

To: Jeffrey Shane
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dear Jeffrey Shane

I did read last week Friday about your initiative to help saving (parts) of the collection of the Tropen Institute library in Amsterdam. (1)

It will take me a few pages to describe the irresponsible and nasty ways of how both the direction of the KIT and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Development Policy are handling the Tropen Museum and Library (after liquidating the theatre and youth departments first).

The story is not easy to understand and the news that comes out about it, is full of manipulation and twisting.

I will start with quoting the conclusion of this letter here:

Your initiative from far away certainly has a more noble character than what we witness here now in the Netherlands. Still I call upon you to reconsider any bid you are making or are intending to make. First of all we want to try here in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands to salvage this library in a better way. We want it to be a non-secret, a public and open process, whereby there can be only one central figure: the community of researchers (both academic and laymen/women) now and in the future... that is what libraries are meant for.

The users of the library have never been asked, nobody speaks about them, also not in the public debate here, and library users for such specialized libraries tend not to be an organised group.

In May this year the news about the closure of the Tropen Library was purposely brought in a brute and sensational way "THE BOOKS WILL END UP IN THE WASTE-CONTAINER The Tropical Institute has to dismantle its book-collection because of economic cuts. What will not be taken by third parties will disappear without pardon into the waste-container." (2)

This was most probably a tactical move, to give a most disastrous view, so anything less could later be proposed as a successful rescue operation.

IN NEDERLAND WORDEN GEEN BIBLIOTHEKEN VERBRAND



MAAR VERKWANSELD

voorbeeld mei 2013 Tropen Bibliotheek KIT Amsterdam

I add a poster I made the news officially broke that the Tropen Library was to be liquidated.

The text of the posters reads:

"IN THE NETHERLANDS ONE DOES NOT BURN DOWN LIBRARIES - but they are squandered away."

I did read about your initiative in the local newspaper Het Parool: "A group of American university libraries is interested in the book collection about South East Asia of the Tropen Museum. The Royal Institute for the Tropics (KIT) to which the museum and the library are belonging, do want to save this part of 700.000 books from the paper shredder, according to Trouw newspaper." (1)

Interest for the collection of the Tropen Museum (the header is a bit a mix up as we are talking here about the library only)..

Of course your initiative to offer a refuge is a nice gesture, but absolutely NOT what many of us want over here. Also you are asked to carefully read a recent policy paper which seems to deny the option of selling or donating main parts of the collection to countries outside of the Netherlands (see note 5).

Let me explain in more detail.

Amsterdam has several main academic libraries. Two are central university libraries and each university (Universiteit van Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit) has many faculty, institute- and special libraries. There are also main research institutions like the International Institute of Social History and several special libraries belonging to (semi) public institutions and museums. Like in many capital cities in the world.

All these libraries have decided to collaborate several decades ago. They also started a joint catalogue sharing project called ADAMnet (first with its own computer system, now function through OCLC/worldcat.org). This library network also functions as a knowledge pool for the Amsterdam region.

As university library budgets have been continuously scaled down since the mid eighties, a policy developed whereby the local libraries (via ADAMnet) would look at the acquisition of other members before buying a book. From this a practice of mutual complementary library collecting for Amsterdam developed. People doing specific research in the Amsterdam region do see the many different libraries as one knowledge source housed in different locations that – especially because of the limited size of the city) are not far apart.

The library of the Tropen Institute did a great job in this sense. Their collection profile concerns not only 'tropical regions in the world ' and is easiest described with 'negative terms': non-European, non-American and non-Russian books (non-EAR) with a wide range of subjects: anthropological, cultural, economic, sociological, war and peace, development policy... For many years they had a triple collection profile: materials relevant for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for tropical and subtropical (and often beyond) areas of the world, idem for the Ministry of Development policy and third a complementary acquisition taking in account local and regional library collection practices.

This practice has led to the situation that for recent literature on non-EAR regions of the world, the libraries of the University of Amsterdam and of the Vrije Universiteit, were often not anymore up to date. Researchers often found necessary books from the last two decades missing on the shelves of their central or institute libraries. In many cases the Tropen Institute Library was the place to go, they did a very good job indeed.

One would think that the library members of the aforementioned AdamNet would have been the first ones to come to assistance of the Tropen Library crying for help, and in a way they tried to do so. They wrote a letter to the Ministries, which was NOT public and in which they stated that they were willing to take over, but some form of payment was needed for them to be able to take over the collection of the Tropen Library. It came as no surprise that this half hearted action - that asked for money in a general situation of drastic budget cuts, had no positive result. It has proven to be the main failure of this local organisation of academic libraries not to go public and make a serious report on how much the Tropen Library has become an essential part of the whole of the local knowledge system.

