



Article

Between Laborer and Slave: The Fate of Contract Coolies in Colonial East Sumatra Plantation

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Article Information	Abstract
Received : March 20, 2024 Revised : April 22, 2024 Accepted : May 26, 2024 Published: June 27, 2024	Broadly speaking, both laborers (or coolies) and slaves served as manual workers engaged in arduous physical tasks. However, distinctions arise not only from the historical origins of these terms but also from their definitions and conceptual frameworks. Key differences between laborers and slaves pertain to social status, identity, rights and obligations, interpersonal relationships with employers, and the nature of treatment received. Despite these fundamental differences, the practical reality often diverged. There are instances where laborers or coolies were treated in ways akin to slaves. This article aims to discuss and examine the extent to which such treatment was experienced by plantation workers in the Dutch colonial era, known as contract coolies, in the East Sumatra region. The issue is reconstructed and analyzed through a historical lens, spanning the late 19 th to early 20 th centuries, marked by the establishment of plantation centers in the Dutch East Indies by foreign entrepreneurs, including those in East Sumatra. Examination of available historical sources reveals that a portion of these contract coolies endured harsh and inhumane treatment, mirroring the experiences of slaves in various other contexts.
Keywords Contract coolies; slavery; plantation; East Sumatra; colonialism.	
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INTRODUCTION

For centuries, leading up to the 19th century, the terms "laborer" or "coolie" as substitutes for unskilled manual workers were not yet in common use. The primary source of such labor across the globe at that time was enslaved individuals. Enslaved labor was heavily relied upon in various sectors, particularly from the 17th century onwards, in the plantations established by Europeans across their colonies in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. This coincided with the imperialist policies of Western powers like Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and Britain.

Some of the most popular examples are the use of slave in the cultivation of cash crops such as sugarcane, coffee, and cotton in the Americas. The slaves were imported from Africa. In Asia, the Dutch VOC also used slave in mining and plantations. In the mining sector in the 17th century the Dutch used slave labour in exploring and exploiting gold mining in Salido, Sumatra's Westkust (Wibowo, [2024](#)). As an example, for the plantation sector, the Dutch controlled Ambon and Banda in Maluku Isles to obtain spices namely cloves and nutmeg by bringing slaves from various other regions (Knaap, [2022](#); Barjiyah & Margana, [2022](#)). To obtain slave labour, the VOC made contracts with indigenous societies in the period 1600-1700 (Hägerdal, [2024](#)).

This was also the case with the British through the East India Company (EIC). From the 18th century the EIC used slave labour to clear land for pepper plantations in Bengkulu and other areas along the west coast of Sumatra. The British EIC used slave labour from various parts of the Indonesian archipelago and also from the Africa (Anatona, [2008](#) & [2023](#); Allen, [2018](#)).

Entering the 19th century, the use of enslaved labor began to decline as a consequence of abolitionist policies and the prohibition of the slave trade. The first ban on the slave trade emerged in Britain in 1807, a policy that was subsequently implemented in British colonies, including those in Southeast Asia (Walvin, [1980](#)). In 1818, the Netherlands followed suit, prohibiting the slave trade in the Dutch East Indies. It took roughly half a century, but gradually, the ban on the slave trade effectively halted the trafficking of enslaved people. After the 1860s, enslaved labor was no longer employed on European-owned plantations, particularly those owned by the British and Dutch (Thompson, [1980](#)).

In the latter half of the 19th century, colonial governments-initiated liberalization policies in their Southeast Asian colonies. The core aim of liberalization was to develop these colonies to generate economic surplus. This period was marked by the large-scale establishment of plantations across various regions.

As a consequence of the Open Door Policy, accompanied by the Agrarian Basic Law of 1870, private entities in Dutch colonies like East Sumatra were encouraged and permitted to invest in the extraction of natural resources for the benefit of the mother country's capital (Breman, [1997](#)). Embracing this opportunity, by 1873, private enterprises had successfully established 13 tobacco plantation centers in Deli, 1 in Langkat, and 1 in Serdang (Said, [1977](#)). In the following years, this number increased dramatically, with over 170 plantation centers established in the once-forested wilderness of East Sumatra. These newly established plantations were then cultivated with various export crops in demand on the global market, such as tobacco, coffee, rubber, palm oil, and others.

