Colonialism and Its Racial Imprint

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To meet the huge demand for a workforce in the plantation belt that arose on Sumatra’s East Coast, coolies were initially recruited from Malaya and later from China and Java. They were held captive by a labour contract subjecting them to penal sanctions. An official but undisclosed report documented a wide range of atrocities to discipline workers found ‘slothful’ or resisting. My monograph, *Taming the Coolie Beast* (1989), featured this report, but was challenged by some reviewers as biased and moralistic. In a riposte, I argued that ‘the coolie scandal’ should be contextualized in the wider setting of colonial rule and its objectives. Resistance to the forced production of agrarian commodities led colonial wisdom to blame the peasantry of indolence. A more polished veneer of this myth suggested that the indigenous population was driven by social rather than economic needs. Institutionalized in legislation, the racist imprint of colonialism insisted on fixing a colour bar. The so-called Dutch ‘ethical policy’ of the early twentieth century promised welfare for the people, referred to as ‘natives’ in discriminatory colonial jargon, but was not implemented.

**Keywords:** coolies, plantation, work contract, penal sanction, colonial historiography, colour bar, ethical policy, indenture, labour inspectorate.

The Coolie Scandal in Deli

Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, Dutch public opinion was caught unawares and justifiably shocked by what became known as ‘the coolie scandal’. This event concerned the regime of unfree labour as practised in the large-scale agribusiness on Sumatra’s East Coast, which had been parcelled out as an administrative enclave. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, plantations had
been established in this heavily forested region to grow commercial crops for the global market. Operated by European management and an Asian workforce imported from outside, the production of tobacco, and later of rubber and palm oil, became a booming business and yielded large profits for pioneering planters. Labour was not available locally since inhabitants of the area were in short supply and also unwilling to submit to the brutal treatment meted out to labour brought in from outside. The first batch of coolies was contracted in Malaya and China, but the robust growth of this workforce—from 95,000 in 1906 and 200,000 in 1920 to a peak of nearly 300,000 by the end of the following decade—was accompanied by a shift in its ethnic composition. Labour recruitment now mainly took place in Java, where a loss of livelihood opportunities forced the land-poor and landless classes to seek employment in the capitalist and expatriate sector of the colonial economy.

A local whistle-blower published a pamphlet in 1902—“The Millions from Deli”—in which he documented tales of horror and terror to which the coolies in the expanding plantation belt were subjected (van den Brand 1902). Authorities both in the colony and at home denied the story as baseless, but under pressure from the minister of the colonies, the governor-general of the Netherlands Indies ordered an official enquiry in 1903. A public prosecutor from the colonial headquarters was sent to Deli on a fact-finding mission to reject the accusations made. The Department of Justice was actually well aware of the brutal labour regime in the opened-up region of Deli, having frequently attended to ‘incidents’ in the preceding decades. Several European officials declined on various grounds to be commissioned with this delicate task, which was then entrusted to J.T.L. Rhemrev, who ranked lower in the judiciary. His elaborate and evocatively detailed dispatch was forthwith sent to the governor-general. When engrossed in research on labour migration in colonial South and Southeast Asia, I stumbled upon a reference to his report, which had been immediately secreted away in the government files. I found it back in the state archives, and I have discussed its contents extensively in my monograph,
Taming the Coolie Beast (1989; originally published in Dutch in 1987). In doing so, I disclosed what appeared to have been a neglected chapter in Dutch colonial history: the labour regime in Deli’s plantation belt in the early twentieth century. Why, when and how this happened is expounded on in the publications referred to in this essay.

The findings submitted by the official investigator were included as an annex in the original Dutch edition of my study (Breman 1987). Once the report had been submitted to the commanding heights, it was deliberately kept from the public eye and also from political scrutiny in the ongoing debate waged in the Dutch parliament on the coolie labour regime in Deli. Only a handful of insiders—civil servants and the planters’ lobby—were given access to it. As its political sensitivity waned in subsequent decades, the report lost its seal of secrecy, but it remained untouched in the archives because of a lack of scholarly interest. In my opinion, it was possible to ignore the contents of this document for so long because of the tenacious inclination of colonial authorities and policymakers to downplay the darker side of the colonial enterprise. Johannes van den Brand, who blew the whistle on the coolie scandal, was maligned and exorcized from the European community in Medan in the wake of his indictment of both planters and officials. Rhemrev, a man of Indo-European descent as his name suggests, was scorned from the top down rather than rewarded for a job well done.

A Façade of Reforms

Opening up the jungle on Sumatra’s East Coast and laying out plantations took a heavy toll on the contracted workforce. The death rate that had been atrociously high in the pioneering years fell at the end of the nineteenth century. The extent of this decline of labour mortality is impossible to gauge, as some planters were wont to cast aside terminally ill or dying coolies in the bush outside the estate. It is a narrative of atrocities impossible to reconcile with the photographs of well-equipped plantation hospitals with immaculate
wards and the—seemingly—neat barracks and available welfare provisions that embellished the memorial volumes even before the turn of the century. No doubt, plantation doctor Tschudnowsky told in his memoirs (1899) a horrendous story of abuse and wanton neglect based on his experiences as a medical practitioner employed by one of the tobacco companies. But was this outsider not speaking about a past that had already disappeared when Rhemrev began his investigation? How credible would my critical appraisal appear if I was found to have wilfully overlooked statistics and annual reports highlighting a growing number of doctors, paramedics, a much-improved infrastructure and a falling death rate?

