

Mission and Colonialism: A Reconstruction of the Historiography of Evangelism in the 19th Century Dutch East Indies

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Abstract:

The expansion of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century took place in close relationship with the colonial power structure, but the historiography of this phenomenon is still dominated by colonial archival sources that tend to place European missionaries as active subjects of history, while indigenous peoples are presented as passive objects of Christian teachings. Previous historiographical studies have not systematically reconstructed this narrative through a critical-postcolonial framework that places local agencies at the center of analysis. This study aims to (1) identify mission-centric bias patterns in conventional mission historiography, and (2) offer an alternative historiographic reconstruction framework based on source criticism and postcolonial theory. This research uses a qualitative historical-critical approach by examining primary sources (missionary reports, documents of the Zending institution, colonial archives) and secondary sources, analyzed through the framework of orientalism (Said), hybridity (Bhabha), and translatability of the Gospel (Walls; Sanneh). The findings suggest that the historiographic narrative of missions has long hidden the active negotiation space of local communities, and that re-reading of the same sources can reveal patterns of indigenous agency that have been marginalized. This research contributes to methodological debates in mission studies and church history, in particular by offering a historiographic reconstruction model that can be applied to mission studies in other colonial contexts, as well as enriching the understanding of the dynamics of local Christianity in Indonesia.

Keyword: *Missions and Colonialism, Reconstructing, Historiography of Evangelization, 19th-Century, Dutch East Indies*

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Introduction

The expansion of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century could not be separated from the colonial structure that overshadowed it. From the issuance of King Willem I's decree in 1816 placing missionary dispatch under government authority, to a series of subsequent regulations in 1835, 1840, and 1854 placing the administration of the church under the auspices of the Governor General, the relationship between the mission and colonial power developed into a mutually supportive relationship: missionaries obtained subsidies, tax relief, and administrative protection, while colonial governments gained moral legitimacy and a means of social control over their colonies. It was in this context that the historiography of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies was generally written, namely from the point of view of the zeasing institutions and colonial apparatus, with indigenous peoples positioned as passive objects of preaching, rather than as actors who helped shape the face of local Christianity.

A number of recent studies have touched on the historical issue of Christian missions and communities in the Dutch East Indies, albeit with a different emphasis from the focus of historiographic reconstruction proposed in this study. (Kadimin, 2024) discusses the movement of Christian privatization in Java through the figure of Kyai Sadrach, an indigenous evangelist who responded as a reaction to the Western zeending attitude during the colonial period that paid little attention to Javanese culture, where his ministry succeeded in shaping a rapidly growing indigenous Christian community through a contextual approach to local culture and customs. This study is important because it highlights local agency, but stops at the biographical-descriptive narrative of one figure without explicitly linking it to a critique of the structure of colonial historiography more broadly. (Juwono, 2023) then examines the dual legal status (legal dualism) experienced by the indigenous Javanese Christian community in the colonial era, and concludes that the difference in legal interpretation between indigenous Christians and their zending priests on the one hand, and the colonial government apparatus on the other, gives rise to differences in policy implementation that have the potential to trigger conflicts of interest.

This research makes an important contribution to understanding the structural position of indigenous Christian communities, but still focuses on the reconstruction of legal-administrative events, rather than on the deconstruction of the historiographical narrative of the mission itself. Meanwhile, in the context of the broader historiographical debate, (Main, 2024) reviews the direction of Indonesian historiography by highlighting Sartono Kartodirjo's views and criticisms of them, which show that Indonesiacentric historiography tends to emphasize aspects of resistance to colonialism while ignoring other dimensions of Indonesian society. This paper is relevant because it emphasizes that the problem of historiographical bias belongs not only to colonial historiography (Dutchcentric), but also to post-independence nationalist historiography—a gap that is rarely mentioned in the study of the history of Christian missions specifically.

The three studies above show that the study of indigenous Christian communities and colonial historiography in the Dutch East Indies has developed, both through biographical approaches to indigenous evangelists, analysis of colonial legal structures, and criticism of post-independence Indonesia-centric historiography tendencies. However, none of them have specifically placed mission historiography as an object of theoretical deconstruction using a systematic postcolonial framework. Previous studies have tended to stop at the reconstruction of events, i.e. what happened in the history of indigenous Christian missions and communities without criticizing the way in which they were written and inherited, i.e. how knowledge about the mission itself was produced, filtered, and institutionalized through colonial archives.

