Chapter 5
For the Common Good: Dutch Institutions and Western Scholarship on Indonesia around 1800

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From the first arrival of Europeans at Indonesia’s shores, they created and circulated knowledge. The Portuguese, trading with Java and the Moluccas from the early sixteenth century, were the first to publish their travel accounts, and much of our knowledge of the region around that time is based on their reports. After 1600, they no longer played an important role in the Indonesian Archipelago, and their days of knowledge creation concerning the region were over.¹

The Dutch arrived just before 1600, and took up the baton. They would stay until the 1940s; they started to collect and publish information on the archipelago right away, and went on doing so ever after.² This chapter looks at the creation and circulation of knowledge regarding Indonesia by the Dutch and other Westerners during the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth.

The Setting

The period around 1800 was not the finest hour of the Dutch state and its network of colonies and trading posts overseas. Between 1780 and 1815 the Netherlands often had to tolerate foreign armies on its territory, was involved in various wars, often in a subaltern capacity, and was cut off from its establishments in America, Africa, and Asia due to the same wars. This was to the detriment of its trade, and therefore of its economy in general. Many of its overseas settlements were taken over by the British and lost to the Dutch for ever. By 1815 the Netherlands miraculously was still in the possession of or had regained most of its former establishments in the Indonesian
Archipelago and the Caribbean (Suriname, Netherlands Antilles), while its near monopoly on the trade with Japan survived as well. But it had lost all other territories and trading posts.

The large trading companies that had connected the mother country and the colonies had disappeared as well—the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie; VOC for short) and the West India Company (West-Indische Compagnie, WIC for short) were discontinued in 1795 and 1792 respectively. They had already been in the doldrums for a much longer period, and had left large debts.\(^3\)

**The (First) Golden Age**

This was a far cry from the Dutch Golden Age, a period that lasted roughly from the 1580s to the 1680s, when the Dutch Republic went through a long phase of high economic growth rates, and arts, sciences, and technology flourished simultaneously. This was also a period of mercantile expansion, during which a network of colonies and trading posts was created in the Americas, Africa, and Asia by the WIC and the VOC.\(^4\)

High rates of economic growth, mercantile expansion, and the flowering of Dutch science and technology went hand in hand. Perhaps the best example of this relationship can be seen in the development and role of Dutch botany. Botany was economically important because many plants had medicinal properties, and various plants played important roles in commerce, industry, and agriculture. During the seventeenth century, physicians-cum-botanists and amateur botanists followed the flag of the VOC and the WIC to the Americas (Brazil, Suriname), Africa (Cape of Good Hope), and Asia (Malabar, Ceylon, Java, Moluccas, and Japan).\(^5\) There, they collected, dried, described, and made drawings of thousands of plants, shrubs, and trees. The descriptions and illustrations were sent to the Netherlands, where they were usually published in beautiful many-volume series. In the Netherlands, and in various Dutch establishments overseas, botanical or medicinal gardens were founded, and seeds, cuttings, tubers, etcetera, were exchanged and planted. The result was that in the early eighteenth century, the botanical gardens of Leiden and Amsterdam had the largest plant collections from America, Africa, and Asia in the world, plus the best collections of herbals and herbaria. So when the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) wanted to design and execute his grand project of a new system of all things natural, he came to the Netherlands.