

An Imperial Snapshot: Colonial Anxiety and Picture Postcards in Early c.20 Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of colonial anxiety through the prism of printed postcards sent from the colonial Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, during the early twentieth century. The argument is that picture postcards featuring colonial images or scenes act as multimodal forms of communication, allowing the sender to promulgate colonial-imperial assumptions while sending an often-banal tourist message to friends and family back home. The study approaches the topic by examining the postcolonial exchange in terms of a symbolic structure through which the coloniser and the colonial society produce symbolic knowledge, through items such as picture postcards, to portray their authority and knowledge of the colonised other. This is contextualised with the Lacanian understanding of structural anxiety to demonstrate the slippage which occurs when symbolic knowledge breaks down. Finally, this article calls for a more inclusive debate on colonial anxiety, drawing attention to the relative lack of definition of the term and the tendency for certain former colonies, such as Indonesia, to be excluded from discussion in favour of the oft-used South Asian example.

Keywords: Colonial anxiety; colonial postcards; imperial photography; material culture; Orientalism.

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1. Introduction

The concept of colonial anxiety has a prominent place in postcolonial scholarship. It is a concept most frequently deployed to relate European colonial servants' unease and dislocation in the colonial setting. In particular, what Ranajit Guha (1997, pp. 483-484) famously described as their inability to be "at home" in the empire. Whereas it is a very useful tool for describing European reactions to diverse others, foreign climates, and security concerns, it can also be adapted as an innovative strategy for the interpretation of historical sources through potential signifiers of anxiety. Notable examples which build and develop the scope of colonial anxiety are studies by scholars such as Gajendra Singh (2016), Lisa Slater (2020), and Yanna Yannakakis (2008). Through the interrogation of sources with an eye fixed on the notion of colonial anxiety, we are able to drill down and develop another layer of understanding within colonial histories, encompassing notions such as migration (Teggin, 2021), warfare (Winardi, 2012) and gender (Hidayatullah, 2023).

The idea of othering, the process whereby an individual, or groups of individuals, is labelled using a subaltern categorisation and thus existing apart from the established ruling social order, is key to this. By establishing the colonial other as being wholly different to the self, the coloniser, and indeed those back in the metropolis, is able to form a semblance of imagined security in their existence. Through the assumption of knowledge about the colonised other, the coloniser reinforces their own conception of the self-other relationship in order to deal with aspects of colonial anxiety. The problem, of course, is that this is only assumed knowledge gathered to divide the Orient into smaller and more digestible portions, and does not necessarily represent fact, as per the work of Edward Saïd (2003, p. 72). This leaves the coloniser and their knowledge structure liable to challenges from reality, with the breakdown of symbolic authority, characterised by the colonial narrative of supposed superiority, leading to spikes in anxiety (Thakur, 2012, pp. 242-243).

Anxiety, being the root form of colonial anxiety, is a marked feeling of discomfort or unease felt by the subject. In the colonial discussion, we may include circumstances such as situations of danger or cultural dislocations. It has an object, something which is known to the individual sufferer, which causes the initial reaction. When the specific object of anxiety suddenly appears, it serves as the trigger for anxiety. Anxiety, therefore, must be understood as the warning signal for danger or discomfort, and not the threat itself (Lacan, 2006, pp. 75-78). Whereas the threat of assault or violence may often be identified as a reliable source of colonial anxiety for Europeans in the colonial context, more nuanced discussions of colonial anxiety reflect locational emotive disturbances, such as interactions with diverse others or unfavourable climates, experienced by the individual(s) involved. This is connected to what Carolyn Pedwell (2014, p. 56) has discussed as anxiety revealing elements of cultural dynamics at work.

2. Methods

In terms of the current study, the concept of colonial anxiety will be used as a lens of investigation with a selection of eight early twentieth-century picture postcards, all taken from a private archive, which depict various locations and scenes in what was then the Dutch East Indies. This will build on notable scholarly works of picture postcards and their importance in the colonial context by scholars such as Sophie Junge (2019), and Stephen Hughes and Emily Stevenson (2019). At the heart of this study, of course, is the concept of colonial anxiety and how the selection of picture postcards discussed are relevant to Indonesian colonial history. Junge (2019, pp. 102-104) has previously discussed Javanese picture postcards in terms of portraying European expectations of a colony, in tandem with her broader study of postcard production and circulation, though this study seeks to elaborate on the importance of colonial anxiety in the construction and distribution of such materials. In particular, it is desired that Indonesian history be drawn more fully into ongoing debates of colonial anxiety, so many of which are dominated by examples from South Asia (Teggin, 2020, p. 86). Some well-known studies drawing on South Asian examples include those by Mark Condos (2020), Kim Wagner (2013) and Jon Wilson (2010).

This study will examine the selection of eight picture postcards, with the concept of colonial anxiety in mind, through two key criteria which will be discussed in separate sections. These are: the notion of visual communication in terms of orientalist representations and the picture postcard as a means of demonstrating alleged colonial order and civilisation. In each case, it will be discussed how these images served as a means of constructing colonial narratives to

pre-emptively alleviate colonial anxiety by filling in gaps in ‘knowledge’. The archive selection, including examples sent worldwide to Belgium, France, Holland, Switzerland, England and the United States, offers a wonderful variety of subject matter to discuss. All of the given examples date from the period 1903-1929. Through this study, and others like it, it is hoped to draw attention to both the study of colonial anxiety in a colonial Indonesian context, as well as the incredible potential of picture postcards to illuminate historical debates in such theoretical arenas.

3. Visual Communication and the Orient

The concept of Orientalism has dominated a great deal of postcolonial discussion in recent decades. Brought into the mainstream debate by Saïd (2003, pp. 1-3; 32) and his seminal work, *Orientalism*, it is viewed as a vehicle for the Western audience to gain symbolic authority over the Oriental sphere and to dominate it. The primary method of achieving this was through the gathering of knowledge, or assumed knowledge, of the Orient to distinguish Occident and Orient. Modernity, buoyed by progressively-termed Enlightenment thought, has a crucial role to play in this in that ‘modern’ Western societies increasingly saw more traditional societies as backward. As a result, a civilisation vs. savagery narrative grew up in Europe when comparing colonised societies with their own metropolitan polities (Mignolo, 2011, p. 152). It was no surprise that such viewpoints abounded in early modern and modern Europe given that this was an age of virulent European colonialism.

