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Indo-European Women and Evangelism in Central Java during the 19th Century

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Abstract

This research uses the historical method to delve into the religious work of 2 Indo-European women that lived around Banyumas and Purworejo in Central Java during the second half of the 19th century. Before there was any official evangelistic mission assigned or even allowed, they spread Christianity with their own way and means. Highly regarded because of their positions and Dutch-Javanese background, they used a special method that was adapted to the needs and traditions of the Javanese around them. This allowed them to develop a small Christian community, which gave rise to Sadrach's Kristen Djawi which emerged after them. They played an essential role in the rise of Christianity and the development of Kristen Djawi. Even though as women from Eurasian backgrounds, they were regarded low by Dutch social standards. Mrs. Van Oostrum and her sister-in-law Mrs. Philips would read from the Bible in Malaysian or Javanese Kromo to their servants. They would hold sacred services on Sunday with them, tell them about their interpretations from the Bible in the aforementioned languages and teach them about the principles of Christian faith. Mrs. Philips would even go from village to village with her Javanese helpers. This lead eventually to the rise of a community with more than 1000 people that had been baptized during a 10-year period. The community would grow even quicker beneath Sadrach's guidance, a principal helper and student from Mrs. Philips, into the Kristen Djawi community around the end of the 19th century.

Keywords: *Van Oostrum, Philips, evangelism in Central Java*

Introduction

The 19th century was the start of when the spread of Christianity began seriously many areas of the Dutch East Indies. Protestant and Catholic evangelism organizations were competing to send people to the interior of Java and other islands to spread their Christian teachings. However, as this research will show, those ventures were not always started by organizations in the Netherlands. There were also Indo-Europeans, descendants of Europeans and Indonesians, who were pioneers in evangelism in Central Java. They preceded it in their own way, according to the language, beliefs and customs of the Javanese. This research examines the ways of two Indo-European women in Central Java, and how they kept relations to the Dutch and Javanese. How did they start and succeed in this, and what made their role special in building the Christian community in the Bagelen area?

The theme of the spread of Christianity in Central Java is a topic that has often been researched. Also, more specifically, how this spread occurred in the colonial administrative area of Bagelen has been researched by Sutarman Soediman Partonadi in his book *Sadrach's Community* which discusses the main disciple from Mrs. Philips who continued to develop the existing Christian community into the Djawi Christian community at that time. This book also discusses a little about Philips, but does not fully cover her role and why she succeeded with Mrs. Van Oostrum to plant the seeds of Christian religions which were then developed by figures like Sadrach in Central Java. Their identity as women and their Indo-European ethnicity had a very big role in this. There are several academic journal articles that raise a similar theme, namely about Coolen in East Java who is also an Indo-European, which has several similarities because it examines the influence of Coolen's own identity, among others, on his work. But the difference is that this research is about Indo-Europeans of the other sex in a different region.

This study uses a historical approach to examine the role and position of Indo-European women in evangelism in Central Java. This research is also closely related to theology, because it examines how the process of spreading religion occurred. These Indo-European women used methods specially adapted for the Javanese around them to get their teachings accepted. Culture became such an important aspect for thousands of people converted to Christianity during their lives. The purpose of this research is to highlight how evangelism does not always take place the Dutch way by Dutch people, but

by people who are born and raised in a place that is closer to the surrounding culture. This led them to success and the development of Christian communities in Central Java.

Method

The method that is used is the historical method of prof. dr. Kuntowijoyo. This method consists of 5 steps, namely theme selection, source gathering, heuristics, the interpreting of sources and writing. After the theme and topic have been selected, the source gathering stage is carried out. Historical sources can be divided into primary sources and secondary sources. Some of the sources used in this research refer to secondary sources, namely sources written by people who did not directly witness the events that are described here. There are also primary sources written by people who directly were in contact with these Indo-European women in Central Java, especially the missionaries Vermeer, Adriaanse and Lion Cachet. Most of the sources are collected through the digital archive Delpher, Dutch missionary archives, history books and other collections of archives. The data obtained from reading those sources is then compared with other existing data to verify the authenticity. After the verification had been carried out, the research proceeds to the stage of data interpretation and writing which resulted in this paper.

The spatial and temporal boundaries of this study were chosen based on the evangelistic activities of Mrs. Van Oostrum and Mrs. Philips. They were active at approximately the same time. Van Oostrum's first pupils were baptized in 1858, while students of Philips began to be baptized from 1860 and onwards. Van Oostrum and Philips continued to work until their deaths in 1877 and 1876 respectively. This means that the temporal boundaries are roughly from approximately 1858 to 1877. The spatial boundaries used is the administrative area of Bagelen during the colonial period, which included, among other areas, Purworejo and Banyumas in Central Java. This is the area where both Indo-European women lived and carried out their work.

