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# PROBLEMATISATION AND PARTICULARISATION: THE BERTHA HERTOIGH STORY\*

## **Problematismation and particularisation: the case of Bertha Hertogh**

*In 1950, a 13-year-old Dutch girl, Bertha Hertogh, became world news. In this paper, the newspaper articles about her dramatic story are analysed to study the process of problematisation from a comparative perspective. In current theories on problematisation, the emphasis lies on the function of attaching and expanding issues. This article shows that particularisation – presenting a story as unique and tactically ignoring certain general issues – is crucial to problematisation. It makes it possible to present problems as new, and as reasons for new measures or policies.*

In 1950, the story of 13-year-old Bertha Hertogh caught the attention of the press. She was born in the Dutch East Indies of a Dutch father and an Indo-European mother. During the Second World War she was separated from her Catholic parents. After the war, her parents and siblings left for the Netherlands. Years later, Bertha was found in the Federation of Malaya (current Malaysia). Since 1942 she had been living with Aminah, a Malayan Muslim woman. She refused to return to her parents, and Aminah refused to let her go. In a court case in Singapore, it was decided that she should stay with Aminah. Three days later, 13-year-old Bertha, or Nadra as she was called in Singapore, married a 22-year-old Muslim Malayan schoolteacher. In a second court case, the first decision was overruled and the marriage annulled. It led to the Nadra riots, in which 19 people died and 200 were injured. Bertha left for the Netherlands, and Muslim leaders called for an international boycott of Dutch interests. Bertha married a Dutch pub owner at age 21. In 1976 she stood trial for having planned to murder her husband. She was acquitted and later divorced. She died in July 2009.<sup>1</sup>

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1. About her death: *BN/De Stem* 10-7-2009, 11-7-2009.

Bertha's story was international news in 1950 and 1951. In later years, the Dutch media occasionally showed interest.<sup>2</sup> In Singapore, however, the story is given the same kind of importance as that of Anne Frank in the Netherlands. It is seen as a clash between Christianity and Islam, and a defining moment in Singapore's history.<sup>3</sup> It is the subject of a large number of publications, websites, a film and a theatre play.<sup>4</sup>

In this article I compare Dutch, Singapore and British/American newspaper articles in order to analyse the process of problematisation: how, why and by whom is an event presented as a problem?<sup>5</sup> Problematisation is a process in which actors (academics, politicians, journalists) analyse a situation, define it as a problem, expand it by attaching issues to it, and finally suggest a solution.<sup>6</sup> It is based on inflated ideas of a threat created by extensive media attention and exaggeration of numbers and consequences.<sup>7</sup> Problematisation always serves a purpose. In earlier research, I showed how problematisation made it possible to bend rules by emphasising the vulnerability of women.<sup>8</sup>

2. NCRV *De tijd stond even stil* 24-11-1975; NPS 22-1-1999 *De affaire*; Hans Meijer, 'De Bertha Hertogh-affaire. Een botsing tussen culturen in een dekoloniserende wereld', in: Marieke Bloembergen and Remco Raben (eds.), *Het koloniale beschavingsoffensief. Wegen naar het nieuwe Indië 1890-1950* (Leiden 2009) 267-294; Sarah van Walsum, *The family and the nation: Dutch family migration policies in the context of changing family norms* (Cambridge 2008) 1-5, 15-17. A Dutch film is currently being produced (Fu Works, Ben Sombogaart).

3. Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, *Colonialism, violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia. The Maria Hertogh controversy and its aftermath* (Abington 2009) 2.

4. People involved in the affair wrote several publications: T. E. Hughes, *Tangled worlds: the story of Maria Hertogh* (Singapore 1980). Hughes was a civil servant involved in the affair; Haja Maideen, *The Nadra tragedy. The Maria Hertogh controversy* (Petaling Jaya 1989). Maideen was a friend of Mansoor Adabi. Michael Leifer, 'Communal violence in Singapore', *Asian Survey* 4:10 (1964) 1115-1121; Nordin Hussin, 'Malay press and Malay politics: The Hertogh Riots in Singapore', *eaj* 3 (2005) 561-575; [http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP\\_508\\_2004-12-23.html](http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_508_2004-12-23.html); [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria\\_Hertogh\\_riots](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Hertogh_riots); <http://royaltlady.blogspot.com/2009/12/hertogh-riots-or-nadrah-riots-which.html>; [http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertha\\_Hertogh](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertha_Hertogh) (last visited 20-10-2010). The websites are based on the books by Maideen, Hughes and Aljunied. They added details that were not known at the time such as that Bertha's mother was of Scottish-Javanese descent, was adopted at a young age by a Muslim family, and converted to Christianity at age 15 upon her marriage to Bertha's father. For these claims no proof is offered, and they often contradict information in other publications.

5. The article is part of my NWO VICI-project (277-53-002).

6. M. Foucault, 'Polemics, politics and problematisations: an interview with Michel Foucault', in: P. Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault reader* (London 1984) 381-390, 388-389.

7. Peter Vasterman, *Mediahyppie* (Amsterdam 2004); Marlou Schrover, 'Family in Dutch migration policy 1945-2005', *The History of the Family* 14 (2009) 191-202.

8. Schrover, 'Family in Dutch migration policy', 191-202; Marlou Schrover, 'Why make a difference? Migration policy and making differences between migrant men and women (The Netherlands 1945-2005)', in: Marlou Schrover and Eileen Janes Yeo (eds.), *Gender, migration and the public sphere 1850-2005* (New York 2010) 76-96.

Theories on problematisation emphasise the importance of the tactical linkage of issues.<sup>9</sup> This article adds to the theory by showing that tactically ignoring issues plays a crucial role in problematisation, because it presents problems as being new.<sup>10</sup> I will refer to this as particularisation when it involves presenting a detailed individualised description of events.

Problematisation has not previously been studied by comparing various views on the same problem. Because Bertha's story became an international issue, it offers unique opportunities to do so. Depending on the point of view, the problems at a basic level were whether Bertha was adopted, whether she was a Muslim or a Catholic, whether she was 13 or 14, and whether she was married or not. At a more complicated level, it was about belonging, good parenting, and a bad versus a good world. Causes of the problems were, again depending on the point of view, Islam, colonialism, communism, poverty, or foreign interference.

The sections below first address discourse theory, the sources that were used for the present study and the context of the story, and then move on to an analysis of the key events: the discovery of Bertha in the jungle, the court cases, her marriage and the riots.

## Theory

In discourse theory, *discourse* does not refer to language, but to systems of relational identities.<sup>11</sup> Discourse emerges through the process of articulation in which nodal points give the discourse stability and coherence.<sup>12</sup> A nodal point is a point within the discourse in terms of which other meaning is defined.<sup>13</sup> Discourse analysis – at the empirical level – looks at grammar, words, metaphors, and routine combinations of words, for instance of fair-

9. Arthur Stein, 'The politics of linkage,' *World Politics* 33:1 (1980) 62-81; Alexander Betts, *Conceptualising interconnections in global governance: the case of refugee protection*, RSC Working Paper 38 (Oxford 2006); Alexander Betts, *International cooperation in the global refugee regime*, GEG Working Paper 44 (Oxford 2008).

10. Michael Billig, 'Prejudice, categorization and particularization: from a perceptual to a rhetorical approach', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 15:1 (1985) 79-103; Lisbeth Clausen, 'Localizing the global: 'domestication' processes in international news production', *Media, Culture & Society* 26:1 (2004) 25-44.

11. Claire Sutherland, 'Nation-building through discourse theory', *Nations and Nationalism* 11:2 (2005) 185-202.

12. E. Laclau, and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (London 1985) 105; Isabel Hoving, Hester Dibbits and Marlou Schrover (eds.), *Veranderingen van het alledaagse. Cultuur en migratie in Nederland* (Den Haag 2005).

13. Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reisingl and Ruth Wodak, 'The discursive construction of national identities', *Discourse & Society* 10 (1999) 149-173, 157.

ness and firmness.<sup>14</sup> Nodal points and routine combinations form the intersection between discourse analysis and frame analysis. Within the text there are packets of organised knowledge, called ‘frames’.<sup>15</sup> Frames are a series of claims and themes, strung together so as to tell a consistent story about problems, causes, implications, and remedies.<sup>16</sup> Frames support an argument without constituting it. They make the text ‘recognisable’: they make it possible to omit information, because it is an inherent part of a packet of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Frames play a role in the process of problematisation via what is called the ‘tactical linkage’ of issue areas (such as safety and migration).<sup>18</sup>

Several frames can exist simultaneously.<sup>19</sup> In research on problematising migration, four kinds of frames have been identified:<sup>20</sup> economic (referring to costs and benefits), humanitarian (referring to decency, tradition, or Christianity), endangering (referring to cohesion, sovereignty and security) and cultural (referring to difference and similarity). Cutting across these frames is the portrayal of migrant men as a threat and women as victims.<sup>21</sup>

In the Bertha Hertogh story, four analogous frames can be identified. The Singapore press used an abnormality frame: the riots were uncommon to the colony and caused by external factors. British and American papers used a combination of a Tarzan/Mowgli frame and a Cold War frame. The rapid

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14. Teun A. van Dijk, ‘Discourse and the denial of racism’, *Discourse & Society* 3 (1992) 87-118, 92; Teun A. van Dijk, ‘Semantics of a press panic: the Tamil invasion’, *European Journal of Communication* 3 (1988) 167-187; Teun A. van Dijk, ‘Race, riots and the press. An analysis of editorials in the British press about the 1985 disorders’, *Gazette* 43 (1989) 229-253; Baukje Prins, ‘The nerve to break taboos: new realism in the Dutch discourse on multiculturalism’, *JMI/RLMI* 3:3 & 4 (2002) 363-379.

