

# Revolusi

## Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World

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### Sample Translation

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## Chapter 1: “Wouldn’t you say?” How Indonesia helped make world history

I’d never heard an explosion like it before. I was in my hotel room on Jalan Wahid Hasyim, working. It was like a huge thunderclap, and close by, but the morning sky was a steely blue, just like the day before and the day before that. Had a truck exploded? A gas tank? From my window I saw no plume of smoke, but then my no-frills hotel only looked out on a little corner of the city. With its ten million inhabitants, Jakarta is a vast megalopolis, covering almost seven hundred square kilometers; if you count the surrounding satellite towns, it brings you to a whopping 30 million people.

Five minutes later, the phone rings. It’s Jeanne, in a complete panic. I’ve never heard her like this before. Six months ago, we met at a language course in Yogyakarta. She was a young French freelance journalist, and one of the most relaxed travelers I’d ever met. Jakarta was her chosen base of operations, and she was her way to my hotel. We planned to spend the whole day visiting some nursing homes in the remoter neighborhoods, looking for eyewitnesses; she would once again be acting as my interpreter. But now she was in tears. “There’s been an attack! I had to run away from the shooting, and now I’m hiding in that mall around the corner from you!”

I was out on the street. Hundreds and hundreds of people where cars usually crept along, honking their horns. Hundreds of arms holding up smartphones to film what had happened. Four hundred meters further, at the intersection of my street and Jalan Thamrin, the major arterial in the center of Jakarta, we saw a body lying in the street. A man on his back, killed just minutes ago. His feet pointed at the sky in an unnatural way. Policemen and soldiers drove the crowds back. The situation was not under control, not yet. Along the sidewalk on the left I saw Jeanne approaching. We stared at the scene in disbelief, hugged each other and hurried back to my hotel room. The subject today would not be the 30s and 40s.

The attacks of January 14, 2016 were the first in Jakarta in seven years’ time. Members of an extremist Muslim group had pulled up to a police station and opened fire on it. At the Burger King and at Starbucks a bomb went off – that was the explosion I had heard – then two of the terrorists blew themselves up in a parking lot; the footage can still be found online. The neighborhood was home to

embassies, luxury hotels and a central U.N. office, but none of these seemed to be the immediate targets. Eight people were killed, including four of the terrorists, and twenty-four were wounded. After recovering from the shock, Jeanne went right to work. She hammered out press reports for a number of French papers and websites, and watched the TV news in my room in order to send updates on to Paris. We combed the Internet in every language we knew. Meanwhile, I had placed a few comments online via the social media, and the first newspapers and radio stations began calling for more information and interviews. For the rest of the day, the hotel room served as the nerve center where the French, Belgian, Swiss and, to a lesser extent, Dutch media (the Netherlands still has a few regular correspondents in Indonesia) were fed with updates. At one point, I recall, Jeanne went out into the hall and sat on the carpet as she gave a radio interview to France Inter, while I was engaged in a live Skype chat with a Flemish TV broadcaster. We went on like that all day, non-stop, until we finally came down with pounding headaches from the whole thing and decided to pop out for a late lunch.

The next day, it was all over.

As soon as it became clear that this was not yet another attack like the one on Bali in 2002 (two hundred dead, mostly Westerners) or another tsunami like the one in Aceh in 2004 (131,000 deaths), the international attention fizzled out. Indonesia became once again the huge, silent giant about which one hears rarely or never outside of Southeast Asia. Which is, in fact, extremely peculiar: in terms of population, it is the fourth largest country in the world, after China, India and the United States, all of which are constantly in the news. It is home to the largest Muslim community on earth. Indonesia's economy is the most important in all of Southeast Asia and supplies large parts of the world with palm oil, rubber and tin. But the world's interest in Indonesia remains limited. That is the way it has been for decades. Walk into a good bookstore in Paris, Beijing or New York and in the section dedicated to Asia you will have an easier time finding books about Burma, Afghanistan, Korea or even Armenia (countries with no more than a few tens of millions of inhabitants) than about Indonesia with its population of 268 million. One out of every 27 earthlings is Indonesian, but the rest of the world would be hard pressed to name even one of them. Or, to go with the classic ex-pat joke: "Any idea where Indonesia is?" "Uhh... not really. Somewhere close to Bali?"

Let's go back to our geography lessons. As marginal a part of our worldview as Indonesia may be, just as marginal does it seem on the map the world: that blob at the bottom right, that messy sputtering of dry land between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, that's it apparently. It lies far from compact Western Europe and massive America, both at the top of the map, which is of course a historical convention: the world has no center and the cosmos no top or bottom. But if you were to tip the perspective and place Indonesia at the center, you would see that this is no remote corner of the world, but a strategically located archipelago in a vast maritime region between India and China. For seafarers in ancient time, the islands provided a fantastic row of steppingstones between East and West, a double row of islands, growing smaller and smaller the further east they went. The Malay Peninsula lies huddled up against colossal Sumatra, then you have Java, Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, Flores and so forth. To the north lies the row of Borneo, Sulawesi and the Moluccas; islands massive, jagged and scattered, respectively. Both strings of beads come together at New Guinea.

Indonesia is the largest island empire in the world. Officially, it comprises 13,466 islands, but it might also be 16,056. Or 18,203. No one knows exactly. Vulcanism, earthquakes and tidal currents are constantly altering the coastlines, and at high tide the number of islands only grows. One time I saw that with my own eyes: when the tide came in, the central part of a little tropical island disappeared underwater for six hours. So was it two islands, or one? According to the U.N. definition, there were two, but the local population had only one name for it. Of those countless islands, only a few thousand are inhabited. Most of them are tiny, but five of the world's thirteen largest islands also lie within Indonesia: New Guinea, Borneo, Sumatra, Sulawesi and Java. The nation shares the first two

of these with Papua New Guinea and Malaysia; the third is the most populous island on earth. Java is about one thousand kilometers long and between one hundred and two hundred kilometers wide; in terms of surface area, that is only 7 percent of the country, but with 141 million people it accounts for more than half of Indonesia's total population. No wonder so many crucial historical events have been initiated there. But Indonesia is more than Java alone. The entire tropical archipelago stretches out across 45 degrees of longitude, one-eighth of the entire globe, covering three time zones and more than five-thousand kilometers along the equator. If one could click on Indonesia and drag it onto the map of Europe, it would begin in Ireland and end somewhere in Kazakhstan. Superimposed on a map of the United States, it would stick out almost a thousand kilometers beyond both East and West Coasts. Within that immense area, almost three hundred distinct ethnic groups are identified and seven hundred languages spoken, but the official language is Bahasa Indonesia, a fairly recent language derived from Malay and with numerous traces of Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch and English. Yet Indonesia deserves our attention for more than the demographic and geographic superlatives alone. Its history includes a primeur of international importance: it was the first country to proclaim independence after the close of WWII. That was less than two days after Japan capitulated. After almost three-and-a-half centuries of Dutch presence (1600 – 1942) and three-and-a-half years of Japanese occupation (1942 – 1945), a number of local leaders announced that from then on they would continue as a sovereign state. It was the first domino in the row to topple, at a moment when large parts of Asia, Africa and the Arab world were still in the hands of a few Western European countries, such as Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal.