The research gap that this article seeks to fill, therefore, is the lack of historiographical reconstruction efforts that explicitly re-read the sources of the colonial archives through a critical-postcolonial framework, while placing local agencies as the center of analysis rather than merely a narrative complement. As far as the author's research goes, studies that specifically reconstruct the historiography of missions in the 19th-century Dutch East Indies with an approach that combines criticism of colonial sources, postcolonial theory, and mission studies in an integrated manner are still limited. This research fills this gap by shifting the focus of the study from a mere mission narrative to a critique of the way the mission narrative results in an epistemological shift that distinguishes the contribution of this article from the previous studies that have been mentioned.

Based on the above description, this research is formulated to answer two main questions: first, how can the historiography of Christian missions in the 19th-century Dutch East Indies be reconstructed to correct the mission-centric bias that has been dominant in colonial archival sources? Second, how can local agencies be repositioned as the center of analysis in the narrative, rather than simply complementing stories centered on European missionaries? In line with the formulation of the problem, this study aims to (1) identify patterns of bias in conventional mission historiography in the 19th-century Dutch East Indies, and

(2) offer an alternative historiographical reconstruction framework that integrates criticism of colonial sources with postcolonial theories and mission studies, so that mission history can be read as a dialectical process between local actors and the gospel message brought by missionaries, rather than just a one-way projection from the colonial-missionary side to the colonized society.

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a historical-critical method, which aims not only to reconstruct the historical events of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century, but also to criticize the way these events are represented in existing historiographic sources. The historical method used follows four standard stages, namely heuristic, criticism (verification), interpretation, and historiography (reconstruction), as commonly applied in church and mission history research in Indonesia, including in the study (Juwono, 2023) who used similar stages to reconstruct the legal status of the indigenous Javanese Christian community.

This study uses two categories of sources. First, primary sources: colonial and zending archives, including missionary reports, correspondence of zending institutions (such as NZG/Nederlandsch Zendeling Genootschap (Society, 1897) and NGZV) (Zendingsvereniging, 1885), as well as colonial administrative documents relevant to church and mission arrangements in the Dutch East Indies. Such data are generally obtained from archival storage centers, both in the Netherlands and in Indonesia, such as the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia. Second, secondary sources: previous historiographic and theological studies of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies, including studies of indigenous evangelical figures and the legal status of indigenous Christian communities, to map how narratives about mission have been constructed in the existing literature.

Analysis is carried out through two stages. Historiographic analysis, which examines not only what happened in the history of the mission, but how the narrative was written, who was the subject and object of the narrative, and what perspective was dominant or ignored in the source texts. As well as source criticism, to identify the inherent bias in colonial archives considering that these sources were generally produced by the missionary or colonial government, so they are vulnerable to distortion of perspective towards local agencies.

These two stages are then read through the framework of postcolonial theories (orientalism, hybridity, and gospel translatableness) that have been described in the theoretical framework, so that the results of the analysis do not stop at chronological reconstruction, but produce a critical rereading of the established historiography of missions.

This study recognizes the limitations in the form of dominance of Dutch-language archival sources produced by the colonial/missionary side, so that the voices of local actors can often only be reconstructed indirectly (through third-party records). This limitation is one of the methodological justifications why a critical-historiographical approach, rather than mere narrative reconstruction, is needed in this study.

Result and Discussion

Postcolonial Theoretical Framework in Reading Mission Historiography

This study uses the framework of postcolonial theory as the main analytical lens to unravel the biases inherent in the historiography of Christian missions in the 19th-century Dutch East Indies. Postcolonial theory, as developed by (Said, 1978), through the concept of orientalism, emphasizes that knowledge of the "Other" in the colonial context is never neutral, but is shaped by the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. In the context of mission historiography, the narratives written by

European missionaries tend to position indigenous peoples as passive objects that need to be "saved" and "civilized", a pattern of representation that is inseparable from the logic of European cultural superiority of the time.

The concepts of hybridity and mimicry developed by Homi Bhabha are also relevant for re-reading the dynamics of the relationship between missionaries and local communities. (Bhabha, 1994), asserts that the colonial process never produced a single and one-way relationship of domination-submission, but rather gave rise to a third space in which local and foreign identities interacted, adapted, and produced distinctive religious forms rather than mere passive imitations of the religion brought by the missionaries. This framework is important to avoid the generalization that indigenous peoples are merely passive recipients of Christian teachings without negotiation.

