of St Nicholas' Day took on 'an appearance of a first-rate *European* city' (L 7-12-1915, my italics). As Eriksen (1993:21) has written about a similar situation, 'ethnicity was deliberately "shown off"'. Particularly in the first decades of the twentieth century, when 'racial and class markers of "Europeanness"' were in a process of redefinition (Stoler 1991:74), the festival offered Indo-Europeans an opportunity 'to assert their Europeanness' (Ido 1916 as quoted in Baay 1991:52). And they clearly took advantage of that opportunity. Van Wermeskerken ([1933]:107) states that 'everyone with the tiniest drop of European blood in his veins, or with pretensions to this, celebrates the festival of St Nicholas in a carnivalesque manner'. He thereupon immediately contrasts this with the behaviour of all those with no European blood.

The Indonesian audience: Separation

My argument in this paper is that the festival of St Nicholas in the Dutch East Indies was an expression of the symbolic ethnicity – to use a felicitous term coined by Gans (1979) – of Dutch culture. Here the Dutch or Europeans not only staged a play, but they also had an audience: the native population.⁸ This colonial festival automatically implied such an audience, be it consciously or unconsciously. Manning (1983:6-7) has rightly drawn attention to 'the way in which celebration articulates and modifies power relations [...], which involves examining the political (in the broadest sense) relationship between "audience" and "producer"'. For public events are devices 'to bring into close conjunction ideology and practice, attitude and action' (Handelman 1990:16). The festival then is to be interpreted as an instrument to 'give greater clarity to social messages' (Da Matta 1977:263). The message in this case being that the position of the Dutch in the Indies was unassailable.

How did the 'others' react to the spectacle and how were their reactions perceived by the Dutch? The general festive atmosphere in the towns of Batavia, Surabaya, and so on, could not but affect and attract the attention of the Indonesians, Chinese and Arabs who made up the bulk of their population. Their curiosity about the arrival of 'Sinjo Klas' (JB 6-12-1901; JNA 7-12-1910) or 'Sinjo Kolaas' (PB 6-12-1917) aroused, they turned out into the streets in large numbers. Although occasionally Europeans and Indonesians would intermingle, as, for example, when following the figure of St Nicholas during his solemn procession through the streets (in Buitenzorg, JB 5-12-1921), the general pattern was one of separation – only in the town of Surabaya was ethnic distance possibly less pronounced (see below). The Asians were no

⁸ On the notion of the Dutch 'establishing a "theater" of imaginary linkages', see Gouda (1995:23).

participants but onlookers (BN 7-12-1908). They showed no expression on their faces (JB 7-12-1908), watching the spectacle 'reflectively' (JB 5-12-1917). A term used to describe their particular role here was '*nontonnen*', meaning 'to be present at an entertainment as a detached observer. It was something typically Indian' (Ido 1936:10-1). The Indonesians – men, women and children – would squat or stand on the side of the pavement or (in Batavia) leaning against the railings along the canal, silent and motionless. Their behaviour was described, and praised, as being 'orderly and well-mannered', 'quiet and modest' (JB 6-12-1901; BN 6-12-1900, 6-12-1902).

Such descriptions were, of course, a reflection of the usual stereotypes of Indonesian behaviour (see, for example, Brons Middel 1891:4, Buys 1900:105, and, in general, Gouda 1995:22, 118-56). 'A well-brought-up native does not laugh in the presence of Europeans; he may often be present at the funniest events without batting an eyelid' (Rutten-Pekelharing [1916]:69). At the same time they were a blithe confirmation of these stereotypes. Intentionally or unintentionally, this was what the festival achieved: it effectively put the 'natives' in their place. And the latter seemed to accept this. They had no other option, for 'any demonstration on the part of the indigenous people that would indicate their non-acceptance of a subordinate position' would have led 'to a characterization of the situation as one of opposition' (Royce 1982:65). In fact, there is no trace in the sources of any interpretation of the passive attitude of the Indonesians as a sign of hostility on their part (see Wilkie 1977:77). Quite likely their self-exclusion was interpretable less 'as a concrete fact' than as a symbolic strategy 'to defend themselves', as Cervone (1998:109) has suggested, against a culture they abhorred (see also Frijhoff 1997:112).

