

The Gardens of Buitenzorg

by

Jan Brokken

A very personal story from an author at the height of his powers.

Narrative non-fiction • 224 pages • 12,500 copies sold in two weeks, 20,000 copies in print
• English sample translation available

When 23-year-old Olga and 25-year-old Han emigrate to the Dutch East Indies in 1935, it's as if one world after another opens up before them at a near-dizzying pace. They spend the first few months in Java; later, they live in Macassar, where Han does research. When the Second World War breaks out, the world

they've become part of is destroyed. In 1947, they have no choice but to return to the Netherlands. Olga is Jan Brokken's mother – before she became his mother.

After the death of Jan's parents, his Aunt Nora gave him the letters and photographs her sister Olga had sent her from Buitenzorg (now Bogor) and Macassar (now Makassar). In tender, sensitive, and questing prose, Brokken searched those letters for the woman who had remained a stranger to him throughout his life: "My brothers knew my mother from the Indies; I did not. My brothers had never let my mother out of their sight for a moment in the Japanese internment camp. In the cabin of the ship that repatriated them, they had lain in the berths above hers. But to me, she was no more than the pastor's wife in a village that was as Dutch as Dutch could be."

Jan Brokken ingeniously interweaves his mother's story with reflections on music, literature, culture, and history, introducing the composer Leopold Godowsky, who became fascinated with the gamelan, the linguists Adriani, Mattes, and Cense, who discovered entire worlds, and Katharina Diehm Winzenhöhler, the most famous concert pianist in the Dutch East Indies, whose daughter became a great European novelist. *The Gardens of Buitenzorg* is a gem of a book by an author at the height of his powers.

"Jan Brokken always manages to turn history into a deeply human story; that is his talent and his strength." – Geert Mak on *The Just*

Quotes on *The Gardens of Buitenzorg*:

"More than the tale of a couple from the Netherlands in the latter years of the colonial Dutch East Indies, the new Jan Brokken is a search for the vibrant young

woman his mother once was before she returned to the Netherlands traumatized in 1949. ... In a time when it is almost impossible for a historian to write about the past without moral judgment, this book is a breath of fresh air, if only because Brokken shows us a world through the eyes of an 'innocent' young Dutch husband and wife. ... Brokken tells the whole story in a down-to-earth style, without false sentimentality. This is the only way he can enter that place as yet undiscovered and become better acquainted with his mother, whom he knew mostly as the reserved wife of a pastor. And that is exactly what he sets out to do, in a book that easily qualifies as one of his best." ●●●● – Michel Krielaars, *NRC Handelsblad*

"The delights and the atrocities of the Indies. In *The Gardens of Buitenzorg*, Jan Brokken writes about his parents' eventful stay in the Dutch East Indies. The themes that run through all his work – travel and music – come together here in an ingenious way. ... Respect and justice – those words give this beautifully written, many-layered book a moral that remains relevant today." – Thomas van den Bergh, *HP/De Tijd*

"To my mind, Jan Brokken is just about the best non-fiction writer in the Netherlands. In *The Gardens of Buitenzorg*, he goes in search of his mother in the days before she was his mother. This story is interwoven with more essayistic passages about art and, of course, music. Brokken at his best. He once again proves himself a master of recovering history." – *Leestbest.nl*

"In *The Gardens of Buitenzorg*, Jan Brokken transports us to the life of tropical adventure that Han and Olga led before becoming his parents. True to form, he explores all sorts of side paths along the way, treating us to an anecdote about the Jewish Lithuanian composer Godowsky, the musicologist Paul Seelig, or the brilliant linguist Professor Cense before returning to Olga. Yet in the midst of all those fascinating detours, she remains the focal point of this rich book, which thanks to Brokken's enviably polished style is once again a delight for his readers. ... It was Jan's Aunt Nora who gave him Olga's letters, because she felt he was still searching for his mother. 'And you still haven't found out who she really was,' she told him. We should be grateful to Aunt Nora, because thanks to her we too now know the answer." – Katja de Bruin, *VPRO Gids*

