

WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WILD LIFE IN THE EAST SUMATRA PLANTATION 1880-1940

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Abstract

Since the enactment of the Koeli Ordonantie in 1880 by the Dutch colonial government, large plantations on the east coast of Sumatra began to open up opportunities for Javanese and Chinese women to be employed as laborers. There are also those who follow their husbands to work on plantations. The planters took advantage of the presence of women on the plantations to create entertainment for the male workers, because at that time many coolies ran away from the plantations, due to the heavy workload. The easy flow of money makes unpaired female workers take advantage of opportunities. They choose dual jobs as laborers during the day, and prostitutes at night. The impact is the spread of various disease outbreaks, one of which is venereal disease. In the context of social history, this research uses archives as its methodology. The archives come from Koloniaal Verslag, Verslag voor Geneeskundige, Verslag van den Dienst van Arbeidinspectie, Tijdschrift voor Geneeskundige, reports from Deli Planter Vereniging and Memorie van Overgave, and other support books.

Keywords: *Women, Coolie, East Sumatra Plantation, Prostitute*

Abstrak

Sejak diberlakukannya *Koeli Ordonantie* pada tahun 1880 oleh pemerintah kolonial Belanda, perkebunan-perkebunan besar di pesisir timur Sumatera mulai membuka peluang bagi perempuan Jawa dan Tionghoa untuk dipekerjakan sebagai buruh. Ada juga yang ikut suami bekerja di perkebunan. Para pekebun memanfaatkan kehadiran perempuan di perkebunan untuk menciptakan hiburan bagi para pekerja laki-laki, karena saat itu banyak kuli yang lari dari perkebunan, akibat beban kerja yang berat. Mudahnya aliran uang membuat pekerja perempuan yang tidak berpasangan memanfaatkan peluang tersebut. Mereka memilih pekerjaan ganda yaitu menjadi buruh di siang hari dan menjadi pelacur di malam hari. Dampaknya adalah merebaknya berbagai wabah penyakit, salah satunya penyakit kelamin. Dalam konteks sejarah sosial, penelitian ini menggunakan arsip sebagai metodologinya. Arsip tersebut berasal dari *Koloniaal Verslag, Verslag voor Geneeskundige, Verslag van den Dienst van Arbeidinspectie, Tijdschrift voor Geneeskundige*, laporan dari *Deli Planter Vereniging* dan *Memorie van Overgave*, serta buku pendukung lainnya.

Kata Kunci : Perempuan, Kuli, Perkebunan Sumatera Timur, Prostitusi

Introduction

During the colonial period, Sumatra grew and developed into plantation areas on a large and small scale. The plantations that developed there were tobacco, coffee, tea, rubber, and others. After the enactment of the agrarian law in 1870, the colonial government

made East Sumatra a special plantation area,¹ which had special autonomy over its territory, and was not governed directly by

¹D. A. Darini, R., & Anggraeni, "The Life of Deli Tobacco Plantation's Workers in East Sumatra, 1880-1930.," *IHiS (Indonesian Historical Studies)*, 2021, 5(1), 30–44.

the colonial government, which was also called *Zelfbesturendelandschappen*.²

Colonization of the plantations of East Sumatra occurred in the late 18th century.³ East Sumatra is one of the few areas in the Dutch East Indies that did not experience intervention from the Dutch colonial government. This area was formed after the implementation of the 'open door political-economic system' which introduced economic liberalization in the Dutch East Indies.

After the opening of various plantations in East Sumatera, many workers from various regions came as coolies on the plantations. Dominated by two ethnicities, Chinese and Javanese. These two tribes were brought in through a long recruitment process. However, according to many records, not a few were tricked into becoming plantation workers in East Sumatra. In the initial stages, only male workers were allowed to work on the plantations.⁴