In the context of mission studies more specifically, Andrew Walls' ideas on the translatability of the gospel and Lamin Sanneh's on vernacularization provide an additional relevant framework. Both argue that the spread of Christianity to various cultural contexts always involves a process of local translation and reinterpretation, so that the end result is not an identical replication of European forms of Christianity, but rather a local variant formed through active negotiation between local actors and the gospel message they carry. This approach allows this study to see the indigenous peoples of the Dutch East Indies not as passive recipients, but as agents who help shape the face of local Christianity in line with the findings (Kadimin, 2024), regarding the active role of Kyai Sadrach in forming a distinctive indigenous Christian community in Java.

By integrating the three theoretical frameworks above—orientalism, hybridity/mimicry, and gospel translatableness, this study argues that conventional mission historiography needs to be reconstructed to correct the mission-centric bias that has been dominant so far. This reconstruction does not simply add a local perspective as a complement, but rather places local agencies at the center of analysis, so that the historiography of missions in the Dutch East Indies can be read as a dialectical process, rather than a one-way projection of European missionaries to the colonized society.

The discussion in this study is directed to re-read the historiography of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century through a critical-postcolonial perspective. So far, mission historiography has tended to be built from colonial archives and reports of zending institutions that place European missionaries as the center of historical narratives, while indigenous peoples are positioned as passive recipients of the Gospel. In fact, as Edward Said emphasized, the production of colonial knowledge was never neutral, but was shaped by power relations that created a certain representation of the "other" (the Other) in order to sustain colonial domination (Said, 1978). In this context, mission historiography serves not only as a record of the spread of religion, but also as an epistemological instrument that builds moral legitimacy for the project of colonialism in the Dutch East Indies.

Through a critical historiographical approach, this study seeks to show that the process of spreading Christianity in the Dutch East Indies took place in a much more complex negotiation space than the linear depiction in colonial archives. Local communities did not simply passively accept or reject the Gospel, but actively translated, interpreted, and adapted Christian messages into their own cultural contexts. This perspective is in line with the hybrid concept of Homi Bhabha, which sees colonial relations as a space for the production of new identities that are negotiable (Bhabha, 1994), as well as the views of Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh on the translatability of the gospel that allows for the birth of distinctive local forms of Christianity (Sanneh, 1989)). Thus, this discussion not only highlights the relationship between mission and colonialism, but also reconstructs the position of local agencies as active subjects in the formation of the history of Christianity in Indonesia.

Mission Narrative in Colonial Historiography

The historiography of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century was generally constructed through colonial archives, reports of the Zending institutions, missionary correspondence, and administrative records of the colonial government. This kind of source structure caused the historical narrative of the mission to develop in a mission-centric manner, placing European missionaries as the main subjects of history, while indigenous peoples were positioned as passive objects of evangelization. In many zen reports, mission success was measured by the number of baptisms, church building, and the success of the "civilization" of local communities by European standards. This model of historical writing shows what Edward Said called the practice of colonial representation, which is the production of knowledge about the "other" that is formed through colonial power relations and serves to sustain Western superiority (Said, 1978). Thus, mission historiography is not only a religious record, but also part of the epistemological mechanism of colonialism that constructed indigenous peoples as "uncivilized" groups that required moral and religious guidance from Europe.

In the context of the Dutch East Indies, the relationship between the mission and colonialism developed more and more closely, especially after the enactment of the colonial policy of the 19th century that placed the church and the activities of the zeending under the supervision of the colonial state. The colonial government viewed the mission as a moral instrument to create social stability and political loyalty in the colonies. David Onnekink asserts that the Dutch Protestant mission movement in the period 1850–1940 developed "inseparably" from the project of Dutch imperialism, in which the mission was used to expand the imagination of Dutch imperial power in the colonial territories (Onnekink, 2023). The mapping of mission territories, the establishment of zen schools, and the dissemination of Christian literature were not merely religious activities, but also symbolic means of marking colonial spaces and expanding social control over local communities. Colonial narratives later portrayed the existence of missionaries as agents of "progress" and "civilization," while local culture was often represented as an irrational, pagan, or backward tradition.

This kind of historiographic pattern shows the strong influence of orientalism in the writing of mission history. Said explained that orientalism works by creating a dichotomy between the rational West and the inferior East, so that colonialism gains moral legitimacy to exercise political and cultural dominance (Said, 1978). In reports of zending in the Dutch East Indies, indigenous peoples are often described as "dark", "animistic", or "in need of the light of the Gospel", a theological language that simultaneously contains the assumption of the superiority of Western civilization. Even in the context of Dutch colonial policies, Christianity is often seen as a means of forming a more "orderly" and "civilized" society. Andrew Goss shows that the Dutch "civilising mission" ideology in the early 20th century developed through the integration of science, education, and religion in colonial projects aimed at maintaining the legitimacy of colonial power (Goss, 2009). Thus, the historiography of colonial missions cannot be separated from the grand project of colonialism that uses religion as an instrument of cultural hegemony.