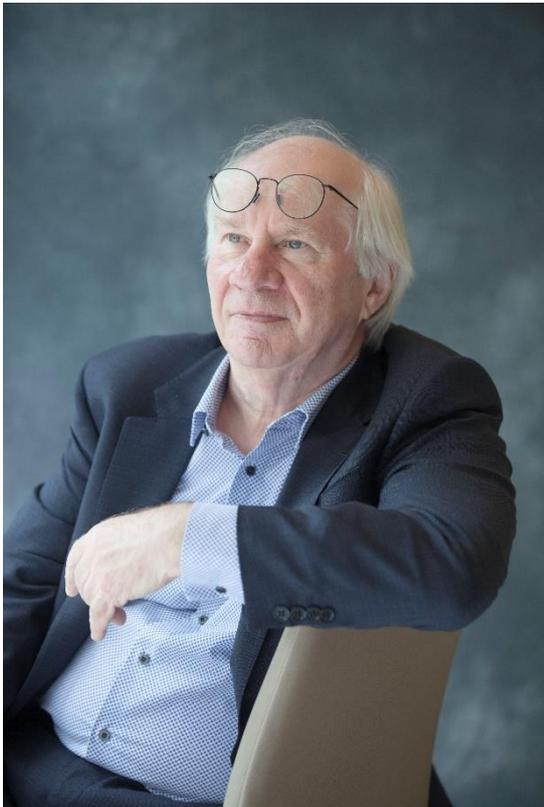
"The book's power lies ... in Brokken's ability to make the reader *experience* the sound of the patient raking of leaves and to evoke the atmosphere of his young mother's intellectual world and lived experience." – *De Lage Landen*

"In this new book, master storyteller Brokken delves into his own family history. His parents lived and worked in Indonesia from 1935 to 1947. Jan Brokken was born only after that and knew his mother only as the pastor's wife in a traditional Dutch village. He went in search of who she was before she became his mother. The correspondence between his mother Olga and her sister Nora, who had both washed up in the Dutch East Indies, pointed the way for him." – *Langzullenwelezen.be*

"Brokken brings every sentence to life. *The Gardens of Buitenzorg* is vintage non-fiction by a master of the craft with an international reputation." ●●●● – *De Standaard*

“Don't get lost in our past,' Jan Brokken's mother once told him. In *The Gardens of Buitenzorg*, he is far from lost. He is a sensible and inquisitive guide.” – Carel Peeters, *Vrij Nederland*

“An exceptional book. Brokken journeys through history *and* finds his way home.” – *De Telegraaf*



Jan Brokken (b. 1949) is a writer of novels, travelogues, and literary non-fiction. He has earned an international reputation with books such as *The Blind Passengers*, *My Little Madness*, *Baltic Souls*, *In the House of the Poet*, *The Reprisal*, *The Cossack Garden*, and *The Righteous*. In early 2020 he published *City Tales*. His work has been translated into many languages, including English, Chinese, French, German, Danish, and Italian. In 2020, *The Righteous* was awarded the Premio Tribùk dei Librai, the Italian booksellers' prize.

Jan Brokken

The Gardens of Buitenzorg

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In the distance sounded the monotones of the gamelan, wistful, as if
from a limpid glass piano, alternating with deep dissonants...

Louis Couperus, *The Hidden Force*

The truth lies elsewhere, away from it all,
somewhere as yet undiscovered.

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell

One late summer morning I heard a piano piece by a composer of Polish origin on the radio: “The Gardens of Buitenzorg.” It’s an astonishingly beautiful piece, around five minutes long, which summoned immediate memories of the rustle of palm trees, a unique sound my mother once described in a letter as reminiscent of raking, the patient raking of leaves. I turned up the radio, and it transported me straight back to the Kebun Raya Bogor, the majestic botanical garden in the city of Bogor.