The reason I did not retract my initial judgement was the discovery of fresh proof pertaining to the years immediately before and after Rhemrev submitted his report (1903). In a memorandum addressed to the Resident of the East Coast of Sumatra, the government health inspector in the region described in late 1901 how he had found the inmates of plantation hospitals in a filthy condition, deprived of any form of care. He profusely condemned the indifferent behaviour of the medical practitioner in charge and labelled the treatment of the patients revolting and cruel (Maier 1901). Such factual evidence corroborates the repertoire of excesses documented by Rhemrev. No doubt, digesting such testimonies elicited feelings of shock and compassion towards the victims. And yet, another tone, present as an undercurrent in the book reviews, caught my attention even more: the implicit suggestion that Rhemrev’s report once submitted must have ended the abuses. In an attempt to draw the public discussion about ‘the coolie scandal’ to a close, the authorities both at the central and regional level stepped in to end this abusive state of affairs. With the measures taken—the establishment in Sumatra’s plantation belt of a Labour Inspectorate above all—they seemed to have managed to do so. The reforms announced should have closed this black chapter of colonial governance in cahoots with capitalist agribusiness. In *Taming the Coolie Beast* (Breman 1989), I argued that their ongoing collusion was dressed up by officials and planters as a tale from an unwieldy past.
I expressed doubts about this wishful thinking, as I had given concrete evidence on the continuation of the abusive coolie regime. I may have failed to convey my reservations adequately because, in most reviews of my book, neither the maintenance of the merciless coolie treatment nor the question of how this could have officially been tolerated and sanctioned was mentioned, even in passing. The naïve suggestion seemed to have been that what the government and the plantation lobby had in close alliance covered up was now finally in the public domain. This pretended ignorance or insistent denial of sustained malpractice is misconceived, although critical reviews blamed me for having failed to register how an alerted colonial government introduced reforms and improved the plight of the coolie workforce (Houben 1988; Houben and Lindblad 1999). In response, I vented my strong disagreement with these appraisals that claimed a turning of the tide and a benign government successful in controlling an abusive work regime (Breman 1992).

Van den Brand (1902) was the first to highlight what the colonial media for many years had only incidentally paid attention to. The power of his brochures resided in his denouncement of what was considered perfectly natural among those familiar with the colonial theatre: the denial of the human qualities and rights of the coolies. Even more persuasive than what he had drawn from his private legal practice in Medan were the announcements he reprinted from newspapers promising a bounty for runaway coolies. The Uncle Tom association was impossible to miss. Advertisements that were scattered throughout the pages of his booklet offered coolies and cattle for sale in the same breath. It is mind-boggling that in the colonial milieu only a handful of dissenters such as van den Brand took issue with what was considered ‘normal’. The shock of recognition that followed was confined to the homeland of the Dutch community. Even there, it only created a temporary outburst of empathy, and it most certainly induced no change in colonial morality. It also failed to end the miserable conditions in which plantation coolies worked and lived, as Tan Malaka pointed out nearly two decades later (see Poeze 1976). Ann Stoler (1985)
came to a similar conclusion in her study of the work regime on Sumatra’s plantation belt.

The Fabrication of a Contract

The coolie workforce experienced a lack of freedom both on the plantation and during the process of recruitment in China and Java because of the penal sanction included in the labour contract that held them captive to the employer. The compradors (labour brokers), acting as touts who press-ganged the coolies, were guilty of all sorts of misdeeds, varying from deceit and intimidation to brutal force. In 1905, an agent in Hong Kong informed his superiors in Deli that recruitment was only free in name (Stecher 1905a). The official memoranda that looked into these unlawful practices invariably insisted that such complaints had to be dismissed as groundless or exaggerated and could be ignored as outdated and as evidence of past misdemeanour (Stecher 1905a; Kuenen 1906, pp. 8–9). However, right up to the end of the colonial era, the rumour that contractors were prowling around the Javanese countryside created so much panic that mothers used to keep their children at home.

Reports continued to be written, as they had been earlier, not to ferret out the truth but to fabricate the legality of what was not condoned. In the final instance, abuses could be excused by accusing the coolies of being the instigators of these unfounded allegations. The ‘natives’, supposedly afflicted with a childishy primitive mentality, simply lacked the capability to behave as rational and responsible adults. As one commentator argued, when hiring a horse, one did not make a contract with the beast itself but with its owner (Ezerman 1912, p. 1287). Likewise, the employers obstinately continued to claim that the medical inspection and transport of contracted labourers were beyond reproach. The pretence was that the coolies entered freely into contracts. The advance paid out on recruitment indentured them to the employer. Nevertheless, a great deal of what happened could not stand up to the public gaze: the incarceration of coolies in a dilapidated depot or in a camp for convicts, and transportation
under harsh supervision. The coolies had no say in their destination or type of employment.

This was decided by the emigration office. The name of the plantation was written on a small board which was hung around the coolies’ necks before they were photographed; ‘strangely enough, the people [the coolies recruited] seemed satisfied with this high-handed and arbitrary procedure’. (Stecher 1905b, p. 5)

Crammed below decks on ships to Sumatra, they were deprived of even the most elementary amenities. Although the voyage lasted several days, the medical inspector believed there was no need to provide sleeping accommodation.

The various places were indicated on the deck by coloured stripes, leaving several pathways open for inspection.... Any other furnishings would do nothing to heighten comfort, only to increase the squalor. One just has to think of the fruit peel, the betel quids, and the detritus of sea-sickness. (Kuenen 1906, p. 22)

It is no wonder the coolies arrived tattered and exhausted. Thoroughly commodified, they were noted down in the bills of lading as cargo (Stecher 1905b, p. 33). The last part of the journey from the harbour of Belawan to the estate in the interior was carried out in freight trains (Rothe 1946, p. 328). This manner of transportation conjures the image of cattle herds, piece goods and beasts—these associations were not in the least fortuitous. From the moment they were recruited, the coolies were subject to treatment devised to dehumanize them. Even before being put to work, they were already degraded to a mere commodity.

