Introduction

Transoceanic Mobility and Modern Imperialism

*Subversive Seas* explores an important, yet little researched, subject within modern history – the transoceanic aspects of the twentieth-century Dutch empire. During the 1920s and 1930s, Dutch ships flowed along global maritime networks connecting the Java and South China Seas, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans with port city nodes throughout Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Australia, and the Americas. Concurrently, colonial insecurities and fears intensified throughout the interwar years and helped shape maritime regulations during a period of increasing indigenous demands for religious autonomy, political independence, and cultural empowerment. The following chapters reveal the ways imperialism existed outside the geographic connections linking metropole and colony and show how maritime networks played an important role in defining colonial structures within Indonesia. Three areas of Dutch shipping are examined (Figure 0.1): haji pilgrim shipping between colonial Indonesia and the Middle East on the Kongsi Tiga (Trio Line); Asian shipping on the Java-China-Japan Lijn (Java-China-Japan Line or JCJL) connecting colonial Indonesia with China, Japan, the Philippines, Indochina, and Malaysia; and the passenger liners run by Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland (Netherlands Steamship Company or SMN), Rotterdamsche Lloyd NV (Rotterdam Lloyd Limited

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or RL), and Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (Royal Packet Navigation Company or KPM) linking European and Asian ports. Beyond simply playing an economic role in imperial expansion, Dutch shipping companies served as political and cultural agents of empire and facilitated connections across global maritime networks that helped define anticolonialism during the interwar years.

The Indonesian archipelago consists of over 17,508 islands forming the nexus of the Java Sea, South China Sea, Aratuta Sea, Banda Sea, Pacific Ocean, Celebes Sea, Molucca Sea, Indian Ocean, Makassar Strait, Carimata Strait, and Strait of Malacca. This water-centric geography complicates the analytical framework connecting metropole and colony, which often obscures the majority of transnational exchanges and “lateral connections” across Southeast Asia’s contiguous zones, impacting millions of colonial residents.

Approaching empire from a maritime viewpoint relegates the European metropole to one of many nodal points along global maritime networks, helping provincialize metropolitan power and highlight the “transcolonial links” between peripheries. Ultimately, repositioning colonial Indonesia to a “sub-imperial center” at the nexus of its own connective maritime webs provides a deeper understanding of how the ocean’s permeable boundaries created a simultaneously liberating and threatening maritime spatiality and exposes the fundamental differences between terrestrial and oceanic characteristics particular to the interwar Dutch empire.

Subversive Seas expands our notions of transnationalism – sometimes criticized for favoring global over local analyses – by incorporating local, national, and global “trans-alities” to illuminate

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3 While Michel Foucault saw the ship as a perfect heterotopia or place of “otherness” – rendering it “by itself” as a “place without a place” – maritime historians have since shown ships to be more than objects simply connecting one point to another. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics*, xvi (1986): 24, 27.


5 Banivanua-Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, 9.

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d the networks and counternetworks connecting ships, shores, and oceans. Exploring the world through a transoceanic lens exposes how identities were recognized, transformed, and reinvented across maritime networks—connecting ships on the open seas to littoral port cities—while recognizing global interconnectivities existed within a system of nation states that continued to define political, cultural, and geographic definitions of the world. Subversive Seas explores the simultaneous establishment and transgression of maritime boundaries and the Dutch colonial fears surrounding the interwoven complexities between power and agency, authority and transgression, and subversion and state power during an increasingly troubled period between colonizer and colonized. Unlike other terrestrial exchanges, the transoceanic world’s transformative possibilities result from the transversal movements of ships, inspiring maritime travelers and workers to reenvision their own

7 Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton’s use of translocality as a way of recognizing “spatial logics and the spatializing violence that global visions can and often do produce,” encourages the fluid integration of the local, national, and global while encouraging a more “kinetic” idea of spatiality. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds. Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 10.


9 Contemporary maritime historians dealing with these issues in terms of Dutch shipping include Joep à Campo’s work on the KPM, which reveals how colonial shipping and government worked together in a shared colonial project. Jeroen Touwen explores the relationship between KPM and the colonial government, showing how ships helped bring the goals of the Ethical Policy to the Outer Islands. Frans-Paul van der Putten explores the political challenges and responses to JCJL in China during the interwar years. Hiroshi Shimizu traces connections between JCJL and Japanese shipowners. Although these historians explore the relationships between government and business, they work mainly from a socioeconomic viewpoint, leaving a gap in our knowledge over the sociocultural aspects of the modern Dutch maritime world. Jeroen Touwen, Extremes in the Archipelago: Trade and Economic Development in the Outer Islands of Indonesia, 1900–1942 (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2001); Hiroshi Shimizu, “Dutch-Japanese Competition in the Shipping Trade on the Java-Japan Route in the Inter-war Period,” Southeast Asian Studies, 26, no. 1 (1988): 3–23; Frans-Paul van der Putten, Corporate Behaviour and Political Risk: Dutch Companies in China, 1903–1941 (Leiden: Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, Leiden University, 2001).
The fluidity of the transoceanic world encourages “mental remapping” for maritime actors by providing a place of change, movement, and reinvention. Some academics term this transit-based transformation of traveler and migrant identity as “cultural flexibility,” while others see the fluid properties of water itself as helping to “liquefy” geographies and identities that would otherwise create barriers between people moving across maritime networks.11 Due to the fluidity of ships as “mobile elements” negotiating the maritime world’s shifting spatiality, maritime actors are able to simultaneously manipulate the real and imagined spatiality of onboard spaces.12