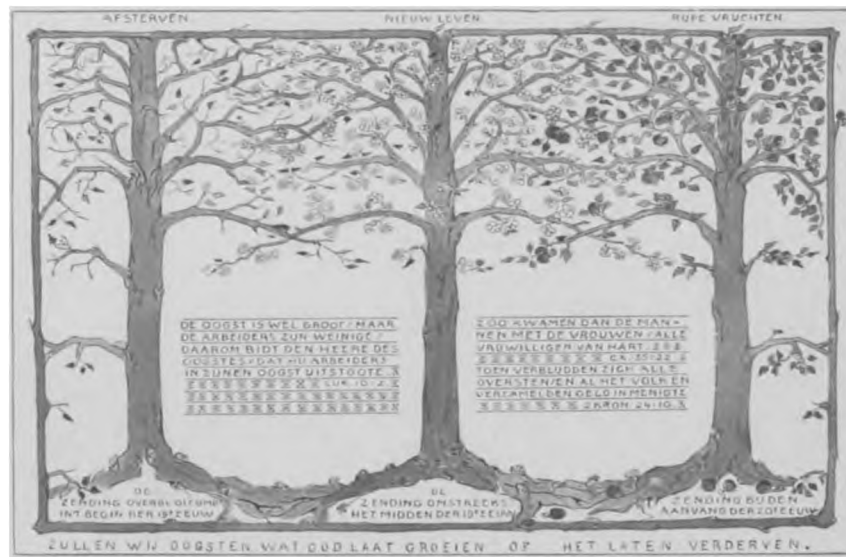
Result and Discussion

Christianity in Central Java, Bagelen, during the 19th century.

Zending or evangelism in the mid-19th century was just experiencing a revival. During the previous centuries the Gospel message was regarded as a 'dead tree', which just in the mid-19th century was gaining 'new leaves' and then in the 20th century it began to 'bear fruit'. The colonial government in the early 19th century was still skeptical about the preaching of the Bible and did not always give permission for evangelistic activities. This also happened in the Bagelen area, where an initial request by the

missionary Hoesoo was rejected in the 1850s. At that time only one missionary assistant was allowed to live in Bagelen. The first Dutch missionaries did not get permission to preach the Gospel in 1865. That was after Van Oostrum and Philips had already started to preach their message. These two women were not hindered by the local government, because they were already local residents who initially only preached the Gospel in small circles.

Image 1



From left to right: the 'evangelism' tree, which died during the 18th century, came to life during the mid-19th century and finally bore fruit in the early 20th century.

The preaching of the Gospel in the Bagelen, Banyumas and Purworejo areas was initiated by Mrs. Van Oostrum around 1858. Van Oostrum owned a batik business in Banyumas where many Javanese women worked. At first, Van Oostrum liked to read verses from the Bible for her batik and domestic workers. This led to the baptism of 7 women and 2 men, 4 of them domestic workers the rest batik workers, traveled to Semarang in 1858. The baptism took place in Semarang, because at that time there were no missionaries allowed in the Bagelen area.

Around 1860 Van Oostrum's sister-in-law, Philips, started evangelizing at her house in Ambal. In 1860 the first 5 students were baptized at the Purworejo church. Both held regular meetings every Sunday at their yard. This Christian network spread quickly. Philips and Van Oostrum communicated with various Javanese missionaries and evangelists, such as Kyai Ibrahim Tunggul Wulung, who had become a student in 1863 at both Philips' and Van Oostrum's houses. Also Dutch missionaries such as Anthing, Hoesoo and Poensen who had great influence often communicated with them and sent students.

The students mainly came from outside the Bagelen area. They were given food and clothing, but no money or salary to help. In 1864 Philips moved to the village of Tuksana in Purworejo when her husband retired and continued preaching the Gospel on a small scale.

At first, they were under the responsibility of the *Nederlandse Zendingsvereniging* which was based in Semarang, but in 1865 changed hands to the *Nederlandse Gereformeerde Zendingsvereniging* (NGZV). Pastor Vermeer from the NGZV then moved to Tegal in 1863 to be closer to the territory given to him, but after getting to know Philips and Van Oostrum he moved to Purbolinggo. This was because Vermeer in 1865 had sent a follower to Banyumas who was received kindly and allowed to preach, but with conditions. If he wanted to do evangelism, then it had to be under Van Oostrum's tutelage. Vermeer's follower wanted independence, which caused difficulties. In the end Vermeer gave in, so his follower then moved to Purbolinggo to avoid further conflict. Vermeer himself followed in 1867 to Purbolinggo. It was only after moving to Purbolinggo that Vermeer got to know Philips and he sometimes made trips to both their homes to help with holy services when invited.

