

NICOLAAS VAN DER WAAY



A painting on a Dutch royal family carriage. It shows people from the Dutch colonies, including Javanese people from the East Indies, paying tribute to Queen Wilhelmina on her 1898 coronation.

Caught between the old world and the new

Maria Hertogh was born in Indonesia and grew up in Malaya. She was a child of the last days of European colonialism in Southeast Asia as well as of the new world of independent young nations. Read on to find out more about how geography and history affected her life and times.

When Maria was a young child, a large part of Indonesia was a Netherlands colony. In fact, that explains why the Hertoghs — a Dutch family — were living in Indonesia. Her father, Sergeant Adrianus Hertogh, had been posted there by the army of the Netherlands, the European kingdom where Dutch people come from.

While the Dutch ruled what they called the Dutch East Indies in Indonesia, a large part of the rest of Southeast Asia — including Malaya and Singapore — was part of the British

empire. This **backdrop** of power in the hands of Dutch and British colonisers, as well as the Japanese Occupation during World War II, affected Maria's childhood at many points.

Separated by war

Maria's early years were hugely affected by World War II. Her father was captured by the Japanese and was a prisoner until the end of the war. The wartime hardships made it so difficult for her mother, Adeline Hertogh, to cope that she asked her friend, Aminah



An old Dutch stamp from the 1940s. The text reads, "The Netherlands is helping Dutch East Indies, national fundraising."

to have become a matter of national pride in the Netherlands. Maria was a Dutch descendant, after all. The Hertoghs' efforts to get Maria back were financially and politically supported by the Dutch government. The Dutch Queen personally asked the British government to help the Hertoghs.

British withdrawal

After World War II, most of the British colonies also wanted freedom. In Singapore and Malaya, confidence in colonial rule almost completely evaporated after the British were defeated by the Japanese.

Unlike the situation in Indonesia, the British government acknowledged Singapore and Malaya's right to self-governance. In a speech in 1948, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee detailed his government's plan to prepare Singapore and Malaya to become independent nations.

But, just like in the Netherlands, attitudes did not change overnight. Some aspects of the Maria Hertogh riots showed that the British colonial authorities did not understand the people they were ruling. For instance, they should have realised that sending Maria to stay in a Catholic convent would upset Muslims as she was a Muslim at that time.

In the aftermath of the riots, the British

government set up the Singapore Riots Inquiry Commission to investigate the cause of the riots. The report appears to place a large portion of blame on the anger of the Malay-Muslim communities in Singapore. It failed to mention that a large number of Malays and other locals in Singapore had sheltered Europeans and Eurasians from harm during the 1950 riots. Such stories would only emerge many years after the riots.

Local resentment

When Maria's two families were quarrelling, the people of Indonesia and Malaya were caught up in that much bigger struggle against colonialism. Although Indonesia had already achieved independence, its citizens were still upset at how difficult the Dutch had made the process.

The Indonesian War of Independence ended in 1949 with a treaty that required Indonesia to make annual payments to the Dutch government. Many Indonesians felt this was unfair. They questioned why their country had to make payments to a former coloniser that had exploited their land and people for over three centuries.

Malaya and Singapore were still colonies in 1950. In the early 1950s, various groups in Singapore were pushing fiercely for independence. Anti-colonialist groups saw Maria's tragic tale as a good opportunity for them. The Hertoghs happened to be Dutch and the courts were still British. This was a chance for them to use the story to criticise these colonisers.

At the heart of the protests were Muslim activists in Singapore who formed the Nadra Action Committee. (Nadra was the name Cik Aminah gave Maria.) Muslim activists in several other societies, such as Malaya and Pakistan, also spoke up. Communists



Young Indonesians training to fight the Dutch in 1949.

in Singapore, too, knew that the Maria Hertogh story was a good way to show that the colonial systems were unfair and that the European officers were racist against ethnic and religious minorities here. The communists appealed to all races to show their unhappiness with colonial rule.

The way some activists used race and religion to whip up people's emotions was dangerous. But, the colonial authorities did not handle race and religion well either. Colonialism promoted the racist idea that Europeans were superior to Asians and other races, in order to make it seem natural that Europeans should rule over Asian peoples and enjoy more privileges.

At the time, the British claimed that their colonial laws and courts were **rational** and trustworthy, but historians now say that they were unfair, often punishing locals more severely than whites. Members of the Nadra Action Committee were arrested after the riots and sentenced to death.

On the other hand, H L Velge was not charged with any crime after firing his gun into the crowd and wounding two Malays. Perhaps this was because he was trying to defend himself. However, some felt the authorities let him go because he was a Eurasian.

The action taken against the Nadra Action Committee looked so unfair that Tunku Abdul Rahman, who would later become the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, led a successful appeal to save the men from the death penalty.

Historians and even the British media at the time criticised the British government's review of the riots. Although the report highlighted failures of the police in handling the riot, it was not interested in going deeper. Even before the Maria Hertogh case, the Muslim community — like other locals in Singapore — was already fed up with the way the colonial government was running the city. But, the government did not want to admit that there were these deeper reasons for the riot.

The world has changed

Given this backdrop of wartime and independence struggles in this region, we can see why one quarrel between two families over a child spun out of control. Much has changed since then.

Today, it is not acceptable to view one race as superior to another. There is even an important United Nations agreement that sets strict rules against racism. It is called the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Countries today are also obliged to respect the independence of other countries. Attempts

to seize other countries as colonies would be met with strong disapproval from the global community.

The United Nations (UN) works with governments around the world to ensure that people everywhere have basic human rights. Furthermore, the UN encourages countries to allow citizens to choose their own governments.

Both Britain and the Netherlands of today bear little resemblance to their former colonial selves. The social inequities present in Maria's time are no longer accepted. Their capital cities, London and Amsterdam, are amongst the most **cosmopolitan** in the world.

On a more personal level, when you and I read about Maria Hertogh, we too can see what went wrong and think about how to prevent it from happening to children like Maria in our world today.

— By ZACHARY JOHN

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VOCAB BUILDER

backdrop (say "bak-drop"; noun) = the setting in which particular events took place.

rational (say "ra-she-nel"; adjective) = based on reason.

cosmopolitan (say "kos-mo-po-lit'n"; adjective) = with a great diversity of peoples.

It is now over 70 years since the Maria Hertogh riots took place. Yet, the stories in this series offer fresh lessons that we can apply to our lives today. For the full series, visit our website, www.more.whatsup.sg.