15. Teun A. van Dijk, ‘Discourse analysis: its development and application to the structures of news’, *Journal of Communication* 33:2 (1983) 20-43, 30.

16. R.M. Entman, ‘Reporting environmental policy debate: the real media biases’, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1:3 (1996) 77-92, 77-78.

17. D.A. Scheufele, ‘Framing as a theory of media effects’, *Journal of Communication* 49:1 (1999) 103-122; B. van Gorp, ‘Where is the frame? Victims and intruders in the Belgian press coverage of the asylum issue’, *European Journal of Communication* 20:4 (2005) 485-508; J. Matthes and M. Kohring, ‘The content analysis of media frames: toward improving reliability and validity’, *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008) 258-279.

18. R.A.W. Rhodes, *Understanding governance. Policy networks, governance, reflexivity and accountability* (Buckingham 1997); Betts, *Conceptualising interconnections*; Betts, *International cooperation*.

19. Ineke van der Valk, ‘Right-wing parliamentary discourse on immigration in France’, *Discourse & Society* 14 (2003) 309-348.

20. H. Bauder, ‘Media discourse and the new German immigration law’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34:1 (2008) 95-112; H. Bauder, ‘Immigration debate in Canada: how newspapers reported, 1996-2004’, *International Migration & Integration* 9 (2008) 289-310.

21. Marlou Schrover, ‘Differences that make all the difference. Gender, migration and vulnerability’, in: Michel Orly, et al. (eds.), *A female demography. Migration, work, fertility, family* (Bern 2009) 143-168.

transformation of Bertha from a 'jungle girl' and married Muslim woman to a child emphasised her belonging to Western society.<sup>22</sup> The Cold War frame was abandoned when the geopolitical situation changed. The Dutch press used a flight-and-rescue frame, which on the one hand infantilised Bertha, renounced her marriage and loss of virginity, and emphasised innocence and belonging, and on the other hand criminalised the Other.<sup>23</sup> The frame was used to shed responsibility for events in Singapore and legitimise Dutch actions.<sup>24</sup>

## Sources

I have analysed 550 newspaper articles (see table 1). Dutch papers cover a full spectrum from the communist *De Waarheid*, via the populist labour paper *Het Vrije Volk*, the former war resistance paper *Het Parool*, the Protestant *Trouw*, the Catholic *de Volkskrant* and *De Tijd*, the regional paper *de Leeuwarder Courant*, the liberal right wing *Het Algemeen Handelsblad* and *NRC*, to the populist right-wing *De Telegraaf*.

For the analysis the newspapers were clustered (Dutch, Singapore and British/American newspapers), but there were differences within the clusters. Articles in *De Waarheid* stood out because they emphasised how this story was used to divert attention away from more important issues. *Het Vrije Volk* sensationalised the story more than other Dutch papers. *De Telegraaf* presented expert views (for instance, on law or on colonial issues) to legitimise the Dutch actions more frequently than other Dutch papers. As a rule, the British newspapers tended to be supportive of the colonial rule in Singapore. The American newspapers were the least informed about Bertha and her background, but they did tell a dramatic story. During the riots, they were well informed, because they had war correspondents at the scene. *The Straits Times* and *The Singapore Free Press* were English language newspapers in Singapore. The Malay language press was banned.<sup>25</sup> The Singapore papers were

22. Jens Schneider, 'Talking German: othering strategies in public and everyday discourses', *International Communication Gazette* 63 (2001) 351-363; Shani D'Cruze and Anupama Rao, 'Violence and the vulnerable; Maggie Ibrahim, 'The securitization of migration: a racial discourse', *International Migration* 43:5 (2005) 163-187, 175.

23. Jenny Hockey and Allison James, 'Finding the child in the woman: the post-mortem infantilisation of Diana', *Journal of Gender Studies* 8:3 (1999) 303-311; Nicola Foote, 'Race, state and nation in early twentieth century Ecuador', *Nations and Nationalism* 12:2 (2006) 261-278.

24. Compare: B. de Hart, 'Not without my daughter. On parental abduction, Orientalism and maternal melodrama', *European Journal of Women's Studies* (2001) 51-65.

25. From December 1950 to October 1951. *The Straits Times* 15-10-1951, 6; *Utica Daily Press* 2-11-1951, 28. *The Melayu Raya* did report on the event, but only from December 4th

not instruments of the British authorities in Singapore and voiced criticism of the British rule.<sup>26</sup> *The Straits Times* was the more analytical of the two papers – offering explanations for what happened – while *The Singapore Free Press* sensationalised the case more.

**TABLE 1** Overview of newspapers and the number of articles per paper, 1950-1951

<i>Het Vrije Volk</i>	48
<i>Leeuwarder Courant</i>	38
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	37
<i>Trouw</i>	35
<i>De Volkskrant</i>	26
<i>Het Parool</i>	12
<i>Het Algemeen Handelsblad</i>	12
<i>NRC</i>	8
<i>De Tijd</i>	8
<i>De Waarheid</i>	8
Other local Dutch newspapers*	31
<i>The Straits Times</i>	192
<i>The Singapore Free Press</i>	23
<i>The Manchester Guardian</i>	29
<i>The New York Times</i>	18
<i>The Washington Post</i>	6
Other newspapers in English**	19
Total	550

\* *BN/De Stem, Peel- en Maas, Nieuwe Leidsche Courant, Leids Dagblad, Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* and *Zeeuwsch Dagblad*.

\*\* *The Observer, The Citizen Advertiser, The Amsterdam Evening Recorder, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, Utica Daily Press, The Herald Statesman, Schenectady Gazette, Binghamton Press, Niagara Falls Gazette, Kingston Daily Freeman* and *Utica Observer*.

## Context

The British crown colony Singapore (it became independent in 1959) was separated from Indonesia by the Singapore Strait, and from the British protectorate Malaya by the Johor Strait. Singapore was a world seaport, important for British trade, and the most important British navy base in the region. In 1947, Singapore had a population of 940,000, 78 percent of whom were

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onwards. After that date this paper, which was not available for this research, did its best to stir up emotions. Hussin, 'Malay press and Malay politics', 569.

26. *The Straits Times* was first published in 1845, and *The Singapore Free Press* in 1835. Aljunied, *Colonialism, violence and Muslims*, 14.

classified as Chinese and 2 percent as Europeans and Indo-Europeans. In Singapore and Malaya adoption was common, but the transfer of children was not registered. In some regions 20 percent of the children was adopted.<sup>27</sup> There were three important political movements in the region. In the first place, there was a movement that pushed for a change from *adat* (traditional law) to Islamic law. Singapore did not have an Islamic law, while adjacent countries did.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, the pan-Islamic movement, which had begun before the Second World War, strove towards a united Muslim world. On the one hand, it was anti-colonial and thus seen as a threat to the West, in particular because the united Muslim world might join forces with communism. On the other hand, a united Muslim world could form a strong ally against communism.<sup>29</sup> Thirdly, in Singapore and Malaya there were active pan-Malaya independence movements, which strove for a greater Malay nation that might include Singapore, Malaya, and Indonesia.<sup>30</sup> The first movement was referred to in the Singapore papers, the second was presented as a threat by the British/American papers, and the third was largely ignored.

In 1949, the Dutch East Indies had become independent Indonesia. The arrival in the Netherlands of 350,000 people from the former colony led to discussions in parliament and press because of severe Dutch housing shortages and fears for unemployment.<sup>31</sup> The Dutch authorities encouraged people who were established in the Indonesian society and did not speak Dutch to stay in the former colony.<sup>32</sup> In 1950, the position of the Dutch in Indonesia rapidly deteriorated, and the Dutch admittance policy became more

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27. Judith Djamour, 'Adoption of children among Singapore Malaysians', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 82:2 (1952) 159-168; See also: Aljunied, *Colonialism, violence and Muslims*, 10.

28. Justus M. van der Kroef, 'The Role of Islam in Indonesian nationalism and politics', *The Western Political Quarterly* 11:1 (1958) 33-54; P. de Josselin de Jong, 'Islam versus Adat in Negri Sembilan (Malaya)', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde Leiden* 116:1 (1960) 158-203, 180.

29. Dwight E. Lee, 'The origins of pan-Islamism', *The American Historical Review* 47:2 (1942) 278-287; Charles Gamba, 'Labour and labour parties in Malaya', *Pacific Affairs* 31:2 (1958) 117-130; Nikki R. Keddie, 'Pan-Islam as proto-nationalism', *The Journal of Modern History* 41:1 (1969) 17-28; Mohammed Nuri El-Amin, 'The role of international communism in the Muslim world and in Egypt and the Sudan', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23:1 (1996) 29-53; Francis Robinson, 'The British empire and Muslim identity in South Asia', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series* 8 (1998) 271-289.