However, a reading of contemporary historiography shows that the relationship between the mission and the local community is actually much more complex than the linear picture in colonial archives. Homi Bhabha through the concept of hybridity and mimicry rejects the view that colonialism only produces a one-way domination relationship. According to him, the colonial space actually gives birth to a "third space", which is a space for cultural negotiation where local and foreign identities interact with each other and produce new forms that are not entirely identical to colonial or indigenous cultures (Bhabha, 1994). In the context of Christianity in the Dutch East Indies, this process can be seen through the emergence of indigenous Christian communities that adapt Christian teachings into local symbols, languages, customs, and social structures. Thus, indigenous peoples cannot be understood only as passive recipients of the Gospel, but rather as actors who actively interpret and shape their own expressions of Christianity.

This perspective is reinforced by Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh's ideas about the translatability of the gospel and vernacularization. Walls asserts that Christianity has historically always evolved through the process of cultural translation, so that the gospel is never present in a single cultural form, but rather translated into different local contexts (Walls, 1996a). Meanwhile, Sanneh points out that the process of translating local languages in Christian missions actually opens up space for the birth of an indigenous Christian identity that is independent of Western cultural domination (Sanneh, 1989). In the context of the Dutch East Indies, the translation of the Bible, the use of regional languages in liturgy, and the involvement of local evangelists are evidence that indigenous peoples have a significant agency in the development of local Christianity. Therefore, the historiography of colonial missions that focused only on European missionaries actually simplifies the historical reality that is much more dialogical and negotiable.

Recent studies have also begun to show the need for decolonization of mission historiography. Chongpongmeren Jamir emphasized that contemporary mission studies need to be reconstructed through a decolonial approach that understands mission as a relational and dialogical process, rather than a mere Western institutional expansion. This criticism is relevant for mission historiography in the Dutch East Indies because most historical sources are still inherited from a colonial perspective that places Europe as the center of global Christianity history. Therefore, the reconstruction of mission historiography needs to be done by critically re-reading colonial archives, identifying the representational biases contained in them, and restoring the voices and experiences of local communities that have been marginalized in the official colonial narrative.

Colonialism as a Mission Support Structure

The development of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century did not take place in a neutral social space, but grew within a colonial structure that politically, administratively, and economically supported the expansion of the zending. The relationship between the colonial government and the mission institution was essentially symbiotic: the colonial government needed the mission as a moral and cultural instrument to create social stability in the colonies, while the missionary institution obtained legal protection, territorial access, educational facilities, and administrative legitimacy to carry out evangelism. In this context, colonialism not only became the historical background of the mission, but also served as the main supporting structure that allowed the spread of Christianity to take place systematically in various regions of the Dutch East Indies.

The close relationship between the mission and the colonial state began to strengthen after the reorganization of the Dutch East Indies government after the collapse of the VOC and the return of Dutch rule in the early 19th century. The decree of King Willem I of 1816 placed the affairs of the Protestant church and mission activities under the supervision of the colonial government, so that the church was practically part of the administrative apparatus of the colonial state. This policy was strengthened through the regulations of 1835, 1840, and the Regeeringsreglement of 1854 which gave great authority to the Governor General to regulate church life and zending activities in the colonies. In practice, the colonial government provided financial subsidies, travel permits, security protection, and bureaucratic support for missionaries working in the inland areas. The situation showed that the expansion of the mission was not just an independent religious movement, but part of a broader colonial governance.

Edward Said explains that modern colonialism works not only through military and economic domination, but also through the production of knowledge and cultural control that creates moral legitimacy for Western powers (Said, 1978). In the context of the Dutch East Indies, Christianity was positioned as a symbol of "civilization" that was considered capable of transforming indigenous peoples into more "orderly", "rational", and "modern" according to European standards. Therefore, mission activities were often seen by the colonial government as a means to build social order in areas that were considered

"uncivilized". This was evident in colonial policies in inland areas such as Tanah Batak, Minahasa, Timor, and Flores, where the presence of missionaries often went hand in hand with the expansion of colonial administration and Dutch military penetration.

Recent research shows that these relationships are not just historical coincidences, but part of a conscious colonial strategy. Ricardo Vargas Posada, Bernard Adeney-Risakotta, and Dicky Sofjan's study of Manggarai-Flores shows that the Dutch colonial government and Catholic missionaries built an "alliance to civilize" in the process of Christianization of local communities. The colonial government supported mission activities because it was seen as effective in helping the integration of colonial territories while forming public loyalty to Dutch rule (Vargas Posada et al., 2020). In this context, mission schools, hospitals, and social services were not only pastoral means, but also colonial instruments for expanding cultural and administrative control in the colonies.