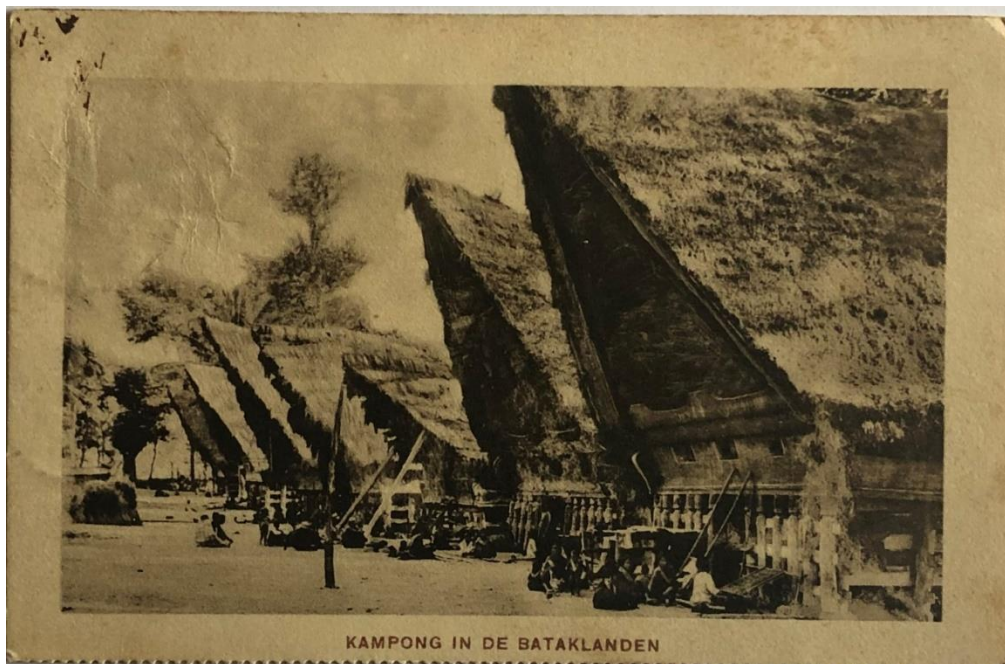
What does this mean for the present study though? It is contended that whilst ‘modern’ Orientalist viewpoints and narratives in verbal and written format, construed as the production of knowledge, were potent methods of control, so too were such narratives in visual and artistic formats. Picture postcards, such as the examples provided in this section, were very good examples of this. The images included on these postcards were chosen by the photographers and / or editors for certain reasons, and were also curated in a very specific way, for the benefit of their audience. This is connected to what Christopher Pinney (1992, p. 78) has discussed as photographs never having been silent, despite their lack of locomotion. One way of viewing this is as a means of reinforcing stereotypes, constituting a symbolic discourse through the creation of knowledge as authority, held by individuals in the metropolis about life in the colonies (Thakur, pp. 242-243). By emphasizing the exotic, the creator could play to the existing narrative held by the recipient(s) and thus reinforce the Orientalist standpoint. Messages written on the reverse of such postcards affirming certain beliefs about an area, people or cultural system could also act as a form of social proof whereby the author laid claim to personal experience and knowledge of a subject, and thus control over it, due to their proximity. This section shall examine the images presented on picture postcards to demonstrate how specific ‘knowledge’ could be created in a variety of narratives.

The first example for discussion, seen below in Figure 1, is captioned ‘Kampong in de Bataklanden’. The image depicts the traditional settlement of Batak ethnic groups of North Sumatra with groups of villagers working in the foreground. There are different varieties of traditional Batak houses depending on the familial name and the picture below is coming from Batak Simalungun. The houses are called Rumah Bolon which means Big House. Bolon houses are equipped with various ornaments in the form of carvings, decorations, and colors that symbolize a traditional meaning as a form and personality of its people (Regita, 2018). According to Guide to the East Indies (1897) by J.F. Van Bemmelen and G.B. Hooyer, Sumatra

was mentioned as one of the cities for tourist destinations where Deli, a place near Bolon Houses, was mentioned as an alternative route to Batavia. As one of the earliest English language guidebooks in the Indies (Sujayadi, 2019), the guidebook is proof that the North Sumatra area has already become a tourist destination.

Although the picture illustrates the cultural significance and tourism appeal of North Sumatra's Batak settlements and Rumah Bolon, the postcard image itself reinforces Orientalist perceptions. By highlighting what appear to a traditional rural village and emphasizing the distinct, forward-slanting roofs of the traditional houses, the scene suggests a rural simplicity that could mislead viewers into believing all Indonesian settlements resembled these predominantly agrarian communities. This visual framing contrasts sharply with the homes and environments familiar to the postcard's Western recipients—such as those in New York, where this specific postcard, mailed from Makassar in March 1929, was addressed—further amplifying the notion of an exotic, underdeveloped colonial landscape.

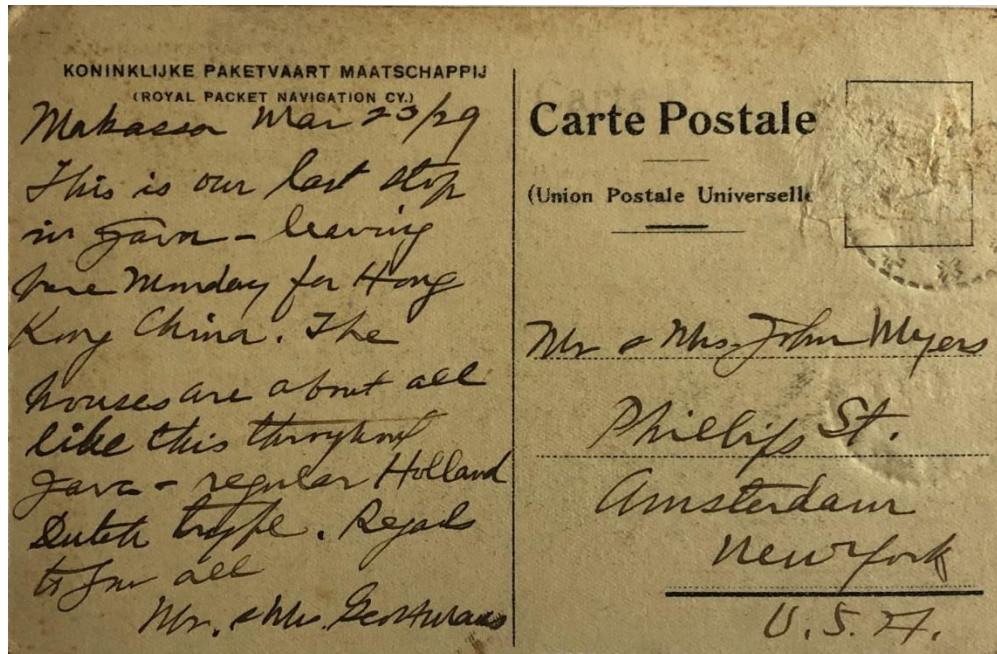
Figure 1. Kampong in de Bataklanden (Village in Batak-land) published by Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij. Private Collection. Sent from Makassar, South Sulawesi, to New York, USA on March 23 1929



