

Unveiling Indonesia's Social Structures Without Doing Any Field Research: The Life and Work of Willem Rassers

Pieter ter Keurs

Universiteit Leiden
Rijksmuseum van Oudheden/National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden
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Willem Huibert Rassers (1877-1973) is, in many ways, a unique cultural anthropologist. He wrote copiously about Indonesian material culture, but never did any fieldwork and never set foot in Indonesia. He was at the origin of important theoretical innovations in Dutch anthropology, but never had disciples who could widely disseminate his ideas. He was never linked to a university and always kept a modest, safe distance, if oral evidence is anything to go by. When he took up his position as Director of the Leiden National Museum of Ethnography in 1937, he is said to have given an excellent lecture and the audience was extremely surprised; they had never heard him speak in public before. However, in 1937, W. H. Rassers was already important in Leiden's anthropological circles.

Indeed, alongside J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong, by that time he had already laid solid foundations for Leiden's structuralism, which, well before the work of C. Levi-Strauss, would dominate Dutch anthropology: a structuralism mostly based on empirical data collected from the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), during numerous ethnographic missions.

Willem Huibert Rassers was born in 1877 in Roosendaal, a town in the south of the Netherlands. Little is known about his youth, except that after his studies in Indology in

Leiden, he returned to his hometown to work in the family business for several years. (This is believed to have been due to an existential crisis.) But we know nothing more about that period. During his studies in Leiden, he was known as a brilliant student, and it is probably no coincidence that in 1918 he was chosen as the successor to H. W. Fischer, curator at the Museum of Ethnography, who died that same year. Rassers returned to Leiden and stayed there. In 1922, he completed his thesis about Panji, a hero of Javanese culture, with honours cum laude. The broad outlines of Rassers' general approach were already clear, but the publication of Marcel Mauss's (1923-1924) 'Essai sur le don' (The Gift) gave his work new impetus. Rassers studied cultural phenomena not in isolation but as part of an underlying structured whole. At that time, he had many enriching discussions with his colleague De Josselin de Jong – they both worked at the Museum of Ethnography – on new theories in the field of anthropology. On several occasions, both indicated that they were influenced by the other's ideas. The most important external influence came from Marcel Mauss, and, in an article on Bornean masks dating from 1928, this influence is clearly perceptible. Rassers was indebted to the French anthropologist and benefited from the concept of "fait social total". As curator of the Leiden Museum of Ethnography, he had direct access to one of the most important Indonesian collections in the world. However, a profusion of objects (at that time about 50,000) could lead to fragmentary analyses that placed too much emphasis on detail. However, one can see in Rassers that in the 1920s he already had a clear desire to look for inclusive models that would allow an interpretation of diversity within this ethnographic reality. His approach to the masks of Borneo shows this very well. In spite of the fact that the masks come from different cultural contexts, that they are distinct in appearance and that the rituals in which they are used are also of various natures (initiation, marriage, burial), it seems that there is an underlying common structure that governs the use of these masks. Rassers emphasizes that a basic structure of rituals is the same everywhere and that underlying societal goals are at work in all cases. The cohesion of society is made possible by the use of masks, and in addition, the importance of relations between neighbouring villages is also highlighted and made understandable; "external people" must take part in the rituals. This last point is particularly important for the sustainability of collective life. Establishing and perpetuating marriage relationships with surrounding villages is crucial to the perpetuation of society.

Rassers published another influential study on Javanese kris in 1938 (in Dutch) and 1940 (adapted English version). He links kris to the Javanese house and the wayang (shadow theatre). In this study, he also looks for elements linking phenomena that seem to have nothing to do with each other and structures that are not visible at first sight. In 1943, Rassers retired. In all, he published little, but is credited with some original studies on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the Batak magic staff (Prager & Ter Keurs, 1998). These two studies have been preserved in their handwritten form. On May 15, 1973, Willem Huibert Rassers died at the age of 95. Despite his modesty, he had a lasting influence on a small group of Dutch and foreign anthropologists.

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