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In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 153 (1997), no: 3, Leiden, 436-438

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DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

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A rejoinder to H.A.O. de Tollenaere's review of Th. Stevens, *Vrijmetselarij en samenleving in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië 1764-1962* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 152-2:331-3.

A touch of added perspective is in order regarding De Tollenaere's comments on Stevens' book and on Freemasonry as such, partly in relation to that reviewer's background as a student of the history of the Theosophical movement.

First of all, De Tollenaere states that Freemasonry claims to have its historical origins in medieval and even ancient times. While individual Freemasons have sometimes made such claims, however, this is not the position of the Order of Freemasons in the Netherlands, simply because it cannot be proven.

In purely quantitative terms, De Tollenaere's point about the limited impact of Freemasonry upon the mass of the population in Indonesia is correct. Even so, a cursory look at just a single volume of the *Indisch Maçonniek Tijdschrift* (1895-1961) shows that the list of Indonesian and Chinese Freemasons in Paul Van der Veur's *Freemasonry in Indonesia from Radermacher to Soekanto* (1976) is incomplete, and perhaps considerably so. Apart from that, Stevens describes among other things the practical concern which Masons showed for the Eurasian community in Indonesia, a not insignificant part of the population. It is not uncommon for scholars to underrate the qualitative significance of numerically small organizations in the colonial period. Professor L. de Jong, for instance, underrated – in fact more or less dismissed – Balai Pustaka in this way, and found Professor E.M. Uhlenbeck effectively opposing him in this journal (*BKI* 142 (1986):337-41). De Tollenaere's argument regarding the limited impact of Freemasonry does not take into account, for instance, the fact that the first three chairmen of Budi Utomo were all Javanese Freemasons: Raden Adipati Tirtokoesoemo, Pangeran Ario Noto Dirodjo, and K.R.T. Radjiman Wediodiningrat, in that order. The influential regent R. Ngabehi Sosrohadikoesoemo was for years Indies Masonic Grand Secretary. Radjiman later became chairman of the independence preparatory committee in 1945, and he was not the only Mason in that body. On

several occasions (in 1922, for example), sections of the Dutch East Indies press implied that certain branches of the colonial state, including Balai Pustaka and the Volkscredietwezen, were dominated by Theosophists and Freemasons; further historical research may well reveal that these were wholly or partly set up by Masons. The Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences was established by Masons in 1778. Taken together, surely this amounts to a little more impact for Freemasonry than De Tollenaere's somewhat vague 'limited'.

While De Tollenaere's observation that Freemasonry 'did not include the low income-earning majority of the people' is correct, it should be remembered that no Western organization, secular or religious, ever remotely achieved that – despite, in many cases, considerable missionary activity, something in which Freemasonry does not engage.

De Tollenaere contends that there is inequality in both Theosophy and Freemasonry. Theosophists have held that within the 'brotherhood of humanity' there are elder and younger brothers, 'so, brotherhood implies inequality', while Freemasons, De Tollenaere claims, regard 'operative' masons – that is, members of the building trade – as being at 'a lower level than their own'. This interpretation, however, is not shared by other non-Mason writers on Freemasonry, such as the Roman Catholics M. Dierickx S.J. and Dr A. van der Sande. Regarding De Tollenaere's comment that Freemasonry was 'mainly composed of elite members', one can in fact point to a large component of men of ordinary income and standing in society. Admittance to the Order is based upon criteria of good report and independent moral judgement.

It is erroneous to suppose that the activity of Freemasons in Indies colonial society was an uncomplicated pendant of Freemasonry in the lodges. Masonic ritual does not allude to any specified works in society, good, bad, or indifferent. There is no 'doctrine' on such issues. For the purposes of research on the social impact of Freemasonry in the Indies, it is rather a 'bridge' function with respect to (Dutch) Enlightenment concepts which should be borne in mind. Professionally and otherwise, Freemasons acted on the basis of practical Enlightenment ideas on human advancement, not on the basis of abstract masonic rituals of purely individual ethical interpretation.

One would certainly agree with De Tollenaere that Stevens' book is useful and worthwhile, but not merely in relation to the former's own PhD research, or because it contains examples of (in any case Masonically condemned) colonial misconduct like the one which De Tollenaere quotes. Stevens provides, in fact, an exceptionally well-documented introduction to the subject of Freemasonry in Indies colonial society, hitherto a virtual terra incognita and a distinctly daunting field for the historian.

A good deal of research nevertheless remains to be done to ascertain the precise significance of Freemasonry in East Indies society. (In independent Indonesia, using the Indonesian language as its medium, Freemasonry

lasted but a few uneasy years.) For the purposes of such research it will be particularly important not to ignore the Enlightenment component in Masonic societal thinking.

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