The sender, as seen below in Figure 2, claims that all of the houses they have seen in their travels throughout Java were of a similar type to that seen in Figure 1. However, the style of the architecture shown in Figure 1 appears to be that of the Toba Batak, tying in with the caption of Bataklanden. These houses and their culture are native to northern Sumatra and not Java. For a wider discussion of the styles, see Hanan (2012) and Irianto et al. (2018). The sender's erroneous comments are most likely a generalization made for the benefit of the recipient in making the location seem exotic, in keeping with the theme of Orientalism. The recipients, Mr. and Mrs. Myers, would likely not have been to Java themselves, so the highly stylised setting of the village, in tandem with the sender's commentary, would likely have been viewed as akin to a factual commentary in line with Western creation of knowledge. If they were to ever visit Java in person and inspect traditional Javanese villages, they would be met with surprise due to

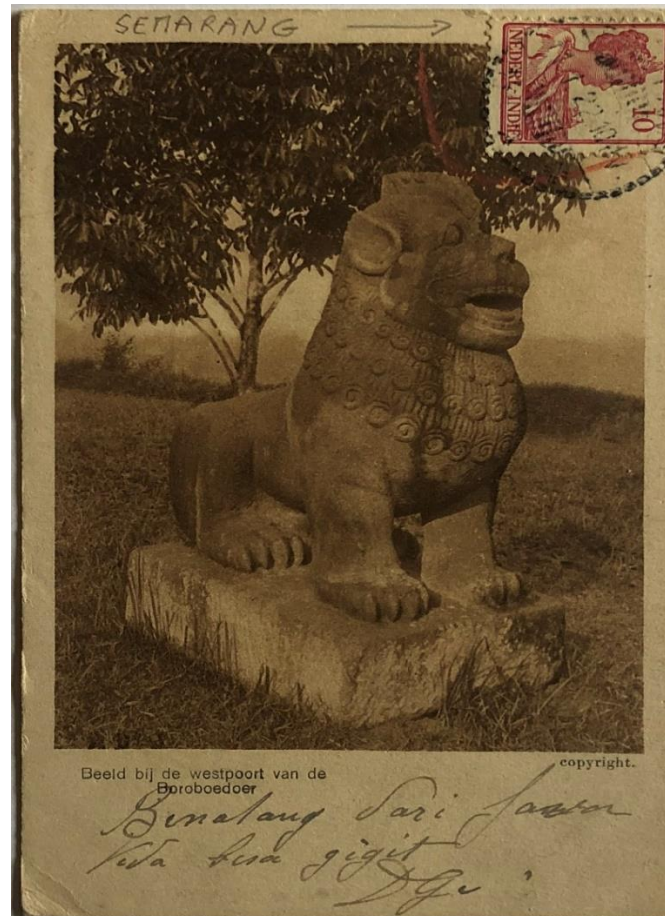
the unfamiliarity of the situation vis a vis their expectations. This would constitute a breakdown of their established colonial knowledge and allow anxiety to develop. This colonial anxiety exists in the slippage between presumed knowledge and this breakdown (Teggin, 2022, p. 80).

