

## The Indo Author Tjalie Robinson

Pioneer of a Multiracial Identity in the American Sixties

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[ J E R O E N D E W U L F ]

When President Barack Obama decided to identify himself as 'Black, African American or Negro' in the 2010 census form, he confirmed the enduring legacy of the United States' one-drop rule. Having a white mother and a black father, he could have made a different choice, such as checking both the 'White' and the 'Black' box or defining himself as 'multiracial' in the box 'Some Other Race'. Obama's decision to identify himself exclusively as black provoked both satisfaction and disappointment. While groups associated with the civil rights movement greeted his decision with joy and interpreted Obama's self-identification as a reflection of solidarity with the country's traditionally underprivileged black community, organizations that represent multiracial America perceived his decision as a lost opportunity to finally overcome the country's racial divide by moving from a static to a fluid definition of race.

While myriads of multiracial societies have developed throughout American history, from the mulatto castes of New Orleans to the Punjabi-Mexican families in California and the Chinese-Irish ones in New York, it is generally assumed that the conscious framing of a mixed-racial American identity is a recent phenomenon that started in the late 1970s with groups such as iP-ride, Biracial Family Network and Interracial Family Circle who in 1989 jointly created AMEA, the Association of MultiEthnic Americans. It is not well known that such organizations were preceded by the *Tong Tong* group for more than a decade. Founded in California in 1962 by the Dutch Eurasian 'Indo' writer Tjalie Robinson, *The American Tong Tong* was probably the first magazine in the United States to consciously advocate a multiracial identity.

### Indo emigration to the United States

Following Sukarno's unilateral declaration of Indonesian independence in August 1945, some 300,000 people with European status, including some 180,000 Eurasians, repatriated to the Netherlands. In a country that was still recovering from the destruction of the Second World War, there was little enthusiasm for the arrival of tens of thousands of destitute 'colonials'. Many doubted whether people who had grown up in Southeast Asia would be able to adapt



Jan Boon  
(a.k.a. Tjalie Robinson),  
1929

themselves to Dutch society. These reservations were particularly strong in relation to Eurasians. The Dutch government reacted to these concerns with a twofold policy. On the one hand, it imposed measures to enforce assimilation into Dutch society: repatriates were spread all over the country and pressured to adopt Dutch habits. On the other hand, the government urged repatriates to consider renewed emigration.

In its efforts to boost emigration to the United States, the government made a promotional film about life in sunny California with the unmistakable message that repatriates from the Indies would feel more at home in California than in the chilly Netherlands. The film, strategically entitled *Een plaatsje in de zon* (A Cozy Place in the Sun, 1961), did not miss its aim. Some 25,000 Dutch citizens with roots in the Indies – most of them Eurasians – emigrated to America and the large majority effectively settled in California, where the mild climate allowed for a similar lifestyle to that in the Indies. Among them was Jan Boon (1911-1974), better known under his alias Tjalie Robinson.

### Tjalie Robinson as intellectual leader

Boon was born in 1911 in Nijmegen, when his Dutch father, a sergeant major in the colonial KNIL army, and Eurasian (British-Japanese) mother were on holiday in the Netherlands. He spent his youth in Cimahi (on West Java) and Batavia, the later Jakarta. Unlike most other Eurasians with a European status, Boon decided to stay in Indonesia after its independence. In those early 1950s, he started the columns *Piekerans van een straatlijper* (Ruminations of a Flâneur) that would make him famous under the Eurasian *nom de plume* Tjalie (a corruption of 'Charlie') Robinson (his mother's maiden name). He wrote his 'ruminations' from the perspective of the *anak Betawie*, the Indo, who, with a mixture of irony and melancholy, witnessed how the (colonial) Batavia was changing into (the postcolonial) Jakarta. Robinson's columns were a statement of belonging, which was reflected in the frequent use of *Petjo*, a typically Eurasian mixture of Dutch and Malay.

Jan Boon with his mother,  
1933



The inner conflict of being torn between Indonesia and the Netherlands, two cultures that for Robinson could only exist interconnected, is also a characteristic of his short stories, written under the pseudonym Vincent Mahieu. The pen name refers to Auguste Mahieu, founder of the *Komedie Stamboel*, a late nineteenth-century form of popular theatre that combined Western and Asian traditions. Mahieu's short stories represent the first genuine Eurasian voice in Dutch fiction and focus on topics such as motorbike racing, guitar playing, boxing, and above all hunting. Both titles of the anthologies in which these stories were later published, *Tjies* (1958) and *Tjoek* (1960), refer to guns used for hunting. In accordance with the tradition of oral literature, Robinson defined his stories as 'tales', and adapted his language to the way stories were told in the Eurasian community: with short sentences, plenty of suspense, and full of expressions in *Petjo*.

