



## Urban Canals in Colonial Batavia: Rethinking ‘Clean and Dirt’ Space

**Euis Puspita Dewi<sup>1\*</sup>, Kemas Ridwan Kurniawan<sup>1</sup>, Evawani Ellisa<sup>1</sup> and Melani Budianta<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Architecture, Universitas Indonesia, 16424 Depok, Jawa Barat, Indonesia*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Literature, Universitas Indonesia, 16424 Depok, Jawa Barat, Indonesia*

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how the discourse of clean and dirt was articulated in everyday life of inhabitants in Batavia (now known as Jakarta) through the use of Molenvliet canal. This study reveals how power, domination and inequality were practised, reproduced, or confronted. This was seen in the written texts and visual graphs representing the social and political context in Batavia. The findings show the Molenvliet canal plays a marker role suggesting the division of two contrasting phenomena between “clean” and “dirty” to signify the dichotomy of “European” vs “Native”. Europeans used their private wells as clean water resources for daily activities, while the “Natives” used the public canals for their daily usage. The usage of the canal by the native population have reinforced various myths of superiority. It produced a discourse of undeveloped native bodies associated with the canal, diseases, and contamination. This study also exposes the failure of the Europeans to create the boundary between clean and dirty space. The Europeans judged cleanliness and relied on laundry services provided by the Natives who used the canal to wash their clothes. These canals revealed how the concept of dirt and cleanliness were used as a form of European domination. The canal become an evidence of powerlessness of European society.

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#### *E-mail addresses:*

euis.puspidadewi@gmail.com (Euis Puspita Dewi)

kemas.ridwan@gmail.com (Kemas Ridwan Kurniawan)

ellisa.evawani@gmail.com (Evawani Ellisa)

melani.budianta@gmail.com (Melani Budianta)

\* Corresponding author

### INTRODUCTION

McLaughlin (1971) in Van Dijk (2011) stated that dirtiness and cleanliness are in the eye of the beholder. The concepts differ between individuals and groups,

depending on who and how the individual or group of people view and assess them. In addition, color, odor, and texture, cleanliness and dirtiness can be used to build social construction. “Cleanliness” and “dirtiness” is a praise or a condemnation respectively of individuals or groups regarding their clothes, body, natural or built environment in order to discriminate based on social status, race, class, economy, religion or ethnic background (Van Dijk, 2011).

This study focuses on the Molenvliet canal in Batavia which was constructed in 1648 by a Chinese Captain, Pho Bing-Ham, and with the approval of the VOC authority to control flooding in the southern part of Batavia. This canal also functioned as a route to transport local goods and open up the inland areas (Blackburn, 2010). During the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, rich Europeans who previously utilised the canal for transportation, moved away from the city searching for healthier environment free from pollution produced by the dirty canal and the smoke of *arak* distillation.

Cleanliness became an issue less than half a century after Batavia was founded. In 1744, Batavia begun to deteriorate and transformed from a city with beautiful and clean canals into an uninhabitable one (De Haan, 1922). The canals were blocked by sedimentation as a result of natural and human factors (Abeyasekere, 1987). Health was the main consideration for the relocation of the city centre from downtown Old City in the South to an area named Weltevreden (means well-contented) after the bankruptcy of VOC in 1799. The

Molenvliet canal connected the unclean and unhealthy Batavia of the North to a clean healthy area of New Weltevreden in the South.

After the development of Weltevreden as a new colonial centre in early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the decreasing quality of the old city area as well as the growth of population driven by migration to the region, Molenvliet canal served as an area for bathing, washing, and fetching water for indigenous communities.

This study aims to explore how the discourse of cleanliness and dirtiness was part of everyday life of colonial practices and was represented through the Molenvliet canal. The other objective of this study is to seek how the concept of power operated in the development and utilisation of the canal.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research used inter-penetration method for historical and the critical discourse analysis. The method for historical research consisted of heuristic (the collection of data), criticism of sources of data, interpretation and historiography. Critical discourse analysis was used to reveal how power, domination and inequality was practiced, reproduced, and resisted through travel stories or visual texts (photos, written texts, report, decree, waiver, reports, films, maps, paintings or sketches) in a social and political context of 17<sup>th</sup> century Batavia.