The post-slave trade ban colonial policies gave rise to new challenges. The emergence of plantation enterprises naturally necessitated a substantial and professionally managed workforce. The enslaved labor that had previously been relied upon for various tasks, including plantation work, was no longer accessible. The intensified prohibition of the slave trade since the early 19th century gradually impacted the availability of labor. People no longer dared to openly trade, transport, or employ enslaved individuals. While some clandestine smuggling persisted, the numbers were minimal. Consequently, plantation owners transitioned from using enslaved labor to employing paid laborers known as coolies, bound by agreements (contracts), hence the term "contract coolies." The article is written based on historical research methods using archives as primary sources/data such as *Koloniaal Verslag*, *Staatsblad*, *Colonial Office*, and secondary sources (Sjamsuddin, [2007](#); Daliman, [2018](#)).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Issue of Slavery on Plantations

The issue of slavery-like practices endured by plantation laborers in the post-abolition era first surfaced in the British colony of Singapore in 1873. Contract coolies from Java and Bawean Island were reportedly subjected to treatment reminiscent of pre-abolition slavery. These allegations were raised by W.H. Read, the Dutch Consul-General in Singapore, in the September 21, 1873, edition of the *Singapore Daily Times* (*Colonial Office* 273, [1873](#)).

A more severe instance of this issue arose among contract coolies working on newly established plantations in East Sumatra. This stemmed from the 1880 enactment of the Coolie Ordinance (*Koeli Ordonantie*) by the Dutch East Indies government. This ordinance outlined the duties, obligations, and rights of coolies, but also included penal sanctions (*poenale sanctie*) for those who violated its provisions (Thompson, [1980](#)). These sanctions, intended to enforce compliance with the ordinance, effectively served as a threat to coolies who might breach the regulations.

The employment contract within the Coolie Ordinance, as stipulated in *Staatsblad* No. 133 of 1880 (*Koloniaal Verslag*, [1887](#)), mandated a written agreement for any relationship between coolies and employers. Newly arrived coolies were to be registered by local authorities, with their names and occupations recorded in the contract. The work period was set at 10 hours per day for the duration of the three-year contract. Designated officials were tasked with verifying the voluntary nature of the contract and ensuring that coolies satisfactorily performed their assigned tasks and did not leave the plantation without written permission. The ordinance also obligated employers to provide housing with washing and drinking water facilities, as well as medical care (Said, [1977](#)). Upon contract expiration, coolies were to be returned to their place of origin if they so desired.

While the Coolie Ordinance was ostensibly designed to regulate the relationship between coolies and employers, its implementation often diverged from its well-intentioned provisions. The inadequate enforcement of the regulations, coupled with the imposition of penal sanctions, proved detrimental to the coolies. The promised amenities were rarely provided, and coolies on plantations lived in poverty and suffering. They resided in overcrowded barracks lacking clean water, bathrooms, and latrines. They received insufficient food, and what was available at plantation shops was exorbitantly priced. Healthcare was also neglected, and infectious diseases among coolies often led to death. These hardships were compounded by meager wages that did not compensate for their labor. Moreover, contract coolies frequently faced arbitrary treatment from plantation owners, mirroring the treatment of slaves.

Debt and the Ensnarement of Contract Coolies

The emergence of slavery-like practices among contract coolies in East Sumatra's plantations originated with their acquisition of debt, in the form of *voorschot* (advances), in their home regions before departing for Sumatra. This phenomenon of pre-employment debt mirrors the experiences of those who became ensnared in slavery during the era when the practice and trade were legal. In fact, one definition of a slave is a debtor, with other terms including "debtor-servant" or "bondservant" (Reid, [1969](#); [1992](#)). Historically, debt has led to the enslavement of countless individuals who were once free. The provision of advances to contract coolies created a similar debt bondage.