During this period, problems arose as many workers fled the plantations. Various reasons led to escape, such as unnatural working hours, the cruelty of labor foremen, accumulated debts, and the problem of lack of entertainment, especially women's entertainment. To deal with workers fleeing from the plantations, the plantation owners then agreed to provide entertainment on the plantations, such as a night market which was held after the workers received their salaries. The night market provides ronggeng dance entertainment, gambling, cockfighting, and opium stalls. In addition, after the Governor General Decree No. 78, the planters let their workers bring their wives or spouses to the plantations, and they can also be employed as laborers or workers there. This situation is the first step for the entry of women workers into plantation areas in East Sumatra. In 1890, only

about 5,000 workers were women out of a total of about 80,000 workers.⁵

The arrival of women on plantations basically solves one problem, but also raises other problems. Many of these women are homeless, especially single, unmarried women. This situation forced them to undergo a double profession as prostitutes. They spend the night at the place of the man who used his services. Not only single women, it turns out that many wives choose to leave their husbands because of economic dissatisfaction. With rampant prostitution and double work as female plantation workers, the biggest problem is disease outbreaks. In certain periods, outbreaks of venereal disease became a frightening specter for planters and coolies. However, the basic need for sexual desire has not been resolved so that the spread of disease is difficult to suppress. This is the basis for this research, discussing the polemic that occurred in plantations in East Sumatra in dealing with the dual work of women there, as well as the spread of disease outbreaks.⁶

Plantation, Labor, And Colonial Government

In 1870, the colonial government issued the Agrarian Law, which invited investors to invest in the Dutch East Indies. The East Sumatra region was then designated by the government as a plantation area with special autonomy. This means that this area is no longer under the interference of the colonial government, but is managed directly by the association of planters. The Planters applied sanctions called *poenalesanctie* to discipline workers, and the colonial government had no right to interfere in imposing these sanctions. In this situation, the colonial government only acted as a supervisor, and periodically received high tax payments from planters who came from various nationalities.

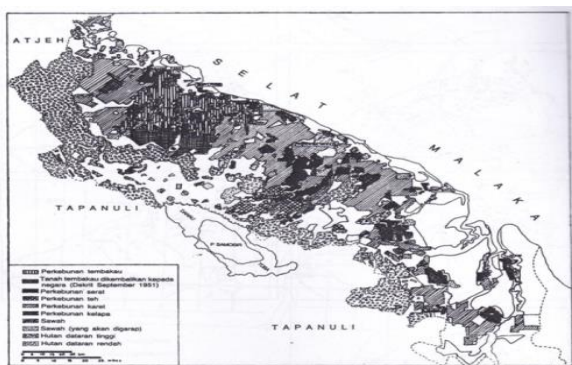
²Ann Laura Stoler, *Kapitalisme Dan Konfrontasi Di Sabuk Perkebunan Sumatra 1870-1979* (Yogyakarta: Karsa, 2005).

³Jan Bremen, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli: Politik Kolonial Pada Awal Abad Ke 20* (Jakarta: Pustaka Umum Grafiti, 1997).

⁴R. Darini, "Deli Maatschappij's Contribution to the Transformation of East Sumatra, 1869-1940s.," *Paramita: Historical Studies Journal*, 2021, 31(1), 22–32.

⁵Bremen, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli: Politik Kolonial Pada Awal Abad Ke 20*.

⁶D. Teeuwen, "Plantation Women and Children: Recruitment Policies, Wages and Working Conditions of Javanese Contract Labourers in Sumatra, c. 1870-1940.," *The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History*, 2022, 19 (1), 7–36.



Picture 1. The Growth of Industrial Plants in East Sumatera Plantations 1864-1945 Source: Karl J. Pelzer (1983), p., 228.

The success of plantations, especially tobacco plantations in East Sumatra, quickly attracted Europeans to try their luck in East Sumatra plantations. Until 1884 there were 688 Europeans from various nationalities. The tobacco business remained a monopoly of Dutch entrepreneurs. Until 1930, more than 11,000 Europeans from various nationalities lived in East Sumatra; they are directly or indirectly involved in the plantation industry.⁷

After many plantations were opened, the most thorny problem was the unavailability of labor to work on the plantations. Labor was far scarcer than land to cultivate. In 1874, shortly after the plantation was opened, most of the workers employed on the plantation consisted of Deli residents who were in charge of the Malay ethnic group. Over time, the Malay workforce continued to decrease and were replaced by Chinese and Javanese workers.⁸



Picture 2. Coolies In The Plantation In The Early 20th Century, source: R.P. Suryono (2005), p., 105.