This declaration of independence not only came quite early, it was also very youthful. It was supported and defended by an entire generation of fifteen-to-twenty-five-year-olds who were prepared to die for their freedom. The 1945 *revolusi* was in every way a young people's revolution. Anyone who thinks today that young people can make no difference in the struggle against climate change and the loss of biodiversity should take a good, long look at the history of Indonesia: the fourth largest country in the world would never have become a reality without the efforts of teenagers and those in their early twenties – although one hopes that the efforts of today's young climate activists might be of a less violent nature.

The main reason why the Indonesian *revolusi* is so fascinating, however, is the enormous impact it has had on the rest of humanity: not only with regard to decolonization in other parts of the world, but even more when it comes to the cooperation between all those new countries. In the photos of that bombing attack in Jakarta, one sees, hanging from a pedestrian bridge over Jalan Thamrin, an enormously long billboard: Asian African Conference Commemoration, it says, and below that: Advancing South – South Cooperation. The contrast with the smoke and panic below is enormous. The billboard was referring to a recent international commemorative conference: in 2015, it had been sixty years since Indonesia had extended a hand to the other countries that had recently gained independence. A few years after the definitive transfer of power by the Netherlands, the legendary Asian-African Conference, the first meeting of world leaders without the West, was held in the flamboyant Javanese city of Bandung. The delegates represented no fewer than one-and-a-half-billion people, more than half of the world's population at the time. According to the Afro-American writer Richard Wright, "Bandung", as the conference came to be known, was "the definitive moment in the consciousness of 65 percent of the human species". What took place there would "determine the totality of human life on earth". That sounds rather pompous, but it was not far from the truth. In the years that followed, in fact, every part of the world was touched by the *revolusi*: not only large parts of Asia, the Arab world, Africa and Latin America, but also the United States and Europe. The American civil rights movement and the unification of Europe arose, willingly or unwillingly, largely in reaction to "Bandung". It was a milestone in the development of the modern world. A French study in 1965 pulled no punches: Bandung, it said, was nothing less than "the second July 14<sup>th</sup> in history: Bastille Day on a planetary scale".

In the days after the bombing, Jeanne and I went back to driving from one rest home to the other. In the week before we had already recorded some amazing stories, and now it was lovely to find eyewitnesses again and to let them tell their own. Although neither of us were Dutch or Indonesian, their life stories fascinated us beyond measure. What they related was a universal tale of hope, fear and yearning. This was about us too, about today.

The *revolusi* had made world history – the world had meddled in it and been changed by it – but that global dimension has, unfortunately, largely been forgotten. In the Netherlands I'd been challenged about why I – “a Belgian, after all” – was writing about Indonesia. “Because it doesn't belong to you people anymore,” I would laugh then. Sometimes I would add something about how Belgium had once been under the heel of the Dutch state as well, which made me a hands-on expert, etc. But what I really meant was that the fourth largest country in the world should actually interest everyone, wouldn't you say? If the Founding Fathers of the U.S., Mao and Gandhi are important to us, then why not the pioneers of the Indonesian struggle for liberation? But not everyone saw it that way. After I had told a bit about my research in an interview with a local weekly, the PVV, Geert Wilders' party, posted an irritated reaction on Facebook: “Why doesn't this idiot write a book about King Leopold and the Belgian Congo first, before shooting off his mouth?” But I had no intention of writing that one all over again.

Decolonization processes are often reduced to a national struggle between colonizer and colony – France against Algeria, Belgium against the Congo, Germany against Namibia, Portugal and Angola, England and India and the Netherlands against Indonesia – which makes the list look like a sort of hierarchical scorecard or barcode. But in addition to those vertical elements, a host of horizontal processes play a role as well; neighboring countries are involved, allies, local militias, regional players, international organizations, etc. It would be a mistake to sift those out of the equation. If we do that, we continue to embrace the Western nation-state and its colonial frontiers as our frame of reference, then we are still thinking in nineteenth-century terms. Those who look only through the loopholes of the past may not see the landscape as a whole. The time has come to drop that national focus and view the global dimension of the decolonization process. And indeed, that does require effort. A jumble is harder to unravel than a diagram showing only two camps, but historical reality is simply not a diagram. And that goes double for the history of Indonesia.

Again, the world meddled in it and was changed by it. There are only two countries these days where the *revolusi* is commemorated as a part of national history. In Indonesia it has for decades been treated as the unshakable foundation myth of the expansive, hyper-diverse state. Whichever island I happened to fly to, the local airport was almost always named after a freedom fighter. Street names and statues consistently honored the *revolusi*. And the museum displays in the cities, behind glass, like the stained-glass windows of mediaeval cathedrals, provided canonized representations of a primal story, in this case that of the nation.

That story is there to bind together the archipelago in the face of any separatist tendencies, like those of the staunch Muslims in Aceh, in the far west of the country, and of Papuas in New Guinea, at its easternmost limit. Whatever ideological differences there may have been between the successive heads of state, when it came to historical awareness, they all drew from the same well: that of the heroic *perang kemerdekaan*, the fight for independence against the colonizer.

That is the way one sees it too in the high-school textbooks. A new history book published in 2014, *Sejarah Indonesia dari Proklamasi sampai Orde Reformasi* (“Indonesian History from the Declaration of Independence to the Post-Suharto Era”) dedicates no less than the entire first half of its 230 pages to the brief period 1945 – 1949, and the second to the long period between 1950 and 2008. A young generation of Indonesian historians has in recent years spoken out against an approach that is all-too *indonesiasentris*, and rigorously opposes what they call the *tirani Sejarah Nasional*, the tyranny of national history. But for the public at large, the *revolusi* remains above all a pure, Indonesian affair.

