Miners, managers and the state: A socio-political history of the Ombilin coal-mines, West Sumatra, 1892-1996
Erwiza, Erman

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
CHAPTER III
THE MAKING OF A CRIMINAL COLONY:
CONTROL AND VIOLENCE (1892-1920)

Introduction

In Chapter Two the importance of coal as an energy source has been described, as well as its incorporation into the world market, followed by discussion of the hesitant attitude of the colonial state to the question of whether the Ombilin coal-mines should be exploited by the state or by private companies. In the last section of Chapter Two, the issues of violence, corruption, and manipulation within the mining society were introduced.

The present chapter will explore the actions of the colonial state regarding compensation of land rights and the construction of infrastructure. After that, it will describe the making of a mining society (Section 2), going into the formation of social hierarchies and the social differentiation of the mining society. Questions about how the labourers were recruited, organized, and controlled in a system of capitalist production will be main focus of this section. Section 2 is also about the creation of a criminal colony as the upshot of the presence of prisoners who were forced to become miners. I refer to this period as a ‘prison’, because pressed by the high demand for coal, the colonial state put the miners into a surrogate ‘prison’. The colonial state treated the miners liked rats in a closed box, isolating them from social contacts with local people, imposing labour control by physical violence, especially by flogging with a cane. (Section 4). This all was for the sake of the achieving an increase in coal production. Under the title ‘Violence and Terror’ (Section 5), the involvement of various state institutions and their non-monolithic characters will be explored.

The implementation of labour control by flogging imposed on the Ombilin coal-miners was worse and even more complex than in the East Sumatran plantations. The methods and configuration of control by physical violence will be seen in the context of the structure of control. This structure involved many actors; not only central and local colonial administrators, but also caretakers, overseers, foremen or mandor, and relationship within and between different categories of the miners. The generalized physical violence had not only a vertical dimension, which reflected the rigid relationship between the miners and the managers, but also spread to a horizontal dimension, namely within and between various categories of labourers. What it boils down to is that the miners have their own politics (Ortner 1995:176). In order to understand the hidden motives behind the generalized culture of violence, it is important to know about the background, characteristics, and the working and living conditions of the miners (Sections 2 and 3). Here, the role of foremen, the presence of criminals as convict labourers, homosexuality, and ethnicity, all contributed to the creation of various forms of physical violence among the miners. The nature of these actions was sometimes random, incidental, individual; and sometimes more organized, through the use of groups or gangs, and ethnic background. Ethnicity was used in solving conflicts, especially as long as there were no other alternatives were available. The motives for such actions should be understood in the context of the daily working and living conditions of the miners.

This chapter will explain two aspects of labour control measures. First, labour control imposed by the state was not obeyed by the miners. The prevailing system was illegitimate and
had no authority. Second, the work discipline of the miners was not only a reaction to labour control imposed by the state, it was a product of social control within the community of the miners itself.

1. Compensation of Land rights and the Construction of an Infrastructure

Soon after the discovery of rich coal reserves along the Ombilin River, colonial officials from various state agencies visited West Sumatra. They investigated and discussed the problem of compensation for the land that had to be acquired for the construction of infrastructure: railways, a harbour, the mine, and a suitable forest area for supplying mine timber. In East Sumatra, the violation of the land rights of the local population by the Dutch government officials had led to conflict and protests from the population, and what happened in Ombilin was not different. In Ombilin, compensation for the land and the ways in which the government operated it has been a smouldering germ of conflict and protest among local people up to the present.

The problem of land compensation in West Sumatra was even more difficult and complicated than it had been in East Sumatra, because the Dutch government officials found that not only did they have to negotiate with the heads Minangkabau villages, nothing was legal until all lineage members had given their consent. This related to compensation for the land needed for the construction of the railway as reported by the Head of the Railways, A. Derx, who inspected West Sumatra in 1889. The committee that negotiated the compensation had done its best, but the situation here was complicated by the idiosyncratic Minang land rights, where nothing could be settled until all lineage members consented (Colombijn 1994:296). The price for compensation would be three to four times higher than had been budgeted for, because it involved more than just payment for the Minangkabau land to its rightful owners there were some lawyers in Padang who were short of work. Eager to earn some fees, the lawyers meddled in the negotiations and stirred up resistance against the settlements. In the end, the extra costs for expropriation were about 550,000 guilders on top of the total costs for construction of railways, which amount to 22,000,000 guilders.

The compensation given by the Dutch government in Ombilin itself was eventually the same as the land compensation for construction of railways. The land compensation was paid a

---

1 In this region, with the approval of the colonial government, the European planters had obtained long-term leases (of seventy-five years) from the (Malay) sultans, whose right to do so was not beyond dispute. This policy had led to the protest by heads of 'Malay' villages against the sultan in 1872, known as the Sunggal War. See Pelzer 1978:69-71; Erman 1985.