Until 1949, the year of Indonesian independence, it was known by the Dutch name of ‘s Lands Plantentuin te Buitenzorg, the Botanical Gardens in Buitenzorg. I heard my parents speak of it many times, although at long intervals so as not to give in to the impossible yearning for what lay in the past. In the early days of their fourteen-year residence in the Dutch East Indies, they had alternated between five-month periods in Batavia (now Jakarta) and six-week stays in Buitenzorg. At three hundred meters above sea level, Buitenzorg was appreciably cooler than Batavia, although it often rained and stormed there and the air felt clammy. The area’s natural beauty was overwhelming.

While my father was engrossed in his “advanced studies” at the theological seminary in Buitenzorg, my mother – that is, the young woman who would become my mother – would go for daily walks in the gardens. Or else she would play her first badminton matches nearby. The sport was then becoming popular in Asia and was played as often by women as by men, either separately or in mixed doubles, a thrilling modern invention. Badminton is usually played indoors, because the shuttles are affected by even the slightest wind. But with so many palm trees and bamboo hedges in Buitenzorg, my mother played outdoors.

In 1935, Olga was a woman – “a girl,” I almost wrote – of twenty-three, whose life was suddenly taking on depth and momentum, as one world after another opened up before her at a near-dizzying pace. Forty-four years later, as I was on the verge of leaving Indonesia, she told me that at the first sight of the gardens of Buitenzorg she had fallen in love with the tropics – a love both heartfelt and sensual, inspired by those fragrances. The botanical gardens were vast, almost nine square kilometers in size, and because they spilled over into the Governor-General’s palace garden, they seemed much larger still. Strolling along the ponds, where the water lilies were so large and bright in color that they appeared to be shooting out of the water like fireworks, my mother-to-be started to have some inkling of tropical abundance. The red of the flowers was redder than blood.

She was seeing most of the plant and tree species she passed for the first time. I imagine her walking with a white parasol, wearing a broad-rimmed gauze hat that protected her from both the sun and the mosquitoes. Her skin was whiter than snow and quick to sunburn, a trait I inherited from her. Nevertheless, she must often have leaned forward into the sunshine to read and memorize a name. No one in the tropics can live entirely in the shade.

Before her departure she had taken three years to learn Malay. Her engagement to my father had begun in 1932, and from then on they knew their future lay in the Indies. What is more, they knew well in advance where he would be sent first: to Macassar (now

Makassar), the capital of Celebes. After their stay in Java, they would take the packet boat there, a journey of three days and nights.

Olga had huge gaps to fill in her education. My grandfather had arrived in the Netherlands from Tsarskoye Selo with a bag of soil and nothing else at all; he was offered a place to stay by a shoemaker in Leiden, who taught him the trade. He began mending shoes in the nearby town of Oegstgeest, in a workshop that filled the ground floor of a house, which he called his "atelier." Soon after he was married, to a farmer's daughter of comfortable means from North Holland, he opened a shoe shop in the village's most prestigious commercial street, but he still saw life as a struggle and was in constant fear of ending up empty-handed again.

He made Solomonic pronouncements about the futures of his four daughters. The eldest was permitted to attend a teacher training college. The second, my mother, had to settle for a degree in domestic science but was allowed to complete the piano studies she had begun at the age of eight. The third was trained as a nursery school teacher, and the fourth had to make do with two years of domestic science. The four of them became living proof that education is not everything; you can never predict what turns your life will take. The youngest sister, my aunt Galina, who had received the least education, died the wealthiest of all, and my mother became the most cultured.

