

Tending to Tradition? Adat, Agriculture, and the Unethical Labour Landscape for Indonesian Women in the Dutch East Indies

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ABSTRACT

From 1901-1942, the Ethical Policy era in the Dutch East Indies was a period when ‘ethical’ colonial policies, which sought to retain the cultural integrity and welfare of the Indonesian people were introduced by Dutch colonial authorities. These ethical policies included strengthening Indonesia’s agricultural economy to bolster local welfare, as well as integrating traditional Indonesian laws and values (adat) into their labour policies—particularly for female labourers. This paper explores the effects of Dutch Ethical Policy on the labour conditions for Indonesian women by examining the consequences of agricultural expansion, how adat is retained in labour policies, perceptions of Dutch versus Indonesian women, and the female night labour bill of 1925. It posits that the Netherlands used pretenses of promoting Indonesian welfare and retaining traditional customs to justify and cover their complacency in the hazardous labour conditions for Indonesian women as a means to earn more profit from crop yields.

Introduction

In 1925, discussions were underway within the People's Council of the Dutch East Indies to draft legislation addressing the governance and regulation of female night labour in Dutch Indonesia (Locher-Scholten 2000, 50). This bill was being developed at a time when notions of womanhood, labour and domesticity began to evolve in the metropole, and Dutch women were increasingly deemed as unfit for physical labour and valued as domestic housewives (Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2016, 150). These standards, however, did not translate for Indonesian women, where the 1925 Bill ultimately made little to no strides in combatting the proliferation of female physical labour in the colony (Locher-Scholten 2000, 54-55). At the same time, Dutch colonial powers were in the midst of implementing their last policy phase in Indonesia before the eventual Japanese occupation: the 'Ethical Policy' era, which placed large emphasis on agriculture and traditional Indonesian customs (Weber et al. 2003, 407-408). These contrasting labour ideals in the colony as opposed to the metropole raise questions about the value of colonial policy, labour, and women's roles in relation to it. Hence, this essay seeks to explore the ways in which Dutch colonial policy and European perceptions of Eastern women influenced the labour roles of Indonesian women in the context of early twentieth century global colonial politics. I argue that the 'Ethical Policy' introduced by the Netherlands in the Dutch East Indies between 1901-1942, specifically their focus on increasing agricultural yield and retaining adat (traditional customary law) alongside Western

policies, shaped Dutch perceptions of Indonesian women as 'natural-born' manual labourers equal to their working male counterparts. These perceptions, in addition to the aforementioned retention of adat ideals, justified the lack of change surrounding the regulation of women's labour laws and practices in the Dutch East Indies, whilst it was simultaneously advancing in the Netherlands. I first discuss the transition of the Dutch East Indies into the Ethical Policy era, what it meant and how it was utilized for the Netherlands' imperial motives. I then focus on a critical component of the policy—adat, how it significantly shaped Dutch perceptions of Indonesian women, and how it ultimately played a large role in the continuation of female night labour. Finally, I examine the 1925 female night labour bill and use it as a case study to demonstrate that its finalized outcomes were a result of the factors I examine in the first two sections. These insights reveal that, despite how beneficial Dutch colonial policies may seem for the colony, there are always hidden imperial agendas in the European colonial system. The Dutch used pretenses of increasing welfare and retaining traditional customs to justify their complacency in the hazardous working conditions for women as a means to profit from agricultural expansion.

The Ethical Policy Era

The turn of the twentieth century was marked by the introduction of "Ethical Policy" in the Dutch East Indies, implemented amidst the last period of Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia (Weber et al. 2003, 407-408). This era of policy stemmed from the increased condemna-

tion by Dutch academics towards the empire's unethical colonial rule—many desired the government to take on more responsibility for colonial subjects and pushed for an emphasis on morality and ethicality in their policies (Weber et al. 2003, 408-409). These concerns eventually reached the governing body, and the Queen expressed her commitment to the welfare of the Indonesian people in her 1901 opening speech at Parliament (Prince 1995, 35). Consequently, the colonial government sought to implement policies that were deemed as morally permissible, such as the introduction of committees that would investigate the economic conditions of the local population (Prince 1995, 35). Furthermore, the Dutch strongly held that welfare was linked to agricultural yield, which resulted in mass expansions in agricultural research, education and labour by the newly created Department of Agriculture in 1905 (Prince 1995, 35). Dutch officials believed that technological advances in agriculture would allow Indonesians to prosper, and the Minister of Colonies even described agriculture as “the single axis around which all prosperity, progress, and development turns” (Moon 2005, 191). As will be explored in the third section, I contend that the ruling government's aspirations to expand Indonesian agricultural industries for local welfare played a factor in the detrimental conditions for women's labour as these policies progressed. Agricultural expansions increase demands for labour, meaning that Indonesian women did not receive the same lax labour privileges enjoyed by women in the Netherlands at the time (Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2016, 150). The primary exports following