[...]

[pp. 23-24]

This book is about that “wouldn’t you say?”. About pride and shame. About emancipation and humiliation. About hope and violence. Its aim is to bring together that which scores of expert historians have uncovered, but that has not always found its way to a broader audience. It builds upon what other authors, journalists and artists in Indonesia and abroad have elucidated. But above all it consults the people who experienced it themselves: the last remaining eyewitness of the *revolusi*. I am a great advocate of oral history. Despite the hours spent on the back of mopeds, the occasionally blistering heat and the palpable air pollution in the cities, the hundreds of mosquito bites after a night’s sleep on the afterdeck of a ferry and the stress of a terrorist attack around the corner, it was always worth my while. Normal, everyday people have so much to tell. It was, on all counts, an honor to listen to their stories.

In the period between July 2015 and July 2019, I carried out what adds up to about one year of fieldwork, eight months of it in Asia. I visited countless islands and spoke to many hundreds of people. In the case of 185 of them, that led to formal interviews of at least half an hour, but regularly of an hour-and-a-half. Often the conversations lasted much longer, or later I went back for more. To all prospective witnesses I explained that I was working on a book about the history of Indonesian independence and asked their permission to interview them and to share their account. When I speak of a “formal interview”, I mean that I always asked whether I could note their name and age, that I ran through their life story with them in chronological order, took notes both visibly and without interruption, went on asking questions about certain aspects of their story and at times made a few recordings or photos, always with their permission. When respondents didn’t feel like sharing certain memories, I did not press them. I prefer to work on the basis of respect and trust. A few witnesses wanted to check any quotes I might use, the rare respondent preferred to remain anonymous. I always honored those requests, of course. Although the conversations took place in an atmosphere of calm, they were usually not without emotion. There was anger, sorrow, resentment, but also homesickness, contrition and regret, alongside humor, frustration and resignation. There was laughter, mourning and silence. Most of the respondents were well along in years, but many amazed me with their memories. If there is anything I have learned from listening to old people, it is that the present fades more quickly than one’s youth, especially when that youth was a dramatic one. Even when everything is gone, in the barrens of the memory a child’s verse still resonates. Or a trauma. Some boulders refuse to be dragged away.

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## Chapter 3: The colonial packet boat

### Social relations in a changing world, 1914 – 1942

On October 25, 1936, O.L. Fehrenbach, a harbor pilot from Surabaya, made a grisly discovery. Standing on the deck of his ship in his immaculate white uniform, he looked out over the waves of the Java Sea, where it was his job to monitor small-boat traffic. One-and-a-half nautical miles north of

the island's western light ship he saw four tattered balloons bobbing around in open sea. He knew right away what that meant, and shot off a telegram to Surabaya. It always takes a couple of days for them to come floating to the surface, he knew. These four, two Europeans and two Asians from the looks of it, had to be from the *SS Van der Wijck*. The sudden, inexplicable wreck of the packet boat had been dominating the front pages all week, even in faraway Holland. The hundred-meter-long steamer provided the express service between Makassar and Batavia, with stops at Bali and Surabaya. The ship had come off the chocks at the Feyenoord yards in Rotterdam only fifteen years earlier, a lovely, streamlined vessel that earned the nickname "The Gull". How could a modern ship like that have capsized on a calm sea, plying the old, familiar route between Surabaya and Batavia, right there on the north coast of Java? Dozens of passengers and crew members were still missing. Fehrenbach knew that the ship had gone down a fair end west of where he was, but the currents he also knew so well had brought the bodies here. Steamer trunks had even been found washed up in the last few days, along the beaches of Madura.

While a tug pushed off to pick up the corpses, the harbor pilot looked again at the somber sacks in the water. They were lying belly down, the way they always did; their hair drifted on the surface like seaweed. He not only knew which ship they were from, with a high degree of certainty he could also have said where they had slept on board. The European bodies – neither fair-skinned, pink nor white, but more like a bluish-gray – undoubtedly came from the upper decks, where the saloons were. The two darker bodies must have been passengers from the lower decks, maybe they even came from the hold and had been boilermen or firemen.

Like all boats operated by the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM), the *Van der Wijck* had three passenger classes. The staterooms of the first-class passengers were on the topmost deck and extremely luxurious. There were enough to accommodate sixty passengers, and they had sinks, toilets with running water and even electric fans. Ships like "The Gull" were furnished with every modern comfort: a dining room with fine wainscoting and marble panels, a smoking room with bronze bas-reliefs, a promenade deck with rattan-cane chairs and cushions, where the passengers could play cards or chat. The deck below it, the second-class deck, still had comfortable cabin accommodations, but the saloons were larger and had to be shared with strangers. In addition, you were closer to the engines and could feel more of the ship's pitch and roll. There was room for 34 passengers. The first- and second-class passengers were also referred to as "salon passengers". Third-class existed only on paper; in fact, the next level down was the fourth class – which says a good deal about the chasm that yawned between them. This was the class occupied by the deck passengers. The *Van der Wijck* could accommodate a thousand such passengers. Unlike the first and second class, they did not have a comfortable cabin, but had to make do with one-and-a-half square meters of deck, where they placed their luggage and a mat. In sunny weather, a canvas canopy was often hung up. Deck passengers often had to share the space with horses and cows. At night they draped a sarong over their head to keep out the electric light from the upper decks. There were no indoor toilets, the passengers relieved themselves in the sea. At the forward part of the ship were stirrups with a toilet seat suspended overboard, by way of sanitation during the days and days of travel. When the seas were rough, the water crashing against the hull cleaned both bow and buttocks.