Insistence on the Penal Sanction in the Work Contract

Indentured labour was a system of bondage set up in the wake of the abolition of slavery. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the surge in demand for capitalist-run agribusiness and mining industry in the colonized world necessitated the deployment of a massive workforce tied down at the site of employment (Breman
On the East Coast of Sumatra, one of the outlying residencies of the Dutch East-Indies, this system took legal shape in the Coolie Ordinance, issued in 1880, to which penal sanctions were attached. The engagement procedure pretended to safeguard coolies against deceit, checking whether they had indeed been recruited voluntarily. But the real motive was to prevent workers from breaking the clauses binding them to the worksite for the stipulated duration of the contract and the burden of work imposed on them. The wide-ranging sanctions spelled out penalties for work-related infractions, flight, disobedience, insolence and other acts of misbehaviour as perceived by the employer.

Behind the posture of rigorous official surveillance with the mandate to check on abuses and the detailed listing of improvements and progress made, the dark side of the plantation remained hidden. Jacob Nienhuys, renowned as a pioneer planter and founder of the famous Deli Company, was made to leave Sumatra’s East Coast in a dreadful hurry, not because of his bad health—the reason given at the time—but to avoid criminal prosecution with the charge of having flogged seven coolies to death. A sensational story, but one of course nowhere to be found in the historiography of the corporation that had expanded to become a state in a state. In an attempt to erase this blot on its proud record, the Deli Company instigated an official investigation as early as 1875. The colonial official to whom this delicate mission was entrusted did not succeed in refuting the accusation. He concluded quite ominously that it was not possible to substantiate that the alleged facts had no foundation (Sumatra Post, 14 May 1913, editorial note).

One would seek in vain to find this incriminating verdict in standard colonial works on the plantations of the East Coast of Sumatra. No doubt, more than before, legal action was taken against ‘excesses’ committed against coolies, or at least to the extent district authorities became aware of them. In the long run, this interference exerted a moderating influence on the impunity with which the planters broke the law. But prohibition of this customary practice had little effect initially. The annual inspection reports did not tell
the story as it was; rather, it was a mix of dissenters in the ranks of officialdom who broke through the conspiracy of silence every once in a while. For fear of negative consequences, such as being passed over for promotion or transferred to an unattractive post, better-informed insiders scrupulously avoided probing into the collusion between colonial governance and corporate agribusiness. As head of the government apparatus, the Resident of the East Coast of Sumatra gave his support to a petition the planters sent to the governor-general in 1910, asking him to tighten the penal detention to which misbehaving coolies were convicted (see also van Rossum 2018). Arduous work such as draining swamps, shifting soil, collecting gravel, breaking stones and other similar chores for ten hours a day, during which the convicts were not allowed to talk to each other, became the prescribed treatment for trespassing coolies. Against the advice of his top civil servants, Governor-General Alexander W.F. Idenburg acceded to this request from the captains of the Deli plantation belt. He subscribed to the view that the Asian coolie could only be transformed into a pliable and diligent worker by ‘putting in the boot’. This is the same person who had six years before, as minister of the colonies in the Netherlands, swept the Rhemrev report under the carpet with a hand-written comment—“a lamentable history of suffering and injustice”.² Idenburg had cut short his military career in the Netherlands Indies to become a leading member of parliament in the conservative Christian party that dominated the ruling Dutch government. Thrice having become minister of the colonies in his political career, he was nominated governor-general in 1909, entrusted with implementing the ‘ethical policy’ that promised the Indonesian population would share in the colonial profits. At the apex of the colonial administration, he gave instruction in 1911 not only to intensify forced labour at Sumatra’s East Coast but also to give the prisoners poorer quality food. This tightening of the prison regime was implemented to prevent the coolies from considering their imprisonment, which was meted out for breaches of contract, as a form of liberation from the merciless yoke of exploitation and oppression on the estates.
The pressure exerted by the planters’ lobby impeded the government from adopting the proposal to modify and, in the last instance, to abolish the penal sanction in the work contract. Having foreseen this outcome, the official who submitted the draft published a pamphlet in which he blamed Idenburg for having taken the side of the planters and retracting his oft-repeated promise that forced labour should be abolished. ‘The whip’, as the penal sanction was also commonly referred to in official reporting, remained in force as the pinnacle of the coolie ordinance (van den Brand 1918, pp. 688–89). The governor of Sumatra’s East Coast stated in 1917 that the ongoing recruitment of coolies from China was required for consolidating tobacco cultivation, while their arrival in larger numbers from Java was required for further expansion of the production of rubber and palm oil. The penal sanction had to be retained in the recruitment and employment of this workforce in order, as it was officially proclaimed, to secure the welfare and development of the region. Staff members of the Labour Inspectorate themselves were, at the beginning of the 1920s, convinced that the penal sanction was and should remain an indispensable part of the work contract. The counsel that these co-opted stakeholders expressed shows that as the years passed the government agency founded to protect the coolies from abuses changed its function to that of a disciplinary instrument in the hands of the planters.

