Miners, managers and the state: A socio-political history of the Ombilin coal-mines, West Sumatra, 1892-1996
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Citation for published version (APA):

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CHAPTER II
OMBILIN-SAWAHUNTO: COAL-MINES
AND MINING TOWN

Introduction

To what extent can the peculiar development of economic and social life in Western Europe since the eighteenth century be explained in terms of coal? Such a question automatically leads to an examination of the opening of coal-mines on a large scale in various countries in the world. Having become the mainstay of the industrial revolution, coal was no longer mined in limited amounts for household purposes, but it was produced in large quantities to meet the demands of the international coal market. After the invention of the steam-engine, the use of coal as an energy source stimulated the growth of manufacturing and heavy industry and the expansion of merchant shipping. The industrial use of coal set into motion a widespread search for deposits of this valuable mineral.

This chapter has three interconnected purposes. First, I shall describe the emergence of steam-engine and the exploration for coal-fields and the opening up of the Ombilin mines in West Sumatra. Secondly, I dig in depth into the debates about whether the Ombilin coalfields and the construction of railways were to be exploited by the state or by private companies (1868-1892). This part will demonstrate that the entire Dutch administration, from the lowest to the highest level, was involved. Finally, under the title 'A trip to Sawahlunto', I take the reader on a short tour around in the mining town as it is today. This will be an exploration of what the remaining old buildings can still tell us about their historical functions. The collective memory of the town's present inhabitants contains many interesting and terrifying stories associated with these buildings, some of which we shall encounter in the interviews with former miners.

1. The Age of the Steam-Engine and The Ombilin Coal-Mines

After the invention of the steam-engine in Western Europe in the eighteenth century, the expansion of industry brought dramatic changes in the use of coal. The increase in demand for coal was spurred on because it was not longer needed simply for the warming of houses, the cooking of food, and all other common domestic services, there was now an enormous need for it for industrial purposes as well. The huge quantity of coal consumed in industry went into such sectors as the railways, steamships, and gas works. Coal, like other energy sources such as oil, played an important role in stimulating various kinds of economic activities.

Pieces of evidence by which to observe the direct influence of coal upon industrial development are legion. One major example is the exploration for new coalfields and the construction of railways in many countries. Great Britain, for example, one of the greatest coal producers in the world, built the first railways from Stockton to Darlington in 1825, connecting the Durham coalfields with the coast (Wolf 1982:291). Many other countries in Europe such as France, Germany, and Spain give ample evidence of their interest in coal.
During the nineteenth century, these countries explored coal-reserves intensively and exploited them. The finding of new sources of supply coincided with the constructions of railways. The rapid spread of the use of coal in various kinds of industries and for transportation (trains, steamships) inevitably caused the demand for coal to rise on the international market. It is no wonder, therefore, that the harnessing of steam-power and the incorporation of coal into the international market, brought a rapid expansion in the world trading network and the growth of capitalism.

The invention of new technology in the form of steam-engines pushed many countries in the world to search new coalfields. East Asian countries like Japan and China were not left behind in opening coal-mines and constructing railways (Ombilien-Kolenfeld 1884: 843). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, China became one of the biggest coal producers in the world, while Japan did not confine itself to exploiting its own coal-mines intensively, but expanded its operation to China. In other Asian countries, like India, Vietnam, Malaya, and Indonesia, the opening of coalmines may be considered to contribute to the explanation of the expansion of Western imperialism and capitalism. Western countries like Britain, France, and the Netherlands competed with each other in the exploration and exploitation of coal-mines in their Asian colonies. In the late nineteenth century, the British explored and opened coal-mines in India (Simeon 1995; Migdal 1988:73) and in Malaya (Kaur 1990). The construction and extension of railway networks in these countries were followed by the opening of the mines. In the years 1881 and 1882, the French colonial government conducted explorations to find new coalfields in Tongkin, Vietnam (Ombilien-Kolenfeld 1884:843). The Dutch started earlier than either the French or the British to explore for and exploit coal in Asia. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial government instructed its mining engineers to explore for new coalfields in Kalimantan, Indonesia. This was intended to find supplies to cover the increased demand for coal, especially for the consumption of naval and mercantile steamships.

In short, the discovery of steam-power and the opening of coal-mines had brought dramatic changes to both the economic and socio-political aspects of the world economy. Economically, the use of coal as an energy source for transportation accelerated the growth of internal and external trading networks, and facilitated communication between countries, and between the eastern and western parts of the world. Benefiting from the use of coal and improvements in railways and steamships, the passage of goods from one country to the other, the coal greatly swelled the volume of traffic by sea and overland. Quite apart from this expansion of the transport infrastructure, the exploitation of coal had the political effect of strengthening the central control of the state over its territories. In the nineteenth century, the bulk of the coal consumed in the Netherlands Indies was used by the navy. The advantages which the navy derived from coal-mines led to the expansion of the Dutch colonial power in the Outer Islands and contributed to the formation of the late colonial state.

