

**Speech of Dr. Nikolaos van Dam on the occasion of the 112nd Stiftungsfest of the
Ostasiatische Verein Bremen e.V., 22 February 2013**

*Sehr geehrter Herr Vollers, Vorsitzender des Ostasiatischen Vereins Bremen,
Sehr geehrter Herr Präsident Weber,
Sehr geehrter Herr Senator Schulte-Sasse, als Vertreter des Hausherrn,
Exzellenzen,
Sehr geehrte Herren Honorarkonsuln, insbesondere Herr Dr. Fürsen, Doyen der
niederländischen Konsuln in Deutschland, in Rendsburg,
und natürlich unserer überall bekannte Honorarkonsul Herr Boerstra, der dafür
mitverantwortlich ist dass ich heute Abend die Ehre habe hier zu sein,
Meine sehr geehrten Herren (ohne Damen),*

Sie fragen sich gleich wahrscheinlich warum ich, als ehemaliger Botschafter in Deutschland, heute Abend meine Rede auf Englisch halte und nicht auf Deutsch, wie ich es in der Vergangenheit immer gemacht habe. Die Antwort ist einfach: Deutsch ist eine sehr schwere Sprache, nicht nur für Deutsche, aber viel mehr noch für Ausländer. Das Problem ist, dass viele Ausländer sich dessen nicht völlig bewusst sind. Andererseits sind die Deutschen meistens viel zu höflich, um die gemachten Fehler zu korrigieren. Ich werde Ihnen ein Beispiel geben. Einer meiner ehemaligen Kollegen in Berlin hat während seines Königinntag-Empfanges eine Rede gehalten, bestehend aus nicht mehr als vier Wörtern. Nachdem er die beiden Nationalhymnen hatte spielen lassen, hob er sein Glas und sagte: "*Die Königin*" und nachher: "*Der Bundespräsident*". Diese vier Wörter enthielten drei grammatische Fehler, weil sie sein hätten sollen: "*Der Königin*" und "*Dem Bundespräsidenten*". Höflicherweise hat niemand dazu etwas gesagt. Lassen Sie mich, also, jetzt auf Englisch weiter machen. The main reason why I use English is that the foreign ambassadors present will not need a translation.]

Excellencies and Gentlemen,

It has been eight years since I left Berlin in order to assume my responsibilities as ambassador to Indonesia. And I am glad that the *Ostasiatische Verein Bremen* has

provided me with an excellent opportunity to be back again in Germany, where my wife and I spent such a good time of our life, both workwise and privately.

When I received the exciting news about my transfer from Berlin to Jakarta, the first thing I did was to go to the Berlin bookshop of Dussmann in the Friedrichstrasse to look for travel guides about Indonesia. Contrary to what I had expected, I could not find any book on Indonesia in the section dealing with Asia and South East Asia. I kept searching and to my surprise finally found what I had been looking for in the section Oceania and the Pacific. Only then I fully realized that Indonesia actually covers two Continents, of which the borderline runs through the deep waterway between Bali and Lombok, where the so-called “*Wallace Line*” is located. To the east of this line we can find Kangaroos and other marsupials (*Beuteltiere*) in the free nature, just like in Australia, but not to the western side of it. The reason is clear: when the sea-level was much lower in the past, these very special animals could not cross this sea straight because it remained too deep for them. As a result, quite divergent developments took place on both sides, also in the field of flora. These deep straights did, however, not prevent human beings from migrating all over the area that is today called the Indonesian Archipelago.

Before going to Indonesia I had never been aware of that Wallace line. When looking at it with hindsight, the Wallace Line is no more than a scientific discovery, albeit a very fascinating and important one. But this discovery has not had any consequences for the composition of the human population and the cultures of Indonesia.

Generally it can be said that the geographic boundaries of Indonesia with its huge territory and extraordinary rich diversity, have not been determined by ethnicity, culture, religion, language, nor its belonging to one or more continents, but rather by its Dutch colonial history. The Dutch colonial boundaries in the end became the political boundaries of the Republic of Indonesia. Not one inch more and not one inch less. I do not want to say that there is any Dutch merit in having contributed to the unity of Indonesia. It is just a result of colonial history, which did not follow any logical ethnic or other boundaries. The Dutch just tried to get control of a large area only to serve their own interests, both strategic and economic.