The packet boat was the best of summaries of colonial society. Nowhere else could one see the distinctions so clearly, and side by side. People who in normal life rarely or never saw each other lived together on board for days at a time. That was the way it had been since the nineteenth century. In *Aboe Bakar*, a lovely novel by P.A. Daum from 1894, several young Dutch girls traveling first class are told that one deck down, where the passengers travel for half the fare, a highly remarkable man was standing at the railing: "Laughing and whispering because they were going to see a handsome Arab, who spoke Dutch, they went down the companionway to fore. And they nudged each other, exchanging sideways glances: 'There he is!' Full disbelief they asked him if it was true, that he spoke Dutch. When Aboe Bakar confirmed that, "with the graceful, polite gesture of a civilized Easterner",

and even seemed to speak a few words of French, they didn't know how to react. "They nodded and said 'Good day', that was all; as a European lady, one could hardly say 'sir' to such a man! They hurried back up the companionway to the rear deck, talking about this unusual encounter, and besieging Mrs. Slaters with the cry: 'Well, you certainly missed something, you did!'"

Even odder was their encounter with the folksy deck passengers, who paid eight times less for their passage. Yet when Aletta Jacobs, the first female physician in the Netherlands and an advocate of women's rights, travelled the archipelago in 1912, she found the deck passengers much more interesting than her own companions: "From over the railing along the bridge I can look right down on them. They are all natives down there, the first mate tells me. (...) And that is an easier crowd to transport than the 1<sup>st</sup>-class fares. We complain about everything, find the mattresses too firm, the statehouse too small (...) the ice in our drinks not cold enough, the ten or twelve dishes that appear on the menu three times a day too monotonous. The deck passengers all have exactly enough room to spread their mats (...) They don't consume a quarter of the food we do, and they do so without the fuss of a table setting. No plates, no knife, fork or spoon, no napkin, no drinking glass, none of the things we overly cultured people think to need (...) They sit close together, hardly an inch to spare between them, and all seem content."

Even after all the pieces of the puzzle were in place, the major class differences persisted. In the period 1914 – 1942, after the end of the Aceh War and before the start of the Japanese occupation, the packet boat was still a perfect microcosm of colonial society. During the mere 28 years that the Netherlands "owned" the colony in its entirety, there was no better place to study societal relations than aboard a steamer.

Let us take a look at passengers aboard the SS *Van der Wijck* on that fateful day in 1936. The ship was not full: there were only 27 saloon passengers (first and second class combined) and 187 deck passengers. Who was traveling first class? The newspapers tell us: Mr. Schoevers, president of the Algemeene Volkscredietbank, Mr. Mangelaar Meertens of the Handelsbank, Mr. E.C. Hudson of the Union Insurance Company, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Polsky – American tourists on their way back from Bali, a certain Mrs. Hartman with her daughter and a baby... They survived, but fourteen other saloon passengers did not. Among the victims was a Mr. Raaff, a 44-year-old coder for the Stoomvaartmaatschappij Nederland in Batavia, also traveling back from Bali on honeymoon with his new bride. One of the unrecognizable corpses found by the harbor pilot was his; he was finally identified by his wedding ring. Mr. Exley of Singapore was identified by his dental records. He was the superintendent of the Ocean Steamship Company, which ran a shipping line between the United Kingdom and China. He had inspected one of their ships at Surabaya, and was now on his way back to his base in Singapore. Exley was scheduled to retire in a few months' time, and to return to Europe. Another traveler, Dr. Wisse of Mojekerto, survived the wreck but lost his wife and baby. Their funeral on Java was attended by "many doctors, administration officials, representatives of the sugar industry, Roman Catholic clerics, and nurses and members of the Netherlands Indies Flying club, of which Dr. Wisse is a member."

It was not only high-status Westerners who could permit themselves the luxury of a first-class stateroom. You might also come across well-to-do Indo-Europeans there, like the Carli's of Bandung, both in their early sixties. Ever since the days of the Far East India Company, children had been born of unions between European men and local women. Mixed marriages were extremely frequent until far into the twentieth century. In the course of time, the children born of such relationships came to be referred to in countless ways: mestizos, half-bloods, Indians, Indonesian Dutch, Indo-Europeans, Indos, Eurasiatics, Eurasians, bi-racials, etcetera. Language seems to wear down quickest there where it abrades most. The variation in the set was large indeed. During the Japanese period, the great-grandparents were the reference point for determining how Asian one had continued to be: you could be an Indo-European if you were only one-eighth European, but also seven-eighths. If you went on to take into account even earlier generations and a different ancestry (Chinese, Arabic...), things

became even more complex. Although they far outnumbered the European Dutch (137,000 vs. 86,000 in 1930), the Indonesian Dutch felt inferior to their lighter-skinned countrymen. In her most recent book, Indonesian Dutch author Marion Bloem writes of this: “My mother said all too often: ‘We are really no less than the Dutch are, even if we are Indos.’” That summed it up completely. It was “historically speaking a relatively young group, yet one with a long history of suffering,” as Rob Nieuwenhuys has put it so succinctly. They were indeed counted among the European part of the population, but they always remained a group in the middle, somewhere between East and West. And between high and low too, for “the class differences ran almost entirely parallel to the racial ones”. In short, they very often felt like the bottom layer of the upper crust.

And it was precisely that which prompted many of them to climb the social ladder. Traveling first class was for some a true statement. The Carli’s had become well-to-do. Mr. Carli had worked as an accountant for the Bataafsche Petroleummaatschappij, taught bookkeeping at a secondary school and led a well-known accountancy in Bandung. They had a son who was a physician in Buitenzorg. In terms of political convictions, he was an outspoken advocate of an ideology of Western colonial supremacy, and so became an active member of the Dutch National Socialist Movement (NSB), as colonial financial inspector. Twenty-five years earlier he had still been involved with the Indische Partij, a progressive movement of Indo-Europeans, but that was a long ago. In the 1930s, national socialism was attractive to lots of “Indo” men: it freed them from the humiliation from above and separated them from the deck passengers below. The Carli’s had lost their son a year before this, the wreck of the *Van der Wijck* now took their own lives. The Bandung chapter of the NSB lowered the flag to half-mast and organized a jam-packed wake. “Carli, the salt of the earth, a man with a heart of gold, a national socialist from head to toe, is no more!” Shortly before his death he had commented: “What would our lives be without the NSB?” The chapter’s “block leader” spoke the final words, then the chorus began a military anthem that was “heard in total silence by those present, all raising their hand in the fascist salute”.