What precisely went on in their minds was anybody's guess. They clearly did not understand the meaning of either the festival or the behaviour of its participants (PB 5-12-1907; JB 7-12-1915). Van Wermeskerken ([1933]:107) supposes they were told it was the celebration of the birthday of a Dutch god. Exclaiming '*baik!*' and '*wa-ah!*', they seemed to enjoy the general merriment and to be amused by the 'foolish' and 'strange' doings of the '*blanda*' – as everybody 'who is not a native', hence including the Indo-Europeans, was called by 'the natives' (BN 6-12-1901; JB 6-12-1909, 6-12-1923; Wagenvoort 1910:163). A parody of an interview with an Indonesian, the 'rather dumb-looking native, "mister" Abdul Bohong', that was published by one newspaper was intended to confirm this (JB 6-12-1915). Taken as another positive sign was the fact that native women in particular seemed to dress up 'in "*pakean deftig*"' for the occasion (JB 5-12-1917, see also 6-12-1901, 6-12-1919). Apart from the astonishment and amazement ascribed to the Indonesians, there was perhaps a trace of derisiveness to be detected in an occasional smile (L 6-12-1912; on the silent contempt of the Indonesians for the way the

'blanda' enjoyed themselves, see also Stoll [1903]:198-203, Wagenvoort 1910:23). To some Europeans who were critical of the festival, this might appear to pave the way to an erosion of white 'prestige' – the cornerstone of the legitimization of white supremacy – although this was in the 1920s (PB 25-11-1922). Some thirty years earlier the exact opposite view was held, with Orientals being said only to admire their overlords for their conspicuous consumption (BN 2-12-1895). These were, however, pure speculations about what went on in the mind of the natives. One could never be sure whether they were correct. For this reason the celebrations were closely watched by the police, although this was just as much to ensure the good behaviour of the Europeans.

The Indonesian audience: Participation rejected; The case of Surabaya tombolas

To the general picture of clearly visible lines of ethnic division during the festival an exception was formed by the above-mentioned tombola. The chance of winning something in these lotteries appealed to Europeans, Indonesians and Chinese alike, although in the perception of the former it did so particularly to the latter two ethnic groups: this 'imitation of European traditions' (SH 7-12-1875) was 'just the thing for them' (L 7-12-1899, see also 7-12-1915). Because money was, of course, always welcome, whatever its provenance, the shops where these lotteries were run probably constituted a more open social space than the public streets during the days surrounding 5 December. European shops had Indonesians and Chinese as (not always welcome, SH 7-12-1888) customers, while conversely Europeans and Indonesians went to the tombolas organized by Chinese merchants, not in the last place because they were cheaper.

The history of tombolas at St Nicholas is relatively well documented for Surabaya, because of either their more prominent position or the greater interest taken in them by the newspaper reporters here. This history may be taken as a model for the development of interethnic relations on St Nicholas' Day in general. After an initial stage in which all ethnic groups participated in these lotteries, soon some irritation arose in the European group. The idea of competing with Indonesians and Chinese on an equal footing was clearly not to their liking. There was a conflict between their desire for material gain and their obvious inability to set the rules of this game. Equality with the other ethnic groups in the face of fortune clashed with their self-assumed superiority in local society. It made them aware of the fact that they were only a minority⁹ – and justly so – and led them to feel they were being 'dispos-

⁹ In 1920 the population of Surabaya comprised about 17,500 Europeans, 22,000 Chinese, and 150,000 Indonesians (Von Faber 1934:30).

sessed' (on this notion, see Harrison 1992) of St Nicholas. It prompted the almost rhetorical question if the Indonesians and Chinese perhaps thought that St Nicholas' Day was celebrated for *their* sake (L 7-12-1887). Chinese and Indonesians were 'ousting the Europeans from the festival of the great children's friend more and more, seeming to think it is staged just for them' (L 8-12-1900). The festival became 'more and more an occasion for merriment for our brown brothers and sisters' (L 8-12-1903). Perhaps this same feeling is reflected by incidents whereby European youngsters harassed Chinese and pulled their pigtails or sailors made trouble in the Chinese quarter (SH 7-12-1885, 7-12-1895, 6-12-1898). Europeans gradually withdrew from this communal form of celebrating (SH 6-12-1912), which was at odds with their idea of the St Nicholas festival as entailing a clear separation of ethnic groups. It comes as no surprise that there were complaints about alleged irregularities in connection with the lotteries and about thefts among the spectators watching them (L 7-12-1915; SH 7-12-1909). The logical consequence of these developments was an official prohibition against tombolas in 1917. They disappeared in Batavia, too, at about the same time (SH 6-12-1917, 6-12-1924).