These Christian communities developed slowly with their small-scale activities and only focused on their immediate surroundings. In 1870 there were 29 Javanese registered at the Purworejo church including the local Javanese regent. Together with them and other Indo-European friends Philips built her own church in her yard to hold meetings every Sunday. In this church, which had the capacity for about 100 people, Philips took turns holding sacred services with friends or helpers. Other communities like those of Philips and Van Oostrum developed during this time. For example, there is a sibling of Van Oostrum, Mrs. Willemse, who also managed a Christian community at her house. There is also Mrs. Bouwer who lived in Kutoarjo who applied the same method and was close to these other Indo-European women.

Although on a small scale, the Dutch community in Purworejo felt awkward with the relatively large number of Javanese. In 1869 a special community was formed for the Javanese by the church council. The church in Purworejo began to hinder the church's pastor, so that Philips and Van Oostrum were told to ask the missionary Vermeer for help. The distance between Purbolinggo, Banyumas and Purworejo plus the lack of adequate transportation made visits from Vermeer difficult.

The arrival of Sadrach, who later became the head of the *Kristen Djawi* church in Central Java, brought about major changes in 1869. Sadrach was sent by the missionary Anthing to Philips, who accepted him as a student who also helped in evangelizing and carrying out religious duties. Sadrach, who was gifted in discussions and speeches, was well versed in propaganda. In almost a year the community had doubled in size so that by 1871 there were 65 Javanese registered at the church. But this growth accelerated in

the following years, when it is estimated that a total of some 2,500 people were baptized in the period 1870-1873. The Dutch community did not like this, so conflict arose between the two groups. The church pastor was accused of spending too much time with the Javanese, so he was transferred in 1873. His successor was forbidden by the Purworejo church council to continue giving sacraments to the Javanese.

In the conflicts that arose between her community and the local church or the colonial authorities, Philips played the role of intermediary. Also, between her husband and Sadrach she interceded. Mr. Philips did not share the spirit of evangelization like his wife did and was not as understanding of Javanese cultures or ornaments which Sadrach used for example. The treatment of his wife as the *Ratu Adil*, the just king according to Javanese mythology, was opposed by him, but Philips managed to balance decent relations between all parties. Although she fell ill in 1873, she continued to try to help as much as she could in the development of her Christian community.

The Bagelen region at that time was an area with a very large number of Muslim adherents. It was also the reason for the colonial government to initially reject the preaching of the Bible, for fear of triggering a negative response from the Javanese. At the same time, there were other religious movements that made it easier for Christianity to enter, namely the 4 *guru pameco*. These teachers had many students who were taught about morality, having one wife, forbidding divorce, gambling and these opium, love for one another and consider everyone equal.

Sadrach made trips to villages in the interior with Philips starting around 1870. Sadrach was able to beat these teachers in religious debates so that they and their students were baptized for the most part. Before that happened, they were brought to Philips to be taught and then baptized only when Vermeer had free time to travel to Purworejo or the surrounding hinterlands. Sadrach increasingly assumed the role of propagandist, but the missionary center remained at Tuksana where Philips lived, although Sadrach had moved to a nearby village in 1871. Trips to the countryside in 1872-1873 brought thousands who wanted to study or were ready to be baptized.

After 1873 Philips fell ill, so she could no longer partake in evangelistic tours across the countryside. She remained a protective figure for Sadrach and other Javanese, even though Sadrach was already quite independent in evangelizing. It was not until Philips' death in 1876 that Sadrach was truly independent and without any intermediary. The impact was felt in 1882, when Bieger, Vermeer's successor, arrived from the NGZV. An open conflict arose between Sadrach and Bieger, because the latter wanted to become the leader of the *Kristen Djawi* community and teach them according to the Dutch way. This conflict caused Sadrach to be arrested and a great deal of suspicion arose among his community towards the Dutch missionaries.

The Van Oostrum community in Banyumas experienced a slightly different fate. Van Oostrum never did as many activities as his sister-in-law, but always held gatherings at home until the end of her life. After the death of Van Oostrum in 1877 pastor Vermeer attempted to keep the community united. However, after Vermeer himself died in 1891, there was a 10-year gap until another priest was sent again to the area in 1901. As a result, most of Javanese returned to become Muslims while only a few had remained Christians.

Van Oostrum and Philips as pioneers of evangelism in Central Java

Image 2



Johanna Christina van Oostrum-Philips.