Figure 2. Reverse of Postcard in Figure 1

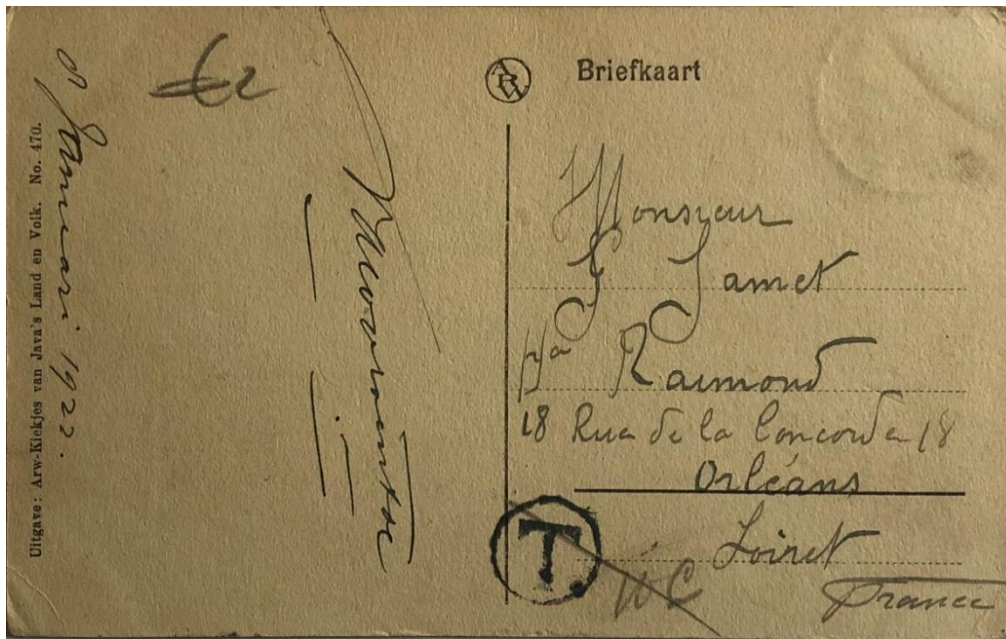


The second case study, seen below in Figure 3, is of a leonine statue situated at the west gate of Borobudur, near Magelang in Central Java. Borobudur, a UNESCO world heritage site, is a ninth-century Buddhist temple and is also the world's largest Buddhist temple. Despite the photographer choosing to display a leonine statue, the temple itself also features 504 stylised Buddha statues in varying states of repair (Sentot et al., 2023, pp. 20-22). Also of interest in this respect is the study of Hartijasti et al. (2019). Lion depictions are often found in sacred buildings with Hindu and Buddhist motifs. According to Buddhist beliefs, the lion is a sacred animal, the Buddha's vehicle to nirvana. The leonine statue in Borobudur Temple is located at the entrance of the temple, which functions to guard the temple from all dangers (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology). This statue is a small part of the entire Borobudur complex. For a commoner, it would be difficult to guess the location of this statue, but at the same time, it represents an exotic Orient object originating from the Far East that is easily recognized by the colonial. The visualisation and iconography of the Buddha would likely have been more familiar to Western audiences by this stage. The focus of Figure 3 is clearly on the statue and draws attention to the intricate carving on the neck and head. This representation of a lion would stand in stark contrast to more 'modern' European statuary which would likely have been familiar to the recipient, Monsieur Jamet, in France. As such, picture postcards such as Figure 3 serve as a catalyst for the imagination of the consumer. They invite the viewer to remark upon the stylistic differences and make the distinction between their surroundings and the Orient. Through such distinctions, stereotypes about the exoticism of the Orient are formed. Whereas the method of communication is intended to portray the colonial setting as more traditional in comparison to 'modern' Europe, it does, ironically, also serve to underline the rich heritage and civilisational accomplishments of the region.

Figure 3. Beeld bij de westpoort van de Baroboedoer (Statue at the west gate of Borobudur) published by Arw-Kiekjes. No. 470. Private Collection. Sent from Semarang, Central Java, to Orléans, France on January 11 1922.



Although the purpose of the postcard was to highlight the difference and exoticism of the subject matter, the point about civilisational accomplishments is one which deserves further examination. Partha Mitter (2013, pp. 32-33), in his classic work *Much Maligned Monsters* has acknowledged that whilst Europeans encountering Oriental art may have experienced anxiety or discomfort when engaging with such artworks, they were also capable of expressing admiration for the skill that went into creating them. He does, however, concede that the meaning behind such works could be lost on the viewer. Thus, though a westerner might not have been able to understand artworks, they could still appreciate them in their own way. The problem with regard to Orientalism and colonial anxiety, however, is that in seeking to understand subjects, Orientalist scholars created knowledge through their studies which was not necessarily accurate.

Figure 4. Reverse of Postcard in Figure 3

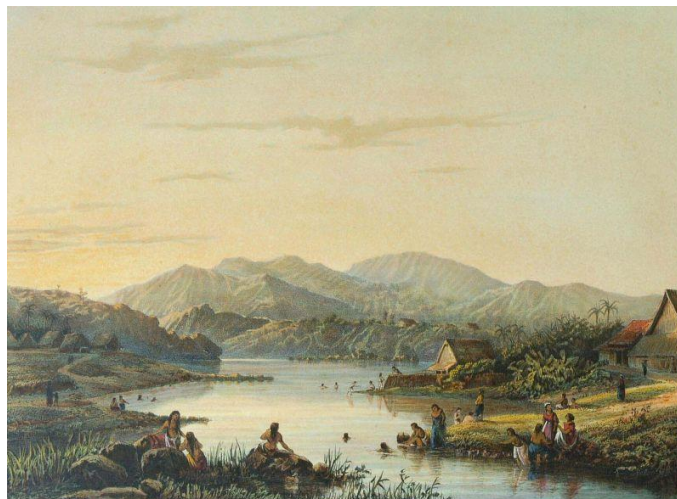
The creation of such knowledge, amounting to a symbolic discourse, was tantamount to a method of domination, as per Saïd (2003, pp. 1-3; 32). Historically, Orientalist scholars such as William “Oriental” Jones (28 September 1746 – 27 April 1794) in the South Asian example were central to this approach. With regard to colonial anxiety, issues for individuals crept in when Orientalist knowledge and assumptions were challenged, leading to a breakdown in the symbolic discourse. Anxiety, being a lack in Lacanian terms, would be initiated through the sudden acknowledgement that there was an information gap (Lacan, 2006, pp. 75-78). As a result, and following Thakur’s (pp. 242-243) interpretation of the work of Homi Bhabha, every time Orientalist ‘knowledge’ was challenged by truth, anxiety would emerge. In this way, those who had previously seen highly Orientalist images of the colonies, and who later experienced the reality, were bound to experience colonial anxiety.

The third given example, seen below in Figure 5, is entitled ‘Badplaats Wendit (Java)’. This photograph was seemingly taken in Wendit, near Malang, where there is a famous freshwater spring that is still used for recreational purposes today. The image depicts a group of women and children bathing in the foreground. The scene is, however, dominated by the natural environment, with the water in the foreground being overshadowed by mature trees and plants. The presentation of the scene makes the bathers seem small in comparison to the wild and lush surrounding vegetation and draws attention to the rural setting. A comparable scene can be observed in Abraham Salm’s lithographs produced between 1865 and 1872 in Figure 6. In these works, a similar sense of exoticism emerges: a vast natural landscape dominates the background, while the tiny figures of people bathing appear in the foreground. Viewed through the Orientalist lens, and considering that Figure 5 was produced for a detached Western audience, it seems to suggest that the photographer sought to portray the traditional aspects of life in Wendit as part of the construction of a wider colonial discourse (Hughes & Stevenson, p. 3).

Figure 5. No. 31 Badplaats Wendit, published by Kanxi and Co. Bandung. Private Collection. Sent from East Java to Kilchberg, Switzerland, in May 1925.