Piecemeal dealings have started with all kind of libraries - both in the Netherlands and abroad - which will lead to a diaspora of the collection, that was meant for the use on local (Amsterdam) and national (the Netherlands) level. There are now several proposals whereby these collection parts, or individual titles will not remain in Amsterdam or even in the Netherlands. Also the selection of titles by other libraries are done in disrespect for the 'coherence of the big collection' in question.

In Dutch we say 'picking the raisins from the porridge' (de krenten uit de pap pikken' somewhat similar in English is the expression "cherry picking"). (3) that is NOT what a serious 'library dismantling' (after all other options failed) should be about. Libraries are always collections of collections, and over time their configuration changes with the change of the social order. But, one has to accept a historical library collection as a whole, as a result of a practice that is a complex of many professional incentives and initiatives established over a long time (in this case from 1950 to 2013). This is aside the drama of a library collection that also has many intimate bibliographical relations with the rich collection of objects in the Tropical Museum, being harshly separated like a mother from her child.

It has been shocking for many of us, those who did get no voice in these draconic decisions, that some unknown state commission has decided to accept the liquidation and also to take the haphazardly chosen year of 1950 as a dividing line. That the post 1950 part of the collection should be undervalued, having no special interest. While it is said that more care will be given to the pre-1950 part. Let me quote, from the report of that commission and later explain why I call this commission unknown.

"In regard to the existing paper-collection [paper information carriers is meant] post-1950, the conclusion of the Commission is that it should either be terminated or disposed of.."

An option is given that a new commissioner for this part of the collection could be found, with suggestions for the preliminary conditions of such a new host, including all kind of (unrealistic) demands for needed sound economic management, while it is the withdrawal of financial support by the state for the Tropical Institute, that started the whole thing. A de-engagement of the Dutch government from science and culture that is not incidental, but structural.

There is so much hidden manipulative content in the following sentence in the state commission report, that for the moment I will not even try to translate and explain it's content. This because one sentence further the commission draws itself already the negative conclusion of what they suggested before as a possible positive option a few words before:

"Perspectives hereupon seem remote. Therefore the only possibility that remains, is that the existing post-1950 paper collection will be disposed off."
(4)

This commission that had been established in September 2012 on demand of the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (it is important to understand that this moloch institution has several sections and the library has only a subaltern position in it) carries the name "Cie Ontheemde Collecties" (Commission for 'displaced' / 'stateless' collections). This name expresses the state of Dutch cultural, educational and scientific research politics for non Beta sciences.

The Tropen Institute and its subparts developed from a private initiative a century ago into a state financed conglomerate of institutions and facilities. How come that all this has become 'displaced' or 'stateless'? The commission has been formed by the director of the Royal Library in the Hague (B. Savenije) and had - including him - only four members: G. Spikman (Wageningen UR, director University Library), G. Verhoeven (University of Amsterdam, head Special Collections), and D. Waarsenburg (Royal Academy of Sciences/KNAW, senior advisor Humanities).

The first sentence says that this commission is 'independent' but that is nothing more than a farce. The commission took the decision to get rid of the Tropen Library as a 'fait accompli', only the way in which to dismantle the library was on its agenda. All members are state functionaries and dependent on the will of the government. Library users have not been given any position in this commission. Both the Royal Library and the Royal Academy of Sciences (KNAW) are deeply engaged in restructuring many other institutions and their libraries. All kind of plans for the 'clustering of institutions and libraries are circulating whereby the supposedly 'independent' librarians in this commissions have each of them their own special policy interest, in a dynamic reshuffling of academic institutions and all the behind the scene wheeling and dealings that

comes with it.

The report starts of with a few pages with all kind of deliberations on the need to cut down on the costs of not only this library but of such kind of collections in general. There are some remarks that sound as enlightened, but that is only a way to package and hide the merciless attitude toward a century of cultural heritage.

The representative in this Commission of the biggest library in Amsterdam (and the Netherlands) the University Library Amsterdam is NOT its chief librarian (at that time, Nol Verhagen), but the head of the Special Collection department, G. Verhoeven, who is heading a department most of all geared to old prints and rare and special books (the old name of the department was *Zeldzame en Kostbare Werken* = rare and valuable/precious works). It comes as no surprise that an 'old books and maps' curator has little or no affinity with recent books in the knowledge areas of the post-1950 acquisition of the Tropen Library.

Chief librarian Nol Verhagen - the boss of commission member Verhoeven, had already decided before that he did not want to salvage the many thousands of post-1950 books. His policy in the last decade was especially focused on gaining shelf space by deselecting miles of books and periodicals, thus limiting the number of copies of books and periodicals to be kept on a national level (only two copies in so called 'depository libraries'). This is not the place for detailing the long term dangers and the short term failures that are inherent in such a task (de-selection often without 'autopsy of supposed double copies). The driving force of the chief librarian was not the interest of the Amsterdam community of researchers - who are about to lose a big chunk of valuable material - but the economics and efficiency of the own existing university library constellation.