Johanna Christina van Oostrum-Philips, usually called Van Oostrum or Van Oostrum, was born in 1815 into the Philips family. She married to Mr. Van Oostrum and owned a well-known *batik Belanda* company in Banyumas, Bagelen. The Javanese workers from Van Oostrum's company, together with the people who worked at her homes, were the first people to be taught about Christianity. In the beginning, Van Oostrum liked to read verses from the Bible to them. After reading from it in Dutch, she translated the verses into Javanese and explained their meaning.

Some of the listeners became so interested in the teachings that Van Oostrum began to teach them the basics of Christianity. This led to the first 9 people who were baptized in Semarang in 1858 after being taught by Van Oostrum. Van Oostrum was a very independent figure and could speak Javanese and Dutch fluently. From this small Christian community that grew Van Oostrum became its center. She decided everything

and lead it herself as the head of the community. Her yard became the center of all activities.

There she held sacred services, taught according to her own understanding of the church and decided who was ready to be baptized. When Vermeer and his assistant tried to take over the evangelism activities in 1865, they encountered fierce resistance from Van Oostrum which was so tough that they moved to Purbolinggo to avoid further conflict. This meant that Van Oostrum also became the one who invited Vermeer to come baptize, preach and give the sacraments whenever she felt it. The only things she did not perform were the baptism and giving of sacraments.

Vermeer also couldn't speak Javanese, so in terms of communication he depended on his assistants and Van Oostrum. The first time he visited Van Oostrum's home, he was surprised to see the great spirit of her small community. He was satisfied by seeing their knowledge of church history. The Dutch East Indies at that time was known as a land where there were not many religious people, so Vermeer was really amazed to see the relatively many people that gathered in 1865 at Van Oostrum's yard. In total there were about 20 Javanese and 40 Indo-Europeans. He was amazed, because the last time he held such a big sacred service for that many people was at least 2 years before.

At that time Van Oostrum had built a communication network with missionaries throughout Java. Some of her students who later became pioneers of evangelizing in other areas, such as Tunggul Wulung and Sadrach, temporarily lived at her house and studied and assisted in religious duties. The community continued to prosper and grow until the end of her life. After that, because there was no figure with her enthusiasm or knowledge of religion and Javanese society, the community underwent a gradual decline.

Image 3



Christina Petronella Philips-Stevens.

Christina Petronella Philips-Stevens was born in 1925 in Yogyakarta. Her father was Johan Christiaan Stevens, a land owner in Yogyakarta, while her mother was a Javanese. She married Johannes Carolus Philips, a brother of Mrs. Van Oostrum, who was

a supervisor on an indigo plantation in Ambal. At first it was said that Philips was not a very zealous Christian. However, after meeting a Javanese Christian from Semarang, she started to rethink about her religion and her own zealousness. After conferring with her sister-in-law Van Oostrum, she took started religious activities which during the 1860-1869 period were not much different.

After moving from Ambal to Tuksana in 1864 she gradually began to deepen her activities. Philips also developed as a very dominant figure, although she found support from her husband and other Indo-Europeans around her. Like Van Oostrum, she enjoyed reading from the Bible in Dutch, which she then translated into Malay and Javanese. She also taught in Javanese to her students about basic knowledge of the Bible, the 10 commandments, the 12 pillars of faith and the Our Father prayer. When her students had learned those things, she called Vermeer to come or ask for help at the church in Purworejo to baptize them.

When she performed sacred services, the adjustment to Javanese culture was very prominent. Everything was translated or directly preached into Javanese. Also when Vermeer led the service, it was Philips, an Indo-European friend or student who then translated it into Javanese and explained its meaning. At first they sat on the floor, then someone sang a religious song adapted to the Javanese *tembang* tradition. After each section, they stopped and Philips explained what it meant. Afterwards they continued singing the song. Students who could read were also given a small book in Javanese about Christian principles. The book was written by a Dutchman in Javanese in 1855 and has only 27 pages, but Philips bought it and made efforts to provide additional reading for students, even though the book was tough difficult to understand for the Javanese.

During the 1869-1873 period activities began to get more serious. Sadrach, Philips' newest student, became an active figure and began traveling the countryside with Philips. Philips also built a church out of bamboo in her yard. Meetings were held every Sunday, but also on other major holidays such as the birthday of Jesus Christ, the day he was circumcised, the Resurrection Day, Ascension Day, and the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Also during the week from Christmas to New Years they gathered every day at this small church. On special days like these the church was decorated with green ornaments.