Everywhere new coal-mines generated a great demand for labour, which brought about the emergence of new mining communities. In Japan, for instance, coal-mines created a working class not only of males, but also encompassing women, and even children (Kooiman 1916:16). In some cases, these emerging mining communities depended completely on the mine for their livelihood, while others such as those in India and Spain derived some additional income from agriculture (Rothermund 1978; Simeon 1995; Shubert 1985). Naturally, the differing degree of dependence of the mining community on the mining company, influenced its social relations and political actions.
As already described above, the Dutch colonial government gave careful consideration to the importance of coal as an energy source. Keen to reduce the dependence on imported coal, especially from Britain, since the mid-nineteenth century, the Dutch had launched several expeditions to Indonesia to explore for coal-reserves, but made little significant progress in tapping promising sources. The first coal-reserve was discovered in Pengaron, Kalimantan. In 1848, the mine was opened by Governor-General J.J. Rochussen and named the “Oranje Nassau” (Van Lier 1914:4). The mine provided almost all the coal used by the navy during its campaign against the kingdom of Banjermasin in South Kalimantan (Van Lier 1914). Despite the promising start this early Dutch attempt to exploit coal in Pengaron was doomed to fail. Although the mine was operated using a cheap labour force, mostly convict labourers, the costs of transportation from the centre of production to the harbour were too high. The mine produced no more than 80,000 tons (Van Lier 1914:5).

After the failure at Pengaron, Dutch geologists searched for more profitable coal deposits in other locations. Their explorations at this point were still confined to Kalimantan and Sumatra. The chain of explorations that led directly to the opening up of at least two other coal-mines in Kalimantan, had been launched as the century drew to its end. These coal-mines were developed by both a private company and the Dutch colonial government. The East Borneo Coal-mining Company was made operational in 1882 as a private company (Lindblad 1985:182) and the Pulau Laut mine was initially operated and developed by a private company, then it was taken over by the government (Baks 1989). At that time there were several other coal-mines working in the archipelago.

It does not require much insight to see that the reason for the intensive exploration for coal deposits carried out by Dutch geologists and mining engineers was linked to a high demand for coal, and the anxiety to avoid dependence on imported coal. Beside the navy, steamships of the merchant marine also consumed huge quantities of coal. Many countries used steamships to expand their trading activities in the international market. In the Netherlands Indies this was particularly the case after the supply in agricultural products, like sugar, and coffee took off after the introduction of the Cultivation System. In this case, the state had an important role in controlling the shipping networks. The KPM, a Dutch state-owned company that monopolized almost all trading networks in the archipelago, was established in 1888 (A Campo 1992). Fourteen years later, in 1902, the company was operating forty-five ships. In the next decade, because the state steadily boosted its trading activities in the Outer Islands, the total number of ships increased to eighty. In 1930, the fleet comprised 113 steamships and thirty-two motorships (Furnivall 1948:331). During the period 1900-1930, the number of steamships departing from the harbour of Tanjung Periuk in Batavia increased from about 800 in 1900 to 1,636 in 1913 and 3,134 in 1930 (Furnivall 1948:331).

In the Netherlands itself, coal-reserves were only discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, especially in Limburg, and these were exploited by a private company. Like in Britain, the opening of coal-mines was followed by the construction of railways, namely the lines between Herzogenrath, Heleen and Sittard. After 1900, when the demand for coal rose on the international market, the Dutch government decided to take control of the coal-mines. For a more detailed study of coal-mines and working conditions of the coal miners in Limburg, see Kreukels 1986:13-5.
The growth of railway transportation also put pressure on the demand for coal, as is shown in the following figures. The construction of railways and tramways rose sharply: in 1913 there were twenty-five under construction which increased year by year to 7,425 in 1930 (Furnivall 1948:329). A great number of these railway and steamship companies were managed and controlled by the Dutch colonial state, the logical consequence being that the state also became increasingly dependent on coal. Coal was in fact the state’s leading energy source. Since the Dutch chose Java as their headquarters in the Indonesian Archipelago, it is not surprising that most of the railways were constructed in this island, and the proportion of coal consumed for rail transportation was higher in Java than the other islands.

A look at the total of production of coal and its contribution to the colonial economy shows there were two big coal-mining companies in the Netherlands Indies. They were both located in Sumatra: the first was the long-lived mine which is still operating, the Ombilin-Sawahlunto, West Sumatra, and the second was in Bukit Asam, South Sumatra. W.H. de Greeve, a young Dutch geologist, explored West Sumatra to map its natural resources and in 1868, he found coal deposits in Ombilin and reported its mineral and economic potential to the state. This region contained very rich coal deposits that were estimated to be about 2 million tons by R.D.M Verbeek (Verbeek 1875:1,82,86,91-6). The discovery of rich coal reserves attracted many people both from the colony and from the Netherlands eager to seek profit and make their fortune in the coal industry. In the following section, I shall discuss the debates that raged about whether the Ombilin coalfields should be exploited by the state or by private companies.

2. The Ombilin Coal-Mines: State or Private Company?

The most important problem that arose after the discovery of the rich coal reserves in Ombilin-Sawahlunto was whether the exploitation of the mine and the concomitant construction of railways should be undertaken by the state or by private companies. A lot of water had to flow under the bridge before this debate was resolved (1868-1891). It is striking that there were many different interest groups involved in the debate, among them members of the Dutch Parliament (de Eerste and Tweede Kamer), the Minister of Colonies, the Governor-General, and the former highest administrators in the Netherlands-Indies, local administrators, private investors, and engineers. These groups were all motivated by their own motives and interests.