Nearly two decades after Rhemrev had exposed in minute detail the atrocities committed against the coolie workforce in Deli, Indonesia’s radical freedom fighter Tan Malaka came to Sumatra’s East Coast. After having finished Teacher Training College in the Netherlands, he accepted a job offer to educate children of the Javanese workforce on a newly opened Deli plantation school. During his stay from December 1919 to June 1921, he sought the company of the coolies in the off hours and summed up their ordeal in his autobiography:

The class which toils from dawn to dusk; the class which earns a wage just enough to fill the belly and cover its nakedness; the class which lives in a shed like goats in a pen; and is arbitrarily
flogged, abused at and damned to hell; the class which could at any time lose wife or daughter should the white boss lust after her ... that is the class of Indonesians known as contract coolies. (Malaka 1947, pp. 47–48, cited in Poeze 1976, p. 76)

The loss of the patronage and protection Tan Malaka had enjoyed from the owner of the estate, an unusual figure among the planters, drove him away from the first job he held (Malaka 1991, pp. 47–59). On his resignation as teacher from the plantation school, Tan Malaka went to Java, where he joined and promoted the nationalist movement. The colonial government felt sufficiently threatened by his radical views to send him into exile in 1922. His trajectory as a revolutionary politician brought him to many countries in Europe and Asia. On his return to Indonesia during the Japanese occupation, he remained a revolutionary leader who, for his radical leanings, was assassinated by pro-Sukarno vigilantism in 1949 (Poeze 2007).

Voicing Dissent Versus Compliance

A few dissenters in the bureaucracy refused to abide by the colonial dictates on harnessing coolie labour, and they were taken to task for their opposition. That happened, for instance, to an assistant-resident who dared to point out the frequent and unduly harsh punishments to which the police magistrate sentenced the coolies for minor breaches of their contract. The planters were quick to lodge serious complaints against protests from within the ranks of officialdom. Such unwelcome criticism was followed by the transfer of the civil servant concerned. The charge about the poor health of many plantation labourers filed two years later by a hospital doctor had just as little effect. He felt obliged to resign. Before he left, he wrote a letter to the director of justice in which he stated that many of his patients had to be admitted either in a malnourished state or required medical attention as the result of maltreatment (Bruinink-Darlang 1986, p. 99). Young white males were imported from the homeland and charged with supervising gangs of coolie labour. Once in a while, one among this junior staff would lack the
mettle to engage in the immense exploitation and repression that was practised. Apie Prins came to Deli in 1908 and narrated what he experienced in a vividly written autobiography (1958) about his rambling career. He owed his arrival on Sumatra’s East Coast and a job as junior manager to family connections with a member of the board of directors of a plantation company. Although a dedicated non-conformist, Apie soon got used to the demands the plantation made on its European staff. A tough demeanour was required to earn the respect of both the coolies and the bosses:

"Giving a Chinese a smack on his bald head was commonplace. If they were idling around or obstinate, you gave them a couple of biffs and habis perkara [that was the end of it]. You had a choice: hit out or take it lying down and lose your prestige. And then be fired! A timid assistant was out of the race. There were, of course, exceptions among the older, more experienced, and level-headed assistants, but most of them were rowdies or bullies who hit out at the least excuse. A gentle-minded assistant was considered a poor one. A toean djahat [note: a harsh, evil-tempered man] acting as a rogue curried favour with his superiors. (Prins 1958, p. 229)"

His narrative is an insider’s account of the plantation regimen: the daily work, the pecking order among the white staff of seniors and juniors, and the interaction with Asian foremen and coolies. Apie excelled in his descriptions of the vulgarities that featured in the bachelor life which he shared with his colleagues.

As junior managers, they were not allowed to get married. These lonely young men had to while away their leisure hours engaged in typical ‘male’ diversions in which guns and hunting, beer swilling, dogs and horses played an important role. There was no interest in reading or anything that might have been considered ‘cultural’, with many nights spent in horseplay at the club and ending in a drunken orgy. And naturally, there was the sexuality, with the nyai (a maid serving as kept female) as an intimate but untrustworthy and despised companion. All this with no holds barred; the white junior managers (toean ketjil) competed with each other or shared their female prey,
...he Javanese ‘birds’ [note: women] did it for next to nothing, especially if her own toean [boss] had gone to Medan. The assistants were always prowling after each other’s birds and slouched around the house like hungry wolves. (Prins 1958, p. 243)

The author himself did not need a steady partner. When he desired a woman, he simply summoned a coolie maid, whether she was married or not. Non-conformism made Prins an acute and frank observer, but his view of Asians precluded him from dissociating himself from the white man’s supremacy. Prins indeed left the East Coast of Sumatra because he was afraid that had he remained he would have sunk to the racist mentality of the average European assistant. He arrived at this conclusion when he noticed in his behaviour symptoms that pointed to ‘tropical madness’—a feared ailment in his milieu. He had difficulty stifling sadistic impulses, which were vented by torturing pet animals, and he was shocked into awareness of this pastime when a colleague, his housemate actually, appeared to display the same delusion. Prins was convinced that loneliness and the tropical climate were the cause of this aberration. Reaching this conclusion, he did not deviate from the common understanding in the colonial milieu of Tropenkoller (tropical madness) as a mental breakdown said to affect Europeans only.

Racism as Featured in Colonial Psychology

‘Tropical madness’ was first diagnosed by doctors who described the ailment as afflicting pioneering German colonists in Africa. It was found everywhere that young men from Western countries had to live in a tropical environment in the midst of colonized people. The symptoms described pertained to males who in Europe were no different from their fellow citizens. Unrestrained behaviour was the generic name for a series of aberrations summed up by the colonial psychologist Jacob M.F. Kohlbrugge as follows: “all acts of bestiality, sexual excesses, physical tortures and murders, plus bursts of delusions of grandeur” (1907, p. 167). This professional of the
colonial psyche, both of the colonizer and the colonized, sought the main cause of derangement in the tropical climate in the wayward behaviour of the indigenous population.