30. Gordon P. Means, 'The role of Islam in the political development of Malaysia', *Comparative Politics* 1:2 (Jan., 1969) 264-284.

31. Herman Obdeijn and Marlou Schrover, *Komen en gaan. Immigratie en emigratie in Nederland vanaf 1550* (Amsterdam 2008) 229-240.

32. P. van der Veur, 'Eurasian dilemma in Indonesia', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 20:1 (Nov. 1960) 45-60, 56-58; Proceedings Lower House, session 1958-1959, 7th meeting 16-10-1958, Van Doorn, KVP, 2142.

lenient.<sup>33</sup> In January 1950, Westerling, a former captain of the colonial army in the Dutch East Indies, staged a coup in Indonesia. The coup failed and led to many fatalities among the Indonesians. He fled to Singapore and later Europe, causing tensions between the Dutch, the British and the Indonesian governments.<sup>34</sup> Dutch papers did not connect Bertha's story to those about the Dutch in Indonesia or the coup by Westerling, although both affected Dutch relations with Indonesia and Singapore.

Among the few Jews in the Netherlands who had survived the war, there was still some hope that their children might also have survived in the care of non-Jews. Newspapers called for foster parents to come forward, so that children and parents could be reunited.<sup>35</sup> At the time of the Bertha Hertogh affair, there was a remarkably similar story about the Jewish girl Anneke Beekman which also received widespread press attention, but the newspapers hardly made any cross-references.<sup>36</sup>

The Soviet Union voiced strong criticism of domestic us race relations, and many countries shared this critique. The us feared that former colonies would be receptive to this and would turn to communism.<sup>37</sup> The us was involved in the Korean War, and at the height of the Bertha Hertogh affair the us General MacArthur was asking for more troops and funds.

### Bertha, Maria and jungle girl

The Dutch, Singapore, and British/American press used different words to refer to the main actors. Below the names Bertha, Maria, and Nadra are used alternately, as they appeared in the newspapers. Her full name was Huberdina Maria Hertogh. Until December 5, 1950, Singapore papers referred to her as Maria Hertogh, and sometimes as Nadra, her Muslim name. After December 5th, when the court had decided in favour of her mother, the Singapore press called her Bertha. The British/American press called her Maria Bertha Hertogh, reversing the order of her given names and strengthening the association with Christianity and virginity. Only *The Washington Post* called her both

33. P. W. van der Veur, 'The Eurasians of Indonesia: castaways of colonialism', *Pacific Affairs* 2:2 (Jun. 1954) 124-137, 133-134; J.H. Kraak, *De repatriëring uit Indonesië. Een onderzoek naar de integratie van gerepatriëerden uit Indonesië in de Nederlandse samenleving* (Den Haag 1957).

34. Aljunied, *Colonialism, violence and Muslims*, 17.

35. *Het Vrije Volk* 17-5-1945, 3.

36. Joel S. Fishman, 'The Anneke Beekman affair and the Dutch news media', *Jewish Social Studies* 40:1 (1978) 3-24.

37. Mary L. Dudziak, 'Desegregation as a Cold War imperative', *Stanford Law Review* 41 (1988) 61-120, 118; Mary L. Dudziak, 'Josephine Baker, racial protest, and the Cold War', *The Journal of American History*, 81:2 (1994) 543-570, 556.



Maria Bertha Hertogh and Nadra Adabi, her Muslim name after marriage.<sup>38</sup> British/American papers called her a 'Dutch girl, reared in the jungle', 'child bride', 'jungle girl', 'the little Dutch jungle bride', 'pretty little girl' and 'the fair-haired Dutch girl'.<sup>39</sup> British/American newspapers used the term 'jungle girl' in all articles without failure, thus making references to popular, fictive characters such as Tarzan, raised by apes in the African jungle, or Mowgli, raised by wolves in the Indian jungle. German newspapers used the word 'Dschungelmädchen',<sup>40</sup> but the Dutch and Singapore press never used the term or an equivalent.

Dutch newspapers used the name Bertha Hertogh, and referred to her as little girl, child, little daughter, and little Bertha.<sup>41</sup> *De Telegraaf* observed how young and very Dutch she looked.<sup>42</sup> In early articles she was called Blond Bertha and Blond Blue-eyed Bertha, until journalists visited her siblings in the Netherlands in August 1950, and found they had dark hair and eyes.<sup>43</sup> The Dutch press emphasised that Bertha was Dutch, and favoured a strategy of infantilisation, expressed in the frequent use of diminutives.

Singapore papers first called Aminah (whose full name was Che Aminah binte Mohamed) an *ajah* (nurse), but later referred to her as the foster mother.<sup>44</sup> British/American papers occasionally referred to Aminah as a foster mother, but mostly as 'Malay nurse', 'native nurse' and 'native governess'.<sup>45</sup> Dutch papers first called Aminah a *baboe* (native child minder), and later described her as a lonely, barren woman, a Malay woman and once a second mother.<sup>46</sup> *De Telegraaf* called her a *baboe* throughout the event.

Not until August 1951 did *The Straits Times* mention that Bertha's mother, Adeline Hertogh, was Indo-European.<sup>47</sup> *The New York Times* already wrote

38. *The Washington Post* 4-8-1950, 23.

39. *The Washington Post* 4-8-1950, 23; *Utica Daily Press* 12-12-1950, 2; *The New York Times* 4-12-1950, 3; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 12-12-1950; *The Manchester Guardian* 12-12-1950, *Binghamton Press* 13-12-1950; *Utica Observer* 13-12-1950; *The Manchester Guardian* 13-12-1950, 4, 5, 8; *Schenectady Gazette* 13-12-1950, 1; *The Observer* 17-12-1950, 3; *The Manchester Guardian* 18-12-1950, 5; *Kingston Daily Freeman* 19-12-1950, 24; *The Washington Post* 19-12-1950, b15; *The Manchester Guardian* 9-1-1951, 7; *The Manchester Guardian* 1-3-1951, 8.

40. *Hamburger Abendblatt* 16-11, 4, 14, 16 and 29-12-1950.

41. *Leeuwarder Courant* 16-5-1950; *Het Vrije Volk* 23-5-1950, 5.

42. *De Telegraaf* 10-8-1950, 1.

43. *Het Parool* 23-5-1950, 9; *Het Vrije Volk* 23-5-1950, 5; *Het Parool* 24-5-1950, 5.

44. *The Straits Times*, 19-5-1950, 1.

45. *The Manchester Guardian* 3-8-1950, 5; *The New York Times* 13-12-1950, 3; *The New York Times* 14-12-1950, 11; *The Manchester Guardian* 4-12-1950, 5; *Schenectady Gazette* 4-12-1950; *The Manchester Guardian* 13-12-1950, 5, 8; *The Manchester Guardian* 15-12-1950, 7.

46. *Het Parool* 19-5-1950, 3; *Algemeen Handelsblad* 28-7-1950, 1; *De Volkskrant* 1-8-1950, 1; *De Telegraaf* 3-8-1950, 1; *De Volkskrant* 4-8-1950, 1; *De Telegraaf* 25-8-1950, 1; *De Volkskrant* 1-12-1950, 3; *Leeuwarder Courant* 28-7-1950; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 23-5-1950, 1.

47. *The Straits Times* 7-8-1951, 5.

that she was 'part Indonesian' in December 1950.<sup>48</sup> Bertha's father hardly featured in the Singapore and British/American press, but played a prominent role in Dutch papers, which referred to him as 'sergeant' (his military rank in the Dutch colonial army), thus giving him an aura of authority. When reference was made to Bertha's spouse, the word 'husband' was placed between inverted commas in Dutch papers.<sup>49</sup> According to Dutch papers, Bertha was involved in an arranged marriage, a forced marriage and a sham marriage, and her husband had not married her, but had *tried* to marry her.<sup>50</sup> 'Marriage' and 'married couple' were consistently placed between inverted commas.<sup>51</sup>

### A little girl found

The story began with an article in *The Straits Times* in May 1950 about a Dutch girl who had been found in a kampong and only spoke Malay. She had been left in the care of an *aja* after the Japanese in the Dutch East Indies had interned her parents in 1942.<sup>52</sup> An English district commissioner had spotted the blue-eyed girl in the sarong.<sup>53</sup> *Het Vrije Volk* emphasised how the girl stood out among the native children, stressing her Dutchness.<sup>54</sup> Dutch papers ran the headline that blond blue-eyed Bertha would rather stay with her *baboe* than come to the Netherlands. *Het Parool*, however, expected that the girl, who had been wearing a sarong for eight years, would arrive in the Netherlands shortly.<sup>55</sup> Attention to what Bertha wore is a constant factor in all articles and is used as a marker of her identity.

Since Aminah refused to let the child go, the issue was brought before a Singapore court. Pending a decision, Maria was placed in a Girls' Home.<sup>56</sup> *The Straits Times* published a photograph of a crying Maria, clinging to the back of Aminah, while a social worker tried to pry her away.<sup>57</sup> The photograph was widely used, and later got an epic salience.<sup>58</sup> Bertha went on a hunger strike, but only continued it for a day according to *Het Vrije Volk*.<sup>59</sup> She also

48. *The New York Times* 28-12-1950, 5.