Figure 6. No. 31 A Lithograph of Wendit based on a Painting by Abraham Salm, Collectie Wereldmuseum (Tropenmuseum), part of the National Museum of World Cultures, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons



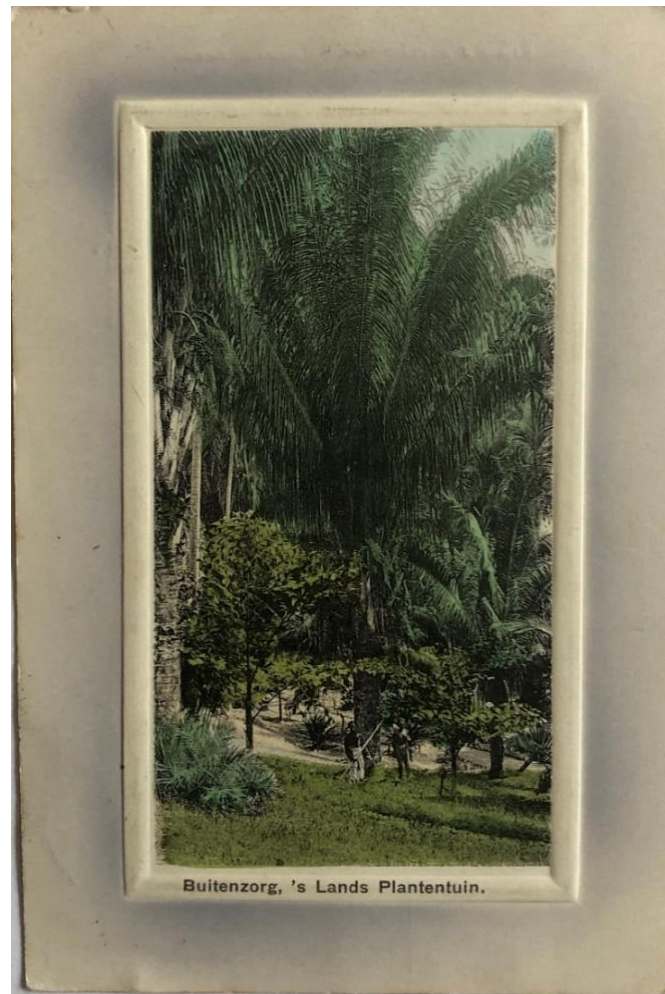
Westerners with no first-hand knowledge of the reality in Java might have assumed that the region was largely rural and that the indigenous population all bathed in pools or rivers. Whereas it was highly likely that this group was bathing for recreational purposes, there is no proper caption or context given for the recipient. The group in the foreground have had their agency taken away from them by their photograph being taken in this manner and are subject to the potential biases of the photographer, sender, and recipient. Assumptions such as these would constitute the creation of knowledge for domination. This is speculation, of course, though it is made possible by the highly stylised nature of the scene and the investigative mandate of this study. Intriguingly, given the discussion of knowledge, both the sender and recipient were academics. The postcard message, seen below in Figure 7 and written in German, is a standard holiday message indicating that the sender is enjoying himself and will return to Europe in time for an important conference.

Figure 7. Reverse of Postcard in Figure 5



In keeping with the discussion of nature dominating scenes depicting indigenous people, Figure 8, below, also emphasises nature's place. It is captioned 'Buitenzorg's Lands Plantentuin'; this is present-day Bogor Botanical Gardens, West Java.

Figure 8. Buitenzorg's Lands Plantentuin, published by J.M. Chs. Nijland. Surabaya. Private Collection. Sent from Banyuwangi, East Java, to Liverpool, UK, on January 22 1913.



In the early twentieth century, a guidebook called *Java the Wonderland* was published to provide an in-depth introduction to tourist destinations across Java. On page 29, it highlights the Bogor Botanical Garden as a prominent attraction, stating: “The famous Botanical Garden at Buitenzorg (Hortus Bogorenses, founded in 1817) is the great showplace, the paradise and pride of the island.” Around 1925, another guidebook produced by the Koninklijke Paket Maatsschappij, titled *Java: The Garden of the East*, also celebrated Java’s exotic appeal, featuring popular images of tropical plants and palm trees (see Figure 9). Building upon the guidebooks’ promotional narratives, the postcard’s visual composition appears to draw on this established imagery of the tropical landscape, presenting the flora in a grand scale that diminishes the human figures. Here, two small figures, seemingly indigenous men, in the foreground being dominated by the scene of the highly curated gardens. Such a visual narrative could be interpreted as the European mastery over nature in the colonies, symbolising their dominance over the indigenous population. This is linked to Stephen Mrozowski’s (1999, pp. 153-154) work into the commodification of nature, with narratives of the natural world being distorted to fit their agenda. This again also draws on theories of a civilisation vs traditionalism paradigm vis a vis empire, as discussed by Mignolo (p. 152).

Figure 9. Left: Ferns in the Botanical Garden at Buitenzorg, Java the Wonderland. Right: Botanical Garden Buitenzorg, Java the Garden of the East



This particular postcard, sent from Java to Liverpool, UK, in 1913, also appears to have been a more expensive product than other examples. The artwork is a stylised depiction rather than a photographic transfer, and there is an embossed border surrounding the image, which gives the impression of professional framing. As a quality product, it thus has the potential to act as a form of Oriental knowledge and as an aspect of material culture intended to impress the recipient. This ties into the arguments of Mascha Gugganig and Sophie Schor (2020, pp. 691-692) on the multimodality of postcards in terms of communication, collectability, and gifting.

Figure 10. Reverse of Postcard in Figure 8



4. The Postcard as a Demonstration of Order

Whereas the previous section has argued that picture postcards had the potential to act as forms of symbolic knowledge in the process of domination in the colonies, particularly through the Orientalist viewpoint, this section will focus on how such postcards could be used as a demonstration of order and control in the colonial space. This is a concept which Sophie Junge (pp. 101-102) has also discussed, with the idea of reinforcing European expectations of a colony being crucial. Images of rural and exoticised colonial settings may have been used to portray a sense of wonder and oriental discourse, but postcards could also be used to demonstrate order and formality as well, as we shall see from the following four examples. This is connected to wider narratives deployed in picture postcards to communicate messages and provide symbolic markers for the recipient(s). Studies by Strauss (2020) into the Great War and Ben Yishai et al. (2021) into the realities of the Lodz Ghetto are important points of reference here.

