Die Iridescent World of the East Indies

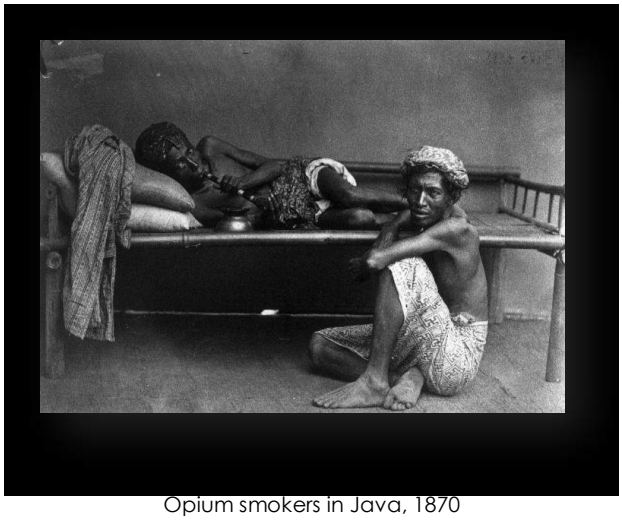
Passions and vice

As conservative and strait-laced one used to live in the Netherlands of the nineteenth century, as sensuous and (from the European point of view of those days nothing less than shockingly) licentious were the living conditions in the East Indies.
A general disparity between the old world in Europa and the new colonial worlds in either dry and hot or tropical climate – although not without a certain double standard regarding the differences between men and women.

In those years when the story of *The Heart of the Fire Island* takes place, it was hardly imaginable that British, French and Dutch women just like Eurasian women used to chew betel nuts, with intoxicating and euphoriant effects. It was only in the course of the nineteenth century that white women bit by bit broke this habit that was increasingly considered unattractive and coarse. Only among the natives and Peranakans chewing betel persisted.
Especially beautifully designed containers to store the betel, called *sireh*, and the corresponding paraphernalia were the pride and joy of any wealthy Peranakan woman, like these containers named *tepak sireh* in the Asian Civilisations Museum Singapore testify.

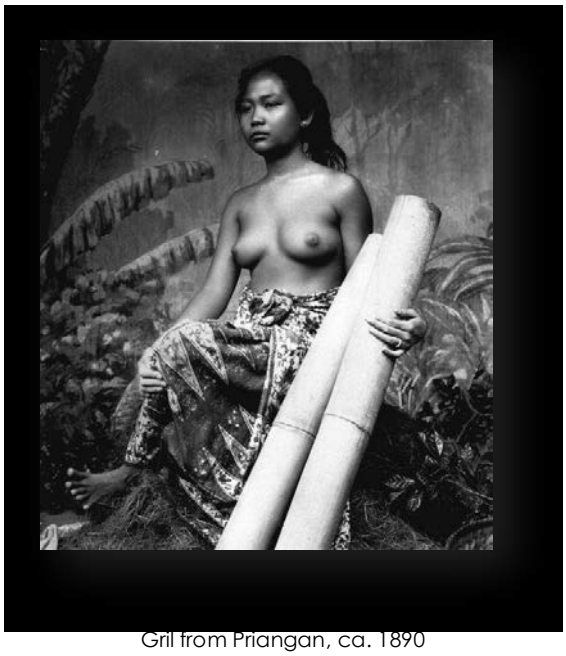
Towards the end of the century, smoking opium became increasingly popular among the population of the East Indies. Opium has numbing, pain-killing and relaxing effects, but also reduces appetite, and besides its high potential for addictiveness also leads to depression and to absolute apathy. Brought into the country and promoted by the Dutch, who made money out of the import and the allocation of licenses for manufacturing and sale, just as the Chinese and the Peranakans did, their partners in this business.

Opium paraphernalia, Asian Civilisations Museum



Opium smokers in Java, 1870

Like in all other European colonies, the East Indies were also to the imagination of the Dutch what the feminist publicist Anne McClintock in 1995 so aptly called "porno-tropics". The tropics were for the Europeans with their conservative and restrictive background a perfect foil to project their forbidden sexual fantasies and fears onto the people of the exotic worlds – and to act them out.