their agricultural expansion were coffee, sugar, tobacco and various spices (Tyson 2010, 25), which were also the primary industries where Indonesian women found work (Locher-Scholten 2000, 157-158). While value on agriculture was framed as a commitment to welfare, Tyson describes these profitable plantations as essentially “unfettered capitalism” (Tyson 2010, 25), demonstrating that these ethical policies were ultimately implemented to profit the metropole, with little regard for women's labour conditions despite welfare being at the forefront of their policy model.

Because of these conditions, it is evident that while the Dutch promoted their Ethical Policy as beneficial for the local people, this welfare was not extended nor reflected in the lives of working Indonesian women. The desire to be “ethical” in their ruling extends into the next section, where it will be focusing on a defining aspect of Ethical Policy: adat. Adat Law and its Portrayal of the Indonesian Woman Adat, also known as Indonesian customary law, remains ill-defined to this day due to the ethnic heterogeneity of Southeast Asian groups and the lingering effects of colonial rule on their cultural heritages (Tyson 2010, 24). Adat in the context of the Dutch East Indies, refers to any “entity united by morality, customs, traditions, and legal institutions” (Arizona and Cahyadi 2013, 46-47) and as will be explored, this very broad definition gave the Dutch room to maneuver and manipulate adat to suit their own colonial interests. When the Dutch were drafting the Ethical Policy, they observed that the Indonesian working class were deeply rooted in traditional community ties (Prince 1995, 37), and it

was believed that the use of adat law would be vital to a smooth-working administration (Vandenbosch 1932, 31). They concluded that there would be higher likelihoods of development if colonial policies were tied into Indonesia's native social institutions (Vandenbosch 1932, 31), so the Dutch integrated non-assimilative, indirect methods of ruling during this period and "sought to preserve, to revive where necessary, and to strengthen the native institutions and culture" with little attempt to westernize the local population (Vandenbosch 1943, 499). It was abundantly clear that the Dutch supposedly held heavy respect for adat when implementing their colonial policies—Dutch colonial administrator H. J. Friedericy even expressed in a letter to his parents: "If we want to do our work well, we must immerse ourselves in the mores and customs of every [ethnic] group in every region... We must be aware of kinship relations, friendships, enmities, and intrigues" (Friedericy, 1984, 328). Conversely, it must be questioned to what extent was this respect for adat attributed to genuine care for the local population, and to what extent was it attributed to the advancement of an ulterior agenda. Lev states that while nowhere else did as much to understand Indigenous law and customs, the Dutch simultaneously failed to ask many important questions (Lev 1985, 63).

The retention of adat in colonial policy demonstrates that there is an apparent desire from the Dutch to understand and entrench Indonesian relationships and customs. However, it is difficult to conceive that the empire had genuine concern about the traditional and cultural wellbeing of the Indonesian population—

if this were the case, Indonesia would have not been colonized in the first place. Hidden motivations were littered throughout European expansionism, and in this instance, the use of adat was to uphold the existing exploitative labour laws placed onto Indonesian women to keep plantations profitable. According to Lev, adat law lost its integrity and relation to traditional Indonesian customs after its codification in colonial rule, and officials were rigid and unwilling to expand and evolve adat law as societal conditions changed—the fundamental understanding of adat was no longer Indonesian, but entirely Dutch after its integration into the Dutch East Indies (Lev 1985, 64).

The rigidity of adat law is manifested in the failure of policymakers to sufficiently regulate female night labour laws because it would violate traditional Indonesian ideas that Eastern women were born to work (Gouda 1993, 324), despite growing movements to domesticate women (Locher-Scholten 2000, 50). It will become evident in the following section that adat was a crutch utilized by the Dutch to shape their policies into appearing as ethical, but under the guise of customary respect was the manipulation of traditional Indonesian cultures into policies that would benefit the colonizers at the expense of the colony. The effects of adat law were extremely detrimental to Indonesian women's labour rights because it painted them as biologically destined for physical labour. Gouda asserts that female colonial subjects were often perceived as needing more protection and less disciplinary rigour than colonial men (Gouda 1993, 320), but the opposite is true in the context of Ethical Policy Indonesia—the