49. *Leeuwarder Courant* 10-4-1951; *De Telegraaf* 26-8-1950, 3.

50. *Leeuwarder Courant* 16-5-1951; *NRC* 27-3-1951, 2; *De Telegraaf* 5-12-1950, 3.

51. *De Telegraaf* 7-8-1950, 3; *Het Vrije Volk* 30-8-1951, 1; *De Telegraaf* 15-8-1950, 1; *De Telegraaf* 5-9-1950, 3.

52. *The Straits Times* 19-5-1950, 1.

53. *Algemeen Handelsblad* 15-5-1950, 1.

54. *Het Vrije Volk* 17-5-1950, 3.

55. *Het Parool* 15-5-1950, 1.

56. *The Straits Times* 19-5-1950, 1.

57. *The Straits Times* 20-5-1950, 1.

58. Dutch papers also published it. *Het Parool* 20-5-1950, 3.

59. *Het Vrije Volk* 22-5-1950, 1; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 23-5-1950, 1.



Ill. 1 13 year-old Bertha Hertogh and her foster mother Aminah (4th and 3rd for the right) are escorted to car after a court hearing while protesters are held at a distance. The court decided in the end that her marriage was annulled and that she should be returned to her birth parents. This decision led to major riots, which left 19 dead and 200 wounded. ANP Photo Reuter. Picture archive, National Archive The Hague 2356844-501130-32.

threatened to kill herself.<sup>60</sup> Non-Dutch papers did not mention the hunger strike or the suicide threat.

Dutch papers already provided details on how Bertha had come to live with Aminah in May 1950. The non-Dutch press did so much later and with less detail. The numerous and precise details gave the Dutch articles credibility. Dutch papers used strong tropes to criminalise Aminah. According to *Het Vrije Volk*, Aminah had close ties with the Japanese ss and had kidnapped the girl. She had offered to take the girl in for a few days because Mrs. Hertogh was about to deliver her fifth child, and Mr. Hertogh had been made a prisoner of war. When Mrs. Hertogh later came to collect Bertha, the Japanese took her prisoner. *Het Vrije Volk* wrote that Aminah was an interpreter for the Japanese and part of their secret service, and implied that she had betrayed Mrs. Hertogh. Mrs. Hertogh had written to Aminah asking her in vain to send Bertha to the internment camp, according to Dutch papers. After the war the parents had looked for the child for ten months, and when they

60. *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 23-5-1950, 1.

failed, they were forced to go to the Netherlands without her. After Bertha had been found, Aminah demanded that the parents come and collect her themselves, and she demanded a reward. Later she asked if she could bring her to the Netherlands, with the parents paying for her passage both ways. When the parents agreed, Aminah asked for an extra 1000 Straits dollars (1200 Dutch guilders). The Dutch Red Cross offered to pay this 'ransom'.<sup>61</sup> By using the word 'ransom' *Het Vrije Volk* attributed criminal motives to 'kidnapper' Aminah.

*Het Parool* wrote that it had already been known for a year where Bertha was. Aminah had brainwashed the child, the paper added.<sup>62</sup> Mr. Hertogh had kept quiet in order not to jeopardize the case. Now that matters were threatening to go wrong, he wanted to tell his story. His daughter had not been miraculously found, and the woman was never her *baboe*. She was an acquaintance of Mrs. Hertogh's mother, who had repeatedly asked to let one of the children stay with her. Bertha had gone to stay with her for a few days only.<sup>63</sup> *The Straits Times* ran a simple version of the story, emphasising chaos and confusion,<sup>64</sup> while the Dutch press emphasised criminal intent.

### The marriage

Shortly after the court case, *The Straits Times* reported on the marriage between Maria and schoolteacher Mansoor Adabi. Maria and Mansoor had only known each other for a few days. Aminah had received a letter from the Dutch Consul-General, which summoned her to hand over Maria to the Dutch authorities, but now that Maria was married, Aminah believed that this was no longer possible. The letter came one day too late. Maria was quoted as saying that she did not understand why her mother would want her back since she had enough other children to care for.<sup>65</sup>

The next day *The Straits Times* wrote critically about the marriage. Dutch girls could only marry at age 16 with special consent, and until 21 had to have the consent of their parents.<sup>66</sup> In the East, boys and girls matured earlier than in the West and could marry when they reached puberty. However, early marriages were being increasingly criticised. A marriage between East and West could be successful, but Maria was too young to estimate the chances of success. For Maria the laws of her own country should be respected. The

61. *Het Vrije Volk* 23-5-1950, 5; *Trouw* 7-8-1950, 4.

62. *Het Parool* 24-5-1950, 5.

63. *Algemeen Handelsblad* 24-5-1950, 1.

64. *The Straits Times*, 5-8-1950, 6.

65. *The Straits Times*, 3-8-1950, 1.

66. *The Straits Times*, 4-8-1950, 1.

paper did not dispute the fact that she held Dutch nationality.<sup>67</sup> The paper also described a party, which was thrown for the newlyweds. The happy bride, wearing a red sarong and kebaya and red lipstick, showed her guests her presents: clothes, household utensils, jewellery, and a large number of letters with money or cheques.<sup>68</sup>

Reports in British/American papers were short. *The Manchester Guardian* mentioned the marriage of 14-year-old Maria,<sup>69</sup> but in a next article changed her age to 13. According to *The Washington Post* Maria was 14 and could marry under Islamic law.<sup>70</sup> The papers gave few details.

The Dutch public was shocked by the marriage, according to *De Telegraaf*.<sup>71</sup> Civilised nations should treat a lost minor of foreign nationality as it would its own. Singapore had not behaved in this manner when it let a child from a Catholic family marry a Muslim man, whom she had known less than 24 hours. The Dutch would never treat a little English girl, lost in The Hague, in a similar way. Singapore should be ashamed about this case of child trafficking, *De Telegraaf* concluded.<sup>72</sup>

Dutch newspapers paid a lot of attention to Bertha's age. It was not clear whether she was 13 or had just turned 14. If the latter was true, the marriage might be valid, because it would be in accordance with Singapore law.<sup>73</sup> Parents could ask for an annulment if they had not agreed to the marriage.<sup>74</sup> The fact that Bertha had chosen to marry, according to Aminah, was mocked in *De Telegraaf*. An editor wrote about his 13-year-old daughter, who had refused to eat her porridge for breakfast. He had forced her and when she came home from school that afternoon, she had announced her engagement to a 'Kingallees', so she would no longer be forced to eat porridge. She could marry whom she wanted, even her teacher, the daughter claimed. When her father said she had to wait another ten years, the daughter said: 'What about Bertha?' All children would revolt as a result of this case, the editor wrote.<sup>75</sup>

The Dutch press continued to discredit Aminah by the use of strong tropes like wartime collaboration and interest in monetary gains. She had kept the girl away from her parents, and now married her off to an unknown man, probably because she would be able to get more money for her this way than she would get from the Dutch government. Bertha was only five when

67. *The Straits Times*, 5-8-1950, 6.

68. *The Straits Times*, 6-8-1950, 1.

69. *The Manchester Guardian* 3-8-1950, 5.

70. *The Washington Post* 4-8-1950, 23.

71. *De Telegraaf* 4-8-1950, 1.

72. *De Telegraaf* 4-8-1950, 3.

73. *De Volkskrant* 4-8-1950, 1; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 23-8-1950, 3.

74. *Trouw* 9-8-1950, 3.

75. *De Telegraaf* 5-8-1950, 3.

she 'chose' to become a Muslim.<sup>76</sup> The refusal by a British court to let the girl be reunited with her parents, kicking her back into the native and Muslim society to which she did not belong by birth had rightly outraged the whole Dutch population. The forced marriage of a 13-year-old Dutch Christian girl to a Muslim man was no less than rape and violation of the most fundamental human rights.<sup>77</sup> The Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs would do his utmost since the parents had a right to their child,<sup>78</sup> but after the marriage, all Dutch newspapers referred to the case as hopeless.

*De Telegraaf* was the first paper to expand the story further and informed its readers that Bertha was a tool in the hands of Mr. A. Majid, president of the *Muslim Welfare Association* and the *Indo-Malay Pakistani Seaman's Union*, in whose house the marriage took place. Majid used the organisations' funds without permission, and arranged the marriage to increase his own popularity.<sup>79</sup>

In August 1950 tension started to build up in Singapore. In a letter to the editor of *The Straits Times*, the author complained that some people wanted to make this into a religious issue, while it was in fact only about a mother and a child.<sup>80</sup> Pending further legal steps, the *Muslim Welfare Association* organised a mass rally,<sup>81</sup> created a Nadra fund, and collected money.<sup>82</sup> In Bergen op Zoom, hometown of the parents, a Bertha Hertogh fund was created.<sup>83</sup> *Trouw* declared the case a matter of honour to the Dutch people.<sup>84</sup>

In September 1950, Dutch papers reported about Muslim protests against raising the legal age of marriage to 16. An advocate of this change called child marriages spiritual prostitution and referred to the Bertha Hertogh case.<sup>85</sup> Majid, quoted in *De Telegraaf*, said that if justice would not be done, this would become a religious affair in which also Indonesia, India and Pakistan would be keenly interested.<sup>86</sup>

At this stage the Dutch newspapers were already emphasising that tensions were building up, and they were already expanding the story by attaching other issues. *Het Vrije Volk* and *De Telegraaf*, the two populist Dutch newspapers, did so the most, clearly aiming to stress the importance of the issue.