Many people argue that present day Indonesia has experienced 350 years of Dutch colonialism. This is true, although it is not valid for the whole territory of Indonesia. Some areas have only been fully colonized in the early 20th century, which in some cases means that colonial occupation lasted 35 instead of 350 years. In the early 17th century the Dutch occupied small parts of what today is Indonesia, with the main purpose of lucrative trade in, for instance, spices like nutmeg, which were found in the remote Banda Islands. This spice trade, conducted by the United East Indies Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie - VOC), was the beginning of a development that finally led to that huge colonial empire, called the Dutch East Indies or *Nederlands Indië*, which now stretches over an area of over 5,300 kilometers (which is similar to the distance from Bremen to the western borders of China). The northern region of Aceh was one of the areas occupied by the Dutch in the beginning of the 20th century, after a bloody war of some 30 years. Had Aceh not been occupied and incorporated into the Dutch East Indies, it might now have been a separate Sultanate, like for instance Brunei, not being part of the Republic of Indonesia. The same applies to the Batak region in Northern Sumatra, as well as to Bali, which were equally incorporated in the early 20th century. In the absence of Dutch domination in Northern Sumatra in the late 19th century, the German Lutheran Church had the chance to convert many Batak people there and to establish the Batak Christian Protestant Church. Similarly, German protestant missionaries introduced Christianity in Papua in 1855. Later on, with the expansion of Dutch colonialism in Papua, it was agreed between Christian missionaries that Papua was to be divided into a Catholic and Protestant zone of influence. Just imagine how pragmatic the missionaries were at the time, by deciding that the northern part of West Papua was to be Protestant and the southern part Catholic! I am sure that in Europe such things did not go that smoothly. As a result of all these developments, and many more, the Indonesia of today has become even more highly diverse than it already was. The present situation therefore carries all kinds of residues of earlier colonialism, even in the sphere of religion.

People in Germany may have been brought up with a perception and a political map of Asia and Oceania that differs somewhat from that of the Dutch, particularly because of our different colonial histories, Germany being more oriented towards Oceania. Or is that just because of my imagination? Isn't the Hamburg *Ostasiatische*

Verein fully called the *German Asia-Pacific Business Association*? I am not aware of any similar Dutch Business Association covering specifically these two areas. Throughout the centuries the Dutch have generally given more attention to the Asian area (because of its colonies there), even though Australia was first discovered by a Dutchman in 1606, whereas the whole Australian continent was called *Nieuw Holland* (New Holland) from 1650 till 1817.

Former German colonies in the East were particularly located in Oceania, for instance in North Eastern Papua, a fact that is hardly known in the Netherlands, even though the Dutch colonized the western part of Papua, which made Germany and the Netherlands neighbors at the time in both Europe as well as in Oceania.

Colonial backgrounds are often reflected in the art collections of the former colonizing countries. When I looked in Berlin for Indonesian treasures in the Ethnological Museum in Dahlem, I found a rich collection of most beautifully decorated boats from Oceania, but I could not detect anything of Indonesian origin. In Dutch musea it is, obviously, the other way around. When visiting the Tropical Museum in Amsterdam with my parents as a small child, I already got familiar with Indonesian gamelan music and Sumatran dances, as a result of which I have been fascinated by Indonesia's rich cultural heritage ever since.

The colonial past is occasionally also clearly reflected in our diplomatic relations. When I started in Jakarta, our embassy there was still our biggest diplomatic mission in the world, whereas the Belgian embassy there was among the smaller ones. On the other hand, the Belgian embassy in Kinshasa, Congo, is very important to Belgium, but ours is of minor importance.

Looking at it objectively: Indonesia is a very important country in the world, having a strategic location with respect to China, a population of over 240 million people, a stable democracy, a fast growing economy and being a serious candidate member of the BRIC countries. We usually take the Western democratic orientation of Indonesia for granted, but just imagine how different the Asian region might have looked if the Indonesian Communist Party would have succeeded in taking over power in Indonesia in 1965.

For many years, the biggest number of European political visits to Indonesia used to be from the Netherlands. Whereas I hardly had to encourage or stimulate this

development, the French ambassador to Jakarta, on the other hand, complained to me that he had to, more or less, beg Paris to give more political attention to Indonesia. All of this had nothing to do with the objective importance of Indonesia, but rather with our historic past, whether colonial or not. For the French Algeria is, for instance, of high political relevance. For Belgium it is Congo. For Portugal East Timor or Timor Leste is relevant, and so on.

For the Netherlands it is obviously Indonesia (and Surinam). It goes without saying that in the Dutch public mind, also China and Japan are considered to be highly relevant, particularly from an economic point of view. And it is only logical that we devote ourselves to these countries in order to best serve our economic and political interests. Fewer people in the Netherlands are aware, however, that, when it is about our exports, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg are much more important than China and Japan together; just like Nordrhein-Westfalen, to which our exports are bigger than to the whole world outside Europe.

