

HERMAN NEUBRONNER VAN DER TUUK AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY LANGUAGE STUDY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA*

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Abstract: This article describes the life and works of Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk, one of the greatest scholars and linguists of the nineteenth century, well known for his works on Batak, Malay, Javanese, Lampong and Balinese languages.

Abstrak: Artikel ini memperihalkan riwayat hidup dan hasil penulisan Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk, salah seorang ilmuwan dan pakar bahasa yang terkenal dengan penulisan di dalam bahasa Batak, Melayu, Jawa, Lampong dan Bali pada abad ke-19.

At the beginning of 2002 the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology in Leiden published a book which I edited entitled *Een vorst onder de taalgeleerden: Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk, afgevaardigde voor Indië van het Nederlandsch Bijbelgenootschap 1847-1873* (A Prince Among Linguists: Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk, Representative of the Dutch Bible Society for the East Indies 1847-1873). This volume of sources includes an integral publication of the letters written by Van der Tuuk to his employer, the Dutch Bible Society. These are supplemented with letters to friends and colleagues as well as a wide sampling of his publications. The volume as a whole gives a good picture of the life and work of Van der Tuuk, who can be considered one of the greatest linguists of the nineteenth century, thanks to his work on Batak, Malay, Javanese, Lampong, and Balinese. I would like to tell a little more about this unusual person, who was already a legendary figure in his lifetime – a great scholar but also a contrary, unconventional, bold, and eccentric character who launched vigorous attacks on everything that displeased him in his time.

Van der Tuuk was born on February 23, 1824 in Malacca, at that time still a Dutch colony. He was the oldest son of Sefridus van der Tuuk and Louise Neubronner, who were married in Malacca on January 27, 1823. His father had been a notary in the Netherlands before moving to the East Indies in 1820. He began as a member of the Court of Justice in Batavia, but in 1821 was appointed fiscal magistrate for revenue offenses and president of the

orphanage in Malacca. Herman's mother was born in Malacca as the daughter of VOC official Johann Anton Neubronner from Frankfurt am Main in Germany and Catharina Koek, born in Malacca. Herman was given the family name of his mother as a middle name. Information on the family can be found in the National Archives of Malaysia, where the birth certificate of Herman and the marriage licence of his parents are deposited.

After Malacca was exchanged for the British colony of Bengkulu in 1825 as a result of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, the family left Malacca for Surabaya, and Herman grew up there surrounded by speakers of Dutch, Malay, Javanese, as well as Madurese. In 1836 he was sent to the Netherlands for his secondary education. He began studying law in Groningen in 1840, earned his first degree (*kandidaatsexamen*) in 1843, but did not complete his studies. At that time he was already spending more time studying languages, especially Arabic and Persian. This prompted his move to Leiden in 1846, where he also learned Sanskrit. While there he made a thorough study of Malay as well, and at the young age of twenty-two published a book review in which he demonstrated his familiarity with all the relevant literature about and in the Malay language. At the end of 1847 he was recommended to the Dutch Bible Society for the translation of the Bible into Batak and was appointed – at age twenty-three – 'language representative' for the Batak Lands in Middle Sumatra. Following some preparation in Europe he left for the East Indies, and in September

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1849 arrived in Batavia. As the west monsoon made it impossible for him to travel on immediately to West Sumatra, he occupied himself with the Malay language in Batavia and wrote a treatise on what he called Centralization Malay – the High Malay spoken by educated Malaysians around the Straits of Malacca.

In May 1850 he contracted a serious skin disease. The sweating and sulfur therapies nearly drove him mad, and a long hospitalization followed. He was released from hospital only in October of that year and had to spend a few more months convalescing in Buitenzorg (now Bogor), where he immersed himself in Sundanese. Finally, in January 1851 he set out by boat for Padang, and from there travelled further north to Tapanuli. He first settled in Sibolga, but did not find the place particularly suitable for his language study owing to the great influence of Malay. He therefore moved on to the northern coastal town of Barus, where the population had largely converted to Islam but was of Batak origin and spoke Batak.

In 1852 he travelled to Mandheling in the part of the Batak Lands that was under Dutch rule. A good part of the long journey to the main locality, Padang Sidempuan, he made on foot. Everywhere he went he noted down words, recorded songs and stories, and copied *pustaka* (books made of tree bark).

In 1853 he undertook an expedition to Silindung in the Batak Lands, still independent at the time. This brought him to the shore of Lake Toba, which was considered holy and had never before been seen by a European. The journey almost proved fatal for him, however. On the way back, according to his own report, he was twice in danger of being eaten up by the Bataks, and the expedition became more like a flight to safety. Apparently he had quite a scare, for he never ventured into the Batak interior again.