76. *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 4-8-1950, 5.

77. *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 5-8-1950, 5.

78. *Het Vrije Volk* 22-8-1950, 5; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 23-8-1950, 3.

79. *De Telegraaf* 18-8-1950, 1.

80. *The Straits Times* 17-8-1950, 6.

81. *The Straits Times* 2-9-1950, 7.

82. *The Straits Times* 14-9-1950, 7.

83. *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 10-8-1950, 1; *De Telegraaf* 10-8-1950, 1; *Trouw* 10-8-1950, 2.

84. *Trouw* 11-8-1950, 2.

85. *Het Vrije Volk* 1-9-1950, 1.

86. *De Telegraaf* 5-9-1950, 3.

The Singapore press was problematising the issue less and denied links to other issues.

### The second court case

The case was brought before court again because the parents had new evidence. They asked whether Bertha could be transferred to the Girls' Home again, like she was during the first court case. Her husband and her foster mother refused.<sup>87</sup> In October and December 1950, Dutch papers wrote that Bertha was expecting a baby, according to Aminah.<sup>88</sup> Thereafter the pregnancy was not mentioned again.

In November 1950, Adeline Hertogh arrived in Singapore.<sup>89</sup> Bertha refused to see her. Adeline Hertogh told the press that she had presents waiting at home for her daughter, to celebrate the feast of Saint Nicolas (December 5th). Prompted by journalists, the mother said Bertha looked exactly like the little girl she had known, only her hair had been done up in an overly adult fashion. She was fully confident that her daughter would come round once she had seen her. Mansoor was not present because he had been hospitalised after a motorcycle accident.<sup>90</sup> A day later Mrs. Hertogh met her daughter for the first time in eight years, in the presence of numerous journalists. Aminah asked why she went on fighting since she had given the child to her for adoption. The mother claimed it was only meant to be temporary. Bertha said she could not love her because she had given her away. She wanted to stay with her husband until her death. When her mother tried to kiss her, she turned away and buried her face in Aminah's back. Mrs. Hertogh ran from the room crying, according to *The Straits Times*.<sup>91</sup>

Mansoor was still in hospital when the court case started on November 21. Mrs. Hertogh had legal support, while Aminah and Maria did not. Maria was wearing a dark red sarong and kebaya, decorated with silver flowers, and a loose fitting veil, according to *The Straits Times*.<sup>92</sup> Dutch newspapers wrote that Bertha wore different clothes to court every day, did not attempt to follow the court case since she did not understand any English, and acted rather self-assured.<sup>93</sup> This was not the little girl that Dutch journalists expected to see.

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87. *The Straits Times* 16-9-1950, 7.

88. *Het Vrije Volk* 29-10-1950, 1; *Leeuwarder Courant* 30-11-1950, *Trouw* 2-12-1950, 2.

89. *The Straits Times* 9-11-1950, 8; *Het Vrije Volk* 13-11-1950, 1; *The Straits Times* 15-11-1950, 1.

90. *The Straits Times* 15-11-1950, 1.

91. *The Straits Times* 16-11-1950, 1.

92. *The Straits Times* 21-11-1950, 1.

93. *Leeuwarder Courant* 15-11-1950; *Het Vrije Volk* 15-11-1950, 1; *Leeuwarder Courant* 23-11-1950.

The court case revolved around the question of what would be in the best interests of Maria, the plans of both adult women for her future, and the validity of the marriage. Mrs. Hertogh wanted to send her daughter to school in the Netherlands. The judge thought this might be difficult since the girl did not speak any Dutch. The Dutch Consul-General testified that many children who did not speak Dutch had come to the Netherlands after the war, and they had adjusted well.<sup>94</sup> Mrs. Hertogh argued that children could not be given away for adoption under Dutch law.<sup>95</sup> No mention was made of the fact that adoption was common in Singapore and Malaya. Newspapers presented Mrs. Hertogh as the good parent. They also created a frightening atmosphere and wrote that Mrs. Hertogh had received a letter from the communist party, threatening to kill her, and letters suggesting that Bertha was under the spell of black magic. An important witness had disappeared.<sup>96</sup> A bodyguard was assigned to her, and a police cordon was formed around the house at which she stayed.<sup>97</sup> All this added to the criminalisation of the issue.

According to Aminah, Mrs. Hertogh had not been interned by the Japanese. She had had a job in Surabaya while her mother took care of the children, except for Nadra. After the war, she was reunited with her children, but she had not asked for Nadra. The press aimed to discredit Aminah: she had declared earlier that Mrs. Hertogh had been imprisoned, and she had introduced Mansoor to Maria.

On December 1, Bertha was transferred to a Catholic convent, where 1000 yelling Muslims gathered. Special police forces scattered the crowd using clubs, but the crowd grew to 2000, shouted 'Allah is great' and threw stones at cars and the police. The police shot at the crowd with blanks.<sup>98</sup> In Dutch papers there were extensive reports on events building up to the riots, but the Singapore and British/American press did not mention them.

The court annulled the marriage on December 2: Bertha was not a Muslim and thus could not marry under Islamic law. The court decided that Bertha should be reunited with her parents. Bertha broke out in tears, and Aminah fainted. Aminah had taken good care of Bertha, according to the judge, but she had made a negative impression as a witness and had arranged a shameful marriage, according to *Het Vrije Volk*. Mrs. Hertogh and her daughter, who was struggling to get away from her, were put into a car and escorted to the convent, where the police tried to keep a crowd of several thousand under

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94. *The Straits Times* 24-11-1950, 7.

95. *Het Vrije Volk* 20-11-1950, 1. Contrary to other European countries, the Netherlands did not yet have an adoption law. It was introduced in 1956.

96. *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 24-11-1950, 1; *Het Vrije Volk* 21-11-1950, 1; *De Tijd* 2-12-1950, 1.

97. *Het Vrije Volk* 23-11-1950, 1.

98. *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 1-12-1950, 1.



control.<sup>99</sup> On December 3rd, *The Straits Times* published two photographs of a sad-looking Mansoor and Maria, posing in a similar fashion, under the caption ‘parted by law’.<sup>100</sup> This photograph was later seen as a cause of the riots.<sup>101</sup>

### A little girl again

The day after the court ruling, the tone in the Singapore papers changed drastically. ‘Maria is a little girl again’, a headline in *The Straits Times* read.<sup>102</sup> The Singapore press now started to call her Bertha. At the convent, she wore a short white dress, rather than her sarong and kebaya, and had her hair in two plaits, rather than covered with a veil. She ran across the courtyard hand in hand with other girls, who were her newly found best friends. She played on an organ and would receive piano lessons. Aminah had sent her a prayer mat, a Quran and three sarongs.<sup>103</sup> The next day Bertha wore the convent’s school uniform, and a large bow on her head, but still had on her Malay jewellery. She had been knitting and had taken piano lessons and lessons in English. The newspaper articles emphasised her education and introduction to a civilised Western world. Bertha had also attended mass with other girls. This too was later seen as a cause of the riots.<sup>104</sup> On photographs Bertha looks very young.<sup>105</sup>

In British/American papers the change was much more dramatic and miraculous than in the Singapore press. *The New York Times* wrote about the triumph of a Dutch mother. Maria ‘was torn from the life of a Muslim child bride and returned to her parents’ custody’. The child had fallen into her mother’s arms sobbing after having lived eight years ‘among the Malayan natives’.<sup>106</sup> She excitedly asked about her siblings, whom she had not seen ‘since she went off [...] to a jungle life’.<sup>107</sup> She was ‘just a kid again’, who would start her ‘re-education to Western life’.<sup>108</sup> The rapid transformation from ‘jungle girl’ and married Muslim woman to child emphasised her belonging to Western society. The miraculous transformation, framed as a story about Tarzan or Mowgli, gave the story uniqueness.

99. *Het Vrije Volk* 2-12-1950, 1.

100. *The Straits Times* 3-12-1950, 1.

101. *The Straits Times* 7-8-1951, 5.

102. *The Straits Times* 4-12-1950, 1.

103. *The Straits Times* 4-12-1950, 1.

104. *The Straits Times* 5-12-1950, 1.

105. *The Straits Times* 5-12-1950, 7.

106. *The New York Times* 4-12-1950, 3.

107. *Schenectady Gazette* 4-12-1950.

108. *Binghamton Press* 4-12-1950, 7.



*Ill. 2 Bertha Hertogh has been given a large doll. Like her plaits and dress it marks her transition from a married Muslim woman to a Catholic child. ANP Photo Reuter. Picture archive, National Archive The Hague. 2356848-501212-13.*

In Dutch papers the change was less sudden and miraculous. Bertha had been talking to her mother for hours, before she kissed her, removed her wedding ring, changed out of her sarong and kebaya, and allowed her hair to be plaited, symbolising her return to childhood. Bertha, who only days before had been a married woman, had been given a beautiful large doll. *De Volkskrant* wrote that Bertha took the doll to bed with her,<sup>109</sup> indicating that a doll made a better bed partner for a 13-year-old girl than a 22-year-old teacher, and marking her transition to restored virginity. *De Telegraaf* quoted the father, who said that Aminah saw the girl as loot, a conquest over the white race, and had raised her with hatred towards the Europeans and their religion. If Aminah had been able to keep the child, this would have been her triumph over the white race.<sup>110</sup> In the Dutch press infantilisation and criminalisation were paired. *De Telegraaf* and *Het Vrije Volk* were the most important papers to do so.