Chinese labor is supplied from Penang through employment agencies. Until the early 20th century, imported labor from Penang continued to increase. In the following years,

⁷Bremen, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli: Politik Kolonial Pada Awal Abad Ke 20*.

⁸Koloniaal, "Koloniaal Verslag 1884-1906" (Netherland, n.d.).

the number of workers brought in decreased along with a significant increase in the number of Javanese workers brought to East Sumatra.⁹

Table1. The number of Chinese and Javanese laborer in the East Sumatra Plantation 1883-1930

Year	Chinese	Javanese	Total
1883	21.136	1.711	22.847
1893	41.700	18.000	59.700
1898	50.846	22.256	73.102
1900	58.516	25.225	83.741
1906	53.105	33.802	86.907
1913	53.617	130.280	183.897
1916	43.689	150.392	194.081
1920	27.715	210.621	237.174
1925	26.800	169.280	196.080
1930	26.037	210.248	236.285

Source: Thee KianWie. *Plantation Agriculture and Export Growth: An Economic History of East Sumatra 1863-1942*(Jakarta: LEKNAS-LIPI. 1977) p., 1 and Anthony Reid (1987), p., 81.

In 1880, the Dutch colonial government, made a rule that governing relations between the planters and their laborer, called *Koeli Ordonantie* (Coolie Ordinance)¹⁰, contained rights and obligations of workers to the planters, and vice versa. The ordinance was made based on a report by the director of Deli Maatscappij, Jacob Theodore Cremer in 1876 to parliament (*Tweede Kamer*) in the Netherlands, regarding the problem of plantation workers who often ran away from plantations. He wrote his report in a letter entitled *Een Word Uit Deli* (A Word from Deli). Finally in 1880, through Governor General Decree No. 138 of 1880, a coolie's regulation was issued which regulated the obligations of workers on plantations which

⁹Koloniaal.

¹⁰ Coolie Ordinance was make by the Dutch colonial government after a lot of complaints from the planters due to workers who escape before the contract expires. In these rules stated that anyone among the porters and laborers who were trying to escape will be arrested by the police and returned to the plantation. If they refuse and fight, they will be forcibly transported and received various punishments, such as forced labor or their employment contracts will be extended.Cecil Rothe, *Arbeid in de Landbouw: De Landbouw in de Indische Archipel* (Den Haag, 1949).

also contained criminal sanctions called *Poenale Sanctie* in the event of violations by workers. Basically, the Coolie Ordinance only benefits smallholders unilaterally. It explains in detail the obligations and fines received by the workers and some of the obligations of the planters towards their workers. However, the points regarding the obligations of plantation entrepreneurs towards their workers were not explained in detail, and plantation workers suffered more than before.

The Coolies Ordinance was then revised In 1890, through Governor General Decree No. 78 of 1890. It not only tells about the obligations of workers but also includes their right to obtain basic necessities, such as wages, proper housing, medical treatment, and working hours not exceeding 10 hours a day. This revision emphasizes the obligations of plantation employers towards their workers and requires them to treat their workers well. This was because many disease outbreaks spread in plantation areas, especially malaria, dysentery, pneumonia, and others. This epidemic not only spread in plantations, but also spread outside the plantation area. Therefore the colonial government participated in overcoming the plague. It was the first time the colonial government had directly intervened in the plantation areas of East Sumatra.¹¹

With the change in the ordinance, the planters are no longer able to punish the coolies who run away, so they look for other ways to make the coolies feel at home. The first step is that coolies who are already married are allowed to take their partners to the plantations, and are also employed as laborers. This situation started the entry of women workers into plantations in East Sumatra. Over time, the number of women entering the plantations continued to increase. The planters eventually took advantage of the development of female workers to lure men to work on the plantations. In addition, every payday the farmers hold events such as ronggeng entertainment, gambling, cockfights, opium shops and prostitution all day long. It aims to make the workers happy and drain the wages earned by the porters. For example, if a

worker loses at the gambling table, the planters will be happy to lend them money. Debt makes the workers tied to the planters.¹² Conditions on plantations instead of getting better, actually got worse. Coolie is increasingly trapped with the planters, and has no option of escape.¹³



Picture 3. Ronggeng Entertainment on the East Sumatra Plantation, source: R.P. Suryono (2005), p., 120.