Dutch perceived colonial women as equals to their male counterparts—as active participants in both the household and labour market (Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2016, 153). Dutch organizations such as the Java Sugar Employers Union (Java Suiker Werkgeversbond) and Netherlands Indies Entrepreneurs Association (Indische Ondernemersbond) argued that according to traditional adat, women had natural inclinations for manual work (Gouda 1993, 324). This heavily contrasted with the ideal image of the European woman at the time, where they were believed to be inherently domestic figures with the sole duty of caring for their husbands and children (Gouda 1993, 324). Indonesian women were depicted as those who “[toil] and [drudge] as long as her powers allow her to” (Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2016, 153), while European women were described as “the [angels] of the house, always present for her children” (Locher-Scholten 2000, 27). These perceptions were extended onto Western and Eastern husbands, where Western men were perceived to have natural breadwinning inclinations and provide for the family, while Eastern men lacked this impulse entirely—forcing the wife to participate in the workforce to support him (Gouda 1993, 324). Such assumptions stemming from adat law solidified Dutch beliefs that Indonesian women were naturally hardworking and destined for manual labour. They played a significant part in the development—or lack thereof—of their labour conditions and justified the outcome of the 1925 female night labour bill as discussed in the next section.

Stagnation of Progress and the Unwavering Constraints on Female Indonesian Labour

The perceptions of Eastern and Western women held in the previous section were directly reflected in the policies surrounding women’s labour in each respective country—Dutch labour laws reflected what was expected of European women, and Indonesian labour laws reflected those of Southeast Asian women. The Netherlands began efforts to ‘civilize’ the female labour agenda in the late nineteenth century, where they pushed to transform working class women into devoted, sedentary housewives (Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2016, 150). This resulted in official censuses displaying a substantial decrease of women participating in the Dutch labour market in the early twentieth century, as they began to switch from formal forms of labour to domesticated, unreported work (Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2016, 155). The same cannot be said for the working women of Indonesia. While women were becoming increasingly idealized as dependent, domestic objects, Dutch beliefs of the inherent biological differences present between Eastern and Western women (rooted in adat) meant that these standards did not apply to Indonesian women, and they were expected to continue working.

Female labour in Indonesia, especially night labour, continued to proliferate in the sugar, cassava, fibre, oil, coffee, tobacco and rubber industries (Locher-Scholten 2000, 157), and while the work of married Indonesian women “was perhaps frowned upon...it was never intended to be eradicated” (Van Nederveen Meerkerk 2016, 157). As noted in the first section, these industries were among the top grow-

ing industries during the Ethical Policy's agricultural expansion. Therefore, the continuation of employing female labour despite it going against the conventional standards for women at the time is in part, due to increased demands for plantation labour as a result of Dutch colonial commitments to invest and expand these industries. The importance of agricultural yield and development to Dutch authorities significantly overrode any notions of womanhood and domesticity that could be applied to Indonesian women in the early twentieth century; they instead continued to work on these farms, possibly in hopes of one day reaping the welfare benefits that were promised by the Ethical Policies. The extent of female labour is illustrated in the 1930 census for Java and Madura, where almost all of the 30% of working married women were employed in agriculture industries (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 1932-1934, 94-95). In contrast, only 6% of all married women in the Netherlands reported having a job (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 1932-1934, 94-95). These differences demonstrate that standards for Dutch women allowed them the privilege of enjoying less hazardous and laborious work, while perceptions of Indonesian women and the expansion of agriculture did not allow them the same lifestyles.

The proposed bill in 1925 to ban female night labour in Indonesia is a prime case study of how adat, and European perceptions of Eastern women perpetuated unfair working conditions for women in the colony. Female night labour was regarded as hazardous and excessive for women, and was banned in the Netherlands in 1889 (Van Nederveen Meerkerk

2016, 150). Conversely, Dutch authorities only considered its regulation in Indonesia more than thirty-five years after its prohibition in the metropole (Gouda 1993, 324). During the bill's deliberation, there were significant strides made by the Progressive Indonesian Members of the People's Council to pass the bill and ban night work—and while the bill was ultimately passed, significant concessions were made (Locher-Scholten 2000, 50). These compromises were largely due to the surveys provided by the Java Sugar Employers Union and the Netherlands Indies Entrepreneurs Association to the government, which demonstrated that female night labour was crucial in the sugar, cassava, fibre and oil industries, and in certain regions, men were not available to work these jobs (Locher-Scholten 2000, 53). These claims lacked evidence and support, but were nonetheless considered in the legislation's drafting.

