

**Welcome speech by the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands  
Dr Nikolaos van Dam  
on the occasion of the publication of the Indonesian edition of Hella Haasse's *Oeroeg*  
Jakarta, Erasmus Huis, 5 October 2009**

Mr Henk Kraima, president of the campaign *Nederland Leest*  
Mr Willem Nijholt  
Yang terhormat Bapak Putu Oka  
Yang terhormat Bapak Radhar Panca Dahana  
Ms Margot Dijkgraaf  
Mr Philip Freriks

Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning and welcome to the Erasmus Huis.

I am happy that we could make this auditorium available for a session devoted to an important book in the cultural history of the Netherlands: "*Oeroeg*" by Hella Haasse. This initiative is an interesting sidestep to the thematic month of reading organised with all the public libraries in the Netherlands within the framework of the Campaign "*The Netherlands read!*". Today the organizers show that they want to reach out to Indonesia as well. The book is launched in an Indonesian language version, and this session aims at gathering opinions and thoughts from the Indonesian side. This is an interesting, and perhaps even daring initiative, because the story takes place in the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia, and the period of the Indonesian independence revolution; and Indonesians are now being asked what they think about it. You have, as it were, entered the lion's den.

In the Netherlands, the genre of Dutch literary works describing *Tempo Doeloe* times in what today is the Republic of Indonesia, is still very popular. Next to the long period of Dutch presence in the Indonesian Archipelago, this type of literature is one of the indirect reasons why the interest among people in the Netherlands with respect to Indonesia is so much bigger than anywhere else in Europe or the Western world.

Next to their literary merits, one might – and in my personal opinion also *should* raise the question of whether or not the scenes described in these Dutch literary works, however beautiful and fascinating they may be, are similar to the scenes as they are perceived or imagined by the Indonesians themselves. Or in other words: are these Dutch books mainly about the Indonesia, or formerly the Dutch Indies, as it existed in the perceptions and imaginations of the Dutch, but not in the minds of its autochthonous people? And did the Dutch in colonial times, from their dominant position, really heed to what the Indonesians really thought or aspired to? And did it not occur to them that the Indonesians might have acted or behaved as they did, just because they were, due to the prevailing circumstances, placed into a subservient position because of Dutch colonial rule?

During the former epoch of Dutch presence in the Indonesian Archipelago the colonial mentality was very much prevalent not only in the Netherlands, but also in the Western world and its colonies in general. Actually it was a period in which it was only normal usage for

dominant countries to have a colonial mentality. It was even thought in Dutch colonial circles, with some exceptions of course, that it was much better for the Indonesian people to be ruled by the Dutch than by themselves. Although today such an attitude of extreme tutelage is difficult to imagine anymore, at that time people even thought this to be ethically justified. But ethics change from time to time. Nowadays these colonial mentalities are fortunately generally rejected.

The selection of Hella Haasse's book *Oeroeg* means that many thousands of Dutch readers will now have a renewed window on the origins of the Republic of Indonesia, be it in a very indirect way. I am aware that it may be an eye opener for many who did not study Indonesian history in school in any depth. Hopefully they will now also want to see and read more about this fascinating country, because that may further contribute to our mutual understanding. I wish to add that the bilateral relations between the Netherlands and Indonesia today are better than ever before. We are not prisoners of the past, and in friendship we now look together to a common future.

Shortly after my arrival in Indonesia in 2005 I read the Indonesian translation of Hella Haasse's "*Sleuteloog*" ("*Mata Kunci*"), which at the time had just been released. I did so in an effort to learn some Indonesian. Now I am looking forward to reading her *Oeroeg* in Indonesian as well, this time to be better aware of the text as it can be seen through Indonesian eyes.

Many Indonesians may already have seen *Oeroeg* as a film. It was released in 1993 and also shown in Indonesia, including in the Erasmus Huis. I saw the film before having read the book; and I want to share with those who saw the film as well, that I experienced the book as being *very* different from the film. This may be an additional reason to want to read the Indonesian translation as yet and to find out for yourselves.

Finally, I want to note that I am glad that this cooperation project has been realised with the secretariat of the campaign *Nederland Leest!*, Gramedia Publishing House and Mrs Barbara Brouwer and her staff of the Erasmus Huis.

I wish you a very fruitful and rewarding session.

Thank you very much.