Van den Brand, a Dutchman who was concerned about the situation on plantations, then wrote an article entitled *Millioenenuit Deli*. The Dutch people were excited about the brochure, so that on May 24, 1903, JLT Rhemrev, who served at the high court, was sent to examine the *Millioenenuit Deli* truth brochure. The brochures revealed the inhumane treatment of the workers by the planters, especially in obtaining basic needs such as food, shelter and health. From a health standpoint, medical services on plantations became a business for European doctors. Led by a doctor, Dr. F Maier, who was ordered to inspect plantations in East Sumatra in 1905. The doctor told about the experiences he had found in plantation clinics. According to him, the patient's condition was dirty and unkempt; they are not given food, even though they already have health facilities in the garden, but they are still far below the standard of a clinic. Plantation leaders argued that providing more facilities was against plantation rules. They also stated that the plantation did not have many disease

¹²Bremen.

¹³B. E. R. Riskita, A. N., Putri, L. A., Muris, D. P., Solin, S. G. W., & Malau, "Wage System Given By Plantation Lords to Contract Coolie Workers In East Sumatra," *Riwayat: Educational Journal of History and Humanities*, 2023, 6(2), 630-639..

¹¹Bremen, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli: Politik Kolonial Pada Awal Abad Ke 20*.

cases, so it did not need a special place for health care.¹⁴

According to Dr. Meier, doctors and health workers on the plantations were paid 1,000-1,300 guilders per month. In addition, they also receive an additional 25-30 cents a day for patients in their care. The money was supposed to be for medical expenses, medicines and food. However, most of the doctors on the plantations think that this is an additional source of income, as much as possible not to use it for medicine and food for patients, and patients must pay again for these needs. From this payment, a doctor on the plantation enjoys a good lifestyle. They come to the clinic several times a month and there is no doctor to look after the sick person. The door to the *puskesmas* is more often locked from the outside with a chain. In addition, there are no bathrooms and potties as well as lighting and clean water for drinking at there.¹⁵

In plantation areas since the beginning of the 20th century, opium or opium, or madat has become the coolies' favorite. The opium business was originally developed on the island of Java, where opium was sold under the monopoly of the colonial government. In the opium business, there is an agreement called *opiumpacht*. Opium had become a common feature of Javanese life, towns and villages in the early 19th century. Among Europeans, opium smoking was not very popular. Europeans liked to drink a type of alcohol called gin, although in some cases Europeans and the poor seafaring class aboard ships also smoked opium. However, among both the Chinese and the natives, smoking opium was in vogue. The Chinese and natives of all walks of life feel closer to the habit of smoking opium.¹⁶

The opium business at the East Sumatra Plantation is growing along with the large number of labor migration to East Sumatra. The circulation of opium in the plantations was led by Chinese workers who did a lot of double business in the plantations.

They provide huts to smoke opium, which is one of the entertainments that are of interest to the workers. In addition to entertainment, opium is believed to cure several conditions: headache, fever and fever (including malaria), stomach ache, diarrhea, dysentery, asthma, tuberculosis, fatigue and anxiety. It is also used to treat symptoms of venereal diseases, treat sore wounds, injuries, sprains and broken bones.¹⁷

The opium business in East Sumatra is not only run by Chinese people, but also by local traditional leaders, Batak leaders. This agreement is contained in Staatblad No. 46 of January 1904, which stated that the Batak leaders were given freedom to run the opium business in East Sumatra. The circulation of opium on plantations greatly influenced the development of prostitution and brothels. This supports the development of disease outbreaks, especially sexually transmitted diseases in plantations. The rapid development of opium in the plantation business allowed the development of other businesses, such as prostitution.