Gril from Priangan, ca. 1890

With an almost fetishistic perception the tropics were conceived as sensuous and feminine, alluring but also dangerous. A world that was lush and ripe of sensuality, offering freely an abundance of opportunities to be sexually active.

On the other hand, it was self-evidently assumed that the population of this exotic world would be sexually insatiable, uncontrollable, sometimes even sexually deviant. Which lead in everyday life to a bizarre mixture of anguish and distaste, fascination and irresistible attraction – conflicting emotions that led to a behavior between the extremes of repression on one side and debauchery up to sexual assault and violence on the other, like depicted in the novel.

A world of its own

The Peranakans

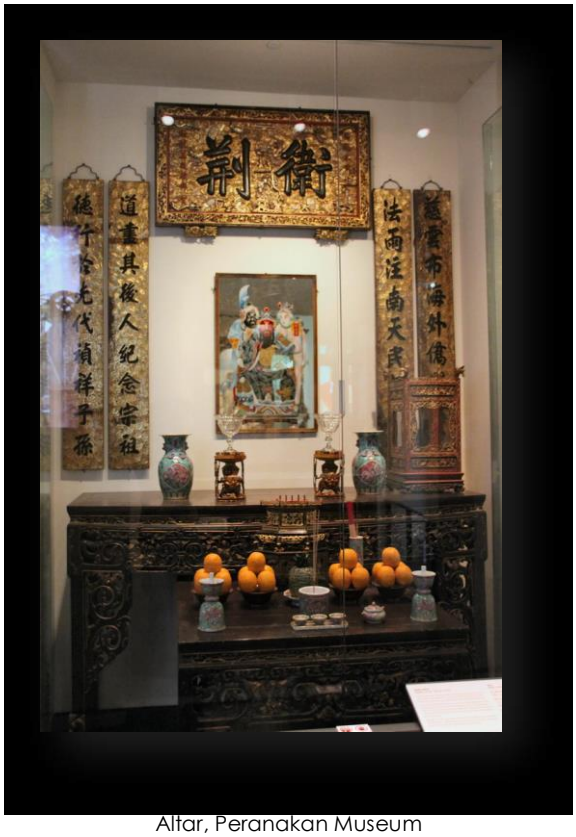
Peranakan – this term, translated as *child of the land* or *descendant*, basically describes in Malaysia, Singapore and Java the progeny of relationships between Chinese men and native women. Descendants who created out of lifestyle, traditions, culture and faith of both worlds something unique: the Peranakan culture.

In practice, things are a bit more complicated, since this term was also extended to relationships with one part Dutch, Indian or Japanese, and often instead of Peranakan the term *Baba Nyonya* (Mr. and Mrs.) is in use, especially in regions of Malaysia and also in Singapore.
In Java, both terms were hardly customary during the nineteenth century, although the Dutch were aware of the differences between Chinese and Peranakans, leading to consequences in social intercourse.

From the beginning, I couldn't imagine Go Kian Gie, the opium dealer, in any other way than as a Peranakan, also because of the demographic situation on Java in these days. In sources usually called "Chinese" without any further distinction, mainly the Peranakans accumulated some wealth, and often by profitable licenses for the opium trade.

Peranakans aspired to live like Europeans without forgetting or even denying their Chinese roots, yet at the same time remaining conscious of the glass ceiling of ethnicity that would always inevitably put an end to any social climbing, any strives for recognition, for emancipation.