Historical data were collected from secondary sources comprising:

1. Maps. Investigation focused not only on the locations and canals, but also the ideological and political background

implied in the development of canals. The maps were obtained from ANRI, Atlas MAIOR, KNAG, and Nationaal Archief collected in *Grote Atlas van VOC Comprehensive Altas of the Dutch United East India Company*.

2. Photos. Photos were selected through the process of collection, selection, and classification before being analysed contextually. Selected photos underwent the process of ‘cleaning up’ and ‘filtering’ from unnecessary reference to avoid unclear origin or ‘bias’. Photos were collected from many sources, such as ANRI, KIT Library, KITLV, COLLECTIE\_TROPEN MUSEUM, etc.
3. Text. Various text as study materials analysed through critical discourse, ranging from the travel records, newspaper, affidavit, decrees, and other related items. The sources were PANOENGTOEN KAMADJOEAN No 4. 1 July 1938\_03 and Daily D’Orient No. 26, June 28, 1930, p 1\_010), Batavia, *De Koningen van Het Oosten The Queen of the East* written by Zee (1926).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A Contrast of Everyday Life between Europeans and Indigenous People

Migration of people from outside of Batavia increased the population and its density. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had eased the access and shortened the distance from Netherlands to Dutch East Indies (Taylor, 1983) and consequently encouraged greater number of Europeans to travel to the Indies. By 1930, the population of the city of Batavia had grown to 435,000, trebling the 1900 level (Blackburn, 2010).

In 1870, the proliferation of private enterprises offered the opportunity for the migrants to find employment in Batavia. The city soon developed progressively which led to influx of indigenous laborers from outside of Batavia. They lived in rural areas of Weltevreden, such as Senen and Kemayoran (Gunawan, 2010). As their numbers rose drastically, the indigenous people made up the majority of the population in this city.

Batavia was divided into two areas, the European city and the kampong (Figure 1). Both areas displayed an opposing scenery: the beautiful environment of European district with good infrastructure and the undeveloped ‘kampong’ without proper infrastructure and sanitary facilities.

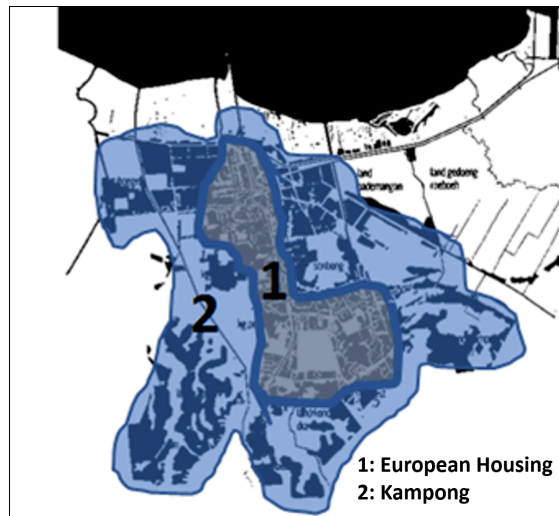


Figure 1. Map of European Housing and Kampongs

The indigenous people lived in the shelters inside kampongs which were almost entirely made of wood, bamboo, and thatched roofs. The Europeans were concentrated in the central area of Weltevreden with large houses and gardens, good facilities and

sanitary facilities. The European society lived a private life and their daily activities took place in the privacy of their colonial bungalows and beautifully landscaped garden. Drinking tea in the morning on the veranda was a common sight (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Washing activities of the indigeneous people along the canal  
Source: Collectie Tropenmuseum TMnr 60005949.jpg

The differences in daily lives between Europeans and indigenous people were also revealed by their cleaning activities, which were done in their private room called “*kamar mandi*” (the bathroom). In addition, they preferred a big house and a

large courtyard to conduct their domestic activities. For the Europeans, the private life should be hidden behind a comfortable interior. There was no any evidence that their daily life was exposed in the association with canals.