Olga learned not only Malay but also the spoken and written Makassarese language. For the latter purpose, she had to master Makasar script. That took five years in all but gave her great satisfaction. My father, the intellectual, could not get the hang of it. Makasar script is an abugida writing system; the consonants are the crucial symbols, as they are in Arabic, which is written from right to left. Compared to Makassarese, Malay struck Olga as easy; it used the familiar Latin alphabet. Makassarese made her curious about Buginese, a language with a different writing system, Lontara, closer to Old Javanese and Sundanese than to Makassarese. Buginese, which was spoken by some one and a half million Bugis people in southwestern Celebes, demanded years of effort before Olga could comprehend it and speak it slowly. She could not write Buginese at all, and reading remained difficult for her, but she picked up enough of the language to become acquainted with the Bugis, a people of rulers, fishermen, farmers, and, above all, reckless mariners, sailing the seas of Asia on three-masters whose design had not changed significantly since the 18th century. She took courses in German and English, the cultural history of the Indies, Asian religions, and first aid for the tropics. She also studied the organ, so that she could lead the Macassar church choir. You see, my parents believed they had a civilizing mission to carry out in that little-known corner of the Indian archipelago. They threw themselves into the role, arriving in Buitenzorg heavy with luggage and idealism, although they must have worried at least a little about how it would all play out.

I was set on visiting the gardens of Buitenzorg when I left Jakarta for Bandung and Yogyakarta in 1991. I had begun my second trip around Indonesia; during the first, in 1979, I had spent four weeks on Bali and three on Celebes, and now I was on Java to give readings. “Traveling on official business” – that was the expression in my parents’ day.

I write “Celebes” because it’s the name I always heard at home while growing up. It should be “Sulawesi,” of course, which has been the island’s name since independence. But some names have an old, familiar sound that should never be forgotten, because a piece of your past would vanish along with it.

By minibus, it took three hours to reach Buitenzorg – now called Bogor. I was struck by the contrast, even greater than in my parents’ day, between Jakarta – a city constantly congested with honking, shouting, teeming traffic, home to nine million people all breathing in the fumes of three million cars – and the provincial town of Bogor, with a population of only one million, where the botanical gardens formed a green lung stretching towards the sprawling tea plantations to the south. Admittedly, traffic in Bogor can be heavy too, with a quarter million mopeds all apparently souped up to make as much noise as possible, by the same method we used when I was sixteen – drilling holes in the exhaust. It took a while after I reached the gardens before the racket stopped echoing in my ears, replaced by the rustling rush of wind through the tall palms.

Green space is the saving grace of any city; trees are said to soothe urbanites, dispelling the worst aggression. The Kebun Raya has fourteen thousand varieties of tropical plants and trees, from woodland giants to clustering fishtail palms, whose soft, fibrous leaf sheaths call out to be touched. Its collection includes almost every species in the palm family, nearly four thousand in total.

Long, wide lanes lined with canarium trees criss-cross the gardens: the ideal place for young people to flirt on endless walks beneath the canopy of green and yellow foliage. When I visited, families were picnicking on the lawns, even though it was prohibited. Sometimes a man would beckon me and offer me something to eat; I had no idea how to respond. It filled me with an unfamiliar bashfulness, perhaps even bordering on shame, for which I could find no conclusive explanation.

Always looming in the background was the former official residence of the Governor-General. It was clear what the Delft-trained architects had been aiming for when they set to work in the tropics: a slender, straightforward architectural style, with every detail well thought out, neither too excessive nor too modest, tending toward classicism.

Colonial architects had to design the residence twice. Buitenzorg was founded in 1745 on the slopes of Mount Salak, a dormant volcano, but the original structure was destroyed in the earthquake of 1834. The new palace was completed in 1856. The colonnade made the façade look a little like a theater. The walls are white, the roofs covered with red Dutch tiles. Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia, had no objection to this emblem of the colonial

period, and as soon as the country became independent, he designated it the presidential summer palace, one of the few decisions his successors never questioned.

