Colonial Exploitation and Economic Development

Whereas the Indonesian economy progressed rapidly during the last three decades of the twentieth century and Indonesia became a self-reliant and assertive world power, the Congo regressed into a state of political chaos and endemic violence which continues until the present. To what extent do the different legacies of Dutch and Belgian colonial rule in Indonesia and the Congo explain these different development trajectories? The Netherlands Indies and the Belgian Congo rank among the most “exploited” cases of modern European imperialism. The atrocities committed under the forced cultivation system in Java and Leopold’s wild rubber scheme in the Congo have become synonymous with unscrupulous European greed. Can two systems of extractive institutions produce a distinctively different long-term legacy?

This book discusses the comparative legacy of colonial rule in the Netherlands Indies and the Belgian Congo during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from a wide range of social, political, economic, and institutional perspectives. The authors reveal notable contrasts in the development of the rural subsistence sector, the plantation economy (rubber), and the industrial sector. The book also discusses differences in labour relations, land tenure policies, and varying features of colonial state formation, such as the development of the fiscal system, the education system, and the direction of post-independence economic policies pursued under Suharto and Mobutu, two of the most callous dictators of the twentieth century.

The comparative approach contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of colonial institutional legacies in long-run patterns of economic divergence. It adds the thought-provoking cases of Dutch and Belgian rule to the existing literature comparing the evolution of the British, French, Spanish and Portuguese empires and complements the literature that seeks to understand the notable Africa–Asia divergence in the post-independence era.

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Preface

The conception of this book can be traced back to the late afternoon of Monday August 3, 2009. In a session on African business history at the World Economic History Congress 2009 in Utrecht, Frans Buelens presented a paper on the equity development of Union Minière, Belgium’s largest mining company active in the Belgian Congo from 1906. Ewout Frankema was in the audience. In the aftermath of that session we engaged in a lively discussion about why the Dutch and the Belgians know so little about each other’s colonial history. Apparently, states and nations, like people, have their own ways of digesting the past and are typically not keen to share the most shameful aspects with outsiders. In fact, until today even a frank national debate about the colonial legacy has been continuously frustrated by politicians and lobby groups in the Netherlands and Belgium. However, when nations cannot come to terms with the black pages of their history, they will find it impossible to take genuine responsibility for the consequences of their deeds.

That afternoon we decided to try to organize a meeting where some leading Belgian and Dutch scholars could exchange their views on colonial exploitation and also explicitly address the question of how this legacy may have affected the long-term development of the subject peoples in the Congo and Indonesia. The project grew bigger than we originally envisaged when we obtained a grant from the Vlaams–Nederlandse Comité voor Nederlands Taal en Cultuur, enabling us to organize two workshops, one in Utrecht (December 2010) and one in Antwerp (October 2011), and to invite a number of international scholars to join the exchange. The proceedings of these workshops have eventually resulted in this book.

We are grateful for the generous support of the Dutch and Flemish Science foundations. We also thank the N.W. Posthumus Institute (the research school for economic and social history in the Netherlands and Flanders) for financial support. We thank Utrecht University and the University of Antwerp for hosting our workshops. We are grateful to Simon Holt and Emily Kindleysides of Routledge for guiding us smoothly through the logistical details of the publication process. A final word of thanks goes to our former colleague Daan Marks, who was a co-initiator of this project until he took up his current job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
Things are changing. In the spring of 2010 David van Reybrouck’s *Congo. Een geschiedenis* (De Bezige Bij) started to conquer the Belgian and Dutch market. This book about Belgium’s colonial past won two major literary prizes in the Netherlands, the AKO-Literatuurprijs and the Libris Geschiedenis Prijs, testifying to a huge hidden interest in the topic. It is our hope that our book can further contribute to the struggle against the great amnesia.