In the course of this history, we will come across the Indo-Europeans often, if only because they were such a diverse and complex group, impossible to pigeonhole in terms of ideology. During the colonial days, the Japanese period, the *revolusi* and after the transfer of sovereignty, each time they had to re-establish their position in Indonesia, mostly because the outside world considered them this time too Asian, then too European the next. Be that as it may, they were an indispensable and characteristic element of colonial society in the Dutch East Indies. Throughout the following chapters, I will switch back and forth between the terms “Indonesian Dutch” and “Indo-Europeans”, and even use the term “Indos” – until recently, a designation deemed taboo. Although frequently a derogatory term in the past, in Dutch it has become increasingly common as a succinct and sympathetic alternative for the more roundabout, bi-racial appellation

And now on to the second class. Who were the passengers there? Among those on board was a man by the name of J. van Egmond, shop clerk for Java Stores, a haberdashery specialized in polo shirts and tweed jackets. He was 37 and single. Then there was C. Brandes, a 63-year-old lady and long-term employee of the local employers’ organization. She was traveling with her daughter. Both survived the wreck itself, but the daughter died the next day as a result of injuries sustained. J.A.D. Kessler, second mate with the KPM, was among the fatalities, as was first engineer A. Kraanen. Both were traveling this time as passengers. Of the on-duty crew, the only one killed was the Marconi operator, 28-year-old M.J. Uytermerk, who remained at his post until the bitter end. “S.O.S. Listing heavily” was his final message; he had no time left to send the ship’s coordinates. Who among these victims was Indonesian Dutch or European Dutch is impossible to reconstruct: the surnames, in any event, tell us nothing. The number of Indo-Europeans traveling second class was probably much higher than on the deck above – they were sometimes referred to on board as “the little Indos”. There was no real color bar, but there was something very like a shade bar, a gradual “darkening” as one stood lower on the ladder, with invisible obstacles and unspoken rules.

The Makatita family was traveling second class too: husband, wife, two children and their nanny, Saptanno. The Makatitas were from a prominent Ambonese family, some members of which had been granted the same legal footing as Europeans, as early as the late nineteenth century. That was something that happened only by way of great exception. In 1930, only 4,718 Ambonese, 2051 Mendonese (inhabitants of Manado and surroundings) and 871 Javanese were emancipated citizens; less than eight thousand in a total population of 61 million. Ambon and the area around Manado in North Sulawesi were the two most Christianized regions within the archipelago; they provided soldiers for the army and civil servants for the administration. The entire Makatita family was drowned, and divers found their nanny six weeks later in the wreckage: she had become trapped in the ship's railing and was identified by a gold ring in her ear. It was these same divers who were finally able to determine the cause of the accident: the bottom row of portholes was open. During a long layover at Surabaya harbor, the first mate had opened them to air out a cargo of fruit from Bali. It had been an infernally hot day. The pineapples, mangos and mangosteens would, were one not careful, soon start stinking as badly as the durians, "the king of fruits", with their odor of raw sewage. When the heavily laden and slightly listing ship set sail once more, he forgot to close the portholes again. A wave of water occasionally splashed in on starboard side, from the start of the voyage, until – little by little – the ship lay so deep that the Java Sea came pouring in.

Of the almost two hundred deck passengers and eighty native crew members, we know very little. They included talliers and provisioners with names like Latuperissa, Turang and Kaunang. Fifteen members of the crew, nineteen deck passengers and three coolies were reported missing. No name is associated with any of them. Were the coolies Chinese or Javanese? Where were they bound? In the lists given by the newspapers, the deck passengers always came at the very end, like some obscure, nameless category of remainders without faces. When a few local fishermen picked up the castaways, bank president Schoevers – probably the wealthiest man on the ship – was pulled on board along with a few paupers with whom he never associated otherwise. Afterwards, he told a journalist: "There was also a horribly wounded deck passenger in the canoe. He was bleeding from a number of very nasty cuts, and missing a finger too. He had apparently been trapped somewhere." This was the only individual deck passenger of whom I found any mention, but the scene itself speaks volumes: hours after the wreck, passengers from every walk of life were packed together in a rickety wooden boat, their clothes soaked, their teeth chattering, with wrinkled fingertips and fuel oil in their hair.

The civil polity law of 1925 officially divided the population into three "national characters": Europeans, Foreign Orientals and Natives. That tripartite distinction was considered more useful than the old bipartite one from 1854, which recognized only Europeans and Natives. Europeans, those were the European Dutch, Indonesian Dutch, other Westerners, but also the Japanese (recognized as from 1899 as "European") and Turks (as from 1926). By Foreign Orientals was meant those Asians who did not come from the archipelago itself, primarily Chinese, and to a lesser extent Arabs and Indians. A Japanese person, in other words, was considered a European, while a Chinese person was a Foreign Oriental. The term "Natives", finally, was traditionally used to designate the original population of the islands – throughout the colonial period, the term increasingly came to be felt as an epithet.

By and large, that was the same thing one saw onboard ship: lots of Europeans on Deck 1, lots of Foreign Orientals on Deck 2 (recall Aboe Bakar from Daum's novel), lots of Natives on Deck 3. But if we home in further, we see Indonesian Dutch passengers on both decks 1 and 2, the "big" and the "little" Indos as it were, but not on deck 3: officially, they were not allowed to go there, as that would have been damaging to the Europeans' prestige. During the financial crisis of the 1930s, unemployed Indo-Europeans therefore had to beg to be allowed to travel "at the rates applied to the Native deck

passengers". The KPM, however, considered this unfitting, "particularly if this were to apply to European women as well". Tjalie Robinson, one of the most scathing writers of the group, paid this no heed and sang the praises of the "irregular, changeable and delightful joys of traveling as a deck passenger on the KPM ships". When refused a ticket, he shouted: "But I am NOT a European."

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[pp.158-169]

## **Chapter 6: The pincers and the oil tap**

### **The Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia, December 1941 – March 1942**

That the attack on Pearl Harbor constituted a milestone in the history of WWII is common knowledge, but the realization that the attack had everything to do with the strategic oil supplies in the Dutch Indies is far less common. Nevertheless, there was a reason why the Japanese armed forces wished to destroy a U.S. military base somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, six times zones to the east, in the early morning hours of December 7, 1941, and that was: to keep the Americans from becoming a problem in the south.