The botanical garden predates the palace and was founded in 1817 by Caspar Georg Carl Reinwardt, a Prussian who had come to Amsterdam at the age of fourteen to study chemistry and botany at the Athenaeum Illustre. This “illustrious school,” the forerunner of the University of Amsterdam, had earned an international reputation. In 1815, when the French had left and The Hague began devoting serious attention to making money from the colonies again, Reinwardt was sent to Java as the director of agriculture, science, and art—three subjects that went together in those days. He conceived of the garden as a place that would “satisfy the craving for knowledge.” Before long, Reinwardt had collected nine hundred species of plants, partly through his expeditions from Buitenzorg to Timor, the Moluccas, and Celebes.

His successor was another German; until well into the nineteenth century, the Netherlands was a country of immigrants. He was called Blume, an appropriate name for a botanist. Carl Ludwig Blume came from Braunschweig in Lower Saxony and had studied at Leiden University. He was crazy about orchids and laid the groundwork for the enormous collection that is still on display in the greenhouses of the Kebun Raya Bogor, which now boasts three thousand species. It was also Blume who found the *Rafflesia arnoldii* in the rain forests of Borneo and brought it to the Botanical Gardens: the largest flower on earth, one to three meters in diameter, weighing ten to fifteen kilograms. When the rafflesia blooms, it spreads the repulsive odor of rotting meat and attracts swarms of bluebottle flies. Fortunately, it blooms only once every three years, but even well before then it smells like a corpse that has lain in the sun for too long. The world’s biggest flower, spreading the odor of decay—it sounds like a dark fairy tale.

The third director of the gardens was the first from the Netherlands, although he too had German roots; Johannes Elias Teijsmann’s parents came from North Rhine-Westphalia. A monument to Teijsmann was erected in the gardens, because he presided over them for thirty-eight years. He went on countless expeditions and broke new ground by bringing 133 plants to Buitenzorg from New Guinea, which was still largely terra incognita. Of all the directors, he was the least scholarly and the most enterprising. After finishing primary school, he worked as a gardener, or really as a gardener’s assistant, in the household of Johannes van den Bosch, a count and a general, who took Teijsmann with him to Buitenzorg when he was appointed Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. Teijsmann turned the Botanical Gardens into a breathtaking park. And the next day, when I traveled on from Bogor to Bandung, I noticed something else he had done: in 1852, he created Tjibodas (now Cibodas) Botanical Garden at the foot of Mount Gede. That garden, now larger than the one in Buitenzorg, lies 1,300 to 1,425 meters (4,265 to 4,675 feet) above sea level, and its average temperature of 18° C (64° F) supports a completely different flora from the tropical lowland. In Tjibodas, Teijsmann began to cultivate the cinchona tree, which yields quinine, the first antimalarial agent.

His successor, Rudolph Scheffer, seemed to have been born for Buitenzorg. From the moment he started school, everyone who knew him felt certain he was destined for a great scientific career, from the primary school teacher in the Dutch village of Poortugaal to the headmaster of his classical grammar school in Rotterdam, who gave him extra tutoring in Latin and Greek after school. After Scheffer received his *kandidaats* degree (roughly

equivalent to a bachelor's) in mathematics and physics at Utrecht University, the botanist Friedrich Miquel urged him to study botany and groomed him for the position of director of the Botanical Garden. The Dutch government awarded Rudolph a scholarship of 1,000 guilders a year and sent him for training at Kew Gardens in London – the famous Royal Botanic Gardens, perhaps the most impressive in the world – and the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. In Buitenzorg, Scheffer instituted a number of reforms. He did not have much time there; eleven years after arriving in Java, he died of a liver condition, but he used those years as if the devil were at his heels. Scheffer founded a museum and a library to emphasize the scientific nature of the botanical garden, as well as an agricultural school for boys from Java and Sumatra, one of the first schools to admit indigenous children. From 1876 onward, he also earned recognition for the botanical garden in international scientific circles by publishing a journal, the *Annales du Jardin Botanique de Buitenzorg*. It would continue to come out annually until 1940; with a little luck, you can still find an issue in Paris, at one of the bookstalls along the Seine. Everything in it was interesting, because it had all just been discovered.