Prostitution in the East Sumatra Plantation

After Governor General Decree No. 78 was implemented, being the first step for the entry of female workers into the plantation areas of East Sumatra. Women workers are a minority on plantations. Many of them are of Javanese and Chinese ethnicity. Actually, since 1884, European women have come to the plantation area but only in small numbers about 148 people. This number continues to increase every year. In 1900, the number of European women had grown to around 500. Meanwhile, among workers in 1890, there were only around 5,000 women workers out of a total of around 80,000 workers. The highest increase in the number of female workers occurred in 1930, namely 30% of the total workers there.¹⁸

¹⁴J. Breman, "Colonialism and Its Racial Imprint," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 2020, 35(3), 463-492.

¹⁵Bremen, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli: Politik Kolonial Pada Awal Abad Ke 20*.

¹⁶James R Rush, *Candu Tempo Doeloe* (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2012).

¹⁷Isaac Gronemen, 1899: 56.

¹⁸Bremen, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli: Politik Kolonial Pada Awal Abad Ke 20*.

Table 2. A comparative of men and women laborer in the East Sumatera Plantation Area

Year	Men Laborer	Women Laborer	Total
1912	137.914	38.803	176.717
1913	141.991	41.906	183.897
1916	149.768	44.313	194.081
1917	163.871	53.231	217.102
1918	169.475	59.078	228.553
1919	176.755	62.552	239.307
1920	176.632	61.704	238.336
1921	163.657	44.686	208.343
1925	150.622	45.458	196.080
1926	170.617	52.602	223.219
1927	181.385	57.885	239.270
1928	188.146	62.412	250.558
1929	196.101	65.518	261.619
1930	182.609	53.676	236.285
1931	111.757	25.879	137.636
1932	19.969	7.369	27.338
1933	8.231	3.468	11.699
1934	3.205	2.854	6.059
1938	3.235	1.435	4.670

Source: Verslag Arbeidsinspectie 1910-1938, cited from Lindblad, J. Thomas dan Vincent J.H. Houben, *Coolie Labour in Colonial Indonesia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), p., 73.

Based on the table above, it can be seen that the number of workers at our East Sumatra Plantation increased significantly in the years following the first decades of the 20th century. This situation is due to the high market demand for plantation production. However, after 1930, the number of workers decreased dramatically due to the global economic depression in 1930 or the Maleise Period. The major countries in Europe and their colonies in the Indies also felt the impact. The biggest impact of the depression was that many plantations were no longer able to produce and were abandoned by their owners, especially small plantations.¹⁹

¹⁹H. Brass, T., & Bernstein, "Introduction: Proletarianisation and Deproletarianisation on the

The fact that there are many women in plantation areas also influences the spread of disease outbreaks, especially venereal diseases. This is not only happening among workers, but also in Europe. According to records, several European workers on plantations also contracted tuberculosis, pneumonia and syphilis. This last type of illness is caused by their form of adventure with female workers on the plantations. Women are often the cause of fights between fellow workers or between Europeans and workers there. Some sources even mention the news about the death of a European who served as an assistant to the plantation owner, after a fight over a woman with a coolie there. This is due to the minimum number of women so that it becomes a bone of contention for the men in the plantations.²⁰

Because of the large number of Europeans who were killed in fights with workers or due to venereal disease, in 1919 Deli Maatschappij issued a decree that only Dutch staff who were still single could marry European women. This rule contradicts Deli Maatschappij rules in previous years which prohibited its employees from marrying. These regulations do not reduce the need for European labor for women, because the real main problem is the lack of European women to marry. To avoid violating the rules, they look for a maid or housekeeper who is one of the female workers, and let the woman live in their house. Besides functioning as a nanny or housemaid, the woman is also used as an outlet for her employer's sexual needs. These women are also called *Nyai*.