Why did the decision-making process about the exploitation of the mine and the construction of railways take so long? Actually, given the liberal political climate, the colonial administration should have offered the contracts in free competition to private companies that were interested in investing their capital in these projects, but the state withheld this chance from them. What happened was precisely the opposite to what happened with the tin-mining.

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2 De Greeve’s report was published in 1871 under a title, *Het Ombilien-kolenveld in de Padangsche Bovenlanden en het transportstelsel op Sumatra’s Westkust*. 
on the island of Belitung. There the Dutch government had given the concessions to exploit tin-mines, to a private company, mainly to the benefit of Dutch aristocrats.\(^3\)

In his interesting article entitled ‘Uiteenlopende spoorrails...’, F.Colombijn has described clearly some of the factors which caused a stagnation in the decision-making process with regard to the Ombilin mines.\(^4\) He argues that there were at least three factors that contributed to such a protracted period in the decision-making process. The first was the prevailing administrative culture mired down in the complicated procedures of the Dutch bureaucracy. Secondly, there was a rapid replacement of successive Ministers of Colonies. And the last factor was a consciously concealed tactic of the successive Ministers of Colonies and the colonial government at Batavia deployed to counter private interest groups.

In the following pages, I describe how the discussion of the opening of the coal-mines and the construction of the railways was carried on and how the three factors enumerated by Colombijn caused a stagnation in the decision-making process. The discussion can be divided into two periods of time. The first started in 1868 and lasted till 1887 and the second began in 1887 and ended in 1891. In the first period there are clear indications that the private investors were enthusiastic about constructing the railways and exploiting the mine. This happened after the publication of De Greeve's report in 1871 (De Greeve 1871). The second period (1887-1891) is dominated by the role of the state in the exploitation of the mine and the construction of the railways.

When the very rich coal-reserves were found in Ombilin-Sawahlunto, a number of private investors sent an application to the Minister of Colonies to obtain a concession.\(^5\) The Minister, however, did not read or at least did not reply to the application immediately. No doubt, the Minister was marking time trying to postpone a decision because he wanted to wait for the results of a new investigation.

De Greeve, an important contributor to the opening of Ombilin coal-mines, returned to explore West Sumatra for the second time. Unfortunately, he suffered a fatal accident when he

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From the first discovery of the Ombilin coalfields to the final decision that the state, finally, would exploit the mine and construct the railways, a sea of articles and official reports focused on this case. In a meeting in The Hague, the high-ranking administrators, members of the Dutch parliament, private investors and other interested groups discussed technology, coal reserves, concessionaires, economic considerations for local interests. It is sometimes difficult to follow the discussions. The huge number of people involved, made matters unbelievably complicated. It is important to note that since the discovery of rich coal reserves in Ombilin, both the official administrators and the private investors had paid a great deal of attention to this potential. For a more detailed information, see Colombijn 1992.

The concessionaires were generally from Batavia or from the Netherlands, only one from Padang. Some of them were mining engineers who were involved in the coal exploration, such as Van Diest, Verbeek, and Veth, while the concessionaires were P.H. van Diest (1871) A.S. Warmolts (1872) Van Diest, Verbeek, J.K.W. Quarles van Ufford (1872) and C.S. van Geuns (Padang), D.D. Veth (1882), see Colombijn 1992:447.
was conducting research along the Indragiri River in 1872, and he died before the exploration was completed. In the next exploration his work was continued by R.D.M. Verbeek. His findings basically supported what De Greeve had discovered, particularly the estimate of 200 million tons of coal-reserves. He estimated that about 100 tons of coal could be produced every year in order to fulfil the demand for coal in the Netherlands Indies. In the following years, the Dutch mining engineers who were subsequently involved in the exploration were J.L. Cluysenaer and D.D. Veth. Veth wrote a report which was published in a book entitled 'The Expedition to Central Sumatra'. This report focused on the possibility for the construction of railways, the exploitation of the mines, and a harbour.

Many applications had already been submitted before the new exploration started. The first private investors were P.H. van Diest (1871) and A.S. Warmolts (1872). After reading De Greeve’s report, they were interested in investing their capital in the mine. De Greeve, a person who belonged to the liberal wing and a son-in-law of W.R. Baron van Hoevell, estimated the total capital needed for the exploitation of the mine and the construction of the railways was to be 5.7 million guilders yielding a profit of around 9 per cent (Colombijn 1992:440). After Van Diest returned to the Netherlands Indies, his application was taken over by J.K. W. Quarles van Ufford, a former civil servant at the Ministry of Colonies. He asked the state only 5 percent profit in exchange for his investment (Colombijn 1992:441; Van Diest and Van Ufford 1872). In principle, then the minister, P. P. van Bosse, gave a positive reaction to this application, but he was replaced by a new minister I.D. Fransen van de Putte before he could officially approve of it. The new minister wanted to conduct more explorations before he gave his final decision. This task was handed over to J.L. Cluysenaer. This time, many of the applications submitted to the Minister had come from private investors who tried to convince the state by arguing that it would benefit greatly if the exploitation was carried out by private investors. The state, however, unequivocally refused this offer.