The botanist Melchior Treub put an end to nineteenth-century Romanticism and made the Botanical Gardens a modern, effective research center for tropical botany. He set up the world's first biological testing station in Buitenzorg and had the Secondary Agricultural School built along the edge of the garden in 1902. This was another attractive building, which now accommodates the Institut Pertanian Bogor (IPB), Indonesia's largest agricultural university. The Treub Laboratory, a small white temple in the garden, is a reminder that Treub was also the founder of the Society for the Promotion of the Physical Exploration of the Dutch Colonies, which mounted scientific expeditions to Siboga, northern and southern New Guinea, Seram, Mimika, and the Star Mountains in search of plants, animals, and scientific data. And of course, since everything in the colonies hinged on profit, they were also looking for minerals and natural resources.

The research was consistently high in quality. The biologist Baas Becking, who was the director of the gardens from 1946 to 1948, was the first to use the term *milieukunde*, environmental science. He put forward a famous hypothesis about microbes: "Everything is everywhere, but the environment selects."

A fiery red woodpecker, without a trace of black on its wings, pecked at the thorny bark of a kapok tree. Among the bushes, strawberry finches and Java sparrows alighted. I was walking under the tallest tree I have ever seen, a camphor with a white trunk and a spreading fan of mint green leaves. The myrtles gave off the herbal fragrances of eucalyptus and cajuput oil.

My mother, in her youth, had seen just the same sights and smelled just the same smells. The idea was strange to me, as if I were entering a domain that had been closed off long ago, simply by pushing the gate open. I had slipped out of my own time into hers, and I wondered if that was really possible, if you could not only put yourself in another person's shoes but even step into a different era.

Olga soon found an effective way to come into contact with Makassarese women without being intrusive. She gave them sewing lessons, teaching them how to use treadle-powered Pfaff sewing machines, because not all the houses in the kampongs (indigenous compounds) were connected to the electrical network. She also had smaller electric sewing machines with a special feature: a rotary hook. Useful devices for women who not only made clothes for themselves and their children but also earned a little extra on the side by selling silk or batik shirts to the fashion houses in the city. Olga herself was not an exceptionally gifted needlewoman, and sitting at a sewing machine was not her idea of a good time, but it gave her the opportunity for informal conversation with the women of Macassar.

The city was divided by a form of apartheid. Macassar had a European district that was also home to wealthy Chinese families, a poor Chinese district filled with gambling houses and opium dens, a Bugis area near the harbor, an Ambonese district, and a large number of Makassarese kampongs. It wasn't that these districts were surrounded with barbed wire, but outside of the market, there was little interaction between the diverse range of ethnic groups. Wealthy Makassarese were given such a hard time by the city's colonial administration that they never dreamed of buying a house in the European district; it would cost them a fortune in extra taxes. They had their houses built in the commercial area near the harbor.

The Makassarese were devout Muslims, who had fought to keep out foreign peoples ever since they had converted to Islam in the sixteenth century. Admiral Cornelis Speelman, who had begun the conquest of Macassar in 1666 with six hundred fighting men, had needed three years to break their resistance, even with the eventual help of the ruler of the Bugis kingdom of Bone. The Makassarese were just as hostile toward the colonial officials and soldiers who expanded Dutch domination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; toward the Bugis, a closely related people; and toward the Toraja, the Sundanese, the Ambonese, the Chinese (who had a large presence in Macassar, with a community of more than 16,000 among a population of 80,000), Europeans (4,000), and Javanese. The Makassarese saw all these groups as just as arrogant and authoritarian as the Dutch colonizers. It was as if after their conversion to Islam they had said to themselves, *All right, once is enough, time to close the door to foreign influences again now.* The Buginese were more tolerant, open, and worldly. In their three-masters, they sailed all the seas of Asia and visited all the ports of China and Indochina; they knew that merchants could not afford to be sectarian. But in their home port, they had always clashed with the Makassarese, who refused to let anyone tell them what to do and were master smugglers of spices – the gold of their day.

