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van den Muijzenberg, O.

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Real Manila Cigars for Java's Colonial Elite... from Semarang

Counter-factual reasoning is a hazardous sport for social scientists, but in some circumstances it may help clarify particular issues considerably, while in ours, it may provide a convenient launching pad for a (hi)story. Imagine Frans Hüsken to have been born two generations earlier. If we follow his own musings on a tropical veranda some years ago, he might have been a civil servant in Java. Having crowned his career with the governorship of Central Java, we see him after a day of hard work relaxing on the veranda of the gubernatorial residence in Semarang, thoroughly enjoying his *pait* (Bols or one of the Schiedam brands) and a Manila cigar.

In a colony like the Netherlands Indies in the late 19th century, the consumption of this type of imported luxuries had become common for the elites, as the Semarang daily *De Locomotief* shows. Advertisements abound of 'new arrivals', and sometimes several traders announce the arrival of new Manila cigars in the same issue. Still, 'arrival' should not be taken too lightly to mean 'import'. At least one cigar factory produced them around the corner, in the city of Semarang itself, though with the help of authentic Manila cigar makers. Semarang witnessed not only an early form of import substitution industrialization, but also of inter-colonial labour migration, nearly a century before the massive outflow of Overseas Filipino Workers which became the largest economic sector of late 20th century Philippines.

It was the firm of Messrs. J. Samuel Glaser & Co. who manufactured the cigars at 'reasonable prices' instead of having them shipped from the Philippines. Their advertisement in February 1889 reads:

Excellent [*puike*] Manila Cigars: from the factory of the undersigned:
in boxes of 1000 pieces *f*6 per 1000 pieces, the same superior,
in boxes of 500 pieces *f*12 per 1000 pieces. Available at Messrs.:
Van Bommel & Co.; Euzière & Co.; Evrard & Co.; F. Mariotat;
F.K. de Waal. Signed: Glaser & Co.

It is difficult to establish the exact start of the popularity of Manila cigars in Java. They were common enough to obtain a generic name. Young greenhorn James van Tuyll in Maurits' 'Uit de suiker in de tabak' (*Het Indisch Vaderland* 1883-1984), for instance, is immediately confronted with their existence, hours after his arrival from Holland, when his planter-uncle refers to the consumption of a 'grog and a manilla' as the proof of adjustment to tropical living.

The Dutch consul in Manila reports from 1879 onward that Philippine tobacco and cigars were exported to the Netherlands and Java, whereas the same source tells us that in 1886 'Java' smoked 15,000,000 Manila cigars, a market of about *f*100,000 or more. Apparently this was enough incentive for trader and insurance-agent J. Samuel Glaser in Semarang to start his factory the next year.

In fact, Glaser & Co. prided themselves of importing not only the raw tobacco and the exact procedures of making the cigars, but most of all of having them rolled by female cigar makers from Manila (Van Maurik 1897: 234). The first group of *cigarreras* was contracted in 1889 and was successively replaced annually until 1896.

Glaser's Eerste Manilla Sigarenfabriek (First Manila Cigar Factory) is mentioned as one of the very few existing factories in Java around the turn of last century by no less than Mr. C.Th. van Deventer, the icon of the Ethical Policy, the Dutch version of the White Man's Burden. Van Deventer's survey of the economic situation of the native population of Java and Madura (1904) as a follow-up to his path-breaking article 'Een eerschuld' (A Debt of Honour, 1899) was rather brief on non-native factory labour in Java. With a workforce of about 300 the Eerste Manilla Sigarenfabriek belonged to the top-20 of 562 manufacturing establishments in the whole of Java that counted more than one hundred workers. Van Deventer (1904: 95) writes:

The first cigar factory, which was organized at the example of Manila, dates back to 1887 and was run in the first stage wholly with female labourers imported from Manila. Later, when Javanese workers, male and female, had obtained sufficient skill and dexterity, native labour was utilized more and more, so much so that now [1903] there is an almost completely Javanese workforce.