Figure 3. Activities of European in the garden

Source: Collectie Tropenmuseum TMnr 60005953.jpg

On the contrary, the indigenous people spent much of their their daily routine in association with the canals, which was considered as the source of water for almost all of the necessities of their lives. A photo shows the theirwashing activities along the canal, with a background of a shop owned by a Chinese called Tek Sun Ho (Figure 3).

The indigenous communities lived a hard life and they did not have many choices. They eventually had to use the water in the canal for various domestic activities. The artesian wells were provided only for European communities and limited numbers of indigenous people, because the government was reluctant to use the funds for the benefit of non-Europeans,

even during early 20<sup>th</sup> century after the imppeementation of Ethical Policy. The newspapers complained on the limited access by the locals to clean water, as reported in the newspaper PANOENGTOEN KAMADJOEAN No 4. 1 July 1938\_03: “*Although the water is dirty, it is in the middle of the city. Many Indonesian people bathed in it, because they could not afford to pay tap water.*” The statement in the newspaper showed the powerlessness of the natives, with very limited access to and space for fulfilling their daily needs. Although the canal water was dirty, they had no choice except to use it for bathing, washing, and even drinking.

### Canal as A Marker of the Clean and the Dirty Space

For indigenous people, Molenvliet Canal was a public space for various activities. It was shown by Dr. Strehler in *The Queen of the East* written by Zee (1926): “*Since morning, indigenous women rush into the canal to perform activities of washing*”.

The photographs support data on the number of people who had used the canal.

The activity shown was the washing along the edge of the canal that had been hardened with concrete and stairs (Figure 4). This is illustrated in Daily Dorient below: “*In the colonial time, ....as a sign of modernity, urban colonial government built stairs at the riverside to accommodate this behavior*” (Source: Daily D’Orient No. 26, June 28, 1930, p 1\_010).



Figure 4. Washing activities under the stairs of canal  
Source: Collectie Tropenmuseum TMnr 60013018.jpg

This canal was used not only for washing or bathing human and animals, but also for transporting goods, carnival, etc. (Figure 5).

Most users of the canal were villagers who lived without shower, washing, and toilet facilities.