The loose clothing means that the shape of the body is accentuated, especially in the case with the natives. Nothing arouses passion so much as semi-nakedness, which lures thoughts in a certain direction and then allows the imagination free play. The result is that the orang-baroe [the newcomer] to the Indies ponders much more about the problems of sexuality than in Europe…. Another effect of the climate is that frequent bathing becomes the custom and here again glimpses of one's own naked body elicits the same response, in just such a mood as an old-fashioned Dutch lady would have found taking a full bath more or less indecent; consequently awareness that others are doing the same kindles the imagination. Finally, the nature of the climate has created the custom of sleeping or drowsing throughout the warmest hours of the day: people disrobe, after first having enjoyed a copious meal, which speeds up the circulation of the blood. (Kohlbrugge 1907, pp. 169–70)

Lurking behind this explanation of a nervous breakdown appears to have been class prejudice. Kohlbrugge was convinced that self-discipline, the overriding characteristic of the middle-class in Europe, was not practised among proletarian whites who went overseas. According to him, this brand of (male) foreignness gave in to temptations and plunged into excesses. This was considered revolting by the standards of the superior class to which the white segment automatically belonged in the colony. Nevertheless, only a tiny fraction of the Europeans (those with a proletarian background) succumbed to tropical madness. In contrast, the negative genetic qualities that Kohlbrugge ascribed to the colonized population had nothing to do with illness but were deemed to be determined by race. Among the characteristic components of the Javanese-Malay psyche, he listed unbridled imagination, limited mental capacity, proneness to suggestibility, a lack of individualism, slavish submission and slowness of thought. Immaturity, irrationality and impulsiveness were major traits which the Encyclopaedie van Netherlandsch-Indië (Graaff and Stibbe 1918, pp. 215–16) identified in its profile on
Javanese ethnicity. In contrast to the ‘inlanders’, who were saddled with collective traits that cast doubt on their human capabilities, Europeans only failed as individuals with regards to maintaining social norms and values. Behaviour to which Asians were genetically prone, it was believed, was stigmatized, considered a deviation from the prescribed morality of the Europeans and blamed on the tropical climate and the social environment. It is precisely this difference in explanation that reveals the racism that permeated the colonized landscape.

The Public Staging of Violence and Suppression

A short while before finishing the original Dutch version of this essay, I got hold of a collection of unpublished documents that bear witness to the drama that had unfolded. Two photographs show the death penalty being carried out in early 1893. The first shows two Javanese standing on a scaffold with their wrists manacled. Beside them stand the executioner and his helper, who are busy putting the nooses around their necks. To one side of the scaffold, members of the native police force are lined up under the command of a Dutch officer. Coolie barracks can be seen in the background. The photographer positioned himself in the vicinity of a small group of whites—planters and civil servants—who are looking on fairly close by. Pith helmets and a canopy—the latter, like the scaffold, built specially for the occasion—shelter them from the fierce sun. Equipped with a stick, hands at their sides, in their pockets, or clasped behind their backs, they exude power and superiority.

The second photograph is nearly identical to the first, and must have been taken barely a minute later. The obvious change is that the two Javanese are now dangling from the gallows. According to a brief text on the back of the photograph, this was the death sentence meted out to Tasmin and Kromo di Rono for their participation in the murder of a white staff member on the Tandjong Alam plantation in April 1891. The roles of the various actors in the colonial *mise en scène* could not have been more clearly expressed. One highly
significant detail is that the execution was not carried out in the prison or in some other public space, but on the plantation.\footnote{3}

The excesses that occurred were not aberrations restricted to a few sadistic planters, but they were firmly linked to the work regime of the agribusinesses. Nor were they confined to the outer provinces of the Netherlands East Indies. With the passing of time, the tensions to which the European management of seniors and juniors were exposed transformed into a feeling of insecurity bordering on hysteria. The annual publication of statistics of attacks on white field supervisors by coolies, which began in the first decade of the twentieth century, only served to feed the fear and led to accusations levelled at the Labour Inspectorate for having incited Asian workers to revolt even more (Hanegraaff 1910). Contempt and fear coupled with rage about the intemperate amok behaviour ascribed to the Asian labourer reinforced the climate of racism that permeated the ‘frontier’ society of East Sumatra. And this did not come to an end when the outside world finally came to know about the coolie scandals.

I reject the argumentation that what happened in this frontier region remained confined to it and was either the outcome of inadequate supervision by an understaffed civil service or was engendered by the unclear line drawn between public governance and private authority. The rules of the game to be observed in contacts across the colour barrier were meticulously regulated, and any ‘unseemly behaviour’ by newcomers was immediately corrected. Shortly after the establishment of the Labour Inspectorate Agency—which saw its mandate restricted to the East Coast of Sumatra—an assistant-inspector wrote to his superior that he had been forced to reprimand the newly appointed Chinese interpreter for his impertinence: “[r]ecently I caught him shaking hands when greeting Europeans on an estate. I have strictly forbidden him this gesture of frankness” (Bijleveld 1904). Avoiding any contact that might give rise to a claim to equality certainly did not go far enough in the case of the ordinary coolie. Without excessive displays of subjugation—squatting, doffing headgear, remaining silent with downcast eyes and the like—they risked punishment. While my critics are inclined to relate abusive
practices to extraordinary circumstances that occurred only in newly opened up regions of the archipelago that were still beyond the pacifying reach of the state, I stand by the thesis put forward in my book that the violence-ridden encounter between coolie and planter was an excessive variant of the standardized subjugation of native labour in Indonesia under Dutch rule. To give a fairly arbitrary example of this, a survey among mill hands in the city of Surabaya conducted in 1926 showed that they thought that hitting and kicking were all part of the normal display of industrial management. The excuse given by their bosses for these brutalities was the inferior quality of the workforce (Vreede 1926, pp. 15–16). Also, elsewhere in the Archipelago and right up to the end of colonial rule, the workforce was routinely subjected to physical violence. In Max Weber’s idiom, the plantation coolie regime was an ideal-typical abstraction of the racialized treatment meted out to labour in the bottom ranks of Indonesia’s colonial economy.

