A World in a Box: Education and/or Extraction in a Dutch Colonial School Collection

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Fig. 1: Collection: Museum of World Cultures, Amsterdam; Object number: TM-4108-815; Name: unknown; Place & Community Details: Indonesia and Suriname; Maker's Name: assembled by het Koloniaal Instituut (Amsterdam), box made by N.V. Ultrajectina (Utrecht); Materials: among others, tropical woods, gold ore, manganese, coal, petroleum, different rice varieties, sugar molasses, cinnamon; Collector: returned to the Tropenmuseum by the Royal Archives of the Netherlands; Date collected: 1967.

Waroe, coconut, bamboo, and sisal hemp fibres rest next to a piece of rope from Java, Indonesia, a dried piece of fruit, and a dried root. Neatly tied together in bundles, these are the objects, the products of colonialism, with which you are confronted on opening the first drawer of the richly carved wooden box (inventory number TM-4108-815) from the collections of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW). The other five drawers, below, contain small jars and round cardboard pillboxes filled with different materials and products in random order. They contain edibles such as sugar molasses, corn flour, and spices, natural resources like raw and processed petroleum, ore containing gold, and copal.

This box was a special edition, no. 2000, of the 'school collections' (in Dutch: *schoolverzamelingen*) issued by the Colonial Institute in Haarlem. This institute was the predecessor of the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam which included the Tropenmuseum until 2014. The Tropenmuseum subsequently merged with Museum

Volkenkunde, Leiden and the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, to form the NMVW. School collections were distributed to primary schools across the Netherlands to promote greater knowledge of the natural world in general, and in particular of the natural resources of the colonies: the then-Dutch East Indies and Suriname. But what are we to take from this *object lesson*? Were the collecting and packaging of these materials and their circulation simply intended to be part of teaching children about specific natural worlds as part of the museum's commitment to social advancement? Or might we see this as entangled with imperial education, with the teaching of empire? And, as a museum for world cultures today, might these objects be mobilized in the telling of different stories, planetary histories, telling the overlapping histories of colonialism, planetary precarity, and racial capitalism?

In the early twentieth century, the Colonial Institute sent many similar collections of materials to schools in the Netherlands. However, this 2000th edition was made specifically in 1915 for then-Crown Princess Juliana (1909–2004) who had started primary school in the same year. Like the regular school collections, the box contained around seventy cardboard pillboxes, twenty small jars with liquids, and about thirty loose materials and objects. In contrast to the regular collections, however, this beautifully carved box, made from various tropical woods, was created for this jubilee edition to hold all the samples neatly together. Generally, the individual pillboxes and jars were kept in one of the school cabinets in Dutch primary schools. It seems that many were discarded over the years. Queen Wilhelmina accepted the gift for her daughter, but the royal house's archivist *returned* the school collection to the Tropenmuseum in 1967.

The Colonial Institute, which officially opened in 1926 but was already active since 1910, consisted of three departments: ethnology, tropical hygiene, and a trade museum. It had the ambition of being a national repository of colonial knowledge. The distribution of school collections was in line with their mission: to collect information about the colonies, its people and nature, and employ this strategically to maintain control from Europe. The Colonial Museum in Haarlem, the precursor of the Colonial Institute, had laid the foundation for this mission with its focus on trade and business opportunities.[1] Since 1870, private companies had been allowed to start businesses in Indonesia, the biggest colony of the Netherlands. In the museum, raw materials and finished products were exhibited to inspire Dutch entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, ranging from plantation crops to printed textiles. The focus on the abundance of natural resources in the Dutch colonies and teaching children about them at a young age is therefore not surprising, and the school box is a prime example of an education system that integrates the extractive and exploitative nature of colonialism. The school collections educate children into empire and into the imperial attitudes of taking and extracting motivated by self-

1 Wijs 2017, 122; 129.

interest but promoted as an ethical undertaking. The inscription on the wooden front of this box that reads 'Het lichtet overal' (There's light everywhere) references Dutch medieval verses, employed here to highlight the Netherlands's imagined role as a 'deliverer of light', spreading Christian values, civilization, and progress.[2] The same citation would later be part of the facade of the new building of the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam.

The mode of presentation of the pillboxes and jars in its well-crafted wooden box suggests a certain convenience and untaintedness in contrast to how the actual materials were obtained, the arduous labour of those who harvest them elided. The fifth drawer, for example, contains 31 boxes with varying natural materials, from resins to seeds and tannins to ores. The minimalist, white boxes contain a short description on the cover of their respective contents, which are presented as ready-to-consume materials, without making visible the exploitation of both people and nature to obtain or harvest these products. Metals such as gold and manganese or coal rocks were harvested by underpaid workers in often dangerous working conditions, next to the toxicity of some of these materials or their production processes. By means of the school collection, Dutch children were taught about the earth's resources. They were also taught that there were plenty of opportunities in the colonies to make profit from the natural world. The portability of the school collections, and of this box in particular, demonstrates a certain ambition to spread knowledge about the natural resources of the colonies beyond the walls of the Colonial Institute.

Within the walls of the present-day Tropenmuseum, this object and the specific history of the institution open up possibilities to think of the ethnographic museum as a site for the planetary, to move beyond any singular focus on 'ethnos' and bridge the historically formed separation between natural history and ethnographic collections. But how have the school collections and this specific box worked thus far in teaching children about the natural world? Did the school collections stimulate a certain curiosity for nature, or was it the children's first engagement with what it means to have the right to extract from the planet? Following Dipesh Chakrabarty's provocation about toy tractors,[3] are these simply objects of education or play, or are they intended to nurture the imperial right to the planet and to labour, the racialized labour of others required to harness the resources of the planet? Do these school collections nurture young people's complicity in the ongoing destruction of the planet? If this other reading is also possible then what might it require of the ethnographic museum to nurture greater planetary interspecies care? This may require that ethnographic museums move beyond the now stubborn divide between nature and culture, to think more critically about how planetary precarity, colonial-

2 Lelijveld et al. 2022, 44–46.

3 Chakrabarty 2020.

ism, and racial capitalism are inextricably connected. This school box may be one object that could help in such a rethinking.

Bibliography

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