Meanwhile, Cluysenaer wrote three detailed reports which were published in 1875 and 1878 (Cluysenaer 1876, 1878). He offered a new and reasonable budget plan for the construction of railways from the west coast through the Anai Valley. He estimated that the exploitation of the mine would cost only 24.4 million guilders. This was cheaper than the offer made by competitors (Cluysenaer 1878; Koloniaal Verslag 1876:132-4). Because the government had its hands full with the Aceh War and the money spent on the construction of railways in Java was higher than had been budgeted, there was no reaction to Cluysenaer’s offer.

With his team (1877-1879) D.D. Veth made another plan for the construction of railways from the east coast of Sumatra. He argued that the coal transported from eastward bound line would be more profitable because it was closer to the harbour of Singapore which was one of the great consumers of coal (Veth 1877, 1879:VI). He promoted his ideas very actively by giving lectures and writing articles which were published in the Netherlands. Two distinct interest groups had emerged by now, one led by those favouring the construction of the railway from the west coast and the other led by those who wanted to build it from the east coast. After considering the financial prospects, eventually no one was interested in supporting the east coast line construction.

See for a detailed report Verbeek 1875.
Until final agreement was reached by members of the Dutch parliament on June 10, 1887, the discussion concentrated on the profit percentage and the conditions of the concession such as its duration and the annual tax on the mine once it was operational (Colombijn 1992:444-5). In 1886, for instance, the concession was only 640 batu (448 hectare) for a period of seventy-five years. In a repetition of an earlier scenario, the Minister of Colonies, F.G. van Bloemen Waanders responded positively to the request of the applicants to guarantee a reduced payment of profit to the state, namely from 4.5 percent to 3.5 percent. But before the decision was made, he was replaced by J.P. Sprenger van Eyk (Colombijn 1992: 444).

Under the new minister, the procedure for the tender was made more complicated. The Minister asked the Governor-General for his opinion about reaching a compromise between the private entrepreneurs and the government for the tender that had already been offered to the public. In fact, the Governor-General wanted to see more stringent requirements for the tender. He proposed that a concession should be given to a person who could pay the annual tax to the government (Colombijn 1992:445). Though his suggestion had been accepted, the Minister had no absolute power to decide on it. This would have to be discussed and decided by members of the Dutch parliament. On June 10, 1887, the majority of the parliament rejected private tenders and decided that the state would exploit the mine and construct the railways. Engineer M.J. Ijzerman, the former head of the railways construction in Java, was given the task of carrying out this project. This decision totally overrode the earlier recommendation of the Minister of Colonies, who suffered a personal defeat because his policy of supporting private investors had been rejected (Colombijn 1992:445; Koloniaal Verslag 1886:88,154-203). To construct the railways and the harbour, the Dutch government would need additional capital for the Netherlands Indies in the upcoming year.

The role of the Governor-General, the local administrators and the leaders in the decision-making process was very marginal, because they depended on the acquiescence of the Minister of Colonies and the parliament. They had no power, beyond trying to influence the government by publishing articles written by such people as members or ex-members of the local Chamber of Commerce in Padang. The local Chamber of Commerce had no executive power, but a petition concerning the construction of a local transportation system was sent to the Governor-General in 1883, persuading the colonial government to begin constructing it immediately (Colombijn 1992:446).

The second period of the discussions (1887-1891) still focused on the exploitation of the mine and the railways. Many private investors sent their applications in the hope of winning a concession, but only two applicants were seriously considered: P.J. van Houten, a businessman in Padang and a member of the Chamber of Commerce of Padang, and the other was Cluysenaer. These two contenders had tried to influence public opinion through a series of lectures and publications, and a heated debate was waged on the pages of the newspapers (Colombijn 1992:448; De Spoorweg 1891:1728-36, 2026-2030).

Cluysenaer and van Houten did everything they could to get the concession and they each had a strong lobby (Colombijn 1992:448). Cluysenaer, for example, enjoyed a good connection with the Minister, since he had once advised him about the best investor to execute the project. He had changed his tune. In previous years, he had suggested that the state should exploit the mine and construct the railways, but now he had other ideas. He was convinced that the exploitation of the project should be given to the private investor rather than to the state.
He argued that the establishment of the railways and the mine should be undertaken by private investors. His basic argument was that if the state were to become an actor in the business of coal distribution, it would not be successful, because it lacked the capacity to distribute coal. He pointed out that H.D. Levysohn Norman, a member of parliament and a former member of the Raad van Indië, also supported the application. The Minister, W.C. Keuchenius, was very aware of Cluysenaer’s hidden motives. It was fairly blatant that his suggestions to the Minister in support of private exploitation were intended to enable his own group to have its slice of the cake. During the debates in parliament, it seemed that H.D. Levysohn Norman was the only member who supported the application of Cluysenaer and Van Houten. He rejected the argument of the new minister, A.E. Baron Mackay, who said that as the biggest coal consumer, the state should therefore control the exploitation of the mine. Determined to achieve success, Cluysenaer also offered the state a profit of more than 5 percent (Colombijn 1992: 449). Moreover, Cluysenaer and van Houten were against the idea of recruiting convict labourers for these projects, an option, which was an unpopular topic at the time. Finally, the debates ended with a decision in 1891 that the state would exploit the railways and the mine, because the mine would benefit the state enormously. IJzerman, who had been appointed as the head of construction of the Sumatran railways, was given the task of leading the two state-owned companies: the railways and the mine.