The final bill outlined that female night labour was prohibited from 10 PM to 5 AM, with the exceptions of industries where large-scale female night labour is prevalent (Locher-Scholten 2000, 53). These industries would be given special licenses by the labour office that would "allow female night labour during certain periods in the tea, coffee and fireworks factories...and other unspecified industries" (Locher-Scholten 2000, 54). In other words, industries already employing female night labour would not be held under these restrictions if they obtained a special license in advance. In addition to this large exception, the "night" as specified in Indonesia is four hours shorter than its specification in the Netherlands (Locher-Scholten 2000, 54), meaning that Indone-

sian women were subject to four more hours of potentially hazardous work than Dutch women were. Evidently, this bill provides little to no protection for women already employed in these industries—meaning that the majority of the working female class continued to suffer from nighttime working conditions. In the years following the passing of the bill, sugar factories employing female night labour rose from 117 to 126 (Locher-Scholten 2000, 54)—not only did the bill not afford women with any solid protection from night work, it increased it.

This case study demonstrates that technically, while there were advancements made on the prohibition of female night labour, the extreme exceptions made to these restrictions ultimately allowed night labour to prevail, and agricultural industries continued to exploit their labour. These concessions, or rather loopholes, illustrate that European perceptions of female Indonesian work ethic very clearly manifest themselves in colonial policy—while there were efforts to reduce women’s laborious duties, they were ultimately overshadowed by adat ideals positing women as natural-born workers. A European employers spokesman even insisted that adat necessitated female labour, and so the Dutch authorities should not interfere with the writings of the customary law if they wish to respect Indonesia’s traditional culture (Locher-Scholten 2000, 51). This is a clear demonstration of the aforementioned rigidity with which Dutch officials treated adat. They refused to engage with the customary law in a meaningful way, and instead manipulated it to serve their own imperialist interests rather than those of the locals, all whilst portraying

themselves as respectful proponents of the local tradition. The upholding of adat in justifying the continuation of women’s labour was used to propagate the agricultural expansions happening under Ethical Policy, directly benefiting the colonial power. As Gouda asserts, adat ultimately became a set of traditions and customs that the Dutch would define, codify, police, control, reform, and suppress—and by prioritizing certain aspects of adat over others (this case being prioritizing outdated assumptions of female human nature), the colonial power took advantage of Indigenous traditions and imposed their Western values onto them as they saw fit (Gouda 1993, 325). Ultimately the manipulation and administration of traditional customary law as a moral high ground to disguise the Dutch’s desires for agricultural expansion had extremely harmful impacts on the working conditions of Indonesian women.

Conclusion

This essay examined the Ethical Policy’s agricultural expansion, the manipulation of adat to portray Eastern women as biologically manual labourers, and the stagnant outcomes of the 1925 female night labour bill. Through these explorations, it is evident that retaining adat in the Netherlands’ colonial policy distorted perceptions of Indonesian women and led to the demise of their labour rights. The lack of change in their working conditions is reinforced by the colonial authorities’ commitments to increase local welfare through agricultural expansion as part of their Ethical Policy, which requires a larger and prolonged labour supply to sufficiently meet crop yields.

Unfortunately, the labour conditions of Indonesian women suffered due to these policies, which operated under the guise of genuine commitment to the local people's welfare and traditional cultures. These findings demonstrate that seemingly beneficial policies for the colonized do not come without a price—increased welfare, agricultural supply and the integration of traditional values into colonial rule came at the expense of safe working environments for local women. Furthermore, these ethical policies were ultimately implemented to benefit the colonizers, not the colony. Expansions of agricultural industries may result in more welfare, but it fundamentally contributes to the widely profitable plantations that directly advances the economy of the Dutch empire. It can then be concluded that the Ethical Policy era fell short in ethically addressing the quality of life for Indonesian women through its upholding of hazardous labour conditions for the sake of Dutch profits.

Further research can be done to examine the other side of this story—how did the Ethical Policy era contribute to the evolution of Dutch women's labour roles, if at all? Did the profits from Indonesia's agricultural expansion directly benefit the professional wellbeing and development of women in the metropole? Nonetheless, while women's labour conditions have naturally progressed in time following Indonesia's liberation, this paper encapsulates the experiences and hardships of Indonesian women during the turn of the twentieth century.

Sharing their stories reveals the wider intricacies of gender and power dynamics, colonial intentions, and the trickle-down effects within

a colonial empire.

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