Unlike most other Indo-Europeans, Robinson originally believed that there would still be a future for him in the Indonesian Republic. Soon, however, the political situation in Sukarno's Indonesia moved in a direction that excluded the survival of a Dutch-oriented culture and he repatriated to the Netherlands in 1954. Despite his repatriation, Robinson refused to accept that there would be no place for people like him who identified with both Dutch and Indonesian culture in the postcolonial world order. While most Dutch authors with roots in the Indies tended to recall their country of birth with the assumption that they wrote about an epoch that was irrevocably in the past, Robinson distanced himself from those who wanted to reduce Indonesia to *tempo dulu* (sweet old colonial times). He believed that 350 years of shared history had created a special bond between two cultures that should continue to develop.

In 1957, Robinson became editor-in-chief of *Onze Brug* (Our Bridge), a small magazine made by and for repatriates from the Indies. While *Onze Brug* had been characterized by a nostalgic perspective of the former colony, Robinson changed its editorial policy. He decided to use it as a platform for the elaboration of a Eurasian identity, which was reflected in its new name *Tong Tong*: a hollow trunk that is beaten to call the attention of the community. Having started with only 400 subscribers, *Tong Tong* quickly achieved a circulation of over 11,000 copies. Instead of deploring Indonesia's independence as the end of an era, Robinson considered it as the beginning of a new phase of Indo identity. He believed that the end of the East Indies liberated Indos from their slavish imitation of Dutch culture and would catalyse them to recognize their cultural and ethnic singularity.

After a visit to California's Indo community in 1961, Robinson decided to apply for immigration to the United States and eventually settled in Whittier, California. Together with his wife Lilian Ducelle, he founded *The American Tong Tong* as a supplement to *Tong Tong*, which was followed in 1963 by the foundation of the Indo community centre De Soos in nearby Pasadena.

## **Framing a Eurasian identity in America**

The Indo community was not totally unknown to American scholars. In the 1930s, they had figured prominently in American sociological studies. This interest related to the work of Robert Park, whose perspective on multiracial

people was ambivalent. Although his ground-breaking article 'Human Migration and the Marginal Man' (1928) carried the stereotypical image of 'mixed bloods' as 'spiritually instable', 'intensified self-conscious' and 'restless' people that dated back to nineteenth-century racist theories, Park also considered them to be cultural innovators. In a later article, 'Race Relations and Certain Frontiers' (1934), Park focused specifically on the Eurasian community in the Dutch East Indies, which triggered the interest of Everett Stonequist. Stonequist's theory in *The Marginal Man* (1937) came close to Park's insights, but his perspective on multiracial people had a stronger negative bias. Stonequist perceived mixed-racial people as a problem both to society as well as to themselves by relating them to inferiority complexes, hypersensitivity, spiritual distress and a general malaise. Not surprisingly, his chapter on 'the Indo-Europeans of Java' recycled the stereotypical image of Eurasians as people who 'live useless discontented lives'. In 1963, a popular version of Park's and Stonequist's theories appeared. Under the title *Almost White*, Brewton Berry again put the spotlight on 'Indo-Europeans in Indonesia' as 'pathetic folk of mixed ancestry who never know quite where they belong ... raceless people, neither fish nor fowl.'

Robinson's identity concept was strongly influenced by these sociological studies. In 1961, he still referred to himself as a 'marginal man ... a child of two races and cultures, living on the border between the imperial-colonial era and a new era.' By 1971, however, Robinson had distanced himself from theories of marginality and claimed that 'where there is no margin, there is no marginality ... he is NEVER MARGINAL who manages to achieve his proper identity.' In his attempt to rescue the Eurasian community with roots in the East Indies from either a deplorable existence in the ethnic margin or disappearance through assimilation, Robinson used a strategy he copied from the civil rights movement: transforming shame into pride. While the abbreviation 'Indo' for 'Indo-European' had been a term of abuse during the colonial era, Robinson adopted it as a *nom de gueux* and propagated 'Indo pride'.

As early as 1958, Robinson established a connection between Indos and the black community in America. He argued that, just as black people had to develop a proper identity in the diaspora after the end of slavery, Indo people had to do the same at the end of colonialism. 'Despite hanging parties ... one finds a strong, creative, indestructible form of black culture in America', he argued, and linked this to his own community that 'can also create such a culture if only we are conscious of our proper values, proud of our own heritage and confident about our own future.' Robinson interpreted the strength of the civil rights movement as a sign that American society offered opportunities for self-development that did not exist in the Netherlands. In an open letter, Robinson encouraged all Indos to consider immigration to America: 'In Indonesia, they still want to make every Indo into an Indonesian, in the Netherlands every Indo has to become a perfect Dutchman. In the United States, they think that such assimilation is ridiculous.'