This brief recital of the early history of the mines demonstrates ineluctably that there was hefty competition between different interest groups for the exploitation of the Ombilin coal-mines and the railways which was to serve it. In addition to the Cluysenaer’s group, there was no lack of other engineering groups who were willing to try their luck. Generally speaking, the engineers formed a very powerful group because the government took their advice more seriously than that of their competitors. They were not content simply to act as advisors, they also tried to participate in the project. Colombijn argues there is every reason to designate them a pressure group, emerging not from the ranks of the bureaucracy, but formed by former classmates from Delft (Colombijn 1992:455). Another pressure group consisted of members of the Chamber of Commerce in Padang and local administrators.

Under the supervision of IJzerman, an enthusiastic and energetic person, the first digging for coal was commenced in the area of Sungai Durian in 1891, even before the ordinance had been officially passed. This mine consisted of three seams, A, B, and C. Seam A has a thickness around two to two and half metres, while Seam C has a thickness of coal of seven to eight metres. The vertical distance between seams A and C is around 30-40 metres. Between these two seams lies Seam B in which the thickness of the coal stratum is no more than 0.8 metre. Apart from Sungai Durian, there are other fields of coal in the areas of Sigalut, Waringin, Parambanan, Lunto, and Tanah Hitam. The Ombilin coal-mines employ two different kinds of mining technology: open-cast and underground mining. The best quality coal with 7,000 calories comes from the underground mine. Up to the present day, it is the best quality of coal in the whole of the archipelago.

3. A trip to the Mining Town

The small town of Sawahlunto is located at a distance of approximately 156 kilometres from Padang, the capital of the province of West Sumatra. The town used to be known as Kota
Arcang (literally ‘coal town’), named after its foremost natural resource. The town first became historically important by the late nineteenth century, when the Dutch colonial government established its mining industry there. To reach it by public bus from Padang there are two different routes. The difference lies in the distance and the number of stops. The shorter route takes about three and half-hour and runs via Sitinjau Laut, Solok, Silungkang, and Sawahlunto. The other route is longer and runs via the Anai Valley, Padang Panjang, Singkarak, Solok, Silungkang and Sawahlunto. On both routes, travellers will catch sight of many trucks (via Sitinjau Laut) or trains (via Anai Valley) carrying coal from Sawahlunto to the harbour of Teluk Bayur, Padang.

Sawahlunto lies at about 256 metres above sea level in a hollow valley in the mountain range known as the Bukit Barisan. Surrounded on all sides by hills, the valley resembles a frying-pan. The hills are dry and barren and unfit for cultivation, but contain rich coal deposits. The flat land at the bottom of the valley is not big enough to contain the town that has grown there. Houses, offices, schools, markets, and other buildings are squeezed tightly together, and the town sprawls out over the hillsides.

If one stands at a higher point and looks down on the flat land, one can enjoy amazing panoramas. At night, when the reflected town lights twinkle, it looks like “Hongkong by night” some proud engineers of the company claim. Through the centre of the town flows the Lunto River, and to the south you can see the Sumpahan River. During the colonial period, the river was used by the students of the Mining School as a swimming-pool, but when it was shown that the river also contained little deposits of gold paned, the river became a place where many people searched for gold, especially during the Japanese occupation.

The first thing one sees upon approaching the town is the text written in large letters on the hill above it, “UTAMAKAN KESELAMATAN KERJA” (“safety on the job first priority”). This slogan was propagated by the Minister of Manpower in the late 1980s in the course of a campaign to improve industrial safety. It is only a campaign slogan, the miners told me, and it has no relation to actual efforts to improve the safety of the mine. The miners also complained that it is ironic, that while the company focuses on the safety of working condition, they still run many old buses that have caused a series of accidents over the years.

Like other industrial towns, Sawahlunto is busy. Every morning, the visitor will be woken up by the siren that sounds at six. It is a sign for miners to leave their homes for the mine. The siren sounds again at five, every afternoon. This is a sign for workers who have ‘respectable jobs’ in the mine to go home. During the day, many old buses made in the 1960s pick up the miners who are waiting for them along the roadside and drop them off at their places of work. In the workplace, the day begins with a roll call. The miners are assembled on a large square where they have to repeat some promises in a style reminiscent of a military drill, both as a civil servant and as a miner. One of the most important slogans is that the miners must work to the top of their capacities. Mining is for strong men, one of the mine engineers said. Working in the mine is dangerous and hard. Hence, the miners have to be both physically and mentally strong.

Visitors will also hear the sounds of a conveyor belt, which transports coal from the mines of Sawahluwung, Tanah Hitam, and Parambahan to Sawahlunto. Up to 1970 the company still operated the old Dutch’s kereta lori to carry coal from the mines to Sawahlunto. It also served as public transport that could bring people from the villages, barracks to the market of Sawahlunto. Coal that has been collected will be transported by
train or by truck to the harbour of Teluk Bayur and the cement factory in Padang. This work carries on both day and night.

Located on 586 hectares, in 1990 the town of Sawahlunto had an estimated population of about 15,279 people (Sensus 1990:1,7). If one asks somebody in the town about their profession, the immediate answer will be: we work for the mining company. As registered in the 1990 national census, 80 percent of its population worked at the mine. In 1966, the population of Sawahlunto was 13,723, three years later in 1969, however, it had declined significantly to 11,811, because the company faced a serious economic crisis, consequently many labourers were dismissed or chose to retire. After the energy crises in 1973-74, the central government made strenuous efforts to increase the production of coal, and recruited more workers. By 1979 the population had risen to 13,825 (Sawahlunto 1979:91).