Colonialism also provided material infrastructure that allowed the mission to expand more widely than in previous periods. Colonial shipping routes, postal systems, trade networks, and military security opened up access for missionaries to areas that were previously difficult to reach. David Livingstone even called the relationship between the mission and imperialism in the 19th century a "partnership of expansion", in which religious expansion and colonial power reinforce each other. In the case of the Dutch East Indies, the existence of zending schools became one of the important instruments for the formation of the indigenous Christian elite who then worked in the colonial system as teachers, clerks, administrative employees, and health workers (Livingstone, 2012). Zending education is thus not only a tool of evangelization, but also a means of forming a new social class closer to the colonial structure.

Ethical Policy in the early 20th century further shows how colonialism used moral and religious ideas to maintain the legitimacy of power. Ethical Politics was promoted as the Dutch "debt of honor" to the colonizers through education, irrigation, and transmigration, but in practice it also expanded the influence of Western culture and Christianity in indigenous communities. Andrew Goss shows that the ideology of Dutch civilising mission developed through the integration of education, science, and religion as a means of sustaining colonialism in a more "moral" form (Goss, 2009). Thus, colonialism not only used coercive force, but also established cultural hegemony through educational and religious institutions.

In the Batak Land, the relationship between mission and colonialism is evident through the activities of the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG). Recent research by J.L.M. Siahaan and colleagues shows that the spread of Christianity in Tapanuli coincided with the penetration of Dutch colonial politics after the Padri conflict and military expansion into the Batak region. The colonial government supported mission activities because it was considered to help social stabilization and weaken traditional structures that had the potential to resist colonialism (Siahaan et al., 2025). However, the study also shows that the Batak people are not completely subservient to the colonial agenda, but rather undergo the process of adaptation and reinterpretation of Christianity according to their local cultural context.

Although missions benefited greatly from colonial structures, the relationship between the two was not always harmonious and without tension. Some missionaries sometimes criticized colonial exploitative practices, particularly those related to forced labor, military violence, or social injustice against indigenous peoples. But these criticisms generally did not go so far as to challenge the foundations of colonialism as a whole. Instead, many missionaries still viewed colonialism as a "providential opportunity" to pave the way for the spread of the gospel. Andrew Walls calls this phenomenon a paradox of modern mission history: Global Christianity developed through the path of imperialism, but at the same time produced local communities that then developed independently of colonial rule (Walls, 1996).

Therefore, understanding colonialism as a mission support structure means seeing that the success of the expansion of Christianity in the Dutch East Indies cannot be explained solely through the evangelization spirit of the missionaries. The spread of religion took place within the network of colonial

power that provided protection, legitimacy, and infrastructure for mission activities. Mission historiography that ignores this dimension tends to produce a romantic narrative about evangelization, while at the same time concealing the fact that religion also functioned as a colonial instrument in the process of social transformation of colonial societies. By critically rereading these relationships, mission historiography can move from a mere story of evangelization success to a more complex analysis of the relationship between religion, power, and colonialism in Indonesia.

Marginalized Local Agencies

One of the fundamental problems in the historiography of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies is the marginalization of local agencies in the historical narrative. Most colonial archives and reports place European missionaries as the main actors of social and religious change, while indigenous peoples are only portrayed as passive objects of gospel recipients. Such narratives produce mission-centric historiography, which is a history that centers on the success of mission institutions, the number of baptisms, church building, and the expansion of ministry areas, but leaves little room for the experience, negotiation, and contribution of local communities in the formation of Christianity in Indonesia. In fact, as Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasizes, colonial historiography tends to "silence" local voices because history is written from a Western epistemological perspective that considers Europe as the center of the development of modernity and civilization (Chakrabarty, 2000). In the context of mission history, this pattern causes indigenous peoples to exist only as a backdrop for missionary activity, rather than as active historical subjects.

Edward Said explained that colonialism works through the production of knowledge that represents Eastern societies as an inferior group and in need of Western guidance (Said, 1978). This representation is evident in many reports of zending in the Dutch East Indies that describe local communities as "pagan", "dark", "backward", or "uncivilised". Such theological language is not only a reflection of religious beliefs, but also part of a colonial ideological construct that placed Europe as the center of moral and intellectual authority. As a result, the contributions of local figures are often erased or reduced to mere "successes" of Western missionaries. In official colonial historiography, the social changes of indigenous peoples are almost always described as the fruit of the education, discipline, and civilization that the missionaries brought, rather than the result of active negotiation of the local communities themselves.