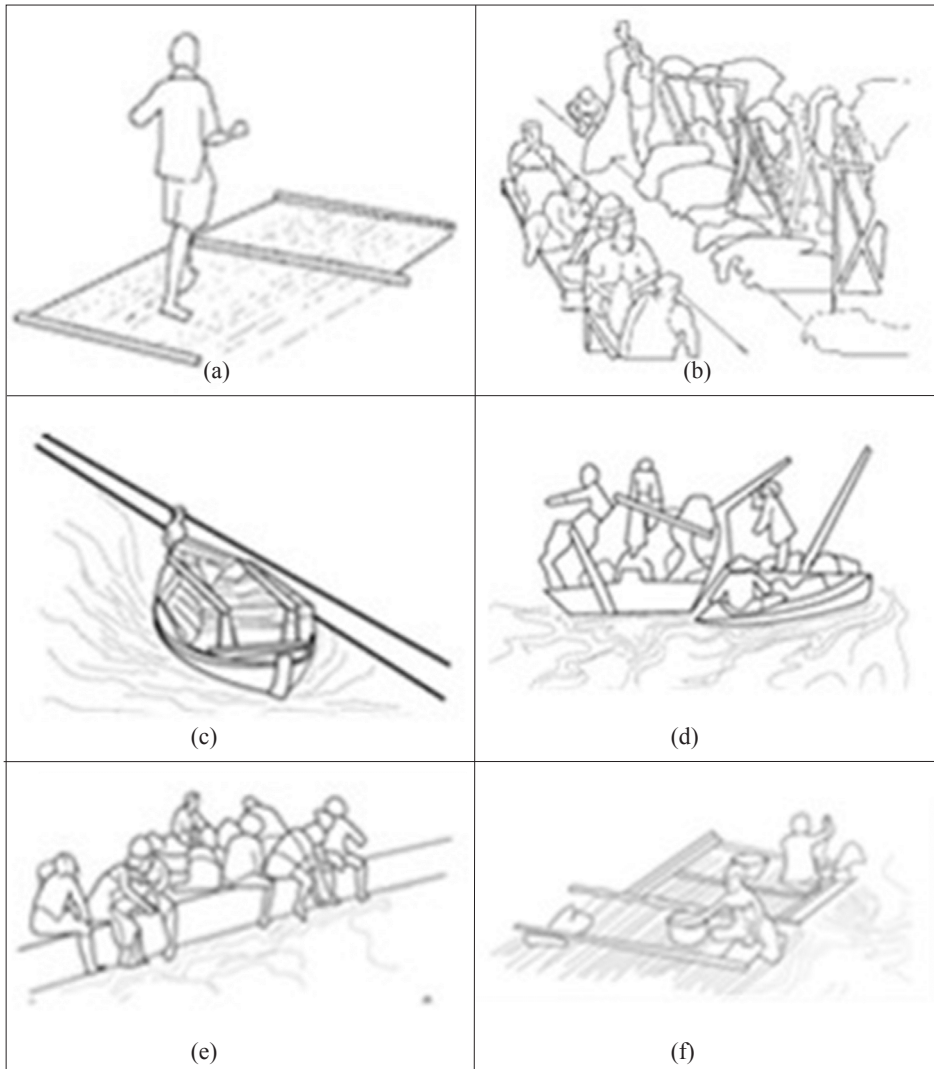


Figure 5. Various activities in the Molenvliet canal: (a) Human transportation; (b) laundry; (c) goods transportation; (d) carnival; (e) washing at along canal side; and (f) washing on the raft

Source: The result of photos tracing

According to Leeuwen (1920) in Colombijn and Coté (2014): “The fact is that the natives enjoy a shower, wash, and defecate in the water flowing [show] an insensitivity them about cleanliness and order”. Van Breen (1916) in Colombijn and Coté (2014) corroborated this adding: “Dislike of natives with artesian water as a water consuming process of aeration and expensive cooling

before consumption shows the apparent lack of them against modernity and the status of non-citizens in a modernization of the urban landscape. The water and the aeration process require expensive cooling time before consumption. They only rely on the properties of water traditionally and unscientific (color, clarity, taste, and smell) to determine the quality. They are

*just as water users 'not modern' and actively excluded in membership in the artesian water supply that was built."* Kampongs were not a priority for the government, although they increasingly became very crowded. Even when the locals requested public toilets and washing facility in the kampongs, the government insisted it had to be provided independently.

The reluctance of the colonial government to improve sanitation facilities for the indigenous people in Batavia was the result of their sense of superiority (Zee, 1926, pp. 45-47). Cleanliness was considered the characteristic of the rich and the elite. Corbin in Van Dijk (2011) states the intolerance towards odour began to emerge among the elite, at the time when there was a rise in interest for pleasant smell. In the 20th century, "smell" was served as a marker of social backwardness and lower command (Ger & Yenicioglu, 2004).

Cleanliness was projected as a reflection of high civilisation (Van Dijk, 2011). As a result, the European elite made the bathroom and the other sanitation facilities as important elements in their homes, and as part of their civilisation. In the colonial context, cleanliness, as part of behaviour and manners, became synonymous with the civilised.

The government of Netherlands looked at Batavia as a pocket of Western settlement, ignoring non-Westerners. This was the perception held by every European when they came to Batavia who saw the beautiful environment, namely the town, as their own creation, indicating the racial superiority

of the colonial power. The European governments had the power to create beautiful cities and they never assumed the Batavia as an auxiliary factor for enhancing the beauty of Batavia.