In the mid-nineteenth century Sawahlunto was a small, isolated village, located in the heart of a very large jungle and its population numbered only five hundred. Most households in this village grew rice and other subsistence crops on a limited area of agricultural land. From a colonial point of view, the village had no economic value because large tracts of the land were very inhospitable and not very suitable for agriculture. Because of the isolated location of the village, it impinged only on the periphery of the colonial administration. The village of Sawahlunto was under the control of the head of Laras Silungkang and Talawi, which included the onderafdeeling of Kota VII. It fell under the authority of the Dutch controleur at Sijunjung.

The development of Sawahlunto from an isolated village into the present bustling town is directly related to the opening up of the coal-mines. The history of its growth though was far from straightforward. The emergence of a typical mining community, especially when convict labour was used, posed specific demands of the administration and maintenance of law and order. For all matters involving convict labourers, the mining company had to deal with the nearest Dutch authority, the controleur of Kota VII stationed at Sijunjung. It was probably in order to facilitate these matters that in 1893 the controleur’s post was moved from Sijunjung to Sawahlunto (Staatsblad 1893 no.119). The company provided him with the necessary facilities. From that time on, the controleur had the double task of administering the district’s indigenous population and controlling the mining community of Sawahlunto.

The controleur’s change of residence from Sijunjung to Sawahlunto did not affect the position of his supervisor, the Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar but the latter did become very concerned about the imbalances resulting from the controleur’s dual task. He reported that the controleur tended to give more priority to the interests of the mining company than to those of the local inhabitants. The controleur himself complained about a heavy work-load and wrote that he was unable to deal fairly with the local people and the convict labourers at one and the same time. For this reason from 1894 the Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar appealed repeatedly to the Governor-General in Batavia, requesting the administrative divorce of Sawahlunto from the Kota VII district. These requests did not win a favourable response from the Governor-General until 1905. It was only in that year that Governor-General conceded the

7 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368, Heuven 1931: 31.
8 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368, Heuven 1931: 26.
request on the basis of yet another plea from the incumbent Assistant-Resident, A. Rooy. Until 1917 Sawahlunto was a separate onderafdeeling, independent of Kota VII, and administered by its own controleur. In 1918 Sawahlunto officially acquired the status of a municipality, and its population numbered 7,376, excluding the mine-workers.

Sawahlunto is a product of historical processes. History is reflected in the ground plan, physical structure, design, and monuments of the town. Although very recently new buildings have been constructed, the previous period of Dutch colonization has left its inexorable mark. Old public and private buildings are dominated by European styles. Excellent examples of these buildings may still be found, particularly in the mining area, including the company’s main office building, the company’s housing complex for the managers and other high-ranking staff members, some offices, and houses for the local administrators. The location of the main office remains within walking distance of the housing complex of the managers and high-ranking staff. It only takes three to five minutes, but there are no people who choose to walk to the office. They always use the company cars. In fact, some of them prefer to travel around the town first, before they go to the office.

The location of the housing complex of the local administrators is clearly demarcated from the housing complex of the higher-ranking staff members. They are separated by the market and the Lunto River. Both the house of the controleur and that of the Assistant-Resident lie on a promontory of higher land and face the coolies barracks. During the colonial period, this location was very strategic, because the controleur and the Assistant Resident could keep an eye on the labourers’ activities. In front of the house, there was a garden planted with many banana trees and where labourers were punished. The foremen used these trees either to exercise or to test the strength of beating aim. The Dutch administrators and their agents used this place to impress their physical prowess on the indigenous people.

As already explained above, the presence of local colonial administrators in Sawahlunto served the company’s interests, particularly in dealing quickly and efficiently with administrative matters. But the incompatibility of relations between the two groups caused many conflicts, certainly during the colonial period, and this friction did not disappear with Indonesian Independence. R.C Kwantes, an aspirant-controleur (a cadet district officer) in Sawahlunto in the 1930s recalled his experiences in an interview (30-11-1997). He remembered that the role of the company in the mining town was very dominant.

The barracks of the labourers were named tangsi Rantai, Tanah Lapang, and tangsi Baru. The word tangsi is still being used by people of the town. Each tangsi has its own history. The tangsi Rantai, for instance, was built in rows, very close to one another, leaving little or no room between the dwelling units. Several narrow roads that connect the tangsins with the outside world run between the rows of houses. Many Indonesians call this narrow...
road an alley, ‘gang’. These gang provide the only open space available to the residents to be used for various purposes, such as meeting each other, chatting and gossiping with neighbours, particularly among the wives, as a playing area for children, and for quarrelling. Although physical conditions of the tangsis have not changed much from the outside, dramatic changes have taken place inside, where one can now see electronic apparatus such as parabolic antenna, TV sets, and radio cassette players. Apart from these electronic goods, their small living room is stuffed with a sofa and a side-board, which is used to display the electronic goods. The sound of very loud music emerges from these small rooms. The ownership of electronic goods confers status, and gives rise to competition. Life in the tangsi is full of competition, a coal-miner told me.

