

The worlds of a Dutch colonial servant: an introduction to the travel accounts of Pieter Albert Bik

Pieter Albert Bik (1798-1855), son of an Amsterdam family that relocated to the Dutch East Indies in search of its fortune, made a career of roughly thirty years (1816-1847) in the Dutch colonial service. The majority of that respectable if unexceptional career is documented in lively colours in the manuscript hereby reproduced, part autobiography and part travel journal. Bik's writings provide a privileged glimpse into the Dutch colonial world of the early nineteenth century: a world he inhabited since adolescence, a world he shared with his immediate family and friends, a world that served his natural curiosity as well as his material needs. Much of the text is intensely personal, but many others shared the broad outlines of Bik's experience. His narration, combining vast geographic and temporal scope with the minute observations of a diarist, retains the power to capture a modern reader's imagination.

Born in Amsterdam, Pieter Albert Bik arrived, along with all his immediate family, in the East Indies in 1816, after the Napoleonic Wars. His older brother, Adrianus Johannes Bik, was the first to go, appointed as an artist to the Department of Arts and Sciences. Mere months later, his father also received an appointment and followed, taking the family along. Pieter Albert had no trouble finding work in the busy years following the hand-over of the East Indies from the British – to whom they had fallen during the wars – to the newly-formed United Kingdom of Netherlands. He initially served in two expeditions to bring various

Bornean rulers into the Dutch fold, and from 1819 Bik in the colonial capital Batavia, rising through the ranks and starting a family of his own. Outside work, this manuscript focuses prominently on the period between 1836 and 1838, during which time Bik and his family stayed on leave back in the Netherlands due to his wife's ailing health. After returning to Batavia, the newly-widowed Bik secured in 1841 the position of *opperhoofd* (chief merchant) of Dutch trade in Japan, the high point of his career. During his time in Japan he undertook the prescribed court trip to the shogun in Edo once, in 1844. He returned finally to Europe in 1847; the manuscript does not cover his final years in the Netherlands. He died in Breda in 1855.

Perhaps the most noteworthy incident of Bik's official career was the Palembang affair, a major incident in Dutch-Japanese relations in 1844. The Palembang was a Dutch military frigate that carried a letter from Willem II of the Netherlands to the shogun in an elaborate but ultimately unsuccessful diplomatic attempt by the Dutch to encourage the opening up of Japanese foreign trade, played out against the background of the First Opium War wherein the British had forced the opening of China. As chief merchant, Bik was a key intermediary between the nations and played a central role. This incident sadly passes almost without comment in this manuscript, the text leaping over the years between the court trip and 1847. For interested readers, the details of the incident have been discussed by Martha Chaiklin among others.¹ More information about the Bik family – before the rediscovery of this document Pieter Albert had been overshadowed by his brothers – can be found in Marie-Odette Scalliet's article on the artists Adrianus Johannes and Jannus Theodorus Bik.² Brief biographical sketches of the family members can also be found in J.A.A. Bervoets's guide to the Bik family archive.³

The manuscript itself has at some point become separated from the rest of Pieter Albert Bik's remaining papers that are stored in the family archive at the National Archives in The Hague. In 2013 the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde in Leiden learned of the existence of the manuscript in the possession of a descendant, and grasped the opportunity to make it available electronically in scanned and transcribed formats. The manuscript contains three major sections. The first, and longest, is biographical in nature, covering Bik's career from 1813 to 1842. It would appear to be based mostly on personal

¹ Martha Chaiklin, 'Monopolists to Middlemen: Dutch Liberalism and American Imperialism in the Opening of Japan', *Journal of World History*, 21:2 (2010), pp. 249-269.

² Marie-Odette Scalliet, 'Beelden van Oost-Indië: de collectie Bik in het Rijksprentenkabinet', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 49:4 (2001), pp. 342-379.