The indigenous people used the canal as a space for washing and cleaning. The Europeans looked at the native men and women with disgusts they perceived the shirtless latter as being dressed improperly while bathing and washing along the canal were considered as unclean.

The indigenous people fought hard for access to drainage and sewerage facility for the benefit of their community. Yet, it was only a waste of time because the policies favoured the Europeans. In 1929, the European settlement in Batavia had four times more supply of water compared with the area where the natives lived. Water supply from hydrants, artesian wells, or reservoir was delivered to households through high-pressure pipelines for European urban homes. Meanwhile the natives obtained water by purchasing them from water vendors who charged high prices. They had little choice as they could not afford the cost involved in installing tap water.

The division of urban space and the native population based on the availability of water supply infrastructure in the late 19th century, was intended as a strategy of colonial domination based on racial superiority (Stoler, 1987). This also showcases level of modernity. The widening distance between the Europeans and indigenous groups arked a separation between the native kampong

and the European city. The canal was a marker of this division.

The canal showed the world the distinct separation between Europeans and the locals (Figure 6). The canal seems to be a theater of powerlessness and lack of knowledge on cleanliness and hygiene

among the indigenous communities. It shows two different faces in the discourse on cleanliness. Luxury buildings showed the modernity of European society, while the activities along the canal reflected ‘primitiveness and backwardness’ of the natives.



Figure 6. The separate lives of the: (a) European; and (b) indigenous peoples

**Commercial Laundry Service at the Canal: European domination and Native Helplessness.** Other than being used for bathing, washing, and defecating, the canal was also used as a place to wash clothes, sheets, and mosquito nets by workers, both men and women. Van Dijk (2011) reported

the women washed the clothes of rich Europeans or non-Europeans, while the men washed clothes that belonged to employees of European owned companies. The male washers used the board as a place to wash the clothes (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Commercial Laundry

Source: Collectie Tropenmuseum TMnr 60005976.jpg

The emergence of laundry service was the result of development of hotels, companies, and shopping centres after the establishment of private enterprises due to economic liberalisation in Netherland Indie (1870-1900). Gas factories, cavalry barrack in Petojo club house, “Bazar” selling men’s clothes, Marine Hotel Molenvliet West, Van Arcken Co. and Eigen Hulp shopping centre among others grew around the Molenvliet area. In addition, businesses selling ornaments belonged to rich Chinese community, Arabs, and Indonesia’s new aristocrats.

Since most of the consumers were companies and families of the European

community, the existence of laundry services shows the former could not escape from their dependency on the indigenous community. In reality, water from the canal provided by the European government for city infrastructure, eventually was consumed by the European to wash their own clothes. European-owned hotels utilised the laundry service at the canal. The maids who were employed by the Europeans (known as “*baboe*”) used the canal as a place to wash their clothes, bed sheets, and the mosquito nets.

The canal served as a mark of separation, and at the same time it functioned as the unifying space of being clean and dirty. It

shows the European failure to create the boundary of cleanliness discourse. The canal was a form of European domination and inability to maintain their discourse of cleanliness. The Europeans criticised and looked down on the indigenous people on their lack cleanliness, but oddly, they still used the canal to wash their clothes.

## CONCLUSION

The Molenvliet canal was a meeting place between the kampong and the city. The canal did not only reflect the movement of the city in time and space, but also a meeting place and a marker of two contrasting civilisations. The canal symbolised the powerlessness and lack of knowledge of indigenous communities on cleanliness and healthiness. European buildings equipped with a sanitary facilities was a contrast with the "backwardness" of indigenous people who still used the canal as a place to wash and clean. The laundry activities along the canals, however, displayed the breakdown of the division between dirtiness and cleanliness as a form of European domination over the Native. The canal thus, was an evidence of the dependency of European society on the indigenous community.

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