In the case of plantation coolies, this debt was euphemistically referred to as "advance pay." These advances, varying in amount, were paid by labor recruiters (*laukehs*) to prospective coolies from China, India, Java, and elsewhere, before their journey to East Sumatra (Said, [1977](#)). It was perhaps not widely recognized that this advance pay constituted a debt. Every cent provided by the labor agents was not a gift; it was a loan to be repaid once the coolies began working on the plantations. Contract coolies in East Sumatra typically worked for three years, during which their debt was deducted in installments from their wages.

However, the coolies' indebtedness did not end with the initial advance. Plantation owners perpetuated a cycle of debt as a strategic means to retain their workforce. With meager

wages, and women earning only half of what men earned, coolies found it nearly impossible to escape debt.

The plantation environment was deliberately designed to facilitate the circulation of money. Activities such as gambling, opium dens, and prostitution were permitted and even encouraged (Breman, [1997](#)). This ensured a rapid turnover of cash. Coolies, in dire need of money for these vices and basic necessities, resorted to borrowing from foremen or supervisors, often pledging their wages as collateral. Consequently, on payday, coolies received only a fraction of their earnings after debt deductions (Hamka, [1962](#)). This continuous cycle left them with little choice but to renew their contracts, precisely as the plantation owners intended.

Sexuality

Unrestrained sexual activity was a hallmark of life on the plantations. This was due in part to the disproportionate ratio of male to female contract laborers. At the dawn of the 20th century, Deli Maatschappij employed 62,000 individuals, of whom 57,000 were male and a mere 5,000 were female (Breman, [1997](#)). This stark 11:1 ratio, coupled with the prohibition against marriage for young European plantation administrators working in East Sumatra, created an environment where female contract laborers were particularly vulnerable to exploitation by the predominantly male workforce.

Facing a vast number of men every day made the existence of female contract laborers in the plantations of East Sumatra very vulnerable. The female laborers had to workday and night. During the day they worked with their hands, and at night with their bodies (Breman, [1997](#)). They not only exerted their energy as contract laborers in the plantation fields or as domestic servants in the household sector, but they also had to sweat to satisfy the sexual desires of men.

There are quite a lot of cases of female contract coolies from Java who are still young but have never received education, providing sexual services in plantations (Stoler, [1980](#)). Beautiful young women with attractive postures, both married and unmarried, can be taken for granted by plantation administrators from Europe who are on duty in East Sumatra as a companion as well as a place to vent their lusts. Female coolies on plantations have been used as sex slaves.

There are at least two forms of sexuality practices in plantations. First, the practice is similar to the custom experienced by female slaves when the practice of slavery was still legal. At that time, female slaves were used as mistresses, namely wives who were not officially married. Some plantation contract coolies in East Sumatra are also used as mistresses. The term used is *nyai* which means mistress or pet woman of foreigners (Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa, [1997](#)).

A young female coolie named Salma who has the beautiful face of Parto's wife has captivated Donk's assistant. This administrator then took and made Salma a *nyai* by paying compensation to Parto and promised to give Parto a new wife as a replacement. Assistant Donk then takes Salma and lives in the same house as her (Lukitaningsih, [2003](#)). Likewise with the fate experienced by Kendut, a young girl who is only 11 years old, the son of a night watchman. He was forced to serve the sexual needs of a garden assistant named Ferdinand. After the incident, Kendut was then taken by Ferdinand to live with him with the status of *nyai* (Lukitaningsih, [2003](#)).

The main task of a *nyai* is to satisfy the sexual needs of the European administrators or the gardeners who are his employers. In addition to these duties, *nyai* also has other responsibilities such as taking care of the employer, managing household problems, and

sometimes also supervising indigenous workers. During her status as a *nyai* and living in her employer's house, she no longer carried out her duties as a coolie.