In fact, the development of Christianity in various areas of the Dutch East Indies actually shows the active involvement of indigenous figures in the process of Christianization. In Java, for example, Kyai Sadrach Surapranata is an important example of how local people not only accept the Gospel, but also reinterpret it within the framework of Javanese culture. Sadrach uses local cultural symbols, traditional leadership structures, and Javanese mystical approaches in building indigenous Christian communities. Kadimin's latest research shows that the growth of the Javanese Christian community under Sadrach's ministry cannot be explained only as the result of the work of Western zending, but rather as a strong expression of local contextualization (Kadimin, 2024). In other words, Javanese Christianity developed through a process of cultural adaptation negotiated by the indigenous people themselves, not just a reproduction of the European form of Christianity.

Similar phenomena are also seen in the Batak Land, Minahasa, and other eastern regions of Indonesia. Although European missionaries such as Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen are often considered central figures in the history of the Batak church, the reality is that the development of Batak Christianity relies heavily on the involvement of church teachers, local evangelists, language translators, and Batak indigenous leaders themselves. They play a role in translating theological concepts into the framework of Batak culture, building congregational networks, and negotiating relationships between new customs and religions. Recent research by J.L.M. Siahaan and colleagues shows that the Batak people are not simply

subservient to colonial projects and missions, but are actively reinterpreting Christian teachings according to their cultural context (Siahaan et al., 2025). Thus, the growth of Batak Christianity is the result of a dialectic between the gospel message, local culture, and the social dynamics of the Batak people themselves.

Homi Bhabha explains this dynamic through the concepts of hybridity and third space. According to Bhabha, colonial relations never resulted in total domination that completely subjugated local communities. Instead, colonialism created a space for cultural negotiation where colonial and local identities interacted with each other and produced new hybrid forms (Bhabha, 1994). In the context of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies, indigenous Christian communities are not just "imitations" of the Western church, but new religious expressions formed through the process of adaptation of local cultures. The liturgy in regional languages, the use of traditional symbols, local leadership patterns, and traditional forms of church music show that indigenous people have creative capacity to form their own Christian identity.

Andrew Walls' idea of the translatability of the gospel also reinforces the importance of looking at local agency in mission history. Walls asserts that Christianity has always evolved through the process of cultural translation, so that the gospel is never permanently tied to one particular culture (Walls, 1996b). Lamin Sanneh even argues that translating the Bible into local languages actually gives legitimacy to the culture and identity of indigenous peoples (Sanneh, 1989). In the context of the Dutch East Indies, the use of Malay, Batak, Javanese, and various other regional languages in education and liturgy opened up space for the emergence of local Christian communities that had a distinctive identity. This shows that indigenous people are not just passive recipients of the Gospel message, but active agents who interpret and shape Christianity according to their context.

However, colonial historiography often fails to acknowledge such contributions because historical sources are mostly produced by colonialists and missionaries. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls this a problem of subalternity, which is a situation when marginalized groups do not have adequate representation space in the dominant knowledge structure (Spivak, 1988). In the history of the Dutch East Indies mission, indigenous peoples' voices generally emerged only through missionary quotes, reports, or interpretations, so their original experiences were often not directly documented. Therefore, the historiographic reconstruction of the mission required a critical re-reading of the colonial archives to find traces of local agency hidden behind the official narrative of the mission.

Recent studies in postcolonial studies and mission history have increasingly emphasized the importance of historiographical decolonization. Harto Juwono's research on indigenous Christian education in the Dutch East Indies shows that local Christian communities were not only objects of colonial policy, but also actors who actively shaped the direction of their own educational, cultural, and social identity (Juwono, 2024). Meanwhile, Maaïke Derksen points out that colonial historiography in Papua has so far overemphasized the "mission of civilization" of the Netherlands and ignores the experience of the Papuan people who experienced structural marginalization due to colonial projects and missions (Onnekink, 2023). These criticisms show that the rewriting of mission history must move from a colonial perspective to a more dialogical and participatory historiography.

Thus, local agencies that have been marginalized need to be repositioned as the center of analysis in the historiography of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies. The history of Christianity in Indonesia is not only the success story of European missionaries, but also the story of the creativity, negotiation, resistance, and adaptation of indigenous peoples in shaping their own religious identity. Rereading history from a local perspective allows mission historiography to move beyond the hegemonic colonial narrative towards a fairer understanding of the dynamics of the formation of Indonesian Christianity.

Historiographic Reconstruction: Rewriting Mission History

The historiographical reconstruction of the history of Christian missions in the Dutch East Indies is an epistemological attempt to reread the colonial narrative that has dominated the writing of church and mission history in Indonesia. Colonial historiography is generally constructed through government administrative archives, messenger reports, missionary letters, and European church documents that place the colonialists and missionaries at the center of history. As a result, mission history is understood more as a success story of the expansion of Western Christianity than as a dialogical process involving local communities. This perspective results in what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "provincializing Europe", which is a critique of the tendency of modern historiography to make the European experience the universal center of world history (Chakrabarty, 2000). In the context of mission history, historiographic reconstruction means shifting the focus from a European-centric colonial narrative to a more dialogical, contextual, and participatory reading.

Edward Said asserts that colonialism works through the production of knowledge that forms a certain representation of Eastern society in order to sustain Western power (Said, 1978). Therefore, colonial historiography cannot be understood as a neutral historical record, but rather as a product of power relations. In mission reports in the Dutch East Indies, indigenous peoples are often represented as "objects of salvation", while missionaries are placed as agents of civilization and modernity. Languages such as "darkness", "infidel", "wild", or "uncivilised" show how the mission archives were at the same time a colonial ideological instrument. Therefore, historiographical reconstruction requires a critical reading of colonial sources to identify the biases, interests, and strategies of representation hidden behind the official narrative of the mission.

In contemporary historiography, criticism of colonial dominance in historical writing develops through postcolonial and decolonial approaches. Homi Bhabha through the concept of third space and hybridity shows that colonial relations are never one-sided, but always produce a space for cultural negotiation that gives birth to new identities (Bhabha, 1994). Thus, mission history can no longer be written simply as a process of religious transfer from the West to the East, but must be understood as a dialectical process involving cultural translation, local resistance, social adaptation, and theological reinterpretation. This approach opens up space to see indigenous Christian communities not as a mere "result" of colonialism, but as active subjects who contribute to shaping the face of local Christianity.

Historiographical reconstruction also demands a methodological change in the reading of colonial archives. Archives are no longer treated as objective sources that contain only historical facts, but rather as ideological texts that must be critically analyzed. Michel-Rolph Trouillot explained that power works in the process of historical production through the mechanism of "silencing the past", which is the elimination or marginalization of certain groups in the official historical narrative (Trouillot, 1995). In the context of the Dutch East Indies, the voices of indigenous peoples were often present only through the interpretations of missionaries or colonial officials, so that their original experiences were hidden behind the language of colonial administration. Therefore, the rewriting of mission history must seek to find the "hidden traces" of local agencies in the colonial archives, whether through language, cultural practices, oral traditions, or unofficial records that have been ignored.

The recent study of Indonesian historiography also shows the need for a decolonial approach in writing national history. Wildan Sena Utama asserts that Indonesiacentric historiography was born as a critique of colonial Neerlandocentrism, but still faces new challenges in integrating plural local perspectives and not being trapped in a single nationalist narrative. In the context of mission history, this criticism is important because church historiography in Indonesia often still reproduces colonial patterns by placing European missionaries as the main historical figures (Main, 2024). Historiographical reconstruction is therefore not enough to simply change the center of the narrative from the Netherlands to Indonesia, but

also needs to open up space for the diversity of experiences of local communities, including groups that have been marginalized in the history of the official church.

The decolonial approach is also seen in the development of contemporary global historiography. Alina Sajed explains that colonialism creates "epistemologies of domination", that is, knowledge structures that systematically highlight Western agency and exclude the experience of colonized societies. This criticism is relevant to the historiography of missions in the Dutch East Indies because most of the knowledge about the development of local Christianity is inherited through colonial epistemological frameworks (Sajed, 2024). Thus, historiographical reconstruction requires a paradigm shift: mission history must be read not only as a religious expansion, but as an arena of contestation of knowledge, identity, and power.

In a practical context, historiographical reconstruction can be carried out through several methodological steps. First, conducting source criticism of colonial archives and mission reports to identify mission-centric biases and orientalism contained in them. Second, integrating local sources such as oral traditions, regional stories, letters of indigenous figures, local spiritual songs, and the history of local church communities to expand the perspective of historiography. Third, using an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, anthropology, postcolonial studies, and contextual theology in order to understand local dynamics more fully. This kind of approach allows mission history to be written no longer as a linear narrative of the success of Western evangelization, but as a history of complex cultural encounters.

Andrew Walls asserts that the development of global Christianity has always been marked by a process of cultural translation that makes the gospel rooted in different local contexts (Walls, 1996b). Therefore, the history of missions in Indonesia should not only be understood as a Western heritage, but also as a result of the creativity of the local community in interpreting and living the Christian faith. Lamin Sanneh even shows that the translation of the Gospel into local languages is a form of recognition of the dignity of indigenous culture and is the basis for the birth of Christianity that is independent of European cultural domination (Sanneh, 1989). This perspective reinforces the importance of placing local communities at the center of analysis in the reconstruction of mission historiography.

Thus, historiographical reconstruction is an important step to rewrite mission history in a more fair and critical manner. This rewriting does not aim to reject all Western missionary contributions, but rather to place mission history in a more balanced relationship between colonial actors and local communities. Through postcolonial and decolonial approaches, mission historiography can move from colonial hegemonic narratives to a more dialogical, participatory, and contextual history. The history of missions in the Dutch East Indies is ultimately not only the story of the spread of religion by the West, but also the story of how local communities negotiated, adapted, and shaped their own Christian identities in the midst of the structures of colonialism.

Conclusion

This study shows that the historiography of Christian missions in the 19th-century Dutch East Indies was generally built through a mission-centric colonial perspective, which placed European missionaries as the main subjects of history, while indigenous peoples were positioned as passive objects of evangelization. Through a critical historiographical approach and postcolonial theory, this study found that the historical narrative of missions was never neutral, but rather influenced by colonial power relations that formed a certain representation of local communities. Colonial archives and zending reports not only serve as records of the spread of religion, but also as epistemological instruments that support the moral legitimacy of colonialism in the Dutch East Indies. These findings show that the relationship between mission and

colonialism is structural, where the colonial government provides administrative, political, educational, and security support for zending activities as part of the colonial "civilization" project.

On the other hand, this study also finds that the development of Christianity in Indonesia cannot be understood only as a result of Western expansion. Indigenous peoples have significant agency in the process of translating, adapting, and reinterpreting the gospel message into their local cultural context. Figures such as Kyai Sadrach in Java, Batak church teachers, local evangelists in Minahasa, and other indigenous Christian communities show that local communities are not just passive recipients of Christianity, but active actors who shape Indonesian Christianity identity. In this context, the concept of Homi Bhabha hybridity, Andrew Walls' gospel translatableness, and Lamin Sanneh's vernacularization become important frameworks for understanding that the development of Christianity takes place through a complex and dialogical process of cultural negotiation.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the effort to reconstruct the historiography of missions through postcolonial and decolonial approaches. This research emphasizes that mission history needs to be reread not just as a success story of Western evangelism, but as an arena of encounter between religion, power, culture, and local resistance. Using a historiographical critique of colonial archives, this study shows how church historiography can move from a hegemonic colonial narrative to a more participatory and contextual historiography. This approach also enriches the study of contemporary church history by opening up space for local voices that have been marginalized in the official history of the church and mission.

The implications of this research for the study of contemporary church history are quite significant. First, the study of church history needs to move beyond institutional and mission-centric approaches towards a more dialogical, intercultural, and contextual approach. Second, church historiography in Indonesia needs to pay more attention to the contributions of local communities, oral traditions, regional languages, and indigenous forms of Christianity that have been underserved in academic studies. Third, this study shows the importance of an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, postcolonial studies, anthropology, and contextual theology in understanding the dynamics of the development of Christianity in Indonesia. Thus, church history is no longer understood solely as a chronology of missionary institutions and figures, but as a socio-cultural history that involves the negotiation of identity and power relations.

This research also recognizes methodological limitations, especially the dominance of Dutch-language colonial archive sources, which are mostly produced by missionaries and the colonial government. As a result, the voices of local communities can often only be reconstructed indirectly through a third-party perspective. Therefore, further research needs to expand the use of local sources such as oral traditions, local church archives, biographies of indigenous figures, regional manuscripts, traditional spiritual songs, and community history to obtain a more complete picture of the development of Christianity in Indonesia. In addition, comparative research between regions—for example between Batak, Java, Minahasa, Papua, Timor, and Flores—is also important to understand the diversity of colonial experiences and the process of contextualizing Christianity in the archipelago.

Finally, the historiographical reconstruction of mission history does not aim to reject all the contributions of Western missionaries, but rather to place the history in a more critical and balanced relationship. Mission history in the Dutch East Indies is basically a history of complex encounters between the gospel, colonialism, local culture, and the social dynamics of indigenous peoples. Therefore, rewriting mission history means restoring the position of local communities as active, creative, and historical subjects that have an important role in the formation of Indonesian Christian identity to the present day.

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