So on forehand the importance of the essential function of complementary collection of non-EAR books, periodicals and other information carriers for the Amsterdam research community by the Tropen Library was denied!

This report with a 'death verdict' has been 'kept secret', in the sense that its content and conclusions have not been available for public scrutiny. As an outsider I was not aware of it, till I read the official answers on the questions posed by a member of Parliament for the Socialist Party (Sander van Dijk) to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (Jet Bussemaker): "Questions about the threatening destruction of the collection of the Tropeninstituut" dated 10 October 2013. In her answer the Minister mentioned this report. (5) As such parliamentarian documents are public, also the reference made by the Minister to a policy report, should be public. I could not find the report anywhere and ended up by demanding a copy from the Royal Library, also mentioning to them that I would use the Law on the Right of Access to state documents that should be public, if necessary. So I did get a copy, be it belated.

It is only in this way that I started to have a full understanding of the reasoning the state commission used. What became directly apparent is that

the choice of dividing line of what is to be seen as of importance for cultural heritage (pre-1950) and what is not (post-1950), is devoid of any sense.

It is as if the start of a War with Indonesia over Papua New Guinea (1959-61), the aftermath of the Post WWII Dutch colonial War in Indonesia (called 'police actions'), the dramatic refugee saga of Moluccan people and the process for independence of the former colony and 'Rijksdeel over zee' (overseas part of the Dutch nation) Surinam (1970-1980), are of no interest for this and later generations. This commission - and the authorities and politicians that follow them - do as if that part of history is best forgotten. Liquidating a major collection of paper based works (books and periodicals) about it. What about the whole change of orientation from colonial to post-colonial society related to the Dutch and other European nations and reversed views of history from new and independent nations to their former colonizers, is something of 'no interest'? That also is part of a no special interest of post-1950 materials. What about the history of 'development policy', of ideas about over- and under development, of 'third worldism', new forms of migration, name it, is all that not important enough to keep together as a collection for this and future generations?

It is necessary to know that factual execution of the downfall of this great library is - as usual - given in the hand of an omnipotent 'interim-manger' who has no professional relation whatsoever with libraries and museums. That is for decades the method used by governmental and public and semi-public institutions. The actual 'interim manager' for the Tropen Instituut (Derk Vermeer, who has a private consultancy bureau) comes from the multinational Shell and has also been manager of a big Dutch 'waste disposal firm' and did some 'cleaning up of hospitals that ran into economic problems. His main function seems is to salvage first of all the more commercial oriented Scientific Research departments of the Tropen Institute, which in the vision of the actual government of Liberals and Social Democrats should be geared more toward export of Dutch knowledge and products, than to what is seen as outdated forms of 'development aid'.

Were there no protest? Well less than expected, this also because of the (purposely it seems) created confusion about what was at stake. Closure of both the Museum and the Library, followed by a temporary solution for the Museum and disbanding the library. Many people did not know anymore what they were protesting against and what needed to be supported. As for the people that worked in the departments under attack...

Library personnel has been intimidated from the beginning (fear to lose some of their employee rights, pensions), attempts to silence their voice, or twist their opinions have been noted. In the breaking up of the collection there is also some form of scramble over the more appealing parts of the older collection, which process has silenced several academics in the higher echelons to speak out, to criticize this disaster, as they have been implied at an earlier state, or they may hope to gain some parts from the dismemberment.

Let me conclude....

Your initiative from far away certainly has a more noble character than what we witness here now in the Netherlands. Still I call upon you to reconsider any bid you are making or are intending to make. First of all we want to try here in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands to salvage this library in a better way. We want it to be a non-secret, a public and open process, whereby there can be only one central figure: the community of researchers (both academic and laymen/women) now and in the future... that what libraries are meant for.

Tjebbe van Tijen & Fred Gales Amsterdam 28/10/2013

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Post script:

I write this letter to you as a first action of a group of librarians, archivists and researchers that is about to establish themselves, who are calling for a change of the disastrous library and archive policy and practice in the Netherlands in the recent years. The group is on its way to be constituted but the urgency of the Tropen Library case has made it necessary to act now and I have taken the liberty to write this together with a long time research associate, not to lose any time. The name of the group expresses its goals:

"De Barmhartige Bibliothecaris: hart voor het verleden – oog op de toekomst"
(the merciful librarian: a heart for the past – an eye on the future)

Its preliminary website will be launched within a week at the domain:

<http://barmbib.nl>

Barmbib

will also be the address/name for its Twitter, Flickr and Facebook accounts.