Elsbeth Locher-Scholten sees the function of *nyai* in plantations from the other side, namely as a cultural mediator. *Nyai* is a person who acts as an intermediary between two communities that have different cultures, namely the culture of Europeans in the gardeners on the one hand and the culture of indigenous communities in the coolies on the other. A *nyai* can convey knowledge about the language, customs, and values of the indigenous people to his employer. *Nyai* and her employer, each of them, can communicate various problems that are poorly understood by each other (Scholten, [1992](#)).

The second practice of sexuality in plantations is in the form of prostitution. The background of the emergence of prostitution practices in East Sumatra plantations is more due to economic factors. The main reason someone becomes a prostitute is because they want to increase their income. In contrast to the wages of male contract coolies, the wages received by female coolies working in plantations are very small, which is only half of the wages of male coolies. Saimah, who works in a rubber plantation, only receives a wage of 40 cents per day. If you work 28 days a month, Saimah's total income is 1,120 cents per month. Of the total income, Saimah only received a net wage of 830 cents because she had to deduct *voorschot* installments of 190 cents, taxes of 40 cents, health expenses of 40 cents, and lunch of 60 cents. By buying the minimum necessities, namely only eating rice with salted fish, the total that must be spent reaches 586 cents per month. The remaining 244 cents is earmarked for buying powder, combs, clothes, and other women's needs, so that there is nothing left to save (Lukitaningsih, [2003](#)). Even to buy rather large necessities such as sarongs, clothes, and jewelry cannot be done at all. So, to get that need, she was forced to prostitute herself. He received high pay when he prostituted Chinese male coolies, while in Javanese men he was paid cheaply (Szekely-Lulofs, [1985](#)).

In addition to the coolies from Java, the European administrators also took women from Japan. *Karayuki-san* is a term aimed at Japanese women who have been working in the prostitution sector since the second half of the 19th century. The designation was originally reserved for village women living on Amakusa Island and the Shimabara Peninsula in northwestern Kyushu who migrated to Southeast Asia and the Pacific to earn a better life. This term is also interpreted as Japanese women from poor communities who live outside Japan and work as prostitutes. They come to Southeast Asia to provide sex services. These young women from Japan were easily obtained in brothels in Singapore (Warren, [1993](#); Brown, [2001](#)). From there, some of them crossed the Strait of Malacca into the East Sumatra region (Asnan, [2011](#)).

Physical Punishment

Similar to the custom that befell slaves when the practice of slavery was still legal, indentured porters who were considered to have committed wrongdoing also received punishment. This condition gained strength after 1880 with the issuance of the coolie ordinance which included a *poenale sanctie* that allowed garden coolies to be punished. Desertion, refusal, and laziness to work, disturbing security, fighting, killing, defection, incitement, and rebellion are things that can cause a coolie to be punished.

The landlord can act as a "judge" to prosecute contract coolies who are deemed to have violated the rules. The behavior of these plantation masters was like the behavior of slave owners towards their slaves. Violations committed by coolies that are not in accordance with the wishes of the gardener can be subject to a fine of *f.* 50 or corporal punishment. They had to work for one month without getting paid. If the coolie still commits another violation, the punishment is increased, namely working for three months, without wages (*Staatsblad*, [1889](#)).

The type of corporal punishment that often befalls contract coolies who are considered guilty is torture with whips or tied up and then beaten with rattan and sticks. All contract coolies have been hit. Torture using whips and shackled with chains, seems to be a common punishment throughout the ages. The punishment of whipping and beating with rattan, which was applied to contract coolies, was also applied in the past to punish slaves. In Batavia, slave owners could punish their slaves, who were caught committing offenses. The punishment was in the form of torture using rattan beatings. The Dutch East Indies government also regulated the treatment of innocent slaves, but the beating of slaves other than using rattan was prohibited by the government (Kalff, [1920](#)).