³ J.A.A. Bervoets, *Inventaris van papieren afkomstig van leden van het geslacht Bik en aanverwante geslachten* (Den Haag, 1977).

diaries: occasionally and especially towards the end the account turns into a day-by-day narrative. Clearly, however, the two-hundred-or-so pages do not allow for an in-depth account of almost three decades of Bik's life: instead, Bik appears to have chosen to focus on travel: the journeys to and back from the Indies, to Borneo, and trips within the Netherlands and to various German cities during the stay in Europe are depicted in detail; the section ends with Bik's arrival in Japan. Elsewhere, the long years in Batavia are passed with little more than a laconic list of events both private and official. The focus on travel is even more apparent in the other sections. The second is a diary of the court trip taken through Japan from Nagasaki to Edo in 1844; the third likewise a diary of the journey from Batavia back to the Netherlands in 1847, passing through Singapore, Aden, Egypt, Malta, Naples, France and Belgium. Clearly, travel is the overarching theme that binds the sections into a whole; apart from that, the purpose of the manuscript remains unclear. Keeping a diary of the court trip was an official duty; together with the other materials the document would seem to aim at creating a biography, a narrative of a career – notably the original appendices, now separated from the document and located in the National Archives in The Hague, mostly consist of official diplomas and other work-related documents. The first section is, at places, directly addressed to Bik's children, so the intended audience may have been immediate family; there is apparently no evidence of any intention to publish.

Over the first half of the nineteenth century, Pieter Albert Bik lived in a world of changes. He witnessed the Dutch colonial machine taking shape in the post-VOC, post-Napoleonic era, and experienced the changes of European policy in East Asia with the opening of China and later Japan. However, perhaps the most evocative shift recorded in Bik's account is technological, not political. His first outward trip to Batavia is by sail, like most others he describes; the final return journey to Europe, in 1847, is by steamship. Steam power was changing the face of Bik's world, and turns up repeatedly in his writings as an object of fascination: in factories, boats and ships, and finally, on the railways tracing their lines across Europe's landscape. This man-made change was, to borrow Bik's term, a "reuzenwerk", a work of giants.

One of the effects of steam power was to facilitate movement and to bring the world closer together. Prior to the means, however, there had to be a motive: a will to move. Bik's travel accounts are testament to this will, the fascination with places near and far. Bik was not an explorer: by his lifetime the world he moved through – the East Indies, Japan, Macao and Egypt – had long since been found and mapped by Europeans. Nor is his interest scientific or ethnographic by nature, although many of his contemporaries made careers out of such

projects. Perhaps none more so than the two Leiden University Professors P.F. von Siebold and C.G.C. Reinwardt, working in Japan and the East Indies, respectively. Both make appearances in this manuscript and moved in the same circles as Bik, but he did not have their ability or taste for painstaking scientific endeavour. What, then, drove Pieter Albert Bik? To some places – Borneo, Japan, Macao – he was taken by official duties; others were visited for leisure and vacation, including two European trips along the river Rhine and one around Java. On closer inspection, however, the distinction between business and pleasure seems arbitrary. There is little to separate Bik's accounts of holiday trips from that of his court trip in an official capacity. The interest in local detail and natural phenomena, the historical sketches and lively anecdotes are of the same complexion.

Through his accounts emerges an image of Pieter Albert Bik as a tourist, even when supposedly on official business. Politics and trade are of minor importance, barely mentioned for long swathes of text. Depictions are rarely in much depth; rather, the general tone is one of first impressions, intersected by humorous or touching anecdotes. It bears repeating that these are travel accounts: the primary interest always and everywhere is the activity of travelling, the sights seen and people met, distances covered and landscapes traversed. People come and go, and every place passed through seems to readily offer approachable contacts: this variety of encounters, of services rendered and helping hands, on the basis of family relations, friendships or shared previous postings provides an informative glimpse to the importance of networks and networking in colonial society. Bik's fascination with nature in all its guises is testament to a Romantic sensibility befitting the period, but the depictions never veer into unbridled poetry, always remaining grounded in the simple here and now of individual experience. This does not lessen the effect of the text: the accounts are, in fact, eminently relatable to any reader with experience of modern tourism. Middle class mass tourism emerged as a major phenomenon in nineteenth century Europe, and Bik paints an evocative picture of that world, filled with bath resorts, theatre plays and concerts, gambling, famous monuments and museums and, crucially, an established network of transport on anything from post coaches to steamboats and trains.