Despite increasing technological hegemony both at sea and on shore, Dutch fears over the oceanic “wild space” surrounding colonial Indonesia grew substantially during the interwar period due to heightened paranoia over increasing imperial instability.13 Colonial fears over the maritime world’s transformative possibilities stemmed from the spatiality of ships themselves, which served as diminutive models of colonial society – what Paul Gilroy calls “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion.”14 Dutch authorities were often challenged by colonial subjects who expressed their own ideas about how the sea could – and should – be used and maritime travel encouraged some to reevaluate their identities and those of others while at sea. However, the effects of transoceanic mobility on travelers and maritime laborers and the transformative spatiality of ships and oceans themselves skewed this colonial reflection in unexpected and unpredictable ways.15 Dutch ships served as refracted images of colonial society, only partially reflective


of imperial hierarchies based on race, class, gender, and religion. In order to control these potentially dangerous refractions of imperial norms outside the terrestrial confines of colonial Indonesia, the Dutch government and businesses policed and surveilled transoceanic networks and connectivities. Through their oceanic mobility, colonial subjects who used the maritime world for their own purposes exposed the vulnerabilities and limitations of Dutch imperial authority, which often “leaked like an old rowing boat.”

*Subversive Seas* repositions the oceanic world to the center of the narrative, uncovering the mechanics of transoceanic empire and exposing the oppositional yet interconnected histories of movement, transgression, and fluidity on the one hand and rigidity, hierarchy, and control on the other. The actual mechanisms of imperial oversight and resistance outside the confines of colonial Indonesia have yet to be fully analyzed by historians. What exactly did colonial control and surveillance look like in the maritime world? How did shipping companies participate? What were the connections between maritime and terrestrial systems of surveillance, regulation, and control? How did the maritime world function as a space of anticolonial resistance? While the Dutch administration and shipping companies worked together to control and constrain the maritime world, colonial subjects and others used the maritime world to subvert imperial systems.

At the heart of the story are ships themselves, which, despite being yoked to modes of governance on land, served as loci of modernity during the early twentieth century: moving cultural, political,
and material goods across vast oceanic spaces and facilitating the migration, tourism, and transport of various peoples around the globe.\textsuperscript{19}

**Understanding Dutch Maritime History**

Not surprising for a country quite literally reclaimed from the sea, the Netherlands has always had a contentious relationship with water.\textsuperscript{20} On the one hand, water has served as an enemy to the nation’s very existence while, on the other, oceans have provided a connective space central to the Netherlands’ global history over the past half-millennium. Within this waterlogged landscape, the maritime world has played a fundamental role in Dutch historiography, however most studies overwhelmingly focus on the Dutch Golden Age – spanning the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries – and explore the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC’s pivotal role in creating, using Charles Boxer’s classic term, the Dutch seaborne empire.\textsuperscript{21} Unfortunately, the rich historiography and theoretical considerations of early modern maritime history are not matched by the historiography of nineteenth- and twentieth-century shipping, which has captured fewer imaginations amongst Dutch historians.\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{20} I limit myself in this study to maritime connections between Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, tying together different regions of Afro-Eurasia. While the scope of this book does not allow for the discussion of maritime routes connecting North and South America across the Pacific and Atlantic, such a study is still needed.


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The very structures inherent to modern imperialism have played a role in this disparity and, as Sugata Bose notes, “colonial frontiers came to obstruct the study of comparisons and links across regions and left as a lasting legacy a general narrowing of scholarly focus within the framework of area studies.” Subversive Seas augments our knowledge of twentieth-century maritime history – following newer historical approaches on studies of the early modern Atlantic, Indian, and, more recently, Pacific Oceans – by exploring transnational connections and interactions between different regions and peoples across oceanic rims.