The hospital in Sawahlunto is also situated on this higher piece of land and faces the soccer field. The Dutch company constructed it for convict labourers. The building has been continuously extended to cope with the increased number of workers who come there to seek treatment. In 1950, the hospital was taken over by the Department of Health. A former nurse, who worked there during the colonial period, said the hospital was not only to take care of sick or injured workers, it was also a place for the medical training of European physicians. At the corner of the building, there was a mortuary in which the bodies of deceased workers were preserved. The doctors used the dead bodies intensively as objects of research and training. In the past, the hospital was the most modern building in West Sumatra. But today, because of its lack of qualified medical staff and other up-to-date facilities, it has been abandoned by many people, who now prefer to go to other hospitals in Solok and Padang.

Standing on the highest floor of the hospital building and looking down, one will see a green soccer field. It was built by convict labourers in 1901. The field has been the site of most large-scale public events: sports, carnival activities, performances by musicians, political rallies, and demonstrations. Several football clubs such as Glück Auf, Hercules, and Marconi (Sinar Sumatra 4-7-1925) have used it for their games. During the colonial period, the Dutch also gathered there on various important occasions such as the celebration of the queen’s birthday. It was a place where groups of musicians and dancers come together to rehearse and perform. There was a range of performances to cater for people from the different social classes represented in the mining town. Of all performances, the coolies’ favourite shows were the Javanese and Sundanese ronggeng who performed after closing time (Sinar Sumatra, 1-9-1925). After Independence, political parties and anti-government groups also made the field their home. It was here that, during the 1960s, political parties, the Dewan Banteng or the PRRI leaders held their large public rallies and ran their campaigns. Since 1960 the field has been used for political rallies for the political liberation of West Irian, the so-called ‘ganyang Malaysia’ (crush Malaysia) campaign, and it has also been a meeting place for trade unions.

Not far from the soccer field, there are three old buildings located at the centre of tangsi Baru, in the village of Air Dingin. These buildings consist of a big kitchen and two warehouses. The kitchen, constructed in 1918, is very big and equipped with a wealth of cooking utensils for the preparation of about sixty-five pihils rice everyday (Sinar Sumatra, 2-5-1925). Here, thousands of portions of food were cooked for both the labourers and their families. The building could tell many stories about the corruption of European administrators.

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11 This resembles the life-story of coal-miners in Britain described by D.H Lawrence in his novel Sons and Lovers (1913).
Chinese suppliers, and the indigenous cooks (Sinar Sumatra, 4,9,10-5-1928). At this kitchen, the labourers competed with each other to get the food distributed by the company staff.

The market of Sawahlunto lies on the opposite side of the soccer field. It has changed little since the colonial days. The old market still exists, but a new construction was finished in 1997. The two are jointed to one another. Until the Japanese occupation, the market was dominated by Chinese and Minangkabau traders, particularly those from Silungkang and Talawi. The Chinese mainly sold goods such as milk, bread, cheese, shoes, and the like to European customers (Interview with Mrs Urban, 10-12-1994), although the Minang traders also had some stocks for European consumers. Although they sold their merchandise mostly to local people. After the Japanese occupation, many Chinese people left the town and moved to cities such as Padang and Jakarta, but today, the visitor still can find some Chinese shops. In 1980 there were only sixty-two Chinese counted (Sawahlunto dalam Angka 1980:23). Up to the present day, the Minangkabau play a dominant role in trading activities in the market. Beside the Minangkabau, the descendants of the former Javanese contract labourers have also developed their own businesses in the market, generally selling traditional Javanese food such as tempe, tahu, and gado-gado.

As it was in the past, so is it still today. Visitors to the market are mostly villagers and the lower social strata of the mining society. In the past, the Europeans or the high-ranking staff members of the company and other important officials sent their servants to the market. They preferred to do shopping in other places such as Silungkang, Bukittinggi, and Padang, and at present, the upper class of the mining society and other high-ranking officials prefer to go to other bigger markets such as those in Solok, Bukittinggi, Padang, or even Jakarta. Just as the behaviour of their Dutch predecessors in the past, this is intended to keep a distance between them and the lower classes of the mining society.

The price of goods at this market is fluctuated steeply and also depends on the economic conditions of the workers. When they received their weekly or monthly wages and annual bonuses, the traders immediately increase the price of the goods they are trading, so that workers may well find themselves with little money in their pockets to take home. The company was well aware of this problem and in order to help them, it opened a co-operative, which is still located at the end of the market. This building was constructed in 1920, and was called ‘toko koperasi Ons Belang’. But it was a shop, primarily for the Europeans and Indo-Europeans (Tjaja Sumatra, 22-1-1920). It sold foodstuffs and other goods at a cheaper price than what was on offer at the market. At the height of this competition, the traders immediately also began to sell their goods at or almost of wholesale prices. The co-operative was unable to maintain this competition with the traders in the market. This happened in the colonial period and once again in the 1970s. In the 1980s especially, it was common practice among the labourers to supplement their cost of living by selling goods such as sugar, canned food, and milk to the traders in the market. The traders acted as collectors for the goods which the labourers bought on credit from their co-operative or ‘toko koperasi’. Because of lack of ready money, the labourers could obtain only a limited number of goods on credit from the co-operative shop, and they then sold them to the traders at the market at cheaper prices. They were forced to do this because they were in debt and they had no money in cash to buy their basic needs.