My primary reason for writing this essay has been to remind readers that the abuses Rhemrev, as an official in the colonial judiciary, revealed in his undisclosed report (1903) were never effectively repressed. A second reason is to point out that accounts about the continuation of these abuses in the years that followed were, as they had always been, taken merely as casual incidents. And a third reason is to confirm my thesis that in the search for an explanation of the terror to which the workforce was subjugated, an analysis only targeting the management of plantation business does not go far enough. To gain insight into what happened there and then requires a broader frame of interpretation. The ‘coolie scandal’ that blew up shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century at Sumatra’s East Coast is incomprehensible if we do not pay attention to the colonial situation in toto. I reject the argument that what happened in this frontier region was confined to it and was the outcome of inadequate supervision by an understaffed civil service. The colonial situation that provided the breeding ground for white superiority continued to exist. In his long-standing research, John Ingleson (1986; 2015) has extensively commented on the role
of race at the colonial worksite. It was the basis on which the Indies government held colonized society in check.

Demarcating the Racial Divide

Perhaps more than ever before, the feelings of hate and contempt felt for the conquered race were expressed with utmost derision when the precursors of the nationalist movement began to articulate an Indonesian consciousness in the early twentieth century. No matter how carefully they trod at first, insistence on their own identity and the inherent set of values came down to a repudiation of the racialized supremacy claimed by the rulers. This sign of awakening caused the greatest possible ire within the European milieu well accustomed to speak of ‘inlanders’ or ‘the natives’ in pejorative terms. The small avant-garde in their midst that unrepentantly confessed to sentiments of an ethical policy—with at the very least the potentiality of progress through education and more generally subscribing to the pledge to uplift indigenous society to a higher plane—were seen by most Europeans in the hegemonic conduit as little short of provocative. The colonial theatre dealt with in this essay now shifts from regional specificity (i.e., Sumatra’s East Coast) to the more general fabric of white supremacy during the last four decades of the Netherlands Indies. The earlier blend of a syncretic mix or fusion of ‘outlandish’ versus ‘inlandish’ cultural practices that used to be labelled tempo doeloe had withered away in the late-colonial era to be replaced by a sharpened segregation between the dominating and the dominated race—the white minority against the coloured majority.

A clear indication of the climate that came to prevail is a discussion waged in leading newspapers in the Netherlands Indies between late 1910 and early 1911. The first shot was fired in an article by a well-known Indies playwright, Jan Fabricius, who claimed that the measures taken in previous years to protect the plantation coolies against abuses had spoilt a sound work regime. It was not by legislation, the writer argued, that the ‘Deli coolie-beasts’ would be transformed into human beings. According to him, people who
stood so low on the ladder of civilization had to be disciplined by the cudgel, and there was no help for it but to maintain this form of punishment systematically and on a large scale. He argued that the wholesome fear of those in command that used to exist had disappeared, and consequently coolie resistance had begun to spring up everywhere.

We are now at a stage at which the Singkeh [newcomer; i.e., the new brand of coolie coming from Java] in Deli dares to lift his insolent face to that of his master; and this is no longer just the volatile Madurese, against whom the planters in Java have stood firm—but also the Javanese, the gentle, submissive Javanese has now begun to raise his head! Still only very sporadically and not demonstratively rudely, but it has begun! (Fabricius 1910)

This opinion vented elicited a host of reactions, of which the first one, and exceptionally so, roundly rejected it. The letter in response was sent in protest by A. Mühlenfeld, an official in the Colonial Civil Service stationed in Java, who wrote to say he was shocked by the diatribe. In his reaction, titled “De koelie en zijn meerdere”, or “The coolie and his superior” (1910), Mühlenfeld drew attention to the widespread maltreatment of workers on the sugar estates throughout the island and to the impunity enjoyed by the white perpetrators of these acts. There were abuses galore in Java, about which no one ever bothered to make enquiries into. His letter specified one case with which he was personally acquainted. A manager of a sugar plantation used to beat up and kick around his workforce; not just for surmised or real transgressions but also when he believed that the Javanese concerned did not demonstrate enough servility and respect to him as a toean besar (big boss). When the judge presiding over the trial against this manager asked if he would treat workers in the Netherlands the same way, he replied that it was an altogether different matter to beat a white worker. The defendant got away with the smallest possible fine, whereas indigenous workers tended to be given harsh penalties for far less severe infringements. The fact that this case had been filed in court was because of the coincidental arrival of a new civil servant who,
in his innocence, undertook these legal proceedings on his own initiative. The Javanese workmen who were cross-examined by the prosecuting official displayed the greatest astonishment about the trial. They explained that there had not been any official sanctions up to that point, born out of their long-standing experience against the brutalities to which they were routinely subjected. According to them, maltreatment of ordinary workmen by their white bosses was not considered a crime. Addressing the editor of the newspaper, Mühlenfeld added:

Nothing is more dangerous and to be condemned as maltreatment of inlanders because nothing stimulates embitterment and class hatred more than demonstrating by sheer brutality subordination to the ruling race. (Mühlenfeld 1910)