Nineteenth-century technological advances revolutionized the shipping industry and multiplied transoceanic networks through faster and cheaper travel and transport. The Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland (SMN) was founded in Amsterdam in 1870, followed shortly after by Rotterdamsche Lloyd NV (RL) in 1883. The two were collectively known as the “Dutch Mails”


26 Rotterdamsche Lloyd NV began as Stoomboot Reederij “Rotterdamsche Lloyd,” founded in 1875, which expanded into Stoomvaart Maatschappij “Rotterdamsche Lloyd” in 1881.
and transported cargo, passengers, and post between Europe and colonial Indonesia, stopping at port cities in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia along the way. In 1888, SMN and RL jointly founded the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM) to serve as a feeder service for coastal transport to local ports throughout the colonial Indonesia archipelago and its ships began operating in 1891. Together, the SMN, RL, and KPM worked to expand their shipping routes around the globe by establishing additional feeder lines, including the Java-China-Japan Lijn (JCJL) started in 1902, which transported cargo, passengers, and laborers around the Nanyang or Southern Ocean. In 1891, British shipping company Alfred Holt, entered the Amsterdam-Java route with vessels owned by the newly formed Nederlandsche Stoomvaart Maatschappij Oceaan (Netherlands Steamship Company Ocean or NSMO) – part of the Blue Funnel Line – in partnership with Amsterdam’s J. B. Meyer and Co. which ran the firm out of its Amsterdam offices. All NSMO ships sailed under the Dutch flag and employed only Dutch captains and officers, alongside Chinese crews. In exchange for eschewing colonial Indonesian coastal trade, KPM negotiated a deal with NSMO that the British company would receive an equal share in the annual pilgrim traffic between colonial Indonesia and Jeddah. Thereafter, NSMO, SMN, and RL created a hajj shipping pool called Kongsi Tiga or the Trio Line transporting hajj pilgrims between Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

Despite economic downturns after World War I and during the 1930s, SMN, RL, KPM, JCJL, and NSMO all experienced substantial, albeit fluctuating, growth between 1900 and 1942. For example, between 1900 and 1914 SMN and RL’s combined profits from passenger transport averaged £2,767,561 per year. This more than quadrupled between 1920 and 1929 to £12,261,896 per year, before dropping to £9,219,449 per year from 1930 to 1939.

27 Despite these new Dutch firms, the official government mail contract was given to the British-owned company (albeit under a Dutch name) Nederlandsch-Indische Stoomvaart Maatschappij (NISM), which had a monopoly over Indonesian shipping from 1865 to 1890. NISM’s contract was eventually overturned by Parliament in 1888 because it was based in Singapore and the Dutch were increasingly weary of relying on foreign companies for essential needs concerning their colonies.

28 SMN and RL also established the Java Bengalen Lijn in 1906 with a regular service between Java and Calcutta, via Sabang and Rangoon. By the next year, the SMN and RL were sending twelve round-trip voyages between Java, Rangoon, and Calcutta as part of the JBL and the following year that number had climbed to fifteen. National Archief, Den Haag, Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland (SMN), 1869–1972, nummer toegang 2.20.23, inventarisnummer 396, 1906; NL-HaNA, SMN, 2.20.23, inv.nr. 396, 1907.


30 Joseph Norbert Frans Marie à Campo, Engines of Empire: Steamshipping and State Formation in Colonial Indonesia (Hilversum: Verloren, 2002), 244.

31 For example, between 1900 and 1914 SMN and RL’s combined profits from passenger transport averaged £2,767,561 per year. This more than quadrupled between 1920 and 1929 to £12,261,896 per year, before dropping to £9,219,449 per year from 1930 to 1939. NL-HaNA,
newly built Shipping House (Scheepvaarthuis) containing the head offices of SMN, KPM, and JCJL, Amsterdam’s ornate building embodied the success of Dutch maritime enterprise and was – and still is – considered one of the Netherlands’ architectural masterpieces.\textsuperscript{32} Outside the metropole, economic wellbeing was exhibited through new luxury motor ships such as SMN’s MS Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and MS Marnix van Sint Aldegonde both launched in 1930 and RL’s MS Baloeran and MS Dempo launched in 1930 and 1931 respectively.\textsuperscript{33} NSMO purchased the MS Tantalus in 1923 and both the MS Alcinous and MS Phrontis in 1926.\textsuperscript{34} JCJL added two newly built ships to its service in 1931, the MS Tjinegara and MS Tjisadane.\textsuperscript{35} However, these material signs of prosperity were tempered by economic fluctuations felt at various times throughout this period, when Dutch shipping companies were impacted by larger volatilities facing the Dutch empire during the 1920s and 1930s.