Ironically, whereas Van Deventer continuously calls his readers' attention to the level of wages paid to Javanese workers in other establishments, he omits any discussion of the wage level in the factory of which he himself was a co-owner. In the mid-1890s, Van Deventer was one of the three members of the board of this cigar firm, which paid handsome dividends between 6 to 12.6% in the years from 1891 onwards (*Handboek* 1893-1898). As a barrister in Semarang (1888-1897) and a self-proclaimed 'passionate moneyman' as early as 1884, Van Deventer accumulated substantial properties and investments in Java and Kalimantan that would allow him to retire early in Holland (Colenbrander and Stokvis 1912: 147).

Of the first batch of about 70 *cigarreras* no documentation could be found in the Philippine National Archive. A notarial act of May 1890, however, shows that 58 cigar makers, under the supervision of *maestra* Fabiana Herrera, were sent to Semarang to continue producing and instructing Javanese women to roll exact copies of the Manila cigars. Even the boxes, in which the cigars were to be packed, accompanied them. The majority of these women were married or already widowed, with only 23 of them single. They all belonged to the lowest tax-paying class (the ninth in 1891), but nine of them were literate. That did not necessarily mean that they could also sign the contract; the married women were represented by their husbands. The *maestra*, one cutter and six leaf-strippers received a monthly wage which was more than twice the Manila amount. The common workers worked on a piece-rate arrangement; the remuneration per 1000 cigars also amounted to more than double the usual Manila rate. Apart from this cash income, their daily maintenance, eventual medical care during their stay, and of course the trip via Singapore to Semarang vice versa, was taken care of by the employer. So, like their granddaughters in the late 20th century labour diaspora of Filipinas 200 years later, they hoped to make good by their overseas adventure.

The homecoming of the first group was remarkable enough for one of the few Manila dailies to publish a long interview about their experiences (as reproduced in Van den Muijzenberg 2008: 92-93). These were generally positive, except for the uneventfulness of life in Semarang, if not outright boredom, as compared with Catholic Manila. Notwithstanding the boredom, the earnings

were attractive enough for more than half of the next batch to return to the Glaser factory, including two *maestras*, Fabiana Herrera again and Celestina Sanson. On May 6 1891, the second group returned to Manila. According to a newspaper article they earned altogether \$6121, half of which was paid out upon their return, this way keeping control over the workforce, a method which is known in 20th-century overseas labour migration as well. Some economic differentiation developed within the group in the following few years as is visible from the data on the rank of their *cedulas* (head tax receipts). All *cigarreras* had a *cedula* of the lowest, ninth, class in 1890 and 1891, whereas seven of the circulating women were placed in the next to lowest class by 1893, and *maestra* Celestina Sanson had even risen into class seven.

In the following years, the number of Semarang *cigarreras* dwindled rapidly. In 1896 only seven persons were contracted. Their task of starting up the production and of training Javanese cigar makers was completed. The Javanese workers were surely less costly to employ, but the factory was also forced by external measures to cut costs. From 1890 onward, only cigar imports from the Philippines into the Indies were subject to a high tariff, which had been legislated at the behest of the Dutch cigar lobby. Philippine tobacco imports disappeared rapidly from the tobacco auctions in Amsterdam and Rotterdam as well, showing an increasing closure of the Dutch imperial tobacco market.

This early case of export of skilled labour was therefore short-lived, even though, in February 1894, one of the Semarang migrants, Eleuteria de la Cruz, switched to employment by the Astrolabe Compagnie in Stephansort – in the new German colony of New Guinea – after two tours to Java, as one in a group of nine *cigarreras*. The *maestro* of that group was hired to start a factory exactly along the model of the cigar factories in Manila. It is improbable, however, that the Governor of Central Java smoked cigars from that factory on his veranda, because the whole Astrolabe Compagnie collapsed within two years.

As mentioned before, the year 1896 witnessed the closure of this trickle of Overseas Filipino Worker activity. Returning home, the workers found their compatriots involved in a revolution against Spain, which finally led to the takeover of the islands by the United States. Subsequent forms of long distance labour

migration arose a decade later within the confines of the newly established American Empire. This time the Filipino labourers were mainly male: sugar workers to Hawaii, agricultural labourers to California and workers in the fish canning factories of Alaska were hired for their muscle rather than their skills. The hopes they had of gaining a better future, however, were the same as those of the Manila *cigarreras* in Semarang.

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