This letter-writer wished to lodge a protest about the way such matters were handled. Mühlenfeld was utterly against bringing back corporal punishment, as had been advocated at the start of the vitriolic debate. His comments met with little approval. The general opinion was that the growing insolence of the coolies had to be met with the *rotan* (rattan cane). Misbehaviour, a Deli planter explained, had to be punished instantly because filing an official complaint did not solve the problem. Karel Wijbrands, a well-known and virulently racist journalist, threw himself into the debate with vigour. He published his diatribe in the daily newspaper of which he was chief editor, rejecting the civilizing mission ascribed to colonial rule. Scornfully, he spoke of “Javanese smoochers”, among whom he included all those who took the side of “the so-called victims” (Wijbrands 1910a; 1910b; 1910c; 1910d). He was convinced that there could be no juridical notion of equality. Flogging a Javanese was indeed something entirely different from flogging a white person. He scorned anything that hinted at ethical policy, and he was not prepared to listen to ideas of upliftment to self-rule. In his view, the ‘moral advancement’ of the people, a goal embraced by all those who put their faith in a civilizing mission, was utter nonsense. According to him, an educated native was a suspect person,
whose danger and antipathy increased the more knowledge he had. Wijbrands argued that the small minority of Europeans could only maintain themselves in the colony by acting firmly: “If we want to remain here, we have to continue to be the boss. If we wish to be respected as Masters, we have to behave as Masters” (Wijbrands 1910a). Unadulterated racism made him qualify a coolie in Deli as a human animal; not as a workman.

Following the same line of thought, calls were raised by other contributors to the ongoing debate in these newspapers to replace the labour inspectors on the East Coast of Sumatra with plantation police, a corps that would be led by ex-army officers. This was the only way to curb the attacks on white managers, which were occurring with great regularity, and not infrequently leading to the death of hardworking, virtuous young European men, as pointed out by the racialist readership of the colonial press. But the less biased and carefully worded reports in the wake of these incidents—stating that the abuses against coolies had increased rather than decreased and that the coolies were only trying to defend themselves against the inhuman treatment they experienced—made little impact. The same fate befell the intervention by S.H. Koesomo, district head of Japara in Central Java, published in De Locomotief. In his contribution to the debate (1910), this high-ranking Indonesian official conceded that the coolies on the plantations came from the dregs of rural society, but he went on to say that the whole population could not be tarred with the same brush. Koesomo advocated bridging the gap between both races, and he expressed his gratitude to the proponents of the upliftment policy, which he believed would create harmony between rulers and the ruled.

Such radical counsel—acceptance of white patronage on the road to brown progress—was given short shrift among diehards in the colonial climate at the time. Several commentators who anonymously joined the debate asked if there was the slightest aptitude for civilization among the indigenous population—a query to which they themselves gave a negative reply. This lofty objective, hailed as an article of faith in the ethical policy proclaimed at the
beginning of the twentieth century, was in their opinion completely out of the question. The continuity of Dutch authority stood and fell by its readiness to inspire fear. The punitive planter’s stick, used to discipline foul and impudent native labourers, should not be mentioned in the same breath as the agricultural tool brandished by the subservient Asian on the plantations as a weapon of resistance against his white boss. Double standards were even absolutely commendable; how else could one single European stand up to more than a hundred coolies? When accused of having spread the call for independence, Mohammed Hatta, in his trial in 1927–28, castigated the system of governance that only mildly reprimanded the sowing of hatred against ‘inlanders’ while severely punishing Indonesia’s avant-garde intellectuals for speaking out against colonial rule and its racial justice (Hatta 1928, pp. 13–14).

Fixing the Colour Bar

I followed up my book on Deli’s coolie scandal with a study on the forced cultivation of coffee imposed by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) on the peasantry in the Priangan region of Java from the early eighteenth century onwards (Breman 2015). The same regime expanded into the cultivation system that the early colonial state operated from 1830 to 1870. The use of coercion was justified with the argument that the peasants were unwilling to work and had to be ordered under threat of punishment to produce crops—mainly coffee and sugarcane—to be traded on the global market. While sugarcane became a major cash crop on the coastal plain, the people dwelling in the highlands of West Java were forced to lay out coffee gardens, and to plant the crop and deliver the harvest to distant warehouses that had been built at the instruction of the government. Reading through the archives, I observed how the indigenous population was imagined as human beings unwilling to toil beyond the bare wherewithal. Their radical otherness held them captive in stagnant subsistence. It would be written up in colonial historiography as the missing drive of these ‘slothful’ people to
engage themselves in remunerative work and thus seek relief from their lasting plight of subsistent scarcity.

In colonial parlance, the stereotyped ‘native’ took shape in a practice of crude racism that was subsequently given a more polished veneer with Julius H. Boeke’s theory of economic dualism (1953). According to him, the divide postulated between Western and Oriental economics was unbridgeable. The regrettable absence in the tropical domain of economic man—driven by unlimited wants and the urge to satisfy them at the lowest possible cost—made it necessary to discipline the peasants to civilized behaviour, coercing them to produce more than their simple sustenance required. However, covering up the essence of what colonialism stood for—plain exploitation—cannot be disregarded when passing judgment on what Dutch rule meant to accomplish. The profits made and remitted to the homeland were a windfall to be harvested that Jean Chrétien Baud, the architect of late-colonial statecraft, had anticipated when he recommended in 1826 a policy to keep the colonized masses locked up in infantile dormancy:

I am by no means a supporter of the reckless emancipation and civilization of the Natives, that can be found in some corners; on the contrary, I believe that they should be kept in a childlike state as long as possible, to enable the exercise of paternal control over them with ease. (quoted in Breman 2015, pp. 86–87)