“You would think,” Olga wrote to her sister, “that Professor Cense would think me a silly woman for starting a sewing circle, but he says it's a marvelous opportunity. In fact, he acts just as if I've come up with some brilliant idea. He says he doesn't converse with Makassarese women or hear them speak their language nearly often enough. At his request, I've begun to keep a notebook in which I jot down everyday household terms. That's the kind of person he is: never condescending, always eager to learn.”

Pfaff had an office in Celebes, and the company's sales representative agreed to lend Olga some sewing machines: treadle-operated models that had been traded in for the latest electric machines and were no longer any use to anyone else, as well as a few modern ones, because the salesman knew that as soon as the women got used to the newfangled contraption they would want to buy one. The machines were set up on the rear veranda of the house on Marosweg. It took a few months before she could count on five or six women showing up for the sewing lessons, but from then on the group expanded rapidly. In photographs, I can see that these were young women, newlyweds around twenty years old, or maybe even younger. Olga wound up teaching sewing classes to four groups at different levels, from beginners to near-professional seamstresses, a new group every weekday except Friday, the Muslim day of collective prayer, or as Olga put it, "the day Adam was created, the day he was admitted to Paradise, and the day he had to leave Paradise. That's the reason for Friday prayer." She was also becoming quite well-versed in the Quran.

Olga kept a list of words she overheard and didn't know, and Cense called out to her, "Now I can learn from you." It became clear that the women had a whole range of words and expressions for ordinary illnesses and minor complaints. Olga took careful note of them. "Another one for the dictionary," her professor would crow as she read from her notebook. It was his dearest wish to compile a Makassarese-Dutch dictionary, a wish that would not come true until long after the war.

How many of the words that Olga collected would find their way into that dictionary? There's no way of knowing. Most of Cense's notes were lost in 1942. Japanese soldiers forced their way into the house and set all the books and papers on fire. They would do the same to the boxes of index cards and to my father's library. His years of work on his dissertation went up in flames. The title he'd come up with was *The Visionary in the Religions of the Orient*.

After a while, Olga invited the women to come for dinner on Thursday evenings with their husbands. Like the classes, that weekly meal got off to a bumpy start. After the second or third time, the women asked if they could do it the other way around: would their teacher and her distinguished husband do them the honor of coming to their homes for dinner? Olga soon realized why: she did not serve enough different dishes. "Spent the evening with the Makassarese again yesterday," she wrote to her sister. "Oh my goodness, the amounts we're expected to eat. It never ends, and if you ever say no, they think you're terribly rude. It's better to go outside and purge than to turn a dish down. Han has started drinking beer here. All the *pedis* [spicy seasoning] makes you awfully thirsty."

The meals soon became a tradition, and Han and Olga were also invited to the feasts for major holidays such as Eid al-Fitr, the Festival of Fast-breaking. The Makassarese women felt "a strong desire to secularize," she wrote in the same letter. I didn't know exactly what she meant by that—until I stumbled upon a collection in the photographic archives of the KIT Royal Tropical Institute documenting daily life in Macassar in the first half of the twentieth century. As late as 1946, Makassarese women were still going out into the streets with at most a thin layer of gauze on their bare upper bodies. The gauze did no more than protect them from mosquitoes. The men, in contrast, were dressed entirely in white, with a wide sash over one shoulder and a *peci*, the black velvet cap worn by many Muslims in Southeast Asia. Only at official events did the women wear the traditional garment, the *baju bodo*. Their everyday clothing was flimsy and much shabbier than their husbands'. Evidently,

the women wanted to do away with this double standard, and that was why they were taking sewing lessons from a Christian woman in the white district. What “secularization” meant to them was walking down the street fully clothed. They wanted to become women of their time – modern, contemporary, worldly.