Dutch papers described how Bertha celebrated the Dutch feast of Saint Nicolas and already seemed to have forgotten about Aminah.<sup>111</sup> Two Malay journalists, who talked to Bertha, told a different story, however. Bertha had burst into tears and said, 'Help me!' Mother superior later scolded the girl for this bad behaviour and decided to keep the press out, Dutch papers wrote.<sup>112</sup> The incident was not mentioned in the Singapore or British/American press. Reports in *De Waarheid* differed considerably from those in other Dutch papers. *De Waarheid* wrote that the Dutch press had appropriated this issue out of lust for sensation and in order to divert attention away from more important issues. By doing so, they had fostered race hatred.<sup>113</sup>

On December 7th Dutch papers announced that Muslims were planning a mass rally at the major mosque.<sup>114</sup> Protesters tried to convince the mother that Bertha was a Muslim, and wanted to give her a Quran, a prayer mat, Malayan clothes and newspaper clippings. Mrs. Hertogh would also be given clothes and Mother Superior would get a valuable Bible and a translation of the Quran.<sup>115</sup> The next day, British and Dutch papers wrote about a protest march of 1500 Muslim girls, all 13 years old and carrying a Quran, to the convent where Bertha stayed.<sup>116</sup> The Singapore newspapers wrote little about these events, and as a result the riots came more as a surprise.

109. *De Volkskrant* 5-12-1950, 3; *De Telegraaf* 5-12-1950, 3.

110. *De Telegraaf* 4-12-1950, 1.

111. *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 6-12-1950, 1; *De Telegraaf* 6-12-1950, 3.

112. *De Telegraaf* 7-12-1950, 3; *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 6-12-1950, 1.

113. *De Waarheid* 7-12-1950, 3.

114. *Het Vrije Volk* 7-12-1950, 1; *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 7-12-1950, 1.

115. *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 9-12-1950, 1.

116. *De Tijd* 8-12-1950, 6; *De Telegraaf* 8-12-1950, 3; *The Manchester Guardian* 9-12-1950, 6; *Trouw* 9-12-1950, 2; *De Telegraaf* 9-12-1950, 3.

Overall, the Dutch press, more than any of the others, conflated evils, expanded the problem and attached issues. Within the flight and rescue frame, it infantilised Bertha, used diminutives endlessly, mocked her choice to convert to Islam and marry, denied her marriage and loss of virginity, and stressed innocence and belonging. Bertha was not a jungle girl and was not estranged from Dutch society. She was warmly welcomed back into a world of Saint Nicolas, piano playing and people who thought dolls rather than teachers made appropriate bedfellows for girls of her age. The Dutch press used the strongest tropes. Her marriage was forced and was equated with child prostitution and child trafficking. She was brainwashed, manipulated and drugged. She was used as a tool for criminal, religious, communist and Muslim evils all balled into one. Singapore was not a civilised society, since it failed to protect an innocent Christian girl. Aminah was a bad parent: she had collaborated with the Japanese ss, kidnapped the girl, asked for ransom, arranged the marriage and lied in court. Bertha's biological parents were the good parents: they looked for their child for months, left in desperation and continued their search from the Netherlands even when it was considered hopeless. They needed support in their attempts to rescue the girl.

### The riots

The riots broke out on December 11th after the court decided that Bertha could await the appeal in the custody of her parents in the Netherlands. Cars and buses were set on fire, 19 people died and 200 were injured, 884 people were arrested, the telephone system collapsed, a state of emergency was declared and a curfew installed. British troops, Gurkhas, and Malay police troops tried to restore order. Muslim leaders sent messages over the radio calling for the rioters to stop. The riots were of short duration. On December 16th the troops were withdrawn and shops were reopened.<sup>117</sup> The Singapore press referred to the riots simply as 'the riots' and later as 'the December riots'. At the time they were not called the 'Nadra riots', 'Maria Hertogh riots', a clash between Christianity and Islam, or a Jihad, as later authors called them.<sup>118</sup>

British/American papers used an overkill of superlatives and wrote about a 'seething mass of stone-hurling and bottle-wielding fanatics', 'frenzied natives' and 'pent up hatred of "white rule"'.<sup>119</sup> British/American papers wrote that the riots were anti-European, and gave many more details than the Singapore press. Five thousand Malays had laid a siege to the Supreme

117. *The Straits Times* 12-12-1950, 5, 14-12-1950, 7, 15-12-1950, 1, 16-12-1950, 9, and 20-12-1950, 10.

118. *The Straits Times* 26-2-1988, 15.

119. *The Washington Post* 12-12-1950, 1; *Schenectady Gazette* 13-12-1950, 1.

Court for three hours, and 'ten thousands of fanatic Moslems' had stormed the convent. They threatened to kidnap the girl, kill the mother and burn the convent. A journalist from the *Associated Press* was wounded, and another one went missing.<sup>120</sup> Soldiers had fired into the mob and killed four Chinese. The papers gave details about the dead and injured.<sup>121</sup> Five Malays had been killed by British troops, and four English and two Indo-Europeans, who were taken to be Europeans by the rioters, were clubbed to death. British authorities urged Europeans to stay inside.<sup>122</sup>

Rather surprisingly, *The Manchester Guardian* already knew that Bertha was on her way to her 'home in Holland' on December 11th. A KLM flight had made an unscheduled landing in Singapore.<sup>123</sup> The news about her departure was kept from the Singapore press, according to *The New York Times*, for fear of more riots.<sup>124</sup> Bertha would later be given the opportunity to choose between Asia and Europe. Should she decide for Asia, Dutch authorities would make sure that she could return.<sup>125</sup> Dutch authorities deposited 7500 Straits dollars (9300 Dutch guilders) to guarantee that Bertha could return if it were decided she should.<sup>126</sup>

Dutch reports about the riots on the first day were short and less detailed than the British/American coverage. The disturbances were presented as rather minor. Groups of Muslims had toured the town, and Europeans, especially the Dutch, had been targeted. It was the worst anti-European riot ever in Singapore,<sup>127</sup> but the Dutch press used the diminutive for the riots.<sup>128</sup> On the second day the Dutch press gave more details about bashings and murders, but still less than British/American papers.<sup>129</sup> Singapore was a battlefield where terror reigned, according to *de Volkskrant*.<sup>130</sup> The crowd, led by Muslims with blood-drained handkerchiefs around their necks, had thrown stones at Dutch banks and businesses, shouting 'Allah is great' and 'we want Nadra'.<sup>131</sup>

120. *Niagara Falls Gazette* 11-12-1950, 1.

121. *Kingston Daily Freeman* 12-12-1950.

122. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 12-12-1950.

123. *Trouw* 13-12-1950, 1.

124. *The New York Times* 14-12-1950, 11.

125. *The Manchester Guardian* 13-12-1950, 5; *Amsterdam Evening Recorder* 12-12-1950, 1; *The Manchester Guardian* 18-12-1950, 5.

126. *Het Parool* 12-12-1950, 1.

127. *Het Vrije Volk* 11-12-1950, 1.

128. They wrote about *relletjes*. *Het Parool* 12-12-1950, 1; *De Tijd* 11-12-1950, 1; *De Tijd* 12-12-1950, 1.

129. *Het Vrije Volk* 12-12-1950, 1; *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 12-12-1950, 1; *Algemeen Handelsblad* 12-12-1950, 1; *NRC* 12-12-1950, 1; *Trouw* 12-12-1950, 1, 2; *De Volkskrant* 12-12-1950, 1; *De Telegraaf* 12-12-1950, 1; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 13-12-1950, 1; *De Volkskrant* 13-12-1950, 1; *De Telegraaf* 13-12-1950, 1.

130. *De Volkskrant* 12-12-1950, 1.

131. *De Volkskrant* 13-12-1950, 2; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 13-12-1950, 1.