For more than fifty years the Japanese economy had been dependent on imported oil. The war the country had been waging with China since 1937 only increased that dependency. The endless convoys of military trucks, the gigantic fleet of battleships and submarines, the hundreds of fighter and reconnaissance planes, the tanks, machine guns and cannonry, not to mention the many factories where these armaments were produced: all these needed diesel, petrol, kerosene and lubricant. Cars were not the greatest guzzlers: at the moment of the Pearl Harbor attack, there were only 210,000 passenger vehicles on the road in Japan, as opposed to 32 million in the U.S. By 1940, Japan needed some 48 million barrels of crude oil annually, more than three-quarters of which came from abroad: one-half from the U.S., and one-quarter from the Dutch Indies. When the oil negotiations with the Netherlands dead ended on June 17, 1941, that formed a serious setback... particularly because Japan had plans to push its way on through to Russia. On July 2, barely two weeks later, top-level consultations were held in Tokyo; even Emperor Hirohito was present. The conclusion was that the war against China must go on. That was only possible, however, with access to the oil reserves in the Dutch Indies – access ensured if necessary by means of a new war, even a war with the United States and the United Kingdom. Two weeks later, yet another extraordinary session was held, this time in France. Marshall Pétain, leader of the collaborationist Vichy regime, received the Japanese ambassador. The stakes were high. Japan, the ambassador emphasized, wanted permission to station troops, lots of troops, in the south of the French colony of Indochina. Could he get the green light on that? Japan had already moved into northern Indochina one year earlier. At the time, the claim was that this move was intended to harry China's southern flank, but this newest interest in the southern reaches of the French colony could mean only one thing: Japan was planning to open a new front, aimed this time at the Indonesian archipelago.

It was eminently clear that this would amount to nothing less than the occupation of the entire French colony, yet Pétain dared not protest – Japan, after all, was an ally of Nazi Germany. What's more, France - in exchange for its commitment - would be allowed to keep its colony. A peculiar state of affairs, in fact, considering that Japan waged war under the slogan "Asia for the Asians". The underlying rationale, of course, was "oil for the Japanese"; if France could help with that, then there was no problem between them. This also explains why Japan had no qualms about drawing Thailand,

the only Southeast Asian country that had never been colonized, into its sphere of influence: independence was all well and good, but passage for Japanese troops was essential. Tokyo, in brief, established a firm base on the continent, overlooking the Indonesian archipelago. Anyone wishing to strike a blow against an island empire needs a shoreline from which to launch its ships.

On July 26, 1941, the first Japanese troops entered the south of Indochina. At Cam Ranh Bay they built the biggest naval base in the region. The U.S. reacted furiously. The earlier move on northern Indochina had already led to an American trade embargo on steel, scrap metal and kerosene, but this southern enterprise was much worse and could destabilize the entire region. America immediately froze all Japanese financial assets. A few days later, Roosevelt announced a new embargo, this time including oil. To avoid war, he had first planned to allow a modicum of exports: "There was a method in letting oil go to Japan with the hope – and it has worked for two years – of keeping war out of the South Pacific for our own good." But when he went to Churchill for consultations, his assistant secretary of state, Dean Acheson, put a stop to all trade with Japan. What's more, the U.K. and the Netherlands followed suit with the same policy, so that Roosevelt had no room to maneuver and could no longer back out. After the financial thumbscrews, the oil tap was now twisted shut as well. Japan had stockpiles sufficient for only twenty-four months, eighteen in the event of war.

The Netherlands' decision to join in the American embargo, and even to up the ante, was understandable but not wise. With that it not only violated its existing trade agreements with Japan, but also saw to it that Japanese supplies would run dry. The Dutch government-in-exile in London apparently thought that a show of maximum toughness for the benefit of the U.S. and Great Britain was more important than a realistic estimation of the risk of war. In fact, the Dutch authorities were repeating that which had seemed effective in the colonial interior: the rigid punishment of undesirable behavior, on the assumption that that solved the problem. But the Japanese empire was perhaps a different breed of cat from a few politically aware Javanese and Sumatran young people. Had the Netherlands continued to honor its agreements, Japan would certainly not have been so prompt in going to war, and the course of history might have been very different.

On December 3, 1941, Roosevelt confronted the Japanese government with the developments in Indochina. He was too late: two days before, during a top-secret imperial consult in Tokyo, the die had already been cast. On the morning of Sunday, December 7, almost four hundred Japanese planes attacked the Pearl Harbor naval base on the Hawaiian Islands. The surprise attack lasted two hours. Three American destroyers, three battleships and three cruisers were destroyed, along with almost two hundred planes. More than 2,400 men were killed. The Pacific fleet, air force and port infrastructure were not completely wiped out, but so heavily damaged that it would take months for the U.S. to struggle back to its feet in that part of the world. And that was precisely the objective. What few people know is that, one hour before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese troops landed on the east coast of the Malaysian peninsula, and that Japanese planes bombarded Singapore. To get to the oil of the Dutch Indies, not only did America have to be neutralized, but also Great Britain, the other superpower in the region. For the British, Singapore was home base for their fleet in the Far East, as important to them as Pearl Harbor was to the Americans. Only by putting both out of action could the Japanese lower the boom on the Dutch Indies. The carefully prepared Japanese plans for attack – the result of many hours of war games with military scale models – was based on a twin mobilization: to the northeast of Java, the Philippines first had to be taken; to the northwest, it was the Malaysian peninsula. These American and British colonies were crucial stepping stones to the Dutch Indies. On the map, this pincer movement looked obvious enough, but called for the complex coordination of air, naval and infantry forces: Japanese planes bombed and strafed strategic targets, after which the navy dropped ground forces to take airfields that could then be used to send fighter planes further south. And that is how it began. On December 10, after three days of fighting, Japan invaded the Philippines and sank the two largest British battleships close to Singapore. A few days

later, Hongkong was taken, as well as British Borneo, the site of the first oilfield. Meanwhile, America lost Guam and Wake Island, two of its mainstays in the Pacific.

Immediately after Pearl Harbor, the Netherlands declared war on Japan. With that, it once again showed itself to be the keenest student in the classroom: the U.S. and Great Britain would do so only a few hours later. Governor-General Van Starckenborgh of the Dutch Indies felt this early declaration of war was “good for our prestige with the rest”, the Dutch government and the queen followed his example. But what was that “prestige” actually worth, when one could fall back at best on a hastily slapped-together army? Even Japan was puzzled. The Dutch diplomat charged with presenting the declaration of war in Tokyo was actually handed back his dossier, in what must have a primeur in diplomatic history: did the Netherlands, the Japanese asked, realize what this meant? Did it understand the consequences? Japan did not consider itself to be at war with Holland, and wanted only to make an arrangement for the Dutch Indies much like the one it had for Indochina. But if the Dutch insisted on making it a show of force, well then... The overconfidence of the Netherlands, with its feeble troop strength, was based on its assumptions about regional allies. In late December, a military alliance was actually set up in the form of ABDACOM, the American – British – Dutch – Australian Command. Although the four armed forces had never trained together, and even though the British and Americans had already suffered grievous losses, the four would now try jointly to throw back the advancing Japanese in an area that stretched from Burma to Australia. The British general Wavell was appointed supreme commander.