The description of the whipping punishment for contract coolies at the Kayu Aro tea plantation was once presented by the famous writer Mochtar Lubis. This case befell three coolies who escaped after stabbing a Dutch supervisor who harassed their wives. The three fled to the forests around the plantation because they were afraid of their mistakes. However, the three were rearrested and put in prison. When they were captured, they suffered from hunger, cold, and full of fear. Before being brought to court, the coolies were first punished with cane lashes 25 times each. The rattan hit the backs of those who were lying face down on the couch with their hands tied. The execution of the punishment was witnessed by the Dutch Government apparatus such as *controleur*, assistant wedana, and the police (Lubis, [1982](#)).

Female contract coolies are also not spared from torture. The types of torture experienced by female coolies in East Sumatra plantations include torture directed at their genitals, which are doused and smeared with hot spices in the form of pepper and chili pepper (Breman, [1997](#)). A 15-year-old young woman was stripped naked and tied to a pole and then dried all day and her genitals covered in chili. This torture was carried out because the young woman refused the request of the Dutch administrator and preferred her boyfriend, a fellow contract coolie (Said, [1977](#)). This type of torture is a long-standing custom that has also been applied to female slaves. This is exactly the same as the torture experienced by a female slave named Djabe in Pariaman in 1853. In 1853, a case of persecution by an employer of his slaves occurred in Pariaman, a city on the west coast of Sumatra. This incident happened to a female slave named Djabe. The persecution case was revealed through a verdict of the High Court in Padang. Through the verdict, it was known that the one who tortured Djabe was his own employer, a European man named Bathelemy, with the initials M.B. living in Pariaman. Bathelemy was charged in court with torturing his slave named Djabe. The court verdict on this case was based on the results of a viscum conducted by Ludeking, a class 3 Dutch health worker. The results of the autopsy showed that Djabe's body was full of bruises due to the torture of rattan blows and patchwork rubber (*Het pandelingenschap in Indië*, [1854](#)).

According to Djabe's testimony in court, beatings using rattan and smeared with patchwork sap were only part of the forms of torture he experienced. Djabe also revealed other forms of punishment in the form of physical torture such as being told to fold his knees constantly while being beaten with a whip. The more terrible torture he felt when he was tied up and stripped. At that time, both eyes and genitals were sprinkled with pepper powder so that he suffered greatly from the pain and pain.

Another case befell a coolie named Marsini, the wife of a foreman named Sumo. He is only 15 years old with the status of a contract coolie. He was first employed in the warehouse, after which he became a housekeeper in Mr. Feira-bend's family. Marsini stated that she was forced to serve Feira's sex lust through the threat that she would be sunbathed and whipped if she refused. Although he was opposed, he was eventually forced to serve Feira's desires. From this relationship, Marsini finally got pregnant. Pregnant, Feira then returned Marsini to her husband, and gave her 15 cents. Murtinah, a female contract porter who refused to be made a

nyai because she was married, was sentenced to whipping by the foreman and returned to her fellow contract porter husband (Lukitaningsih, [2003](#)).

Coolies who worked on plantations also received a death penalty reward by hanging. The death penalty was imposed on coolies who were convicted of murder. In 1871 it was recorded that Chinese coolies killed 2 plantation administrators. As a result, of the 22 people charged in the murder, 7 were sentenced to death. The remaining 15 were sentenced to life imprisonment (Said, [1977](#)).

CONCLUSION

Plantation workers in East Sumatra or better known as contract coolies have played a very important role. Contract coolies have become one of the pillars as well as the backbone for the success of plantation businesses there during the period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Tens and even hundreds of thousands of contract coolies brought in from various places, especially from Java, have made a significant contribution to the success of the plantation business.

The liberalization period is a period of labor transition from slaves to free labor who receive wages. In this period, the status of workers is indeed freer even though they are still bound by contracts. However, in terms of the treatment of workers as a workforce, it has not provided meaningful changes. The transition of plantation labor from slaves to indentured laborer's did not automatically eliminate the practices of slavery. The slave trade has indeed been banned, but the practice of slavery is still ongoing and sustainable. The three indicators above, namely debt, sexuality, and physical punishment, show that the elements contained in the practice of slavery are still experienced by some workers who work in plantations in East Sumatra.

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