In fact, some countries are in our perception more important than they would perhaps deserve to be from an "objective" point of view. But objectivity is a relative concept, which cannot be based on economic factors alone.

Holding such a huge and an enormously diverse country like Indonesia together is a huge task, not to be taken lightly. The Indonesian national slogan is "Unity in Diversity" (*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*). Mutual respect for this diversity helps strengthen the foundation of Indonesia's unity, just as is the case in the European Union. There is one big difference, however, and that is that Indonesia has one single national language -*Bahasa Indonesia* - which constitutes an essential unifying and binding factor. Remarkable is that this language is not the language of the Javanese, who constitute the most dominant and most numerous population group. This makes the national language of Bahasa Indonesia more neutral and more easily acceptable to all population groups. Different from the Javanese language, which has at least three varieties or levels corresponding with social classes, Bahasa Indonesia is more neutral, and for that reason also liked by many Javanese because they are not bothered by any class distinctions when using it. Although Bahasa Indonesia is much easier than Javanese, this was not a reason why it was chosen as a national language. It was easily acceptable because it was already spoken in various parts of the Indonesian archipelago as a kind of traders' language under the name of Malay (*Melayu*).

Besides, rulers have in the past always succeeded in imposing their languages, irrespective of whether or not their languages were difficult.

Another key factor why the huge territory of the Republic of Indonesia can be successfully held together is, in my opinion, its democratic system, when handled properly.

It is often said that Indonesia is the biggest Muslim democracy in the world; or to be more precise: Indonesia is the democracy having the biggest number of Muslims in the world (because there are also many other - smaller - religious communities, like the Protestants, Catholics, Hindus and Buddhists).

This brings me to my last point: *are Islam and democracy compatible?* Actually the example of Indonesia offers a clear example that this is the case.

Personally, I never felt bothered by this question of compatibility between Islam and democracy. To me it was not really a theme that I considered to be relevant.

On the contrary: I considered it to be a kind of non-issue, except for the fact that many people, particularly in the West, *do* consider it to be of importance.

But what if I say, for instance, that during the 20th century three of the most malicious dictatorships emanated from within Europe: that is in Nazi Germany, in fascist Italy, and in falangist Spain; and if I add to this that these countries all have an overwhelming Christian majority, and that this majority was quite religious, certainly also in the period in which these dictatorships prevailed there, does this mean that Christianity and democracy are actually incompatible? If I would make such a statement, I would almost certainly be ridiculed, because it will, rightly, be considered as nonsense. After all, most of Europe is now democratic, and the big majority is still Christian. That should be proof enough in itself. We would not need to study the Bible or other Christian texts to convince us of the thesis that democracy and Christianity are compatible.

If we follow the same logic, we do not have to study the Qur'an or other Islamic texts to convince us of the fact that Islam and democracy go well together, as is already illustrated by countries with Muslim majorities that do have democracies.

To put it differently: there are various Islamic countries with a democratic political system, just as there are various Muslim countries that have a dictatorship. The same

applies to non-Muslim countries: some are democracies; others are dictatorships, irrespective of the religions prevalent amongst its rulers or people. To me this just indicates that Islam and Muslims and democracy can go well together, just as the opposite may be the case. The same applies to countries with people having another religion, such as Christianity. Therefore one might draw as a main conclusion that in practice there is no specific link here with either democracy or dictatorship.

Excellencies and Gentlemen,

Let me end with a lighter note.

It is obvious that we should get familiar with the cultures and habits of the countries and people we are dealing with, not only to be more successful, but also to more enjoy our personal contacts. Enjoying such contacts can become a solid basis for strong relations. A fascination with the host country and its people helps a lot, and will be highly appreciated, as long as it is genuine and authentic. I had the privilege of getting to know all 33 Indonesian provinces and devoted five intensive years to the study of the Indonesian language and its literature, making my life in Indonesia much more pleasant and useful. Making such an effort and going that extra mile can be highly rewarding and enjoyable.

Excellencies and Gentlemen,

There is an Indonesian habit which makes attending dinners there much more easy than in many other countries. If, for instance in the Netherlands, you would ask a Dutchman late at night whether he wants yet another beer, he will almost always say "yes", until finally all beer bottles are empty and it has become very very late. But in Indonesia the saying is: *Sudah makan pulang (SMP)*, which means: "once you have finished eating, you go home". As a host to Indonesian guests - and I am sure that His Excellency the Ambassador of Indonesia, Dr. Eddy Pratomo, is very familiar with this - as a host to Indonesian guests you may be surprised to find that all your guests will have departed shortly after the last course has been served. I am quite sure that this will not be the case here tonight.

Vielen Dank für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit.