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In memoriam Clara Brakel-Papenhuyzen

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In memoriam Clara Brakel-Papenhuyzen
's-Gravenhage, 30 June, 1942 – Voorburg, 23 June, 2022¹



15 June 2021, before a meeting of the Library Committee in Leiden. (Photographer: Els Bogaerts).

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In an e-mail of early January 2021, Dr Clara Brakel-Papenhuyzen told me that she had submitted her article entitled “The *Lancang kuning* song in the North Sumatran performance traditions” to the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. This study of the Malay stories and songs about a yellow ship (*lancang kuning*), told and sung during ceremonies and rituals, was one of the many topics which received Clara Brakel’s scholarly attention and about which she published interesting, soundly based articles. The study was the fruit of a research project on oral literary traditions in North Sumatra, a project which had been

initiated by Clara Brakel’s husband Lode F. Brakel. Using a 1979 recording of the song, the author tries to explain its present-day popularity, looking into its meaning and background. Clara states that, “While the *lancang kuning* may not be used in battles any longer, the ship continues to be associated with spiritual power in Malay culture”. Referring to Tenas Effendi’s interpretation of the dance connected to the *Lancang kuning* song (1981), Clara describes and interprets the voyage of the ship and the “Malay sailors facing the storms and the waves” as follows: with tailwind the ship swiftly gains speed, a headwind requires it to tack. And, when the wind drops, the crew has to row the ship so as to return safely. This means, we can only reach our goals if we work hard, proceeding with great devotion and responsibility, and in close harmony with the others ... How this fitted Clara Brakel’s own stance in life!

With heart and soul Clara devoted herself to the study and practice of dance and to scholarship in the humanities. Keywords in her quest for knowledge and skills were: performing arts, language and culture, written and oral traditions, connections – between people, between disciplines, and between regions (with a focus on Southeast Asia, mainland Asia, and the Middle East). One of her first moments of inspiration was her discovery of the North Indian *kathak* dance and the special teacher-student relationship which developed during

¹ I am grateful to Rosemary Robson for the English editing.



Clara Brakel in *bharata natyam* pose and costume, Melbourne, Australia (circa 1970). (Photographer: unknown).



Topeng Gunungsari Regol dance. Clara Brakel as Gunungsari and Esmeralda Zee-Bilal as Regol, the Netherlands (date: unknown). (Photographer: unknown).

the lessons she attended. It formed the basis for Clara's academic and practical study of Asian dance, music, and theatre and for her attitude towards her future students. Several times she travelled to India to learn the classical South Indian *bharata natyam* dance and music.

When residing and working in Melbourne, Australia, with her family, her attention turned to Indonesia. During her first visit to the Island of Bali, she was caught completely off guard, overwhelmed by the local culture as she attended temple festivals and studied Balinese performing arts, such as the *Margapati* dance and the *Legong Kraton*. It struck her how different these dances were from the classical Indian dances. Her interest in Hindu culture was her initial link to Javanese dance and music. In Melbourne, she joined Margaret Kartomi's newly established *gamelan* group at the Music Department of Monash University. Yearning to learn yet more, she travelled to Java.

The beauty and sophistication of the traditional *bedhaya* dances of the Central Javanese courts made a profound impression on her. Cooperating closely with prominent dancers and musicians from the Surakarta and Yogyakarta courts, she studied the practice, theory, and historical developments of court dance and music. She owed much to the information and instruction she obtained from Bapak Ngaliman, with whom she worked for more than twenty years, and from her other teachers: Ibu Sumartiyah Darsosaputra, Ibu Sutjiati Djoko Suhardjo and R.Ng. Martopangrawit from Surakarta, and R.A. Sri Kadaryati and B.Y.H. Sastrapustaka from Yogyakarta, with whom she had a close connection. While studying and writing about dance, she became aware of several prerequisites which later became *leitmotifs* in her scholarly work. As Clara

writes in the preface to her monograph, *The bedhaya court dances of Central Java* (1992), in order to study and write about the living tradition of the Javanese performing arts, she had to acquire “an intimate knowledge of Javanese language and culture” (1992: x). While she studied Javanese manuscripts, her experiences with the dance instructors also made her realize the vital importance of oral traditions in the transfer of knowledge in Indonesia. The book presents a meticulous analysis of the female court dances and has become a standard work in the field.

Not only did the performance traditions of the ethnic Javanese receive Clara’s attention. She expanded her horizon to other kinds of Southeast Asian cultural heritage, among others to the dance, music, and rituals of the ethnic Dayak of Borneo, Malaysia. This resulted in a cooperation with the Borneo Research Council and the Dayak Cultural Foundation, and in several performances with a local dance group, academic presentations, and publications.

Later, Clara shifted her attention to the literary traditions of North Sumatra, immersing herself in the stories of the Dairi Batak storytellers. An autodidact in the local Batak language and script, she gained access to the oral and written texts, making use of Van der Tuuk’s writings and his collection of Batak manuscripts in the Leiden University Libraries, and of the recordings and documentation of local storytellers made by Lode Brakel and herself in the 1970s. With unwavering perseverance, she overcame problems such as the lack of reliable linguistic reference material and transcription issues. Her publication resulting from this research, entitled *Dairi stories and Pakpak storytelling; A storytelling tradition from the North Sumatran rainforest* (2014), again has become a standard work in the field.

Clara seized upon everything life had to offer and considered it important to share her knowledge and skills with others. Her Kuwung-Kuwung dance group is a fine example of this. Several generations of students were introduced to Javanese court dance in a similar teacher-student relationship as Clara had experienced herself with her Asian teachers. And, just like Clara, the students were enraptured. Another example is her contribution to the Indonesian Association of Oral Traditions (Asosiasi Tradisi Lisan). Clara took the young students under her wing and acted as their mentor during their library research. She organized gatherings in Leiden, offering them a stage on which to perform – all *pro deo* and after she had retired. Acknowledging the urgency of such research, she tirelessly co-edited the two volumes on *Stories and storytelling in Indonesia in Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* (2016, Vol. 17 Nos 2 and 3).² Her cooperation with *Wacana* continued with the co-editing of two issues on *Panji stories* (2020, Vol. 21 Nos 1 and 2).³

Committed to the sharing of knowledge about culture, Clara thought it important to contribute to initiatives aimed at preserving and revealing local cultural heritage. She organized dance and music performances and well-

² Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana/vol17/iss2/> and <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana/vol17/iss3/>.

³ Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana/vol21/iss1/> and <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana/vol21/iss2/>.

attended symposia in museums and other cultural institutions, always keeping the balance between academic presentations and the practice of performance. In particular, she was very much concerned with the worldwide unique collection of the KITLV, the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, after it had been decided the collection should be disposed of. Clara established a Library Committee so as to support the Leiden University Libraries with the preservation of this collection. A heritage symposium-cum-webinar on forgotten collections in the digital era was one of the tools she used to call attention to the value of this cultural heritage.

Unremittingly demanding attention for the significance of the performing arts, she drew attention to dance as a source for historical research, a topic which is tending to fall into oblivion in the world of academia. In her well-read blog “Remember the dance: Viewing history through the notebook of a Yogyanese dance master” (posted at the KITLV website in May 2021),⁴ she demonstrates how a dance notebook offers a Javanese perspective on the transition from colony to the independent Indonesian Republic and the central role the Sultan of Yogyakarta played in this process.

Summer 2021, Clara was preparing a book on the *Bedhaya Jatiwarna* and several articles, she had plans for rehearsing a Yogyakarta *srimpi* dance with the Kuwung-Kuwung group and for a commemoration ceremony for Ibu Sri Kadaryati, princess, beautiful dancer, and dear friend of Clara from the Yogyakarta court who had passed away suddenly in June. But unexpected tidings changed her plans drastically: Clara was diagnosed with a very severe illness. She accepted the new situation and devoted her gradually declining energy to securing her legacy. She began preparing her collections, including a fascinating collection of photo albums of Javanese *bedhaya* dances, meticulously documenting dance choreographies, positions, and movements, including the Javanese terminology, and a series of audio-visual dance recordings, to save them for future research. Since most knowledge transference of dance and music in Indonesia is still done orally, this collection is a real treasure-trove for dance students and scholars, as it provides a wealth of information on performance practices of Javanese court dance in a specific era, materials which are very exceptional at present. The Leiden University Libraries welcomed the materials.

How Clara prepared herself for the new journey is impressive – without fear, open-hearted, and curious about the future. Her son, Manu, supported her and cared for her affectionately during this period, enabling her to stay at home for as long as was possible. Concerned, enthusiastic, and critical as ever, she continued to attend the online activities and webinars of the Library Committee, a Panji seminar, and two weeks before passing away, the Annual General Meeting of the members of the KITLV Learned Society. Live-streamed Javanese dance performances and radio broadcasts of the Belgian Queen Elisabeth Competition for music – dedicated to the cello in 2022 – helped quench her thirst for beauty, depth, and excellence and comforted her.

⁴ See <https://www.kitlv.nl/blog-remember-the-dance-viewing-history-through-the-notebook-of-a-yogyanese-dance-master/>.

The many e-mails, letters, and postcards she received from all over the world showed how much friends and colleagues respected and esteemed her, both as a person and as a scholar and dancer. She treated those who visited her with stories of her adventures in the various places in which she had lived, of her encounters with inspiring people and especially of her passion for culture, performing and visual arts, dance, music, literature, be these Javanese, Dairi Batak, Sarawak, early, baroque or classical European music, once again showing the width of her scope.

Informing me on the submission of her *Lancang kuning* article, Clara concluded her message as follows: "Like the ship that departs in the dark night and heads straight for the deep ocean, we face the future, uncertain but in good spirits!" The yellow ship on the ocean as a symbol of life ... I imagine that Clara sailed away in the royal yellow three-masted vessel, the *Lancang kuning*, and that she is now dancing the *bedhaya* with Ibu Sri Kadaryati. A consoling thought.

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