The public festival in decline

So far I have presented the description and interpretation of St Nicholas primarily in synchronic terms. As may be expected, however, historical developments had an influence on the form and function of this festival and on its role as a marker of ethnic relations over the years. I subscribe to the view that 'ethnic groups and their features are produced under particular interactional, historical, economic and political circumstances: they are highly situational, not primordial' (Barth 1994:12). As a carnival, the festival probably came into being in the 1870s, an old woman at the beginning of the 20th century being reported as remembering that it was unknown in that form in the 1850s (BN 7-12-1903). After an interruption by the economic crisis of the mid-1880s (JB 6-12-1887), it gained in importance from the 1890s onwards (BN 3-12-1892, 5-12-1899, 5-12-1900). The last decades of the 19th century witnessed a relatively rapid increase in immigration of Dutch men, and a concomitant slackening of relations between Dutch and Indonesians and Chinese (Von Faber 1931:61) and rise in 'Western reserve' (Pruys van der Hoeven 1894:274). In the multicultural society of the Indies the Dutch or Europeans became more aware of their ethnic identity. One means by which they expressed and sought to reinforce this identity was the public and typically 'Indies' celebration of St Nicholas' Day – which, as we have seen, was a rite of inversion in every respect. From about 1915 on, however, the interest in this public festival clearly waned. It then seemed dull and insipid to observers (SH 8-12-1917). The participants, in particular the youngsters, had

become more restrained and fewer in number (*BN* 6-12-1921), and the general mood was subdued (*JB* 6-12-1921), hardly animated (*PB* 25-11-1922), and lacking in spirit (*JB* 6-12-1927). This changed mood might be interpreted as being contrary to the 'authentic celebration of St Nicholas' (*L* 10-12-1923), but might gradually also be appreciated as being 'perhaps more agreeable' (*AID* 7-12-1928). In 1935 it was noted that in Batavia the festival had been celebrated 'in the bosom of the family' (*JB* 6-12-1935) more than it had for years.

Many factors contributed to this decline in public celebrating, that is, with the Indonesians as implied and visible audience. The economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s, of course, had its effects on the public mood (*BN* 6-12-1923), and 'people have become fonder of their homes' (*AID* 7-12-1935). More important, however, was the by now definitive 'Europeanization' of the (Indo-) Dutch community. On the points of food, dress and domestic arrangements former Indies standards were abandoned and typically Dutch norms adopted. The typical outdoor festivities on St Nicholas' Day fell victim to this, too. A major influence in this respect was the steadily growing stream of (better-educated) Dutch immigrants, men as well as women. It was these immigrants, the women in particular, who were credited with the 'raising of the standard of social life' and the final domestication of Dutch colonial culture (Wagenvoort 1910:206-8; Bauduin 1927:115; De Jong 1991:31), although, as Stoler (1991:64-7) has shown, this contemporary view needs to be qualified, the attitude of the women being less the cause than a result of changes in colonial society and politics (see also Gouda 1995:186-92). The women's reaction to the rowdy behaviour on St Nicholas' Day can only be guessed at. One woman, commenting on the outdoor St Nicholas celebrations, though not so much the public ones as those in the *soos*, observed to other mothers that 'It is in the home that children should experience their finest emotions' (*JB* 1-12-1915). The teetotallers made themselves heard by standing outside Versteeg's in Batavia carrying a banner with the words 'Celebrate in sobriety' on it (*JB* 6-12-1927). The result of all this was a 'de-transformation' of the short-lived, typically Indies celebration of St Nicholas' Day and a conformance to the standards of the mother country. At the same time the attitude towards the indigenous population gradually changed. The rise of Indonesian nationalism led the Dutch to close ranks and screen themselves off from the Indonesian audience. This affected the recreational domain in particular (Wilkie 1977:80), as confidence was replaced by fear.

The victims of this radicalization process were the Indo-Europeans. They were unwelcome in both the Dutch and the Indonesian camp. Interestingly, one of the strategies they adopted to preserve their 'European' identity from the 1920s onwards (Bosma 1997:8-9, 383-4) – insofar as they were organized in the Indische Partij (*L* 6-12-1912; Bosma 1997:235) and the Indo-Europeesch Verbond – was the organization of their own St Nicholas celebrations. This

they did to 'promote a sense of community' (*BN* 6-12-1921), for propaganda reasons (*Onze Stem* 17 (1936):1150), and in order to raise funds for social activities (Bosma 1997:406). Though understandable enough, in the end this proved a vain endeavour. For these festivities only emphasized the separate character of their culture still further. But then, that was what St Nicholas in the Indies was about.