From Barus Van der Tuuk corresponded regularly with the Dutch Bible Society. Besides news about his life and work, his letters contained more general information about the situation in the Batak Lands. He wrote, for example, about the spread of Islam, the advance of Malay, and the neglect of Batak; and he gave advice to the mission, which in his opinion, could exert a civilizing influence on the Bataks and counter the rise of Islam. He expressed his annoyance at the superstitions of the

Bataks, the exploitation and suppression by the Batak chiefs, and the heavy labour exacted from the Bataks by the colonial government. He complained about practical problems, such as the difficulties in getting cash from his account in a remote place like Barus, the scarcity of good Batak writers, and the lack of good servants (which meant that he was poorly cared for and his house was always a 'pigsty'), the high cost of living in Sumatra compared to Java, the murderous climate, and the vermin that forced him to completely rewrite his manuscripts several times. He also complained about the lack of intellectual conversation and about having to live unmarried and in solitude.

For the Bataks the house of Si Pan Dor Tuk, or Raja Tuk, as he was called, was always open, and he talked with them all day long, jotting down notes that he transcribed in the evening. He always made use of Batak informants, whom he also hired to copy manuscripts and record stories. He also asked them to check his translations to see whether they made sense. Although he was often annoyed at what he called the laziness, filth, and greed of the Bataks, he did everything to win their confidence.

He worked energetically at the tasks assigned him. First he made a translation of a Bible storybook. By way of experiment he then had a small section of this book lithographed in Amsterdam and distributed in the Batak Lands. Never before had anything been published in Batak. The people expressed their appreciation of the beautiful booklet, but because the content was strange and surprising to them, it aroused their suspicions, and they did not want to accept it. Van der Tuuk complained about the problems he encountered in his translation work owing to the un-Batak content of the Bible. He also saw little point in producing a Bible translation as long as the Batak language had not been standardized and introduced as a classroom and administrative language. Only then would the contact with the people become more direct and it would be possible to counteract the further spread of Malay. The problem, however, was that the European civil servants and members of the military had no knowledge whatsoever of the indigenous languages and consequently introduced 'jabber Malay' all over the colony. Van der Tuuk proved himself a defender of the regional languages against Malay, which in his view was having a detrimental effect on almost all the Indonesian languages, causing them to change radically

in a short time. He was afraid that in just fifty years no one would understand his Bible translations, a prediction that did come true.

Van der Tuuk made interesting distinctions between what he called Centralization Malay, Local Malay, and Convention Malay. Centralization Malay, which originated in the Malay peninsula, was spoken, he maintained, by educated Malays on both sides of the Straits of Malacca. Its many dialectic variants, such as Minangkabau Malay, Ambon Malay, but also Batavian Malay, he subsumed under the term Local Malay. The label, Convention Malay, he applied to the Malay used by the Europeans as an everyday language with the indigenous people, also referred to as Pasar Malay or 'jabber Malay,' which exists in a wide range of local variants which do not qualify as languages in his opinion. Van der Tuuk advised the Bible Society to produce a completely new translation of the Bible in Centralization Malay to replace the mid-eighteenth century translation of Leydecker, which was nearly incomprehensible owing to its confusing blend of Ambon Malay and Convention Malay. The Malaccan-born Abdullah bin Abdulkadir Munshi testifies to this in his autobiography *Hikayat Abdullah*, published in 1849. He relates how the Malay translation of Leydecker came into his hands around 1820, and how difficult he found it to read:

The book had Malay letters and Malay sounds, but the manner of speech was not Malay. Words were used in places where they did not fit at all, and words were combined in places where they should not have been combined at all. For this reason I could not grasp the meaning of the book. Everything sounded so awkward to me that I could not help but say: 'This is a book of the white people, and I do not know the language of the whites.' I therefore sat in amazement thinking about that book [...]. The form of the letters is pleasing but the words make no sense.

In keeping with Van der Tuuk's advice, the Bible Society decided in 1860 to produce a completely new Malay translation of the Bible, in the Malay of Riau and Malacca. This translation by Klinkert appeared in the 1870s. From then on the East Indies government would also consider this Malay to be the norm, while the Malay variants spoken outside these areas were viewed as deviations, deformations, and impure. This explains why already around 1850 the linguist H. von de Wall was sent to Tanjung

Pinang in Riau to compile a Malay-Dutch dictionary. Riau Malay would also become the publishing norm for schoolbooks in the East Indies.