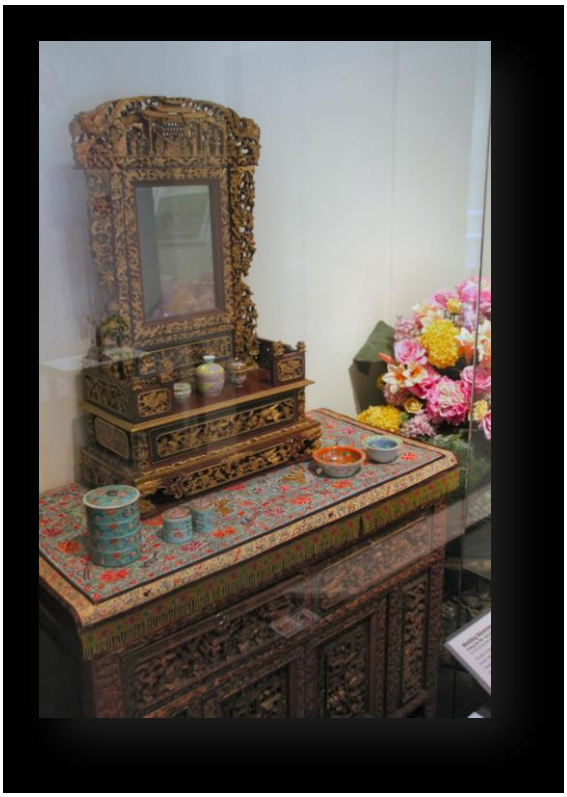
An area of tension that had shaped and finally poisoned Kian Gie's character.
I have a thing for this kind of sinister, broken characters, and like in the case of Vincent de Jong, it was as fascinating as challenging to write about Kian Gie, whom I already had vividly before my eyes when planning the novel.



Altar, Peranakan Museum

But it was only in the Peranakan Museum in Singapore that I got a feel for Kian Gie. In these rooms from the colonial era, in every detail furnished like a typical Peranakan house, with insights into everyday life and special occasions like weddings, I was able to get closer to Kian Gie.
In the Peranakan Museum it was possible to walk a few steps in his shoes and to see his world through his eyes.

The other way round, what I saw and learned in the museum had an influence on the novel. The altar in the entrance hall of Kian Gie's house is based on the altar in the museum, just as the design of the house's interior is inspired by the exhibits in the museum - like a vanity table that I used as a model for the table in Floortje's room.



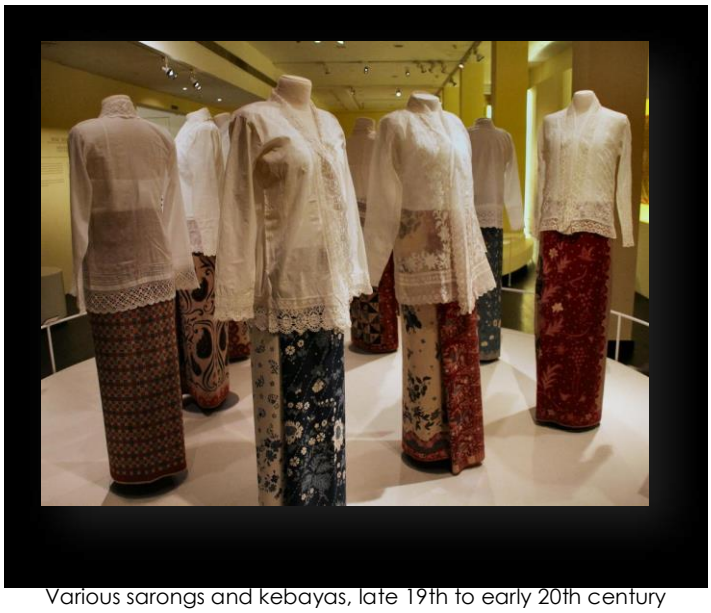
The Peranakan heritage is very much alive in Singapore, and not without a certain pride.
Since Peranakan women spent their days mostly indoors, they did a lot of needlework. It was an honor for a Peranakan woman when she was skillful in sewing and especially in embroidery. Over the time, Peranakans developed out of their Chinese and Indonesian heritage a unique art form of everyday design, in distinct color combinations and patterns to be seen everywhere in Singapore today: there are ties, scarfs and ball pens in typical Peranakan style, notepads, stationary and clothes.

And next time you are at an airport, watch out for the breathtakingly beautiful flight attendants of Singapore Airlines – their skirts and blouses are designed in typical Peranakan style.

Sarong and kebaya

Every time I am working on a new novel, sooner or later I reliably reach the point where I'm asking myself if it was the right time for this subject; if I shouldn't have waited some more years to deal with it. And just as reliably it happens every time that I literally stumble over things connected with this subject, by which I gain new insights in this world I am occupied with and a new perspective on the story I am about to tell.
Small gifts of fate that give me the impression that it is indeed the right time for this story.