I myself have been curator for the Documentation Centre of Modern Social Movements at the University Library of Amsterdam 1973-1990 and I moved with this collection to the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (1990-1998). Since then I work with my own creative firm Imaginary Museum Projects, specialising in 'interactive dramatisation of historical information'. I have collaborated with the Tropical Museum on two occasions, with major interactive installations on the subject of Shamanism and Papua Music, together with my friend the anthropologist Fred Gales, who is a long time user of the Tropen Library and also is a member of the 'Association of Friends of the Tropen Bibliotheek'.

Notes

(1) Een groep Amerikaanse universiteitsbibliotheken is geïnteresseerd in de boekenverzameling over Zuidoost-Azië van het Tropenmuseum. Het Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (KIT), waaronder het museum en de bibliotheek vallen, willen dit deel van de 700.000 boeken redden van de papierversnipperaars, aldus Trouw.

<http://www.parool.nl/parool/nl/224/BINNENLAND/article/detail/3533710/2013/10/26/Belangstelling-voor-collectie-Tropenmuseum.dhtml>

(2) De Volkskrant 24/05/13: "Voor de boeken rest de container - Het Tropeninstituut moet zijn boekencollectie ontmantelen vanwege bezuinigingen. Wat niet door derden wordt overgenomen, verdwijnt zonder pardon in de vuilnisbak."

<http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2844/Archief/archief/article/detail/3446272/2013/05/24/Voor-de-boeken-rest-de-container.dhtml>

(3)

Cherry picking, suppressing evidence, or the fallacy of incomplete evidence is the act of pointing to individual cases or data that seem to confirm a particular position, while ignoring a significant portion of related cases or data that may contradict that position. It is a kind of fallacy of selective attention, the most common example of which is the confirmation bias. [1] Cherry picking may be committed intentionally or unintentionally.

Says the wikipedia page and so we could name it in English as Book-Picking, whereby only the special, rare and so on will survive, while any librarian knows that what is 'significant' or 'insignificant' can not be decided on forehand and later generations may praise or damn us for our selection or de-selection today.

(4) The translated parts are indicated in red.

"DE COLLECTIES VAN HET KIT: **Ten aanzien van de bestaande papieren collectie post-1950, is de conclusie van de Commissie dat deze dan wel beëindigd en afgestoten moet worden**, danwel een nieuwe opdrachtgever moeten vinden die met de uitvoerder overeenstemming bereikt over continuïteit van beheer, acquisitie, beschikbaarstelling, gebruik en dienstverlening aan gebruikers, minimaal vormgegeven naar de actuele normen van de professie, in een sluitende begroting en met een structureel exploitatieperspectief. Gezien het feit dat de papieren collectie post-1950 geen inkomsten genereert, betekent dit feitelijk dat een (andere) publiek gefinancierde partij zich bereid dient te verklaren de structurele exploitatielasten over te nemen. **De perspectieven hierop lijken gering. De enige resterende mogelijkheid is derhalve dat de bestaande papieren collectie**

post-1950 wordt afgestoten" ["De bibliothecaire collecties van het KIT: heden en toekomst Eindrapport Cie. Ontheemde Collecties 1 april 2013"; B. Savenije (vz.; KB, algemeen directeur), de heer G. Spikman (Wageningen UR, directeur UB), de heer G. Verhoeven (UvA, hoofd Bijzondere Collecties), en de heer D. Waarsenburg (KNAW, senior adviseur Geesteswetenschappen).; p.5]

(5)

On October the 10th of 2013 this written answer on questions of the member of parliament of the SP, Jasper van Dijk states clearly that the intend is keeping the collection in the Netherlands.

Minister Jet Bussemaker: "For the post-1950 collection there seems to be – for the time being – insufficient interest to preserve completely a library function with a national and international task, for collecting, cataloguing and [the services] of making available of literature from and about developing countries and related subjects. This leaves unaffected the position of the KIT as an owner taking its full responsibilities, still being engaged with all serious take-over candidates to reach a durable/lasting preservation for the Dutch public of (parts of) the post-1950 collection."

"Voor de post-1950 collectie lijkt vooralsnog onvoldoende belangstelling te bestaan voor het compleet in stand houden van een bibliotheekfunctie met een landelijke en internationale taak voor het verzamelen, ontsluiten en beschikbaar stellen van literatuur uit en over ontwikkelingslanden en – onderwerpen. Dat laat onverlet dat het KIT als eigenaar zijn verantwoordelijkheid neemt en nog volop in gesprek is met alle serieuze overname kandidaten om (delen van) de post-1950 collectie duurzaam te behouden voor het Nederlandse publiek."

[Atwoorden Kamervragen het lid Van Dijk over de dreigende vernietiging van de collectie van het Tropeninstituut; 10 oktober 2013; (ref onze: 552539/uw: 2012Z18794); p.2]