3. Conclusion

Andrade (1997:83) has rightly argued recently that the study of rituals performed by Europeans in colonial situations may provide important clues for the study of interethnic relations in general, for 'they can reveal much about the ways European overlordship was articulated to non-Western societies'. In this article I have sought to make a small contribution to this fairly new field of research. It represents an attempt at understanding how the 'the boundaries of the "colonizers"' over against the colonized were shaped and sets out to 'analyze how those boundaries were produced', or how 'Europeans in the colonies fashioned their distinctions, conjured up their "whiteness", and reinvented themselves', as Stoler and Cooper (1997:8, 16) put it in their research agenda for a renewal in colonial studies. I repeat here that the public St Nicholas celebration around the turn of the century was only one aspect or element of a more complex whole, which included celebrations in the *soos*, in schools, and, in the pre-war decades, in the home. So the picture, new and unexpected as it may be, is only partial. It needs to be further refined also by analyses of the participation of the various ethnic groups in other festivals, such as the celebration of King's or Queen's Birthday or other anniversaries, and, conversely, of Dutch attitudes to and attendance at 'native' and Chinese festivals. Only then will we be on firm enough ground to make sound as well as subtle generalizations.

The conclusion that the public festival of St Nicholas articulated the boundaries between the 'European' and the 'native' population may seem rather obvious and disappointing, especially in view of Stoler's warning against 'the reification of a colonial moment of binary oppositions' and 'being caught up in such dichotomies ourselves'. Stoler rightly points to 'the fixity and fluidity of racial categories' and to their 'obvious hybridity and variation' (Stoler 1995:199; Stoler and Cooper 1997:9), to which one might add the notion of their contextuality, thus leaving scope for their adjustability to different occasions and different moments. Festivals at the same time unite and divide groups. Their 'claiming game', their 'mechanism of inclusion/exclusion that determines the identities in play' (Cervoñe 1998:107), is particularly apparent when not two, but three different ethnic groups are involved, as in

the case of the ethnic festival in an Ecuador village studied by Cervone. In this festival the indigenous Indian population unites with an intermediate ethnic group to take possession of the public space, relegating the 'whites' to the role of spectators. Her analysis shows a striking parallelism, in an inverse sense, with the public St Nicholas celebration in Java. For both whites and Indo-Europeans, the St Nicholas festival was an occasion, though in a different, more strained way than in the case of the Ecuadorian festival, for asserting a shared identity over against the Indonesians. Intra-ethnic tensions were momentarily suspended in favour of inter-ethnic ones (Cervone 1998:110). A similar point is made by Talai (1986), stressing the interplay of inter- and intra-ethnic boundary maintenance, in his analysis of the Armenian community in London. It is clear that future research should proceed along these lines. In particular, more attention should be given to the variations in and modalities of participation in and experience of the festival by different sections of the European community (Frijhoff 1997). As mentioned above, however, the relative invisibility of the Indo-Europeans in the sources rather restricts one's approach in the particular case of the public St Nicholas festival in Java. In my view this nevertheless only qualifies the 'dichotomy', without denying its relevance.

Interestingly, the *las posadas* festival celebrated by immigrant Mexicans in Los Angeles in the last weeks of December, in their home country was a domestic celebration, in the same way as St Nicholas in the Indies. On foreign soil it was transformed into an outdoor festival, however. Apart from underlining the ethnic identity of the Mexicans, the festival also sought to bring about mutual understanding between different cultures, although it is not clear whether it was successful in this respect (Georges and Jones 1995:206-9). The examples of the Antillean and Limburg carnivals given above do not give cause for optimism. They, too, indicate that the intended or unintended effect of ethnic festivals is a magnifying of ethnic differences rather than ethnic integration. Changes in external social and political circumstances combined with shifts in the interests of the participating groups themselves are of particular significance here (Talai 1986:267; Stoler 1995:113; Tak 1996:237). For diachronic studies of ethnic festivals reveal a 'process of ethnogenesis' (Cervone 1998:110). Stoler (1989:137) rightly claims in a summary statement that 'In colonial situations' – here she explicitly also mentions the Netherlands Indies – 'contact and familiarity lead not to a diminution of racial discrimination but to an intensification of it over time, and to a rigidifying of boundaries'. The example of the public celebration of St Nicholas in Java – of its form and development – clearly corroborates this.

ABBREVIATIONS USED

AID	Algemeen Indisch Dagblad	Semarang
BB	De Banten-Bode	Serang
BN	Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad	Batavia
JB	Java-Bode	Batavia
JNA	Jahn's Nieuws- en Advertentieblad	Malang
L	De Locomotief	Semarang
M	Mataram	Yogyakarta
N	Het Noorden	Tegal
NSC	Nieuwe Soerabaja Courant	Surabaya
PB	De Preanger-Bode	Bandung
SH	Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad	Surabaya

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