To those who were already living in the United States, Robinson made an appeal to resist the assumption that one had to forget about one's origin in order to become a successful American. Instead of the word 'Americanization', he used the expression 'to become Yankee' in reference to assimilation in American society according to the melting-pot theory. This choice can be



Jan Boon, 1933



Jan Boon with children and his wife Lilian Ducelle at the Pasar Malam in The Hague, in the 1950s

explained by the influence of Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan's work *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) on Robinson. Glazer and Moynihan had distanced themselves from the notion that the mixture of peoples in American society was soon to blend into a homogeneous end product. Rather, they claimed that 'the point about the melting pot ... is that it did not happen.' Robinson realized how Glazer and Moynihan stood at the beginning of a transformation of American society, where the concept of diversity was about to replace the melting-pot theory. Hence, 'Americanization' was no longer an adequate term to describe assimilation into American society. From Robinson's perspective, 'Americanization' now represented the opposite: to enrich American diversity with one's own identity. He therefore insisted that being a self-conscious Indo would make one more American, not less. Consequently, he highlighted Eurasian cultural achievements that had been traditionally neglected by scholars: *stamboel* theatre, *bangsawan* opera, *kroncong* music and the *Petjo* language. He proudly included the *Tong Tong* magazine in this list as 'proof that the Eurasian is not indolent nor marginal, but capable of conquering a valuable place among other peoples with his own force.'

In Robinson's construction of a unique Eurasian identity for people with roots in the former Indies, hybridity and homelessness became distinctive features. He presented a self-confident transnational existence in the diaspora as a compelling alternative to an inglorious assimilation in Indonesia or the Netherlands. In a reply to Berry's disparaging remarks about Eurasians, he wrote:



'I did not care that people wanted to call me "neither fish nor fowl," and wanted to label me either Indonesian or Dutch. ... I compared our Indo identity to that of the turtle that is "neither fish nor fowl," and praised this animal as a unique, land- and sea-lover ... that cuts through oceans from continent to continent.'

Robinson linked his multiracial identity concept to a world without discrimination and predicted that 'we are the people of the future – heralds of an era free of racial and nationalistic discrimination.' He distanced himself, however, from those who believed that the disappearance of identity markers was the best way to overcome discrimination. In his article 'Negervraagstuk' (The Black Problem, 1964), Robinson defended the importance of cultural differences and argued that in order to overcome discrimination one should learn to respect cultural difference rather than try to abolish it. He rejected the assumption that there was a 'black problem', but rather identified a 'white, European problem' as the real challenge for the future: 'People assume there is a "black problem" only because black people were able to preserve their identity despite millions of attempts to prevent this. The real problem is the "European problem," that of a strange kind of people, who ... assume that they need to tell other people what to do.'



Jan Boon at his worktable, 1960



## The last of the Mohicans

Contrary to what Robinson had expected, his project was much less successful in America than in the Netherlands, where pressure to assimilate had the opposite effect. Almost all major cultural events of today's thriving Indo community in the Netherlands — including the magazine *Moesson* and the annual *Tong Tong Fair* in The Hague, the world's largest Eurasian fair — were founded by Robinson.

This was different in America, where Robinson had set the ambitious goal of 1,000 subscribers for *The American Tong Tong* but only reached 300. Time and again he complained that Indos in America were more interested in money than in culture. Another problem was language. Robinson was well aware of the fact that in order to become successful in American society, members of his community had to become fluent in English. Accordingly, he made *The American Tong Tong* a bilingual (Dutch-English) magazine, which reflected his wish for integration without assimilation. At the same time, however, it was clear to him that 'precisely because we are aware of our heritage, we should not abandon our original language.' Yet he did not anticipate that first-generation Indos in

The son of Jan Boon aboard a ship  
in the bay of Jakarta with his father's  
urn and a woman blessing it,  
31 July 1974



America would massively switch to English as the language of communication with their children. When Robinson realized that most second-generation Indos were unable to read anything of his work, as they did not know Dutch, let alone Petjo, he did not have an answer.

Robinson cancelled *The American Tong Tong* in February 1965, only two and a half years after its creation. By then, his enthusiasm about America had considerably diluted after several attempts to become an entrepreneur had failed. Even more worrying for Robinson were problems with *Tong Tong* in the Netherlands, where many had interpreted his emigration to America as a form of betrayal and had turned their back on the *Tong Tong* group. In 1966, Robinson returned to the Netherlands, where he died eight years later.

With Robinson leaving America, the local Indo community lost its intellectual leader. In 1988, *De Soos* was dissolved after a last play with the appropriate title *En toen al* (And that was it). None of Robinson's ambitious projects in the United States succeeded. Robinson's only concrete legacy is the magazine *De Indo*. What had originally been a club magazine for *Soos*-members survives in the present as a modestly printed monthly publication by an enthusiastic group of volunteers with news from and about Indos in the diaspora.

Robinson's ambition to pass Indo culture and identity over to the next generation was largely abandoned by Indos in America. One rarely finds second- or third-generation Indos at their *kumpulans* (social gatherings). The main concern of these groups is to save Indo heritage from oblivion rather than reviving or reinventing it in cooperation with younger generations. First-generation Indos in America therefore generally perceive themselves as a dying community, or, as one of them said in an interview with Greta Kwik in 1989, as 'the last of the Mohicans'. What remains is Robinson's written legacy with a fascinating wealth of ideas about identity issues that only long after his death achieved prominence in Dutch and American society. ■

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