But let us return to the Batak Lands. In September 1854 Van der Tuuk suffered a severe attack of dysentery and was hospitalized in Sibolga. For a long time after that he continued to feel weak. The tone of his letters darkened, and he was frequently troubled by depressions. He considered his Bible translating more and more wearisome and found it almost impossible to combine his tasks as linguist and translator. One could not translate the Bible into a language at the same time that one was describing it. He therefore decided to accept the Bible Society's proposal to return to the Netherlands and transcribe and publish his material there. At the last moment before leaving Barus in April 1857 he sent the following disillusioned message to the Bible Society:

It is a great misfortune to be in the service of people who are unable to judge uncivilized people and think that translating the Bible into Batak with the help of savages is pleasant work [...]. If I were a deceiver, I would paint a splendid picture for you and tell you, among other things, that there is a keenly felt need for Christ among the Bataks, etc., etc. I leave those lies to missionaries, and do not wish to ingratiate myself like a hypocrite with gullible people.

On October 1, 1857 Van der Tuuk, now aged thirty-three, arrived in the Netherlands and settled in Amsterdam, where he started transcribing his Batak work. His translations of the gospel of John, Genesis, Exodus, and Luke were published in 1859, and his large Batak-Dutch dictionary appeared in 1861. In order to enable missionaries and civil servants to learn Batak, he also published a few readers with original Batak writings.

In 1862 the Bible Society decided to terminate Van der Tuuk's work on Batak. For the time being enough had been translated for the recently initiated mission work among the Batak people. The agreement was that after finishing his grammar and his translation of the gospels he would be sent to the East Indies again, this time to produce a Bible translation in Balinese. We do not know whether Van der Tuuk was pleased with this decision. He in any case did not rush to finish his Batak work. The first volume of his Batak grammar appeared in 1864, the second a full three years later,

followed by the remaining translations. He definitively rounded off his work on Batak at the end of 1867. In May of 1868 he would leave for Bali.

While working on Batak, Van der Tuuk also delved into other languages and planned a wide variety of projects relating to them. In 1864 he wanted to compile a Malay-Dutch dictionary but later thought it a better idea to make it a Malay-English dictionary. He got no further, however, than a short critique of the existing Malay dictionaries. He had plans to produce a Malagasi dictionary and grammar, but never went beyond a preliminary study. He wanted to publish a large catalogue of all Malay manuscripts found in European libraries, but all that materialized was a description of the collection of the Royal Asiatic Society in London. He did edit a set of three Malay readers for the East Indies schools, and he published other work on Malay as well, both of a lexicographic and philological nature – an activity he would continue the rest of his life. After the death of Von de Wall, for example, he continued the editing of his Malay-Dutch dictionary and published it in three thick volumes in the years 1877-1884; and in 1894 he produced a supplement to the existing Malay dictionaries. Van der Tuuk's significance for Malay – a language that was not included in his job description – can hardly be overestimated and deserves closer study.

From his publications it is also evident that Van der Tuuk had knowledge of a wide range of other languages, such as Nias, Aceh, Rejang, Mentawai, and Minangkabau Malay in Sumatra, of Philippine languages like Tagalog and Visaya, of Hindustani, of Favorlang and other languages in Formosa (now Taiwan), and also of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Siamese (or Thai). Through the work of his fellow Bible translators he gained familiarity with Sundanese, Dajak, Buginese, and Makassarese. His formidable knowledge of languages made it possible for Van der Tuuk to level solid criticism at his fellow linguists, and he did so with gusto and considerable vehemence. Not only was the Delft Professor of Javanese Roorda severely taken to task, but also De Hollander, who taught Malay at the Military Academy in Breda; Klinkert, who was working on the new Malay Bible translation; Pijnappel, who taught Malay in Delft and Leiden; Von de Wall, who was working on his Malay-Dutch dictionary; and many other

scholars from the Netherlands, the East Indies, and elsewhere. In 1867 he wrote:

Everything that has been done up to now for the native languages I consider shoddy work, and no change will come about as long as the languages are not studied for their own sake. Little progress can be made in any discipline if it is practised without love. The person who learns a language in order to translate the Bible is by definition a miserable creature, and for this reason I have more contempt for myself than for others. I understand that it was a cruel fate that led me into the arms of the Bible Society.

When he arrived in the East Indies for the second time in 1868 and heard that a rebellion in Bali would make it impossible for him to go there for the time being, he gratefully accepted the offer of the colonial government to undertake a study of Lampong in southern Sumatra. For almost one and a half years he travelled on foot through the Lampong interior and worked on a Lampong dictionary. This comprehensive work of more than six hundred closely written pages was never published, however, because no suitable Lampong printing type was available.