Domestic security posed a problem too. What to do with the Japanese who had settled in the Dutch Indies? Most Japanese shopkeepers, fishermen and traders had already gone back in the last few months, but what about those who had stayed? Wouldn't they form a fifth column for the advancing Japanese troops? There were about two thousand of them; they were all rounded up and sent to a camp in Australia.

And what about the couple of hundred detainees still in exile at the camp in Boven-Digoel? Nothing changed for them for the time being. They were to be sent to Australia only in 1943. The three most important political prisoners of the Dutch remained in detention too, but received more privileges. That all three of them were very critical of Japanese fascism undoubtedly helped a great deal. Sukarno was moved from Flores to a more comfortable place of exile on Sumatra; Hatta and Sjahrir were transferred from Banda Neira to West Java.

And then you had the National Socialists and the Germans who had been imprisoned since 1940. What if the Japanese let them go? For safety's sake, the worst of the NSB members were sent two oceans over, to Suriname, Holland's most important Latin American colony. Their transport ship carried explosive charges, so that in the event of danger the captain could send the whole ship to the bottom. The actual German detainees, however, were sent to British India. The first two prison ships brought the most dangerous individuals to Bombay; with the third transport, however, things went terribly wrong. The SS *Van Imhoff* was to carry the last 473 Germans, none of them high-risk detainees: retired civil servants of the colonial government, former KNIL soldiers with a German background, elderly Protestant and Catholic missionaries, a few anti-fascist and Jewish refugees, a number of stranded German merchant sailors, a few mental patients and the painter Walter Spies. They were placed in cages on the lower and rear decks, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by 62 soldiers. The *Van Imhoff* itself had a merchant crew of 84 men. As the ship was about to set sail, it became clear that there were enough safety vests on board, but not enough lifeboats. The captain reported the problem, but was ordered by the highest naval officer, Admiral Helfrich, to put to sea anyway. The decks of the prison ship were also not marked with any red cross or other sign to indicate its special status. For the Japanese bomber that caught sight of them off the coast of West Sumatra, it was a ship like any other. The *Van Imhoff* was hit. At first the damage seemed slight, there was no panic on board, but a few hours later the prisoners watched from behind their barbed-wire fences as the Dutch lowered the lifeboats and sailed off. That could only mean that the ship was

doomed. To their dismay, they also saw that the lifeboats were not nearly full. As it took on water, the steamship started listing. A group of prisoners succeeded in freeing themselves and jumped into the sea, taking advantage of a few rafts and one lifeboat that had been overlooked, but two hundred others drowned. The next day, two Dutch ships appeared. The first one took no castaways on board, the second asked them whether there were Dutchmen in the group. Admiral Helfrich, our old friend, had radioed secret instructions in which he said to take only “reliable elements” on board and “prevent the remaining Germans from reaching land”. A Jewish jeweler who had escaped from the Nazis in his own country tried desperately to climb on board, but disappeared into the waves. Of the 473 prisoners, 66 succeeded in reaching the island of Nias in a sloop. They were the only survivors. Upon arrival one of them committed suicide: a former KNIL soldier who could not believe that the Dutch Indies, the territory he had served for years, was doing this to him.

The *Van Imhoff* disaster was like a fire that went on smoldering for years. During the war itself, the Netherlands was required to pay the German occupiers some four million guilders in compensation, but in 1956 an Amsterdam court ruled that the captain need not be prosecuted. Yet the highest commissioning principal himself, Admiral Helfrich, never stood trial; his confidential missive came to light only later. A 1965 documentary about the whole affair, by the Dutch VARA broadcasting organization, was not allowed to be shown on TV. Holland was a victim, and the question of whether it had taken part in war crimes was not to be dealt with.

In January of 2016 I flew to Manado, the main city on the northernmost strand of Sulawesi that points like a finger towards the Philippines. It was here, on January 11, 1942, that the first Japanese troops landed in the Dutch East Indies. Manado itself had no oil wells, but the airfield was highly important for the push southward. I wondered whether there might still be eyewitnesses around, but the chances of that seemed very slim. Right after landing, I went to the local veterans’ home to try and get some addresses. To my amazement, a reunion was being held that very day. The home was filled with old soldiers in uniform, who had just started in on lunch. After a noon session of speeches, they were savoring aromatic *nasi kuning* in banana leaves, chicken drumsticks, sweet tea and a great many memories. Sometimes you just have to be in luck.

Hendrik Pauned Muntuuntu remembered it, clear as a bell. He was almost fifteen at the time: “The Japanese landed with their warships at Kema, 35 kilometers from here. I come from a village close to there. I saw them, those boats, they were on the beach at Kema.” His account jibes with the Japanese military reports: 1,400 soldiers came from the Philippines and landed at Kema. Along the western side of the peninsula, another 1,800 troops came on land. Hendrik drew a little sketch in my notebook: “Here, first they went to where the Dutch army was, and then they took the airfield at Langowan.” That too matches the official Japanese reports. ABDA Command ships never appeared during the operation. The Allies carried out a few air attacks, but without causing much in the way of damage. Japanese paratroopers participated in taking the airfield - the first Japanese airdrop ever. Hendrik Muntuuntu: “I saw the first Japanese soldiers. Of course we were afraid! We ran to our fields to hide. Only one week later did we go home again. After that they moved on to Central Sulawesi. A few Japanese civilians stayed behind to run the civil administration.” That felt less strange. “Before the war there were a lot of Japanese fishermen here already. They were here in the thirties already, close to Bitung. They cleaned the fish and cut it up, barrels full of fish went straight to Japan. The boss’s name was Ike-san. After that they were all called back to Japan to go into the army.” There had been four thousand fishermen there, in all. “Now they came back with the navy boats. I went with my parents to the harbor at Bitung. We listened to the speeches the Japanese gave. It lasted at least a couple of hours. The Dutch were gone, they said, Japan was all over the country now, the Japanese administration was going to work together with Indonesian officials.”