In these journeys to the villages, Philips continued to play a key role. she decided where it was allowed to build churches. When the construction was finished, she came to inaugurate it. The churches were made of bamboo and had a mosque-like building style, which Philips never disputed. It was Sadrach who started the preaching of the Gospel, before Philips came to finish it. She used the same prayer that Solomon used to inaugurate a place of worship. The leader and council of this new church were then appointed by Philips.

This community began to grow rapidly. Sadrach became increasingly independent in his duties and moved in 1871 to Karangjasa. However, Philips and the village of Tuksana remained the center of all activities. Everyone who wanted to study was brought by Sadrach to Philips to be taught. Philips himself also often came to Karangjasa to attend gatherings at the church that was built there by Sadrach. She also met face-to-face as much as possible when touring the surrounding villages. Sadrach always arrived before her, announced his arrival and prepared the ground for 'njonja Philips' to preach. The attitude of disciples like Sadrach was full of respect for her. This can be seen, among other things, from the fact that Philips uses the Javanese Ngoko, while Sadrach and the others used the Javanese Kromo when they met.

This rapid growth reached more than 2500 people during the period 1869-1873 who were baptised. Philips became an intermediary between the Javanese and the Dutch Christians. Also between figures like Sadrach and her husband she mediated, so that everything ran smoothly despite the many cultural, racial and personal challenges that arose. She also liked to write letters to various Christian and public newspapers in the Netherlands and Java asking for financial assistance or to send new literature. Philips only had 8 Bibles in Javanese for hundreds of students in 1874 and living only of the pension of her husband, which caused her to have no money to buy new teaching material.

Particularly after falling ill after 1873, Philips was no longer able to go around the villages and handed it over to Sadrach because of a chest ailment. On the last trip with Vermeer and Sadrach more than 700 students were baptized. But she continued to lead her church at her house, calling for further help by mail and interceding between the two increasingly heated parties. In both of these she was successful. When she died, she was sent a thousand prints of Christian hymns in Javanese with directions for musical instruments. She also maintains her own church book and produces her own gospel hymnbook. The 8 Bibles in Javanese has reached 140 copies. However, after she died, her husband moved away and immediately sold all these spiritual treasures.

The Dutch had an ambiguous attitude towards these two women. In their time, their role was often muzzled away and the honours of evangelizing Central Java was initially taken by the NGZV. Also, the fact that they as women carry out evangelism was not always approved, because it was not permitted religiously. But on the other hand, fighters for women's rights and observers of church history were amazed to see the two succeeding in approaching the Javanese, when so many Dutch missionaries failed miserably. The Dutch community in Purworejo and Banyumas were also displeased with the activities of these two Indo-European women and tried many times to fight this and erect barriers so that Javanese Christians could not enter the Dutch colonial circles. The main criticism aimed at the two was the lack of quality of their religious education. But even so, their accomplishments were considered so important and exemplary that it was

often justified. This was also considered as the fault of the church itself which was not helping them and give them the tools for good education.

The Javanese had a very different view. They did not see the problem of education or gender. Instead, they saw the Indo-European descent as something that was 'more' and because their approach very heavily involved Javanese culture, they had much respect for them. The legend of the *Ratu Adil* was also a big element. 'Njonja Philips' was often referred to as *Ratu Adil*, and Philips herself also used the *Ratu Adil* myth as a tool in evangelizing. When she came to the villages she was often greeted as *Gusti Maryam*. *Gusti* as a title used for kings and deities, and considered as a godly reincarnation, while *Maryam* refers to the Islamic name for Saint Mary. Her husband was greeted as *Gusti Joesoep*, with *Joesoep* referring to Saint Joseph, when he sometimes joined her trips, but he was the only one who took issue with such names. While Sadrach was considered a father to these new Christians, Philips was considered as their grandmother.

Conclusion

Van Oostrum and Philips are only 2 of various Indo-European women in Central Java who preached the Bible according to their own interpretation. Van Oostrum became a major pioneer but many others, all Indo-European women, around her followed her example. Philips became the most extensive in terms of activity and succeeded in building a large Javanese Christian community. Their status as women was not an obstacle, while their status as descendants of Europeans and Javanese was actually the key in evangelizing. This was because they really understood the customs and language of the Javanese, something the Dutch missionaries failed to understand. They could read and write and were able to earn the respect and trust of the Javanese around them. It would be interesting for further research to study about the development of these Javanese Christian communities besides Philips', while there is already an extensive and detailed work on Sadrach's life. It will also be interesting to trace the scale of this occurrence in Central Java, although it is difficult due to limited contemporary sources and the sometimes unfavorable view of the Dutch towards Indo-Europeans, especially while women were not allowed to do evangelistic work.

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