As Governor-General Baud aptly phrased it when pushed to increase the excessively low price that the peasants received for growing coffee, “to pay more for what you can get for less is not a sound economic proposition” (quoted in Breman 2015, p. 233). Looking back on a long and exalted colonial career, this statesman warned against reforms that would imperil the undiluted continuation of racial supremacy that, according to him, the subjected had willy-nilly internalized. Also on his watch were those of mixed race who were not admitted to obtain postings in the white ranks of the civil service. This breed of Eurasians would spoil a system of governance based on a policy of segregation between rulers and the ruled that did not tolerate the contamination of its purity. When he stepped
down in 1848 as minister of the colonies, Baud’s memorandum testified to the ideology of apartheid that he had instituted at the pinnacle of the colonial apparatus:

History teaches us that any contact between the white race and the dark-skinned peoples has resulted in the subjugation of the latter by the former. This experience has convinced the black races that the white race is a higher form of being, and that it is the destiny of both that the one should dominate over the other. That right of domination is however, in the strictest sense, considered to be solely a characteristic of the pure white race, so that, while a black man will bow submissively to a white man, he is reluctant to obey a man of mixed blood. (quoted in Breman 2015, pp. 208–9)

Although the white-brown dichotomy was legally instituted, it had to be compromised for the sake of effective governance. In order to cream off surplus value, the mediation of the indigenous aristocracy was vital. The lower ranks of the administrative apparatus were recruited from among the Javanese gentry during the late-colonial period. Screened off from the seats of state power, they were instrumental in locking up the peasantry and the indigenous population at large in a pretentious façade of indirect rule that was made to operate in the shadow of Dutch management.

In the changed political setting of the metropole before and after 1848, Baud remained as single-minded as he had been earlier on in his design of colonial statecraft. Having initiated the launch of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology, or KITLV), he became its co-founder in 1851 and took charge as the first president of the Board of Trustees. He did not relinquish this honorary post until 1857. His commitment to this endeavour was not driven by the pursuit of scholarship per se but by a combination of political and administrative expediency. The intended ambit was to gather policy-relevant knowledge on the fabric of peasant economy, society and culture for the sake of maintaining control over the occupied domain and its inhabitants. It aimed to alienate the Indonesian people from their own history and identity. Dutch rule should endure with the
least possible friction in order to realize the highest economic profit at minimal cost. Baud strongly advised against introducing changes that would weaken the structure of the colonial apparatus he had left behind, and for the time being his counsel was heeded. In the turnaround of political guardianship that took place during these years of turmoil, he briefed Johan Thorbecke, the chairman of the Council of Ministers, who drafted the new constitution of the Netherlands and who masterminded the shift from conservatism to liberalism. Baud remained a man for all seasons who easily switched his allegiance from the old to the new stakeholders, and he was nominated chairman of the committee set up for the abolition of slavery in Suriname (Dutch Guiana), enacted in 1863, which compensated the owners for their loss of property out of the colonial profits made in the Netherlands Indies. On his resignation as minister, Baud posited in the memorandum he submitted:

We have nothing in common with the people of Java. Language, colour, religion, morals, roots, historical memories—everything differs between the Dutch and the Javanese. We are the oppressors, they are the oppressed. That heterogeneity inherently plants a seed of disintegration or separation. It will run its course; with wisdom and due caution the point in time can be delayed, but systemization and recklessness will hasten it. (quoted in Kuitenbrouwer 2011, p. 13)

The collection of intelligence on indigenous life and lore had instrumental utility, and it was meant to yield an annual budget surplus that would flow into the coffers of the homeland treasury. Java had to remain, according to Baud, “the cork on which the Netherlands floats” (quoted in Kuitenbrouwer 2011, p. 16). In subsequent decades, the scope of the institute’s quest would slowly retreat from foregrounding racialized domination as a device to drain away the highest possible gains to the metropole. The high tide of Dutch imperialism after 1870 coincided with a huge expansion of free market enterprise that gave a further boost to colonial profits, which were now reaped and transferred through private instead of public conduits. At the turn of the twentieth century, the impoverishment of the Javanese was
officially acknowledged, although it was veiled as ‘declining welfare’. In 1901, Queen Wilhelmina announced in her parliamentary speech that her government accepted moral responsibility for the welfare of its indigenous subjects in the main colony.

The colonial project was reinvented, from one of making profit and draining off the value added to the motherland to one that would allow the subjected people to share in the wealth generated. This so-called ethical policy was the Dutch version of the white man’s burden, or la mission civilisatrice (the civilizing mission), launched around the same time in the overseas domains of the British and the French. The pledge to foster the material and immaterial emancipation of the Indonesian population was postulated as a welfare project that would push and guide the subjected masses on the road to enlightenment and modernity. Although given the connotation of improvement and progress, that stamp of modernity has turned out to be disputable, as I have argued more elaborately in an upcoming publication (Breman 2021). As far as enlightenment is concerned, ample evidence of authoritarian rule—backed by the prohibition of all that could be fabricated as a disturbance of public peace and order—would make it preposterous to suggest that the late-colonial state genuinely endeavoured to educate the Indonesian people in democracy and self-rule. While Enlightenment ideals were proclaimed to be of universal validity for the nations considered meritorious, these civilizational tenets were not supposed to have been internalized by the peoples (races) classed as inferior. Tailored in a language of deep otherness, it was clearly a racialized explanation of the inherent inferiority of non-Western peoples (see also Alatas 1977).

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**NOTES**

2. Minister Idenburg had inserted this comment in the margin on the first
page of the original Rhemrev report, which I retrieved from the state archives.


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