Tropenliebe: Schweizer Naturforscher und niederländischer Imperialismus in Südostasien um 1900

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Book Review

*Tropenliebe: Schweizer Naturforscher und niederländischer Imperialismus in Südostasien um 1900*. By Bernhard C. Schär. Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag, 2015. 374 pp., illus., maps, notes, bibliog., index. ISBN 978-3-593-50287-8 (hbk). €43.00.

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘Switzerland’? Chocolate and Swiss cheese? Army knives and luxury timepieces? Perhaps the Geneva Convention or the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement? Whatever your cliché of choice, I am willing to bet it is not wealthy gentleman scientists advancing colonial interests in the Dutch East Indies. One of the most compelling aspects of Bernhard C. Schär’s monograph *Tropenliebe* (‘tropical love’) is its comprehensive trashing of the pleasing delusion that Switzerland’s tradition of political neutrality might somehow let it off the colonial hook. Not so, Schär argues: even before Paul and Fritz Sarasin became the ‘moving frontier’ of Dutch colonialism on the island of Celebes (now Sulawesi), their hometown of Basel was deeply enmeshed in colonial networks of trade, science and missionary activity. Tropical products – cotton, sugar, tobacco, coffee and especially silk – contributed substantially to the wealth of Basel’s patrician families; tropical plant and animal specimens formed the basis of the city’s scientific collections.

In 1864, in what Schär describes as ‘a lowlight of Swiss policymaking’, the Swiss Federal Council bowed to pressure from Swiss plantation owners in Brazil and struck down proposed legislation outlawing the purchase of slaves by Swiss citizens overseas (p. 92).

These entanglements are outlined in the book’s first section, ‘Globalising Basel’, which begins by introducing the Sarasins at a personal level. They were, Schär notes, not only second cousins but life partners: their romantic love was expressed in a self-published volume of poems, withdrawn under pressure from disapproving relatives shortly after it appeared in print, and their letters later in life reveal that they felt themselves to be ‘marriage-like partners who missed and desired each other when apart’ (p. 58). Friends and colleagues generally construed their relationship as a ‘friendship’; Paul Sarasin’s nephew Felix Speiser, who became a recognised ethnologist in his own right, described it as a ‘spiritual marriage’. The book’s title refers not only to the Sarasins’ love for the tropics but to their escape from the heteronormative constraints of fin-de-siècle Swiss society in order to live their love for each other in the tropics. The two loves are of course related: the ‘respect, renown and power’ accruing to the Sarasins as a result of their travels enabled a partial acceptance of their ‘dissident relationship’ following their return to Basel (p. 59).

The second section, ‘Fieldwork on the frontier’, examines the impact of the Sarasins’ expeditions on power relations between Dutch colonial administrators and Bugis-Makassar ruling families in Celebes. Up until the 1890s, the Netherlands considered the island of little political or economic importance: their overarching principle of colonial governance was ‘abstinence’ (minimal effort and expenditure, enforced where necessary by gunboat diplomacy). Dutch colonial administrators consequently welcomed the Sarasins’ self-funded expeditions as opportunities to obtain valuable information about the interior of Celebes. In 1895, however, determined local opposition in the inland village of Kalosi forced the Sarasins to turn back. Press reports of this episode triggered an outcry amongst the Dutch public, who felt humiliated by their government’s inability to protect foreign travellers; others found it equally embarrassing that the Netherlands should be content to leave the scientific investigation of its colonies to representatives of a country without imperial ambitions. Ongoing public criticism prompted decision-makers in Batavia and The Hague first to step up their support of the Sarasins’ subsequent expeditions, then to undertake a military invasion of Celebes in 1905, justifying it under the guise of ‘abolishing slavery’ (p. 166). Weapons of mass destruction, anyone?
In the third section, ‘Mysterious Celebes’, Schär outlines the scientific problems the Sarasins were attempting to solve, drawing particular attention to the transnational character of the ‘serious game of competition’ in which, following Bourdieu, they and their fellow savants were engaged (p. 195). He then unpicks their interactions with the countless helpers, translators, porters and ‘Natives’ whose cooperation in the field, whether willing or forced, was essential to their success. Drawing on Richard Drayton’s ‘synchronic palimpsests’ and Sujit Sivasundaram’s ‘strategy of cross-contextualisation’, Schär posits that the Sarasins’ publications did not create knowledge about Celebes ex nihilo but incorporated and reinterpreted elements of knowledge variously held by the people they encountered. ‘Tropical Switzerland’, the book’s fourth and final section, demonstrates how the Sarasins and their contemporaries employed knowledge acquired in the colonies in their scientific studies of Switzerland, establishing new institutions and consolidating existing ones in fields as diverse as prehistory, folklore studies, eugenics and nature conservation. Possibly, Schär suggests, the Sarasins’ endeavours later in life to preserve ‘nature’ and ‘primitive peoples’ from extinction can be understood as a ‘silent partial admission of guilt … for their involvement in [acts of] colonial violence on Celebes’ (p. 182).

*Tropenliebe* is meticulously researched, well structured, entertainingly written, and enriched with numerous helpful maps and historic photographs. It has much to offer students of colonial history, environmental history, gender and sexuality studies, the history of science, and Southeast Asian studies alike. I do not know whether an English translation is planned; I hope it is because I suspect many readers who would appreciate its contents will otherwise be obliged to echo Alfred Russel Wallace, who returned complimentary copies of the Sarasins’ books to them with the disappointing remark, ‘Alas! I cannot read German’ (p. 212).

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