Just like in November 2011, when I was visiting the Peranakan Museum in Singapore and its special exhibition about sarong and kebaya.



Various sarongs and kebayas, late 19th to early 20th century

A length of cloth, wound around the hips, may be one of the oldest forms of human dress, and all over the world, there are still countries and peoples that kept this traditional piece of clothing in one way or the other. Especially in South East Asia, although it is increasingly replaced by modern fashion in western style.

In Java, it is the sarong, wound and knotted, pinned with a corner of the cloth (properly speaking, both ways to wear it are called *kain,* but from a western point of view, they are subsumed under the term *sarong*) or kept together by tiny stitches and rolled at the waistband – the traditional clothing of women as well as men.

Patterns and colors not only depend on the development of the techniques of dyeing and weaving, but also on the region where the sarong is made and worn, on rank and class of its wearer in society and last but not least on the fashion of a certain period.

According to some sources, the term *sarong* originates from Sanskrit, one of the roots of the old Javanese language. *Saranga* means multi-colored but also refers to a piece of clothing in general; in Malay, it means covering.

The typical sarong is almost one meter in breadth and roughly 2.3 meters in length. Patterns are formed by various techniques: Weaving with varicolored yarn, painting by hand or block print are the simplest. More complicated is to do batik, by painting the cloth with molten wax at those spots that are to be remain undyed that will be removed after dyeing and drying. In subsequent working steps, by and by a multicolored pattern on a dark (because overdyed several times) background emerges; the more elaborate and the more colored the pattern and the darker the background, the more precious the sarong.

Another method is the technique of ikat, in which batches of yarn are already dyed in various colors, creating patterns during weaving. The highest mastery is the double ikat: both sides of the cloth are woven in patterns, a time-consuming and complicated process resulting in especially precious and expensive sarongs.

Sarong, 19th century

Kebayas, mid-19th century

For the climate in South East Asia, a sarong is the ideal clothing, just as the thin blouse called kebaya, originating from Arabia: *abaya* means clothing.

Making sarong and kebaya for European women socially acceptable is attributed to Lady Raffles, wife of Sir Stamford Raffles, British Governor in Java from 1811 to 1818. By mid-century, sarong and kebaya had become common everyday clothing for Dutch, British, French and German women in Java and Sumatra, at home as well as for visits with friends and acquaintances. Dresses after European fashion were worn only to formal events.

The clear segregation of society in Java was reflected in clothing. Kebayas in white were reserved for European and Eurasian women and forbidden for native and Peranakan women; they wore kebayas in other colors. Differences were also apparent in the sarongs: European and Eurasian women wore sarongs in muted colors like flat red, green, blue, crème-white and brown, while the sarongs of native and Peranakan women were of more intense color and generally more colorful and vibrant.

Patterns and color combinations of sarongs depended also on fashion. There were periods when scenes from battles were especially popular, like in the years of the Java War from 1825 to 1830 or during the Dutch intervention in Lombok and Karangasem in 1894. At the turn of the century, the style of Art Nouveau found expression in the patterns, and while in one season themes from Grimm's fairytales were fashionable, there were other years when traditional patterns from Javanese culture were popular.

The women designing the sarongs were another determining factor in fashion, like Carolina von Franquemont in the mid-nineteenth century or at the turn of the century Lien Metzelaar.

There were also changing fashions for the kebayas. Of loose fit and from thick, unadorned cotton are kebayas from mid-nineteenth century, while those towards the end of the century are more tight-fitting. Their hemline ending above the

Dutch girl in Indonesia, ca. 1930

hip, they were tailored from fine fabrics, with almost transparent insets and lavish lace trimmings from the Netherlands or Brussels.

How extremely fine these kebayas were – of that I was able to convince myself in the museum, literally with my own hands. So fine that I could easily imagine how shocked a visitor from the then so conservative Netherlands must have been about this kind of clothing.

Camisoles, to be worn under kebayas, ca. 1890

In bloom

It may sound like a cliché – but a striking characteristic of Indonesia is indeed its almost incredible wealth of flowers. Flowers as decoration are appreciated and loved in Indonesia: to adorn oneself, the house within and without and of course temples, mosques, churches and other holy sites, especially during religious rituals and ceremonies.