### Singapore papers about causes of the riots

Singapore papers only started to search for causes some weeks later. The riots had been directed specifically at Europeans and Indo-Europeans.<sup>132</sup> Malays, armed with sticks and broken bottles, stopped cars and buses and searched for Europeans and Indo-Europeans.<sup>133</sup> Rioters shouted 'Europeans!' during the searches and attacks.<sup>134</sup> Indonesians, who had been brought to Singapore by the Japanese during the war, played a role during the riots, the papers emphasised. The bitter anti-European racial violence was similar to sentiments the Japanese had instilled in the Indonesian population, and was uncommon in Singapore society. The papers explicitly denied that communists played a role. The *Malayan Communist Party* was caught by surprise. Only two days after the outbreak of the riots, it had distributed a pamphlet calling on all races to unite under communist leadership and rise against British rule. More important was the role of a criminal organisation of Malays and Chinese, which was involved in theft and extortion. Furthermore, there were the Indians and Malays, who had distributed food to the rioters and who were paid by *The Muslim Publishing House*.<sup>135</sup> In other letters to the editor in *The Straits Times*, the absence of Malays in the upper echelons of the police force was mentioned as a cause.<sup>136</sup> Suggestions were made to reform the police.<sup>137</sup> The armed forces should have been called in sooner,<sup>138</sup> the morale of the police was low, and their attitude was a form of passive mutiny. The police had been correct when they fired into the mob, but waited too long before doing anything, according to *The Singapore Free Press*.<sup>139</sup> The police had been withdrawn from the Sultan Mosque – one of the major sites of the rioting – in the hope that this would reduce tensions, but the opposite happened, and the police lost control.<sup>140</sup>

The annulment of the marriage was seen as an attack on Islamic marital laws, according to *The Straits Times*.<sup>141</sup> This point, however, received less attention than other points. Newspaper reports were seen as an important cause of the riots. Especially news about Bertha's stay in the convent had angered the Muslim community.<sup>142</sup> The Singapore press was held responsible for the

132. *The Straits Times* 20-12-1950, 8.

133. *The Straits Times* 18-1-1950, 8.

134. *The Straits Times* 10-4-1951, 4.

135. *The Straits Times* 7-8-1951, 11.

136. *The Straits Times* 16-8-1951, 6.

137. *Singapore Free Press* 22-8-1951, 4.

138. *The Straits Times* 23-2-1951, 1.

139. *The Straits Times* 16-12-1950, 6; *Singapore Free Press* 22-8-1951, 4.

140. *The Straits Times* 20-2-1951, 1.

141. *The Straits Times* 7-8-1951, 5.

142. *The Straits Times* 20-2-1951, 1.

riots in a government investigation.<sup>143</sup> In response to this accusation, *The Straits Times* wrote that it had moderated its reports on its own account, when the situation became threatening. On December 18th, *The Straits Times* had announced that it would no longer report on the racial or religious aspects of the case.<sup>144</sup> Singapore newspapers started to emphasise positive news.<sup>145</sup> *The Singapore Free Press* had published one special edition after another, and thus played an important role in providing information and keeping people away from danger zones.<sup>146</sup> *Cable and Wireless* had continued to function, and its Indo-European staff had slept at the office for four nights.<sup>147</sup> Journalists had run risks, but had continued their work.<sup>148</sup> The papers published a row of positive articles including stories about riot heroes; people who had helped Europeans and Indo-Europeans get to safety.<sup>149</sup>

It was especially in reports about causes of the riots that Singapore papers used the abnormality frame: they stressed that the riots were uncommon to the colony and caused by external factors such as Dutch interference, Indonesian wrath or Chinese gangs. There were no events leading up to the riots, they were not organised and very much a surprise, and thus an abnormality. In essence, Singapore was a stable and civilised society, to which the riot heroes and the services which had continued to function paid testimony. The riots did make it clear that there was a need for some changes, mainly to the police. Changes in law, acknowledging the Muslim character of society, which formed the outcome of the riots in the long run, were not mentioned at the time.

### British/American press about the causes of the riots

British/American papers never mentioned riot heroes. The causes they mentioned were similar to those in the Singapore press, but the tone was more aggressive. 'Rioting touched off by child bride case' after a 'Moslem priest' in the Sultan Mosque had told his audience that the annulment of the marriage was an insult to his religion.<sup>150</sup> *The New York Times* wrote about 'Moslem wrath' after the annulment of the marriage the child had been forced into.<sup>151</sup>

143. *The Straits Times* 20-12-1950, 1; *The Straits Times* 24-2-1951, 1.

144. *The Straits Times* 18-12-1950, 6 and 19-12-1950, 6.

145. *The Straits Times* 30-12-1950, 7.

146. *Singapore Free Press* 8-8-1951, 4, 22-8-1951, 4.

147. *Singapore Free Press* 9-8-1951, 4.

148. *The Straits Times* 14-12-1950, 3.

149. *The Straits Times* 14-12-1950, 1, 3, 7, 16-12-1950, 5, 19-12-1950, 6, 20-12-1950, 8, 30-12-1950, 5, 6-6-1951, 1, 1-10-1951, 4, 31-10-1951, 4, 21-11-1951, 1 and 24-11-1951, 5.

150. *Utica Daily Press* 12-12-1950, 2.

151. *The New York Times* 12-12-1950, 1.

*The Manchester Guardian* added that it had been very unwise to put a girl, who claimed to be a Muslim, in a Catholic convent. A purely Dutch issue had led to a large number of deaths in a British colony and racial hate against the British.<sup>152</sup>

The British/American press, like the Singapore press, was critical towards the police.<sup>153</sup> *The Observer* emphasised that the Muslim police found it difficult to act against Muslims who were aroused by religious, racial and political sentiments. The police had done little when whites and Chinese were clubbed and stoned.<sup>154</sup> According to *The Manchester Guardian*, the police was badly organised, with too few Chinese and too many Malays, 'who are lower in intelligence and have little alternative employment'. Low wages made them receptive to bribes.<sup>155</sup> The negative tone of the newspapers became stronger over time.<sup>156</sup> The police defended itself by saying that they encountered a situation they had not been in before.<sup>157</sup>

The role of the press was mentioned in British/American papers, but received less attention than in the Singapore press.<sup>158</sup> British/American papers paid attention to Singapore's importance to British trade<sup>159</sup> and mentioned social problems: part of the population lived in extreme poverty, profits fell to the whites, there were severe food shortages, and the water and power supply was poor. Despite these problems Singapore was an orderly city, and the riots were an exception.<sup>160</sup> On this point they agreed with the Singapore press.

The most striking difference between the British/American press and the Singapore press was the amount of attention paid to communism. At first, the British/American press explicitly denied the role of communists.<sup>161</sup> *The Observer* called the driving force behind the riots religious and 'sectional'. If the communists had known what was about to happen, the damage would have been larger.<sup>162</sup> Bitterness within the Malayan community offered a better explanation, according to *The Manchester Guardian*.<sup>163</sup> After December 18th, when the riots had already ended, the tone suddenly changed. *The Washington Post* wrote about 'a rising fear' which 'swept through Singapore' and

152. *The Manchester Guardian* 13-12-1950, 4.

153. *The Observer* 17-12-1950, 3.

154. *The Observer* 17-12-1950, 3.

155. *The Manchester Guardian* 15-12-1950, 10.

156. *The Manchester Guardian* 7-8-1951, 4.

157. *The Manchester Guardian* 26-3-1951, 4, 7-8-1951, 5 and 9-8-1951, 8.

158. *The Manchester Guardian* 19-12-1950, 7 and 20-12-1950, 8.

159. *Utica Daily Press* 12-12-1950, 2; *The Washington Post* 13-12-1950, 10.

160. *The New York Times* 19-6-1951, 3.

161. *Utica Daily Press* 12-12-1950, 2.

162. *The Observer* 17-12-1950, 3.

163. *The Manchester Guardian* 13-12-1950, 4.



about communists who encouraged 'bloody bitterness', which would cause a 'clash' between the Muslim and Western world.<sup>164</sup> *The Manchester Guardian* ran the headline: 'Communist at Work?'<sup>165</sup> The story could weaken the anti-communist front, wrote *The New York Times*, and communist agitators used the case.<sup>166</sup> Shortly afterwards, the threat of communism was emphasised even more.<sup>167</sup> *The Schenectady Gazette* wrote about the danger from the 'Reds', terrorist campaigns and communist activities.<sup>168</sup> The attention to communism disappeared at the end of December 1950. *Pravda* presented the case as another example of British race discrimination against colonial people.<sup>169</sup> The Soviet Union labelled Bertha's case in the United Nations as a violation of human rights: the rights of women had been trampled, and a girl had been forced into a divorce and deported.<sup>170</sup> Not a forced marriage, but a forced divorce was the cause of troubles.

Over time, the British/American press moved from the Tarzan/Mowgli frame, which was used during the discovery and rapid transformation of Bertha from jungle girl to Western child, to a Cold War frame, which was used after the riots. The threat during the riots was overemphasised by providing many details. British/American papers avoided issues of racism, because the Soviet Union framed the case as an example of colonialism and racism. British/American papers presented communism as the main cause of the riots, but only during the brief period in which MacArthur asked for funds, troops and permission for manoeuvres in Korea.

### Dutch papers about causes of the riots

Already during the riots some Dutch papers mentioned that communist Chinese were suspected of enticing the Muslims into riots, although the British Minister of Colonial Affairs was quoted as denying this.<sup>171</sup> Karim Ghani, president of the *Muslim League* in Singapore, declared, according to Dutch papers, that the Nadra case was a war between Islam and Catholicism.<sup>172</sup> *De Telegraaf* wondered why this case became a world issue. There must be doz-

164. *The Washington Post* 19-12-1950, b15.

165. *The Manchester Guardian* 12-12-1950, 5.

166. *The New York Times* 15-12-1950, 13.

167. *The New York Times* 24-12-1950, 73; 24-12-1950, 4.

168. *Schenectady Gazette* 19-12-1950, 19.

