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Notes from Batavia, the Europeans' Graveyard: The Nineteenth-Century Debate on Acclimatization in the Dutch East Indies

Hans Pols

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Abstract

Since the advent of European colonial expansion, medical theories of acclimatization have been inextricably related to convictions about the

possibility and desirability of white settlement in the colonies, and political ideas of colonial governance. Before 1800, acclimatization theories emphasized the inherent flexibility of the human constitution and its ability to adapt to new environments. During the first half of the nineteenth century, European theorists came to highlight the vulnerability of white Europeans in the tropics to disease, degeneration, and death instead. They consequently argued that white settlement in the tropics was impossible and inadvisable. European physicians in the British and French colonies presented similar views. By contrast, their colleagues in the Dutch East Indies remained optimistic. They associated themselves with the colonial European settler community and shared their grievances against autocratic colonial rule. They presented medical theories which related acclimatization to prudent behavior, morality, and proper management of the environment, thereby downplaying the significance of climate and high temperatures. During the following decades, their views on acclimatization were transferred to the Netherlands, where they were deployed as an argument against the cultivation system, the then-current approach of colonial governance, which emphasized the trade of cash crops grown by the indigenous population, severely limited European settlement, and curtailed the rights of Europeans living in the Indies. Throughout the nineteenth century, the influence of climate and the possibility of acclimatization became recurring themes in debates about colonial governance in both the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands.

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