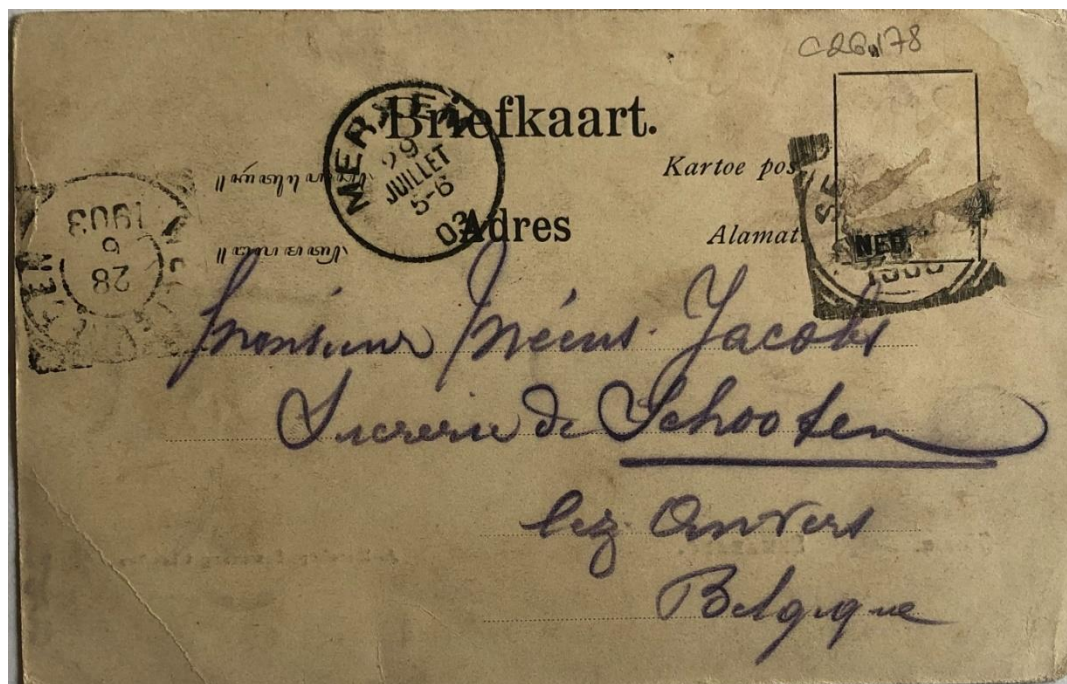
The first example for this section, seen below in Figure 11, is entitled 'Haven. Semarang'. This is obviously suggestive of it being the port at Semarang, though geolocating the precise section of the port is difficult. The stance taken by the photographer also makes it uncertain whether this is an estuarine, riverine or canal section of the port. The fading along the top edge of the postcard also complicates visual identification. The working assumption, however, is that it is the port of Tanjung Emas, Semarang and that the image displays one of the interlocking canals which were constructed in Semarang during the Dutch colonial era (Rukayah et al., 2020, p. 2). The title including the word 'haven' may also hint at it being the Nieuwe Havenkanaal, though haven also directly translates into English as port. Taking the point of discussion that postcards such as this could be used to demonstrate order and progress in the colonies, the photographer choosing this section of the port may be instructive.

Figure 11. Haven. Semarang, published by A. Bisschop, Semarang Cheribon. Private Collection. Sent to Belgium on May 26 1903



Construction of the Nieuwe Havenkanaal was begun in 1872, and this postcard was written in May 1903 (Rukayah & Abdullah, 2019, p. 4). Since the early twentieth century, Semarang has often been represented as a modern city marked by technological and industrial advancement (Hanifati, 2024). The photographer's choice to feature a newly upgraded port facility aligns well with this interpretation. As shown in Figure 11, a railway line in the foreground underscores the image's industrial progress, further emphasized by the prominent appearance of a modern steamship in the central and right foreground. This is reinforced by the looming presence in the central and right foreground of a modern steamship. In the right background, steam can also be seen rising from a smaller vessel. These modern vessels serve as a stark contrast to the more old-fashioned sail barges which also feature prominently in the image. The presence of barges also lends credence to the suggestion that this was a section of canal. The postcard image, whilst not necessarily aesthetically pleasing, does succeed in its mission of demonstrating industrial progress at Semarang. Such progress had a heavy cost to the indigenous population, of course, though the purpose of this postcard was to emphasise the change and to make the recipient feel more familiar and comfortable with the colonial setting. Making the colonial space appear to be more Europeanised was central to this.

Figure 12. Reverse of Postcard in Figure 11



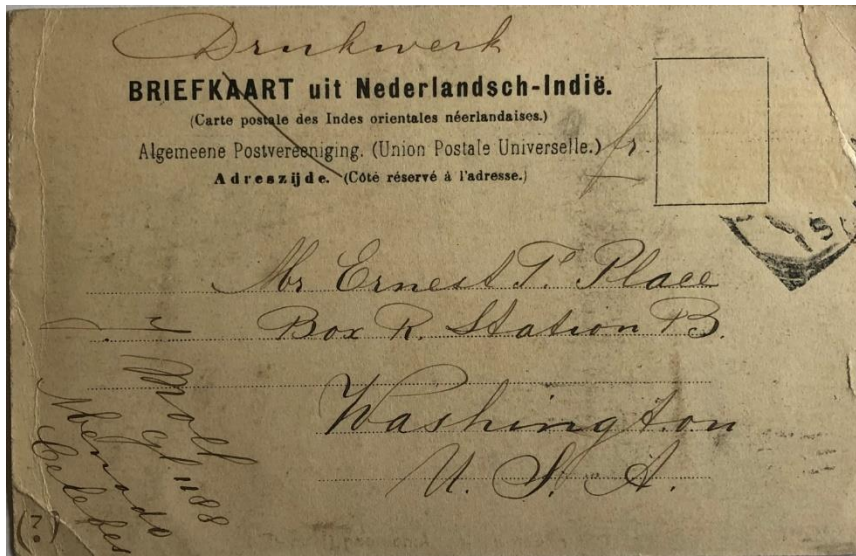
The next image for examination, seen below in Figure 13, is entitled 'Controleurswoning, Amoerang (Menado). This depicts the regional controller's residence in the city of Menado, South Sulawesi. The house was constructed around 1905 in a transitional architectural style characteristic of the period between 1890 and 1915. Such structures typically featured a saddle-shaped roof equipped with additional vents, a front veranda, load-bearing walls with prominent front gables, and decorative carved woodwork at the roof's end (Kumurur & Tampi, 2018). The front side of this postcard is decorated with a frame which surrounds the central image of the controller's residence. The use of a frame visual superimposed on the image, as before in Figure 8, suggests that this postcard was intended to impress the recipient and convey a sense of grandeur, to again return to the work of Gugganig and Schor (pp. 691-692). The residence building dominates the scene and appears to have been situated amongst a cluster of trees,

leading onto a manicured lawn in the foreground. This is again suggestive of the coloniser's domination of their physical surroundings and their ability to shape the natural environment according to their whims.