It was in 1870 when he finally went to Bali for the Bible Society and settled in Boelèlèng, in the northern part of Bali that had been placed under Dutch rule. In order to work in as authentic a Balinese environment as possible, Van der Tuuk had a simple house of bamboo and wood built for himself a few kilometers south of the principal town of Singaradja. He wrote:

I had my house placed at an isolated location and I am determined to have as little contact as possible with European staff, for otherwise I see no chance of learning the language thoroughly. As for my living conditions here, they are not very pleasant, because conversation is totally lacking, but I can put up with this if I see progress in my work. A person should not come to the Indies as a linguist in order to enjoy himself, because one is totally isolated here. Most Europeans here have no interest whatsoever in studies of this kind, and the richly paid civil servant regard a man as crazy who has the mania for studying languages and for that reason is satisfied with a low income.

As earlier in the Batak Lands, he was annoyed here, too, at the suppression of the people by the Balinese princes, by the inertia of the Dutch authorities on this matter, and by the behaviour

of the missionaries. Again he complained about the problems he had withdrawing money from his bank account and about what he called the greed of the Chinese and Arabs, on whom he was dependent for anything he needed from Java. Yet he liked Bali better than Sumatra, because he considered the Balinese more civilized and gentler in character, and their literature was more highly developed.

He worked there at compiling a Balinese-Dutch dictionary, and in the process soon realized that Balinese could not be understood without Kawi, Old Javanese, because all of Balinese literature was actually a continuation of Kawi literature. He therefore decided to include the Kawi words in his dictionary as well, which would of course make the work even more voluminous. It was self-evident to him that this work had to precede the translating of the Bible, and he wrote to the Bible Society in 1871 that they should have no illusions about a Balinese Bible translation appearing soon. It is not surprising that in 1873 the Society reacted with relief at the news that Van der Tuuk had been appointed by the East Indies government to the post of 'civil servant for the study of East Indies languages.' Van der Tuuk was relieved as well. As a language official he would now be able to devote himself completely to the study of Balinese without having to translate the Bible into that language, a task under which he had always chafed because it inevitably meant that his other work would suffer:

If you translate according to the requirements of the language, the missionary is likely to accuse you of violating God's word. If you sacrifice the language to the Bible, a linguist will be up in arms.

Working for the colonial government was not really to Van der Tuuk's liking either. It bothered him to have lost his freedom and to be assigned all kinds of tasks that kept him from his actual studies. In Bali, too, he seemed to have found little happiness. Yet he never really left Bali again. He worked for another twenty years on his steadily expanding Kawi-Balinese-Dutch dictionary. He also published a wide range of scholarly work, much of it in the area of Malay and Javanese; he reviewed and frequently criticized the work of colleagues, and wrote articles for East Indies newspapers.

He lived those years 'like a Balinese.' Many stories circulated among the Europeans about his lifestyle, but also about his eccentric

behaviour. He was said to bathe like the people of Bali under the *pancoran* in his neighborhood, and walk around wearing only a sarong, bare-chested, always with a heavy club in his hands. People talked about his filthy house, which was more like a storage place for books and manuscripts. On the other hand he was said to have the most excellent wines and delicacies in his house. For the Europeans living in Bali his house was a kind of tourist attraction; people wanted to see this odd character for themselves – a cause of considerable annoyance to him. For the Balinese his house was always open, and they consulted him about almost everything. One of the Balinese rajahs is even supposed to have said: 'In all of Bali there is only one man who knows and understands the Balinese language, and that man is Gusti Dertik, Van der Tuuk.'

On August 17, 1894 Van der Tuuk, now seventy years old, died in the Military Hospital in Surabaya, where he had been rushed with an attack of dysentery. His Kawi-Balinese-Dutch dictionary, which was supposed to be his crowning achievement, was still incomplete and would be published posthumously in four thick volumes totaling 3,600 pages.

It turned out that during his lifetime Van der Tuuk had accumulated a small fortune in savings – 135,000 guilders – while the value of his little house was estimated at less than ten guilders. His housekeeper continued living there for many years, making it her task to welcome curious European visitors with the words: 'Ini Goesti Dertik poenja roemah, masoek sadja toean' ('This is the house of Mr. Van der Tuuk, do step inside, sir.'). One of the visitors early in 1896 was the Bible translator Adriani, who related:

The house was closed in the front, but we could push the bamboo door open at the back and walk around the four small rooms. Before long his former 'kokki' came out of a little outbuilding, a Balinese with a rather immodest appearance, who soon told me that she had worked for Van der Tuuk for many years. '*The gentleman had become half Balinese, hadn't he?*' I asked her. '*Certainly not,*' she said, '*he was a grand gentleman, slept in an iron bed, and earned 1,000 guilders a month!*'

In indigenous eyes Van der Tuuk had apparently become much less of a Balinese than European eyes perceived.