With his own eyes, Hendrik had witnessed a great, new start. After centuries of Dutch presence on the archipelago, the Japanese period had dawned. Ventje Memah, another veteran, told me: “We fled

to our fields too, but later the Japanese gave us sugar and broken wristwatches.” He was only eight at the time and didn’t know what to do with a weird present like that. Another of the veterans came from a village a hundred kilometers away: “There wasn’t much fighting where we were, there were no more Dutch soldiers anyway. When the Japanese moved into the village, the people ran into the woods. I was twelve. We children had to catch chickens for them to eat.” Broken watches and cackling chickens, for these Indonesian children that was how a new era in the history of their island empire began.

That same day, Japan attacked the island of Tarakan, a major oilfield off the eastern coast of Borneo. The oil extracted there was so pure that you could use it, almost without processing, as ship’s fuel. The Dutch – Indonesian government, however, had ordered that everything of value around the installations be destroyed in the event of an invasion. The sabotage was prepared in detail by military engineers and oil technicians. A Dutch employee of the Bataafsche Petroleummaatschappij described it as follows: “After a few orders, we could already hear the dull thuds of the various explosions and the first heavy columns of smoke began to block out the sun. Lovely installations that had cost hundreds of thousands of guilders were turned into flaming ruins within seconds. After the explosion, the wells shot their final streams of oil into the air. It was a terrible thing to see, especially for us, the BPM employees who had worked so hard for the company. Then came the tank parks, the one on the Paloesian drilling field and also the one at Lingkas. Two times eighty million liters of oil went up in smoke. The blaze was incredible. On its way to the sea, the stream of burning oil at Lingkas destroyed everything in its path: roads, warehouses, homes and docks. Columns of black and white smoke blotted out the sky. The white columns were from the evaporating seawater, when the burning oil hit it.”

The Japanese landing troops were furious about the sabotage, and threatened to murder all the Europeans if the same thing happened six hundred kilometers southwards, at the even richer oil installations of Balikpapan, the world’s biggest oil refinery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Japanese planes dropped pamphlets stating, in almost perfect Dutch, that “those who destroy petroleum sources, oil company installations, oil tanks, etc. (...) will be executed along with their family members and relations”. This did not stop the colonial government. Balikpapan was good for an annual 1.2 million tons of crude oil and derivatives. The fire went on for four days, a seven-kilometer-long stretch was incinerated. The smoke could be seen more than hundred kilometers away. “The destruction included all the tanks, motors, pumps, generators, turbines, distillation units, boiler houses, steam boilers, firetube boilers, conduit and spray piping, the barrel factory, the tin factory, the paraffin plant and petroleum plant, batteries of twelve steam generators, transformer stations and the entire electrical power plant.” In addition, 25,000 barrels of lubricant, kerosene, asphalt, sulfur and paraffine were blown sky-high.

Japan was livid. The soldiers were able to seize 78 Europeans and, a few weeks after the landing, drove them all out onto the beach: two colonial officials, a police inspector, a public-health officer, a few engineers, a handful of clerics, even patients from the hospital. The local populace was forced to watch. The two officials had to kneel and were decapitated with the samurai sword, the others had to walk single file into the sea where, once they were up to their chest, they were shot and killed – regardless of whether or not they’d had anything to do with the sabotage.

But Batavia went on with the destruction. On Borneo, Sumatra and Java, where the major oilfields lay, but also on a few of the smaller islands, more than 3.3 million cubic meters of oil went up in smoke, the equivalent of what Japan had once received annually from Indonesia. Only at Plaju on South Sumatra did the demolition work begin too late. At that point, Plaju was the biggest refinery in all of Southeast Asia, and was of vital strategic importance as the only location in the Dutch East Indies that produced the non-aromatic kerosene needed for modern fighter planes. The systematic destruction would, normally speaking, have taken four days, but Japan was determined to take this

oilfield; otherwise, their entire operation would have been in vain. The Japanese implemented an emergency plan: on February 14, about a hundred paratroopers were dropped close to Plaju and the nearby town of Palembang, the first large-scale airdrop in Japan's history. Confronted with this lightning strike, the KNIL took upon itself the task of technical sabotage corps. It was a highly improvised operation. In an apartment in Leiden, I heard about it from hundred-year-old Ton Berlee: "I was a sergeant, and I was sent to Sumatra to take back the oilfields there. A small group of Japanese had snatched the one at Plaju. There were 27 of us to force them back." Berlee was born in Cimahi, his parents were from Beverwijk and Enkhuizen. Like his father, he became a career soldier in the KNIL. Now he and his men were carefully picking their way through an industrial ghost landscape of grim distillation towers, tangled pipelines and dozens of hangars. The official Japanese reports did indeed mention "an Allied unit of about thirty men, armed with two light machineguns" who "launched a heavy counterattack and came within forty or fifty meters." It is extraordinary to hear this story told from both sides. "While the bullets were flying back and forth, oil began gushing out of the tanks and pipelines," the Japanese sources say, "the Allied unit opened fire with mortars. The conduits that had taken direct hits burst into flames and black smoke filled the air." Sergeant Berlee himself put it more boldly: "We set the whole thing alight with our mortars. One guy had a bazooka and used it to blow out the pipelines. Flames everywhere! We had to wreck as much as we could, there was no way we could retake it. The Japanese had taken cover and were shooting at us, we took off running with our mortars. The whole thing didn't last long. We started in the morning, and that evening we were already on our way back to Java."

Any number of storage tanks were hit, so that in the end some 850,000 cubic meters of oil was incinerated at Plaju. Nevertheless, the Japanese paratroopers were able to requisition a relatively undamaged refinery, with a goodly volume of oil still in the tanks. The conquest was so important that shortly afterwards a marching song became highly popular in Tokyo: "*Sora no Shinpei*", divine soldiers in the sky. It started with a bit of quintessentially Japanese imagery:

In the sky, bluer than indigo  
Blossom at once thousands of white roses.  
What a sight! Look, parachutes in the air!  
Look, parachutes take over the sky!  
O, parachute, greatest of all flowers!

That the whole thing had more to do with black oil than with white roses, the song didn't mention that.