Ornate garden planters can be seen throughout the centre of the image in front of a large open veranda. In the centre of the image, a lone figure can be seen, dwarfed by the scale of the controller's residence. Dressed in a white kebaya typical of a servant's smock, although around the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some Europeans started to wear kebaya (Putri & Hidayat, 2021). This practice emerged from cultural exchanges and the hybrid social environment of colonial society, where European women adapted local dress styles for comfort in the tropical climate and to fit into the colonial milieu. Yet, the picture likely depicts a native valet or a member of the controller's household staff. This person's placement in the image, appearing to be small and insignificant against the backdrop of the residence and highly curated formal garden, was likely an intentional feature of this image. This is something that has also been commented upon by Junge (p. 103) in her studies, drawing attention to the fact that indigenous people are often incorporated into the colonial narrative as domestic workers or servants in images such as these. Once again, this references the uneven dichotomy of power between coloniser and colonised. Indeed, the very creation of such a picture postcard displaying the controller's residence speaks volumes about the producer's mission. It is a symbol of the alleged power, opulence and stability of the Dutch colonial state. A recipient of such a card in the West might thus interpret it in terms of a calm and controlled colonial space. In agreement with Hans Peter Hahn's (2018, p. 103) discussion, it is argued that photographs are not inherently objective objects and must be interpreted by expanding on the implied context(s). The fragmentation of meanings, particularly with colonial images such as Figure 13, supports the justification for the current postcolonial investigation.

Figure 13. Controleurswoning, Amoerang (Menado). Published by K.D. Que, Menado. Private Collection. Sent to Washington DC, USA, in 1911.



Figure 14. Reverse of Postcard in Figure 13

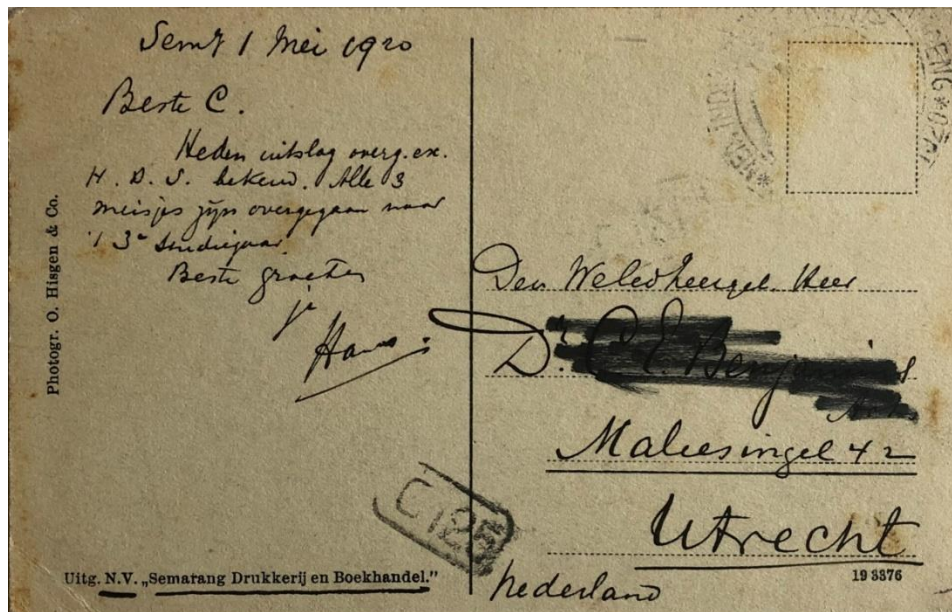
The penultimate example for discussion is Figure 15, below. This postcard is entitled ‘Semarang. Nieuw Semarang met Kampongaanleg’. This image shows the construction of a new housing district at Semarang. At the height of the colonial era in the Dutch East Indies, and with industrialisation leading to an increased demand for housing amongst urban industrial workers, the indigenous quarters or villages surrounding the major cities became increasingly densely populated. As a result, new civic planning was needed to provide adequate accommodation, space, and sanitation for those living in the existing residential areas (Purwanto & Hapsari, 2018, p. 606). It is important to note in the context of Figure 15 that this postcard was sent in 1920, which was before the 1922 and 1925 congresses on public housing in the Dutch East Indies. A Volkshuisvesting (public housing corporation) was established by the central government in 1925 to push for the construction of housing for low-income social groups (Colombijn, 2011, p. 440).

Figure 15. Semarang. Nieuw Semarang met Kampongaanleg. Published by Semarang Drukkerij en Boekhandel. Photo by O. Hisgen & Co. Private Collection. Sent from Semarang, Central Java, to Utrecht, Holland, on May 1 1920.



Major developmental works, such as that shown in Figure 15, were a key part of the government's strategy in portraying their commitments to the colonial sphere in a positive fashion. The construction of modern buildings with an established architectural plan and provision of proper sanitation infrastructure was one way in which the colonial government could claim that their role in the Dutch East Indies was benevolent. This tied in with the so-called 'Ethical Policy' from 1901 onwards, whereby the Dutch government played an increased role in the investment of infrastructure and social provision (Harris, 2013, p. 817). By funding such large-scale projects as new housing and port development, as we saw in Figure 11, the Dutch could also lay claim to their colonial actions as being a facet of the so-called civilising mission of European colonial empires. Such a claim has been critiqued through numerous mediums, such as art, law and religious mission, by scholars such as Robert Aman (2023), Christopher Szabla (2023) and Colette Harris (2017). This is further connected to the work of Mignolo (p. 152), once again, with modernist assumptions surrounding so-called civilisation and savagery.

