

Asymmetry in RI-Netherlands relationship

Nikolaos van Dam, The Hague | Mon, 04/02/2012

One of the first things that struck me when I started as Ambassador of the Netherlands to Indonesia in 2005 was the asymmetry in the relationship between our two nations. It did not take long for me to realize that we, the Dutch, were much more interested in the Indonesians and Indonesia than Indonesians were interested in the Netherlands.

In a way, this was not surprising, because the Republic of Indonesia had already proclaimed its independence 60 years earlier, and as a result, it now has a completely different orientation towards the world. Countries like China, Japan, the United States and Australia have naturally become much more important, whereas the Netherlands — at least in the Indonesian perception — has become a smaller country located somewhere far away on the other side of the world.

In reality, however, today's Netherlands and Indonesia can be considered as equal partners: Indonesia is one of the biggest world economies, as is reflected in its membership of the G20. The Netherlands, on the other hand, though not a member of the G20, ranks 16th in the world in economic terms, and is not junior to Indonesia in this respect.

Indonesia is, by comparison, much more present in the minds of the Dutch, although this is also on the decline.

But which Indonesia do the Dutch have in mind when they think of it? Is it the modern democratic Indonesia, as it exists today? Or is it something else? Something that once may have existed, but is not there any longer?

How many Dutch literary works describe an Indonesia that may have existed in the past, at least in the imagination of the Dutch who lived there, or had dreams about it; dreams that were not necessarily shared by the Indonesian people themselves?

The Dutch generally know that the vast majority of Indonesians are Muslims. Yet, there is no general emotional awareness that this really is the case. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that most Dutch people of Indonesian origin living in the Netherlands happen to be Christians, thereby providing the Dutch with a picture that does not proportionally reflect the general realities of Indonesia itself.

It can also be seen as a kind of cognitive dissonance. Dutch people, who like to order babi panggang (roasted pork) in the many Indonesian restaurants throughout the Netherlands, may be amazed that they will not be able to find it on the menus of most restaurants in Indonesia.

Education on the history of the Indonesian archipelago in Dutch schools is rather rudimentary, to put it diplomatically; and the same applies the other way around in

Indonesia. Education in the Netherlands in the past hardly devoted any attention to the Islamic dimension of Indonesia. This attitude is still reflected in the collections of today's Dutch museums. Not knowing certain things may sometimes be considered a blessing in disguise, but in reality, I think, it is a serious shortcoming that should be redressed.

The Indonesians and Dutch may think that they know one another, but what they generally do not know is that in reality they do not know one another that well, if at all. It is high time, therefore, that this should change and the Indonesia Nederland Society could have an important role in bringing the peoples of modern Indonesia and the modern Netherlands closer together. The result can be, and I quote Indonesian Ambassador to the Netherlands Retno Marsudi, "a 2.0 special relationship with tangible benefits for both sides".

This article is based on the text of a short response by Nikolaos van Dam, former Netherlands ambassador to Indonesia (2005-2010), during the inauguration of the Indonesia Nederland Society in The Hague on March 22.