Leaving the market and moving to the north, one will see the Ombilin Hotel and the State Commercial Bank (Bank Dagang Negara), both in European style. The hotel was used
for the guests of the Dutch company, while the building of the State Commercial Bank was the former 'sociëteit' or clubhouse for the company staff. It was called Glück Auf referring to the 'blessing and greeting of the people who enter and leave the mine'. Like the other clubhouses in the archipelago, it functioned as a place of entertainment for the European staff. Every Saturday, Sunday, and on other holidays, the mining engineers and other high-ranking staff members of the company went there, spending their time drinking, singing, or dancing. A Dutch wife of a company staff member remembered that it was a must to go to the club because the social relations you had developed there informally had a strong influence on your job prospects in the office. While they were busy drinking, singing, and dancing in the club to celebrate their long weekend, the children of the contract labourers watched them from outside, as Pak X told to me. After Independence, this building no longer functioned as an exclusive club. Its name was also changed to Gedung Pertemuan Buruh or G.P.M (the meeting building for the labourers), and was used by the members of various trade unions.

Our final trip is towards the northern part of the market, where the street leads to the mines. Around fifty metres from the club house, there is a police station. In the past, this building was a former prison which was constructed by the Dutch, expressly to gaol labourers who were punished on term of imprisonment. This prison was always full until the second decade of the twentieth century, and even then it was no longer able to accommodate all the labourers on punishment detail. On the first floor of the building, there are leg irons in the corner of a small room. These are a remainder of the past when the convict labourers wore such iron chains around their necks, hands, and ankles. Shackled in this fashion, the company hoped that they would not run away. They were led to the mine under strict military guard. In 1917, the convicts who were sentenced to more than five years no longer had to wear an iron chain around their necks (Tjaja Sumatra, 23-8-1917).

Not far from the prison is the place where twenty-four hours a day non-stop coal which is delivered by the conveyor belt is collected. Here there is also a workshop which produced weapons during the Indonesian revolution. The second prison lies on the other side of the street to the north. It is located in the village of Durian which was notorious as a centre for the communist activities in 1926/1927 and during the period 1950-1965. At the edge of the street, there are various old and new buildings, a company guest house, the municipal office, small club houses, houses, and the former stable for buffaloes and horses. The buffaloes were used as a means of transport, especially during the period 1895-1905, but later they were replaced by horses (Sinar Sumatra, 7-2-1938).

Precisely on the very edge of the street lies the second prison which was destroyed when the company wanted to build the mining school after Independence. Some ruins of the prison building still stand. The former prison was constructed in 1925, and surrounded by seven metres of concrete wall, topped by piles of barbed wire. The construction of the building was finished in 1926, and preparations were made to accommodate 1,000 convict labourers.
The building was very strongly built and intended to ensure that the labourers did not take to their heels. Nevertheless, in May 1926, the company was shocked three times when 300, 350 and finally 100 convict labourers respectively proved they were able to open the sturdy prison door. They did not get much further as the police were able to recapture them immediately.

The prison directly faces the entrance to the Durian Mine, so that convicts had no chance to run away. There were small shops within the prison, selling foodstuffs and other goods. The mine has been compared to a closed prison. It was called ‘tambang panas’ or a hot mine, resembling a place of punishment. Fearing its reputation, the miners were very afraid to be moved to this mine. Ex-miners recalled that the meaning of ‘hot mine’ refers not only to its resemblance to a place of punishment, but alludes to the fact it was also a place where miners worked together with the criminals who sometimes behaved reprehensibly. After working in the underground mines, the latter group was not permitted to see the outside world. Instead they went straight back to prison. Here, fighting, maiming, and even killings occurred among them. Therefore, the villagers used to hear voices screaming from the prison.

Our trip ends at the mine. It is located to the north of the prison, after having passed by many tangsis and villages, such as Durian, Surian, Karang Anyer, and Sikalang. The old tangsi in Sikalang consists of a long barracks, a public kitchen, public bathrooms and toilets. These public facilities were used by the labourers and their families for a long time. Here, one can reconstruct in one’s mind the everyday life of the miners and their families, beset by petty quarrels about food and water, and leading inevitably to more personal matters. There was no clear distinction between the location of the tangsi and houses of the villagers. Former labourers constructed houses nearby the tangsi after they retired.

Passing along the winding road, the visitors finally reach the location of the open pit and underground mines, some now closed down, some still operational. The Sawahlulung underground mine was opened in 1985, when the mechanization of the mining technology was carried out. I visited this mine for the first time in April 1995. I arrived there early in the morning to observe the miners’ activities. The work starts at six o’clock, and the miners go into the mine in their mine clothes, shoes, steel helmet with a lamp. Inside it is dark and hot. Hence, the labourers prefer not to wear clothes. At one o’clock in the afternoon, they are free. I was startled by the loud voices of the miners coming from the entrance of the mine. With black faces and naked torsos, they came out, singing at the top of their voices. I saw their actions as an expression of relief that they were alive, befitting the words ‘Glück Auf’. This is because the world below the ground is dangerous to many people, even today no matter how much new technology there is available.

Our trip to the mining town has come to an end. The old historical buildings still exist. They are visual evidence of human history, which is fraught with terrifying stories of violence, corruption, and manipulation as part of the daily life of the mining society. In the following chapter, I shall explore some of these stories.