Figure 16. Reverse of postcard in Figure 15



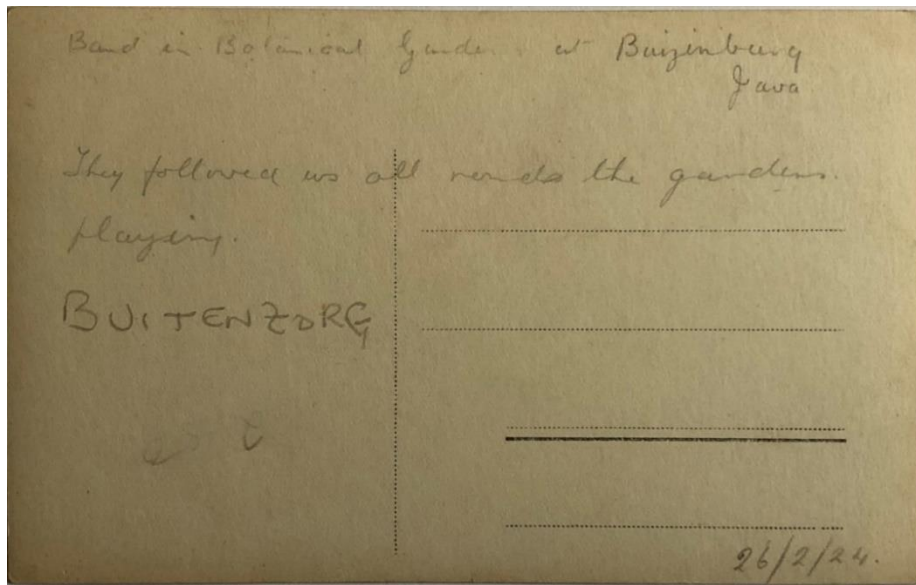
As can be seen from Figure 15, the new residential district has been laid out in a standardised fashion which is comparable to modern housing estates. The newly built houses and foundations awaiting construction are situated along a clearly defined roadway and are spread out at equal intervals. Such a disciplined and structured layout within urban planning, following a decidedly European pattern, would have been instantly recognisable to the recipient of such a postcard in the West. They would thus associate the Dutch colonial presence with progress and order, perhaps believing that such construction works were being completed across the Dutch East Indies. This was a trap for the recipient, however, and was intended to coax them into believing in the alleged civilising mission. The reality, of course, was a one-sided power dynamic based on economic desire through extractive colonialism (Darini & Anggraeni, 2021; de Zwart, 2022). As an item of material culture with potential agency over the recipient, in this case living in Utrecht, Holland, it may be said that it presents a convincing argument for individuals who had never been to the Dutch East Indies or who were acquainted with the realities of empire. As above, colonial anxiety would emerge in the recipient if their sheltered vision of the colonies was challenged by reality.

The final postcard for examination, seen below in Figure 17, is a very interesting example because of both its type and subject matter. Whereas our previous examples were commercially produced and bore publisher's markings etc., Figure 17 appears instead to be a 'real photo' postcard, likely photographed by the original owner. This process was enabled by advances in the early twentieth century. The production of photosensitive paper with a postcard template on the reverse by the Kodak company was very important in this respect, with smaller batches then being able to be produced locally instead of in larger factories (Hughes & Stevenson, p. 11). As Omar Khan (2018, p. 52) has discussed, Kodak's No. 3A folding pocket camera, which entered production in 1902, was able to take postcard-sized film. The real photo innovation benefitted both professionals and amateurs alike and opened up photography as a leisure pursuit (Bogdan & Weseloh, 2006). Figure 17, lacking any production markings and containing a very specific notation related to the image, was likely just such a production. The message on the reverse, as seen in Figure 18, tells us that the band followed the author around the garden playing their music. This of course suggests a direct link between the author and the creation of this postcard. Another key difference to note in Figure 17 is that it was never sent via a postal service; rather, it appears to have been kept as a memento.

Figure 17. Band in Botanical Garden at Buizenburg, Java. Private Collection. Never sent. Dated February 2 1924.



Upon examination of the image presented in Figure 17, we can see a brass band in a military-style uniform. The working assumption, as such, is that this is likely a military band deployed by the colonial state. We can also see that the band is composed of both indigenous and European members. The image suggests a sense of decorum and order, with the precision of a military band being a strong symbol of this. It is also very telling that such a band should have been present at the botanical gardens in the first place. As a highly curated tourist destination, gardens such as this were likely to attract a large number of European tourists who visited Java. Stationing such a band for the tourists' amusement was a convenient way of demonstrating to the visitors the safety and order of the colonial space. This was an artificial environment, of course, but the intention for it was to be a show of pageantry promoting the colonial state. The fact that the author was present to witness this, as noted below in Figure 18, is a happy coincidence which has provided us with an interesting anecdote of passive methods of colonial control through the creation of knowledge.

Figure 18. Reverse of Postcard in Figure 17

5. Conclusion

The humble picture postcard may only be an image transferred onto a card backing which allows for a written message, though it may certainly be said to have had a powerful impact historically. The postcard's carefully curated imagery was intended to promote colonial accomplishments, yet it simultaneously conveyed subtle anxieties and marginalized local communities by providing minimal contextual information and leaving room for misinterpretation. For example, figure 1 presents a Batak settlement with a Rumah Bolon Simalungun—a traditional house from North Sumatra, distinctly different from Javanese dwellings—without any explanatory note, eroding cultural specificity. Similarly, figure 5 shows a bathing place that was actually a tourist spot; however, the lack of context could lead viewers to assume that such scenes were commonplace among Javanese people. Meanwhile, figures 11 and 15—both set in Semarang—positively present the colonial sphere by emphasizing modern port and housing developments. These omissions and oversimplifications reduce the complexity of local narratives and reinforce a skewed colonial perspective. Although sent in their millions as curios and mementoes throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and often with a highly curated mass communicative message on the front, it has been the potential for signifiers of anxiety which could emerge from individuals that has interested this study. The specific form of anxiety, colonial anxiety, has been discussed due to its importance in postcolonial debates. The focus on early twentieth-century Indonesian postcards represents the strongly held belief that Indonesia is deserving of a more decisive and critical place within the canon of wider postcolonial debates, particularly around the concept of colonial anxiety.

The central premise to this study's argument has been that picture postcards and images, those created for consumption by those who were not aware of colonial realities in particular, had the potential to construct and maintain colonial knowledge as a symbolic discourse. The examples of Orientalist narratology and semi-official messaging linked to colonial order and progress

have been discussed here. Through the eight examples given, it has been demonstrated how the varying styles and images of the postcards might initiate colonial anxiety when their visual messages were disproven. This confirms to the methodology whereby the creation of colonial knowledge in this way was viewed as a symbolic discourse. When stereotypical assumptions, such as Orientalist standpoints or order and discipline in colonial governance, are challenged by the sudden appearance of reality or truth, the symbolic discourse breaks down and anxiety enters. It may thus be said that the newfound lack of understanding about the colonies, which causes the anxiety, represents the Lacanian ‘lack’ in structural anxiety.

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