In order to protect their operations, all five companies, SMN, RL, KPM, JCJL, and NSMO, shared a common goal of eliminating competitors by forming conferences, or cartel-like agreements, with each other. These oligarchic shipping pools set rates for cargo and passengers and functioned as collective monopolies by binding the companies together through loyalties and rebates guaranteeing exclusive use of conference ships, discouraging internal competition between conference members through price fixing, and eliminating outside competition through rate wars and other influences.\textsuperscript{36} Interlocking

\textsuperscript{32} Designed by Amsterdam School architects J. M. van der Mey, Michel de Klerk, and P. L. Kramer and was constructed by A. D. N. van Gendt between 1913 and 1928 in two phases. The Scheepvaarthuis also housed the Head Offices of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Stoomboot-Maatschappij (Royal Dutch Steamboat Company), Nieuwe Rijnvaart Maatschappij (New Rhine Shipping Company) and Koninklijke West-Indische Maildienst (Royal West-Indian Mailservice). J. J. Friend, The Amsterdam School (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1970).

\textsuperscript{33} SS Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and SS Marnix van Sint Aldegonde, both introduced in 1930, each accommodated 338 first-, 281 second-, and 64 third-class passengers and RL’s SS Baloeran and SS Dempo each accommodated 236 first-, 253 second-, 70 third-, and 68 fourth-class passengers. To help increase numbers of passengers, both companies introduced a Boottrein (Boat Train) – RL’s running from the Netherlands to Marseille and SMN’s to and from Genoa – cutting down travel time by a few days before heading through the Suez Canal.

\textsuperscript{34} By 1931, their Netherlands East Indies fleet had five ships all, on average, three years old. G. J. de Boer, De Nederlandse Blauwpijpers (Alkmaar: De Alk, 1997), 51–52.


the transoceanic routes of SMN and RL together with the more localized routes of KPM and JCJL created a national oligarchy over shipping to and from colonial Indonesia by diverting sea traffic away from Singapore to the Indonesian ports of Padang, Tanjung Priok, Surabaya, and Makassar. SMN, RL, NSMO, JCJL, and KPM wanted to ensure that the “defense of our interests in the Netherlands East Indies [remains] in our own hands.” Conference members formed additional organizations to establish extra protections against outside competitors. For example, in 1908 SMN, RL, and KPM formed the Netherlands Shipping Union (Nederlandsche Scheepvaart Unie) to ensure KPM retained a virtual monopoly over local shipping across colonial Indonesia and allowing RL and SMN to focus their resources on expanding other routes. These protective organizations were also formed during difficult economic times, for example in 1920 when the SMN, RL, KPM, and JCJL formed the United Netherlands Navigation Company (Vereenigde Nederlandsche Scheepvaartmaatschappij) to protect themselves against the post-World War I economic downturn. Other protective measures included the establishment of private booking offices in place of independent agencies, since the latter could potentially book cargo and passengers on rival liners.

Widespread mutual cooperation was also apparent between shipping companies and the Dutch colonial government, whose relationship Joep à Campo terms a “bilateral monopoly.” While the colonial administration’s liberal economic policies helped stimulate colonial Indonesia’s shipping industry – including a mandate requiring all SMN and RL ships be built within the Netherlands – in exchange for this support the government expected shipping companies to form powerful, nationalistic monopolies cooperative with the

37 The first overseas manager of KPM, L. P. D. op ten Noort, devised a strategy of consolidating both long-distance and local transportation into Dutch hands.
38 Effective 1 January 1921, the offices of the shipping agencies in Batavia, Tanjung Priok, Semerang, Surabaya, Macassar, Manado, Padang, Emma Harbour, Sabang and Calcutta were run exclusively as booking agencies for SMN, RL, and KPM. NL-HaNA, SMN, 2.20.23, inv.nr. 396,1919.
39 The VNS was also founded together by Koninklijke Nederlandsche Stoomboot Maatschappij, Holland Amerika Lijn, Van Nievelt, Goudriaan en Co’s. Stoomvaart Maatschappij (Nigoco) and Stoomvaart Maatschappij “De Maas” NV (Van Ommeren), with routes between the Netherlands and colonial India, Australia, East Asia, and East Africa. Shortly after, VNS also added routes to West Africa together with Hollandsche Stoomboots Maatschappij and Koninklijke Hollandsche Lloyd.
40 These efforts helped the companies earn record profits on passenger fares in 1921 and 1922. For example, SMN and RL, which between 1900 and 1914 earned an annual average of f2,767,561 from passenger fares, earned f16,348,569 in 1921 and f15,907,473 in 1922. NL-HaNA, SMN, 2.20.23, inv.nr. 1033.
41 During the early years of their mail contracts, SMN and RL were paid f6,000 per journey before 1895 and f8,000 afterwards. Campo, Engines of Empire, 88. See also Joseph Norbert Frans Marie à Campo, “Steam Navigation and State Formation,” in The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies 1880–1942, edited by Robert Cribb (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994), 11–29.