169. Quoted in *NRC* 15-12-1950, 1; *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 15-12-1950, 1.

170. *The Manchester Guardian* 28-8-1951, 7.

171. *Leeuwarder Courant* 12-12-1950; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 13-12-1950, 1; *De Tijd* 12-12-1950, 1; *Het Parool* 13-12-1950, 3.

172. *Het Parool* 12-12-1950, 1; *Leeuwarder Courant* 12-12-1950.

ens of these stories in all parts of the world, the paper wrote without offering proof, but this one offered the opportunity to slap the white race in the face, via religious fanaticism, which had been aroused for the wrong reasons.<sup>173</sup> *Trouw* wrote that it would be surprising if the communists were not involved in this Muslim revolt. An underground communist group, mainly consisting of students, was trying to move their terrorist activities from Malaya to Singapore, and the terror was spreading. Communist groups, encouraged by news from Korea, became more active.<sup>174</sup>

*De Tijd* explained that the riots were presented as something unusual, when in fact they were not. People who knew Singapore could testify to this. Riots were not uncommon, and Bertha Hertogh was not the cause, but a pretext. She was a pawn in a political gangster game. Possibly she was so from the beginning, but probably she was later found to be a useful tool. Singapore was a depot for the dark forces of dazzling Asia, where sediment had collected that was made up of the worst of Asia. There were more Chinese here than anywhere else. After the war, the Japanese had not left behind the best of their people, and the same was true for the Indians. In Singapore lived a remnant of the people who had been evacuated from the Dutch East Indies, and they were also not the best people. Jews and Indo-Europeans had quickly found their way into the underworld. How many communists there were in Singapore, and what they were up to, was hard to establish, according to *De Tijd*. Ghani made the issue into a religious affair; others used this little row for their own goal, namely a revolt against the British regime.

Without offering proof, *De Tijd* wrote that there had been other girls who escaped into the convent and came to the Netherlands after sensational court cases. At this point all sorts of religious and political issues got attached to the case of Bertha. Mother Superior, who had nothing to do with politics, had extensive experience in turning girls 'like these' around. *De Tijd* wondered if this issue would have evolved into a dramatic affair if it were not for the situation in Korea.<sup>175</sup>

In *De Telegraaf*, Prof. C. Gerretson, a specialist in the history of the Dutch East Indies, explained that civilisation was only a thin layer of veneer in Asia. Chaos ensued if the colonial authorities did not uphold power by force. Bertha managed to get away, because she had Dutch nationality, but many girls suffered her fate in Indonesia, where Western civilisation had collapsed when the Dutch pulled out. The British had wisely acknowledged this and had forcefully re-established authority in their colony.<sup>176</sup> *De Waarheid* disagreed with other Dutch papers and saw the riots as the result of four centuries of colonial

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173. *De Telegraaf* 12-12-1950, 3.

174. *Trouw* 14-12-1950, 5.

175. *De Tijd* 14-12-1950, 1.

176. *De Telegraaf* 16-12-1950, 7.

repression. The British and the Dutch colonial governments showed their disdain for the Asian people through this case, according to *De Waarheid*.<sup>177</sup>

On December 15th Bertha and her mother arrived in the Netherlands.<sup>178</sup> In Dutch papers Bertha was described with the use of an overkill of diminutives: she was a little girl with long plaits, a little brown coat, a little hat with small flowers, little white socks, little red open shoes (in the middle of winter) and the saddest eyes in the world. She looked younger than 13.<sup>179</sup> It really was a child that descended from the plane.<sup>180</sup> She was not the half-adult of the photographs, but a child that needed a mother to tuck her in at night, and who should grow up in a normal family with brothers and sisters, *Trouw* emphasised.<sup>181</sup> She looked as if she was ten at the most, and as if she wanted to sleep and forget, and play with a doll in the morning and be a child among other children, *de Volkskrant* added.<sup>182</sup> She was a very small little girl, and it was understandable that the father and mother wanted to fight for this sweet little girl, *De Telegraaf* wrote.<sup>183</sup> *De Waarheid*, however, stated that she did not show any emotions, was timid, spineless, and beaten.<sup>184</sup>

There were many more people at the airport than was anticipated. There was pushing and shouting, and people fell.<sup>185</sup> The journalists and photographers fought for the best places, causing a revolting scene, according to *Trouw*. It must have given a very bad first impression of the civilised Netherlands to little Bertha, who silently observed the crowd while the crockery of Schiphol restaurant was shattered and journalists yelled.<sup>186</sup> From Schiphol airport Bertha travelled to Bergen op Zoom, where 30,000 people awaited her.<sup>187</sup> *Het Parool* wrote that it would now stop its reports on the case. The child would have enough problems adjusting to Dutch society as it was.<sup>188</sup>

Dutch papers did not pay any attention to the causes of the riots, like the Singapore and British/American press did, but they did pay attention to the call for a boycott, which was largely ignored by the other presses. Ghani, president of the *Muslim League*, called on Muslim countries to boycott Dutch

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177. *De Waarheid* 13-12-1950, 1.

178. *Het Vrije Volk* 14-12-1950, 2; *The New York Times* 15-12-1950, 13.

179. *NRC* 15-12-1950, 1; *Het Vrije Volk* 15-12-1950, 1; *De Volkskrant* 14-12-1950, 1.

180. *Algemeen Handelsblad* 15-12-1950, 1.

181. *Trouw* 15-12-1950, 2.

182. *De Volkskrant* 15-12-1950, 5.

183. *De Telegraaf* 15-12-1950, 1.

184. *De Waarheid* 15-12-1950, 2.

185. *NRC* 15-12-1950, 1; *Het Vrije Volk* 15-12-1950, 1.

186. *Trouw* 15-12-1950, 1.

187. *The New York Times* 15-12-1950, 13.

188. *Het Parool* 15-12-1950, 1.

interests until Bertha had returned to her own people.<sup>189</sup> Muslim countries should deny Dutch planes landing rights and prevent Dutch ships from docking.<sup>190</sup> On December 18th, Ghani was arrested. He was known, according to Dutch papers, for his ties to communism.<sup>191</sup> *De Waarheid* wrote that the British colonial regime used the affair as a pretext to arrest the Muslim leader and put him and others in a concentration camp.<sup>192</sup>

In short, according to the Dutch press, the riots were not sudden and unexpected, and Bertha Hertogh was not the cause. For months running up to the riots Dutch papers reported on disturbances. The case was also not all that special; there had been similar cases. In this way the press shed Dutch responsibility for the riots and deaths. Dutch papers avoided attachment to domestic Dutch issues: the Westerling affair, the position of the Dutch still in Indonesia, the position of repatriates in the Netherlands, or cases involving Jewish children in foster care. The Dutch papers – *De Telegraaf* again in a leading role – did attach all sorts of evils in the British colony to the case: common crime, terrorism and communism. In the final stages of the affair, the newspapers emphasised even more than before that Bertha was a child, who deserved to be rescued. The heroic rescue operation turned sour because of the large number of fatalities and the call for a worldwide Muslim boycott of Dutch interests. The case therefore later became no more than an incident, detached from parallel or later issues, and hardly part of any history.

## Conclusion

The Bertha Hertogh story makes it possible to analyse the process of problematisation from a comparative perspective. The analysis showed that in each context the story was framed differently, but also that within each context the framing was multilayered and changed over time. The Tarzan/Mowgli frame in the British/American press put emphasis on sensation and Western superiority. Racial issues were carefully avoided in light of Soviet criticism of race relations in the US. The Cold War frame was briefly attached – during MacArthur's campaign in Korea – and abandoned when no longer needed. In the British/American press the problem was that of a Western girl who got stuck in Eastern culture, to which she did not belong despite the fact that she was born and bred in it. The Singapore press framed the story so that it was essentially not about Singapore. Causes for the dramatic events were to

189. *Het Parool* 15-12-1950, 3; *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* 16-12-1950, 1; *Leeuwarder Courant* 18-12-1950; *De Volkskrant* 15-12-1950, 1.

190. *Leeuwarder Courant* 15-12-1950.

191. *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* 18-12-1950, 1.

192. *De Waarheid* 20-12-1950, 3.

be found outside Singapore society, which was in essence civilised and stable. Only years later, and in a different political setting, was the story framed as of paramount importance to Singapore history. The view of the Singapore press that the causes of the problem were essentially foreign or external contrasted with that in the Dutch press, which emphasised that Singapore was unstable and uncivilised, and that the problem was common to its society and, by extension, to other Asian countries including Indonesia. It justified Dutch attempts to save a girl from this country and denied responsibility for the riots that happened afterwards. The Dutch press provided the most details about Bertha, giving the articles an aura of reliability. It used the strongest tropes, expanded the issue the most by attaching a wide variety of issues, but also tactically avoided Dutch domestic issues such as the fate of former Dutch people still in Indonesia or Jewish children in foster care in the Netherlands.

Current theories on problematisation emphasise the importance of tactical linkage or attachment and expansion. This article shows that problematisation used tactical linkage in combination with particularisation, in the form of strategically denying, avoiding and ignoring the linkage to certain issues. Particularisation made it possible to present a 'problem' as new, calling for new measures or policies. Problematisation builds on the combination of tactical linkages and the strategic denying, avoiding and ignoring of links.

### About the author

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