Behind their smoke screen of subservience, Olga discovered, these women were “real go-getters.” She wondered how their husbands would respond. Polygamy stood in the way of any fundamental change. The right to multiple wives had existed even before the arrival of Islam, at least among wealthy Makassarese. The yardstick was whether the man had the funds to maintain more than one woman. Makassarese men were required to have a separate house built and furnished for each wife. Over the centuries, polygamy spread to the upper middle class, but my impression is that Olga’s students mostly came from the lower middle class. In photographs, the youngest ones wore skirts below the knee and silk or cotton blouses with busy patterns. Their hairstyles were modern too. None of them wore veils. Their traditional dress included a diadem high in the hair, but that didn’t hide the hairstyle or the forehead.

Olga really rather liked doing “practical work” for a change. “Studying all the time is not easy, you know,” she wrote to her sister. “Makassarese becomes a struggle after a while. I won’t tell you I sing a happy tune when I’m at my sewing machine, but at least I don’t have to torture my brain.”

Another of her practical activities was playing the organ. She practiced every day on the one in the Witte Kerkje, the “little white church” at the corner of Gouverneurlaan and Hooge Pad. “It was recently taken apart and reassembled completely, because the pedals were barely working, and they found out that the bellows were leaking.”

Improvising was a huge effort for her; she couldn’t do it on the piano either. “I really am playing better and better. It’s just too bad I don’t have a musical bone in my body. When the church collection takes longer than usual, I have to keep playing, and to do that I need sheet music in front of me. I can’t just make something up, I’ve tried it at home, but I get nowhere.”

At the request of a violinist, she gave some concerts during Passiontide. Olga accompanied her on the organ; the two of them performed the four violin sonatas of Johann Sebastian Bach. It was quite a challenge, because the humidity in the Witte Kerkje kept putting the violin out of tune. “Still, it sounded pretty good,” Olga reported, “and Bach can stand up to a little rough treatment.”

Through her, Professor Cense tried to learn more about Makassarese and Buginese music, such as the songs performed on traditional holidays. He was also interested in the dances – did they resemble the East Javanese or the Balinese style? The *pakarena*, for instance, performed by two to eight women during welcoming rituals, was a courtly dance, originally intended for young noblewomen, set to music played on a *puik-puik* or a *puwi-puwi*, a conical double reed instrument that was shaped like a clarinet and sounded like a trumpet – a beautiful instrument, I might add, made of slender, nested bamboo tubes – plus a gong and a *dholak*, a two-headed drum that could be played on both sides. Cense asked her if she could

possibly write up “some of the notes and lyrics” she overheard. In the writings of Bakkers, the colonial official who had first described the ways of life in the interior of Celebes, he had found detailed descriptions of the celebrations at the Watampoine court: cockfights, dice games, ceremonies, banquets, opium smoking (a practice invented by the Chinese), and constant music, “instrumental tones that were more than a little tiresome, a deafening noise,” Bakkers wrote. Was that merely a white man’s prejudice, or was it really such a cacophony? Cense longed to know. He had also read in Bakkers that the *bissus*, indigenous priests who were Muslims and assisted the imam but also stood in the tradition of “heathen Buginese priests,” performed dances in women’s clothing while singing in high, shrill tones, their lips painted a fiery red. The description had reminded Cense of the castrati who performed Baroque operas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Olga had to disappoint him. “Han and I are invited to weddings, but usually only to the official ceremony, not to the days of feasting and celebration that follow. In any case, my impression is that Islam has suppressed the musical tradition in these parts. Java is Islamized too, of course, but the original Hindu temple music can be heard accompanying the temple dances wherever you go there. That’s not the case here, at least not in Macassar or on Selayar. Maybe it’s different among the Bugis, who still have a genuine courtly culture. I’ll be going to Soppeng and Bone with Han soon; perhaps I’ll learn more there.”

She never returned to the subject, nor to that first visit to Watampone on the Gulf of Bone in central Celebes. She did note that “the Oriental soul experiences everything differently. When we would remain silent, they make noise; when we would laugh, they fall silent.”



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