The most intriguing quality of Bik's accounts, however, lies in his ability to extend this tourist sensibility to his wider travels. The depictions of Macao, Egypt, Java and Japan follow largely the same format and employ the same tone. Pieter Albert Bik was a global tourist *avant la lettre*. Even when on official business, he was determined to turn obligations into opportunities. This context presents interesting possibilities: for example, accounts of the court trips to Edo abound and it was common practice to buy a variety of Japanese curiosities

(some of which were – and still are – publicly presented in von Siebold's collections); only here, however, is this ethnological practice presented side by side with the much more mundane act of collecting tourist souvenirs, which Bik engaged in on his travels in the Netherlands and Germany. It is highly tempting to draw an equivalence between the two categories of objects, all the more so considering Bik offered such memorabilia – picture plates of the 200-year anniversary of Utrecht University – to the *daimyo* of Satsuma in Japan in an exchange of gifts. Likewise, sight-seeing visits to Napoleon's grave and to that of a legendary Japanese hero appear strikingly similar in content. In this manner, the reader is challenged to consider, when reading these accounts, to what extent Bik really distinguished between his experiences in Europe and those outside it.

Bik's experience as a global traveler was undeniably shared by others, but few if any contemporary accounts share the scope and colour of these accounts. Individual travel accounts from the period abound, but Bik's is an account of a lifetime of travel: what it loses in detail, it makes up in the thrill and variety of a ride that starts in adolescence and ends in retirement. It helps that Bik is an endearing narrator: his anecdotes are suffused with a self-deprecating sense of humour and an informal directness, while the private joys and tragedies of the biographical material come across as genuinely emotional. His depictions of individuals, both European and otherwise, are with few exceptions non-judgmental and remarkably good-willed; nor can one find much grand-scale theorising about the racial or cultural qualities of this or that people. However informative or interesting they may be, these accounts are also quite simply a pleasure to read.

For readers wishing to delve deeper into the life of Pieter Albert Bik, it is important to note this manuscript is intimately linked with certain items that can be found at the National Archives in The Hague. Most importantly, the original appendices referred to throughout the text can, with the exception of three pieces, be found in the Bik family archive.⁴ Therein lies also a sketch-book of his brother, the artist Adrianus Johannes Bik, containing various sketches drawn during the the brothers' return journey from Batavia to the Netherlands in 1847, some of which are referred to in this manuscript.⁵ Finally, there are various papers relating to Pieter Bik's time in Japan. Among these is another version of the court-trip diary included here: this is not written in Bik's own hand and appears to be a later copy, possibly for official records as it is among other official factory diaries (notably, there is no diary of Bik's

⁴ Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Collectie 302 Bik, 1789-1946, access number 2.21.024, inventory number 33. This bundle contains the originals of all the appendices mentioned in the text except pieces O, P, Q and the unmarked appendix referred to on page 215.

⁵ NA, Collectie Bik, 2.21.024, inv.nr. 14.

court trip in the archives of the Deshima factory); the papers relating to the Deshima factory also contain official correspondence and diaries relating to the Palembang affair.⁶ There are also a few pieces of personal correspondence including letters from J. van Overmeer Fisscher and von Siebold which add some light to Bik's role as a collector of Japanese curiosities.⁷

Finally, a few points should be noted about the transcript. As the electronic format puts no limit on volume, every attempt has been made to preserve the lay-out and structure of the original manuscript in order to facilitate comparison and cross-checking. Line and page breaks follow the original, and page numbering has been designed to follow that of the scanned manuscript file. Spelling has not been modernised; words that deviate excessively from modern spellings or are archaic have been explained with endnotes. The original also contains a large number of corrections: struck out words or sentences have been left out of the transcript whereas additions between the lines have been accommodated into the main text where feasible. Lengthy additions have been moved into endnotes. Finally, "...” has been used to denote an empty space in the original manuscript, generally a name that apparently was intended to be filled in afterwards but was not.

Mikko Toivanen

Leiden University

⁶ The court trip diary: NA, Collectie Bik, 2.21.024, inv.nr. 40; papers relating to the Palembang affair: NA, Collectie Bik, 2.21.024, inv.nr. 45-49.

⁷ NA, Collectie Bik, 2.21.024, inv.nr. 34.