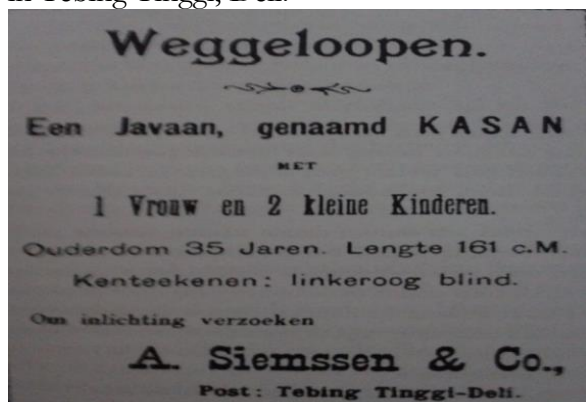
As a *Nyai*, they are often given gifts by their masters. Their life is quite good for the size of a worker on a plantation. They can eat well from leftovers, and they also have a decent place to live. This situation is the envy of many women who work on plantations. Those who follow their husband become dissatisfied with their situation and then leave their husband or partner. Usually the women workers do not have a

Colonial Plantation. In *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia.*, Routledge, 2019, 1–40.,

²⁰R.P. Suryono, 2005: 117

permanent place to live because they only live in the barracks for the men who hire their services every night.

Women on the plantations didn't have many options to survive. There are only two choices for them, to become a *Nyai* or the wife of supervisors and workers, or to become a prostitute. *Nyai* is only for certain women. Not all of them get that chance. European staff and supervisors are free to choose women to be their *Nyai*, even if they already have a partner. In one case, it was told that a female worker was tortured to death by a European Assistant on a plantation because she refused to become a *Nyai* because she already had a partner there. She was punished by being stripped naked, tied to a cross-shaped pillar, deprived of food and drink, flogged, and peppered on her vagina. She only lasted for three days until she died. After that, his body was dumped in a ravine around the plantation. A male worker who becomes her partner gets revenge on European Assistant, but ends up dying in the attempt. This is just one example. In other cases, these actions often end in the killing of plantation employees, as happened at a plantation in Tebing Tinggi, Deli. One of the workers fled with his wife and two children after he killed a European official who wanted his wife to become a *Nyai*. This news was published in the March 1899 edition of the Deli Courant newspaper. His name was Kasan. He is a fugitive with a woman and two children. He is 35 years old, 161 cm tall, and blind in his left eye. Thus the information about him was awaited by A. Siemssen & Co., in Tebing Tinggi, Deli.



Picture 4. The Preaching About The Escape Workers, source: *Deli Courant*, 1 Maart 1899

The news of the coolies who fled and became fugitives in East Sumatra was widely reported by the local media. Even the catcher

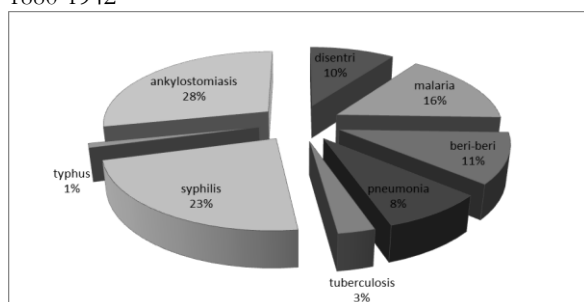
was promised a big reward if he managed to catch the worker. If he was caught again, he would be punished by the cultivator. The punishment often led to death. Van Kol in *Uit Onze Kolonien* (1903) states the fact that *moordaanslagen* (attacks and murders) against European and Asian foremen and supervisors is not something that is rare. The number of workers needed for such actions increased from 148 people in 1894 to 209 people in 1902 and continued to increase by at least two people from 1000 workers.

This situation creates a bad climate for plantation workers because it causes the spread of sexually transmitted diseases that are quite severe on plantations; become difficult to control. As reported by MP Tweede Kamer from Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij who wrote a book entitled *Uit Onze Kolonien*, H. van Kol, *In het hospitaal voor prostituees vindt men een weerszinwekkend mengelmoes van de slachtoffers onzer maatschappelijke inrichting bijeen. Te midden van vieze lucht vond ik daar een paar dozijn chineesche, javaansche en japansche vrouwen, ja zelfs eenige van blijkbaar europeesche bloedmenging... In een lokaal, zonder eenige afscheiding, lagen daar wild dooreen syphilitische vrouwen, stervende malaria-lijders, gezwollen beri-beri patienten en leprozen... een jong, nog zeer jongmeisje, lag vol zweren van venerischen aard plat op den buik.* (In the hospital for prostitutes, Deli people would find an association that is unfavorable to the victims of our social system. With dirty air, I got a number of Chinese women, Java, and Japan as well as some people of Indo-European... In a ward, there are women patients with syphilis lying alongside patients dying of malaria, beriberi patients and lepers ... There is a Javanese young girl who is still very young. She lies on her stomach and her body is covered in sores.) (Van Kol 1903: 103 and 106)