Lots of sun on the constant twelve-hour days and strong rains, hot and humid air and volcanic soil create a natural greenhouse where not only plants imported from other countries - like the poinsettia - thrive, but also native plants, long since at home in the western world, like the hydrangea, which originates from Indonesia.

Indonesian hibiscus

Having arrived from Europe, I've always marveled at the variety of flowers in Indonesia, their bright colors in the tropical light, their scent filling the air. Especially when orchids, so fragile, so meticulously cared for in the European climate, are planted in flower tubs there like oleander back at home or even grow wild everywhere.

Therefore it is no coincidence that flowers play an important role within the novel.

When we think of the Netherlands, the homeland of Jacobina and Floortje, tulips may come to our mind. Just as the Dutch wrestled parts of their land from the sea, another way to tame nature is appreciated

Plumeria

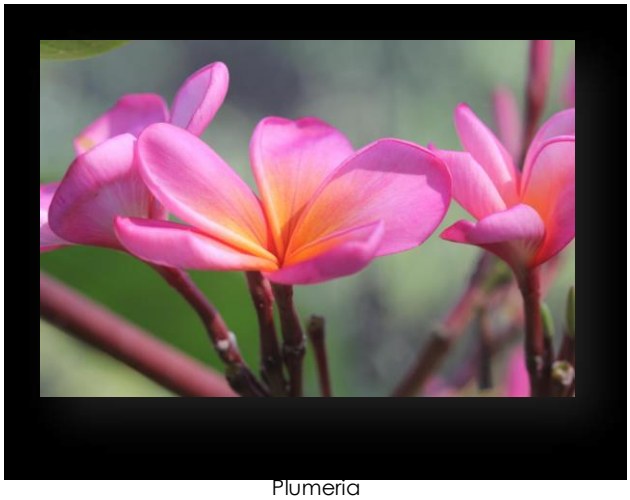
there: the art of gardening. And also in painting, Dutch artists developed the arranging of flowers, fruits and other objects, the still life, to highest mastery.

Already at the beginning of the novel, Jacobina and Floortje are compared to a modest tulip and an exotic orchid. Floortje even bears the connotation of flowers in her name, and at the beginning and towards the end of the novel, bouquets of flowers get a special meaning in the port of Naples. Throughout the novel, tropical flowers are mentioned, in houses as well as in gardens and in nature. But more than mere adornment, some flowers are used as symbols in certain scenes.

One of my favorite flowers is the plumeria, blossoming in white, pink, yellow or crimson on trees. Since the plumeria is considered especially beautiful in Indonesia and is in addition said to ban demons and ghosts, it is very common there and therefore mentioned often in the novel.

I can't get enough of plumerias, I like to touch their soft and wax-like petals and simply love their strong and sweet scent - that sometimes, in the evenings, indeed fills the room.

And Jacobina's mishap with conserving these flowers is based on my own failed attempt to take some plumerias home with me.



Plumeria

Cananga odorata

Almost as much as to the scent of plumeria I'm attracted to the scent of ylang-ylang. Much to my joy, I once discovered young cananga trees on the grounds of a temple in Bali. Compared to the sumptuous, brightly colored other flowers in the tropics, the cananga appears very modest, and its scent in nature is also much more subdued as we know it from perfumes, essences and lotions.

The shape of the three and of its flowers, their color and scent reminded me very much of Jacobina; Jan aptly compares her to this tree and its blossoms in the Botanical Garden of Buitenzorg.

Another flower has a special role in the novel: the lotus, maybe in Asia the most holy of all flowers, and this time it is Floortje who is compared with this flower - by John Holtum.
For the ability of its petals to make water and dirt simply drop off, the lotus is the symbol of purity and innocence; moreover, it is equaled with feminine beauty.

Because the respective words are homophones in the Chinese language, the lotus represents in Chinese culture love and harmony in marital relations, and in Indonesia, one can also find many ponds filled with lotus.

This abundance of flowers everywhere in Indonesia, lush and colorful and sweet-scented, gives the impression of being indeed in paradise.
Almost like in a dream-like and carefree Garden of Eden.

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