In the period 1910-1920, on plantations in East Sumatra, syphilis was still a disease with a very high prevalence, and pneumonia was in the second degree. While the next period 1920 - 1942, the spread of syphilis decreased dramatically, and was replaced by pneumonia. This is because many workers were exposed to syphilis in

the previous period, encouraging the planters through the Deli Planter Vereeniging (DPV) in collaboration with the institution that handles worker recruitment, Wervingsordonnantien, to include health checks in the requirements system to become workers in Sumatra. Every prospective worker must have a health certificate from the colonial government. This aims to reduce the spread of disease in the East Sumatra plantation area. This method seems to have been successful in reducing the spread of syphilis when seen from table 3.6. Syphilis is no longer the highest disease sufferer, but is replaced by pneumonia.

Graph 1. Disease Outbreak In East Sumatra Plantation 1880-1942



Sources: Diolah dari *Verlag Van Den Dienst Der Arbeidsinspectie En Koelievering In Nederlandsch-Indie* (over de jaren 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, en 1928), *VijfdeVerlag Van Den Dienst Der Arbeidsinspectie En Koelievering In Nederlandsch-Indie* (over de jaren 1917 en 1918) WeltevredenBoekhandelVisser And Co., *Memorie van Overgave, van Kempen 1930, KoloniaalVerlag1895 dan 1898, Koloniaal Verlag 1884.*

The graph above compares disease outbreaks in East Sumatra plantations. It appears that most of the outbreaks were due to ankylostomiasis or hookworm infection, although only one period was reported. Followed by syphilis, malaria, beriberi, pneumonia, dysentery, tuberculosis, syphilis and finally typhus. Outbreaks of ankylostomiasis and beriberi developed massively only from the period 1900-1920. After the outbreak of the disease reportedly gradually decreased.

The existence of women became entertainment for the laborers on average at a young age, especially Javanese laborers. Laborers from Java cannot survive in plantations without a woman. They are not too concerned about the physical shape of women to live with them. On the contrary, Chinese laborers were not too sexually interested in women except their people. Meanwhile, Chinese women on the plantation were scarce,

so they looked for alternatives to vent their sexual needs. It was a shared secret that the Chinese laborers had a sexual preference among young men, especially children, to become their partners over women. These young children were named “*Anak Jawi*”. In fact, according to Van Kol, a murder among Chinese laborers was not unusual because everybody on the plantation knew about same-sex relationships in public. Therefore, when the Javanese laborers competed in terms of women, they were not so interested. Meanwhile Javanese men are not so picky about women. They paid little attention to her past life or even her physical beauty or age. (Kooreman 1903: 37) quoted from Jan Bremen p., 205.

In the Chinese coolie environment, male prostitutes are more financially promising than female prostitutes. Even in the coolie barracks they have beds with decorated curtains and accessories. This is inversely proportional to the prostitutes there. The average woman did not have a bed or barracks on the plantation. Usually, they are nomadic and live on the move depending on the man who employs them every night. Their income as female laborers during the day is only sufficient for their daily needs. While the income they earn at night provides money to buy powder and perfume.

Conclusion

The dark face of the plantations in East Sumatra in the 1880-1940 period was not only seen from the high poverty rate of the workers, but also from the many women workers who carried out two professions. During the day they work as laborers, while at night they work as prostitutes. On the one hand, this situation is beneficial for the planters because the number of workers who have fled has decreased. However, on the other hand it is detrimental because with this double task, disease outbreaks, especially venereal disease, spread massively in the plantation area. Unfortunately, the planters were not prepared for this situation. The colonial government highlighted it; until then strict regulations were made regarding the standard of living of workers on plantations.

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