2 ARA, MvK. 1850-1900, MR 1892/283. Letter Governor Sumatra’s West Coast to the Governor-General on 10-1-1891; Idem to Director Education, Religion, and Industry of 9-3-1891; KITLV, Kom Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:43.

once only payment to buy the rights of land use. Ignoring or choosing to overlook the complicated situation in West Sumatra, the Dutch government set to work and did not negotiate with all lineage members, but only with the head of the village or penghulu. It then compounded its error by assuming that by giving the land compensation to the penghulu meant that the land had already been transferred to the government. The land compensation paid by the colonial government to the aileu heads of the nagari of Kubang, and not to the members of the lineage were between 50 to 100 guilders (Manan 1984:187). It amounted to 1,500 guilders plus 500 guilders for popular feasts that would be held by the inhabitants of the nagari. Assuming a hierarchical division of society the colonial government had tried to acquire acquiesce of the lineage by winning over the penghulu. It is therefore not surprising that since resentment simmered, and protests from villagers against the company have been emerging since the initial years of exploitation up to the present.

Another problem that emerged later on concerned compensation for the land needed for expanding mine sites, and also for constructing other facilities needed by the company. A market, housing complexes for various social strata of the mining society, government offices, entertainment facilities, and forest area: each of these required an arrangement be made to recompense the land rights of local people. Consequently, had it followed the adat, the government would have had to pay the same kind of compensation to neighbouring nagari such as Kolok, Talago Gunung, Silungkang, and Talawi by the end of the nineteenth century. The land compensation in these nagaris should have been the same as that paid in the Kubang nagari.

There were at least two important points that required special attention in the matter of the land rights according to local customary law. The first of these was a clear contradiction in the government treatment of the communal land or tanah ulayat. The Dutch colonial

---

4 Nagari is Minangkabau traditional settlement, composing of from four to up eight or nine clans or suku; each is headed by penghulu. Clan or suku is a matrilineal kin group within which marriage is prohibited. The village communities (nagari) are governed by a council of penghulu who represent the different clans and lineages within the village. A more detailed description of the history of formation of nagari and the patterns of its extension see Nairn 1984. About social organisational aspects of Minangkabau nagari, see De Jong 1951; Akira Oki 1977; Kahn 1980; Kato 1982.

5 Originally, total compensation for land rights was predicted to be 3,000 guilders. According to the investigation team that visited Sawahlunto for the first time in 1879, this total could still be reduced. The cost of compensation for land rights was included in the budget of the Ombilin exploitation. See ANRI, GB 6-9-1879 no.26; GB 15-3-1892 no.1. See also KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:113-26.

6 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:43.

7 Tanah ulayat can be divided into two sorts: village communal land and cultivated land. The former consists of land allocated for village use and uncultivated land. Over uncultivated land, villagers had communal rights to cultivate, graze cattle, collect forest products, and so forth, whereas cultivated land can be subdivided into ancestral land (it is inherited by the matrilineal line) and private land (tanah pancarian), which has been obtained through individual effort. Villagers who wished to cultivate tanah ulayat, as well as others who wish to use it for cultivation, mining,
government did not regard the *hak ulayat* to uncultivated land as constituting property rights of the *nagari*. Hence, the Dutch colonial government acted as if the compensation for the *hak ulayat* for Ombilin involved a complete transfer of the territorial rights of the *nagari*, assuming its payment to have been compensation for property rights.

Second, the Dutch colonial government misunderstood the concept of the *uang adat* or the customary duties. *Uang adat*, as far as the government understood it, was usually referred to as *bunga kayu*. In fact, *bunga kayu* was a village tax applied to the amount of forest products collected, and it was about 10 percent of the received value per year. The scope and calculation of *uang adat* varied from one village to another. According to *adat* regulations in the village of Ombilin and its environs, there was a distinction between *bunga kayu* and *bunga tanah*. *Bunga tanah* was namely a tax that had to be given to *nagari* for exploiting minerals in the ground calculated at about 7.5 of the received value per cent per year. The Dutch government completely ignored such a distinction, regarding this as having been included in the land compensation paid to the *nagari*.

When the second phase of expansion of the Ombilin coal-mines was underway between 1900 and 1915, the *penghulus* of the *nagari* surrounding the mine location demanded compensation for the use of their uncultivated land. In vain, as all these requests were rejected by the government. During this period compensation was paid by the government only for the *sawah* taken over by the Ombilin coal-mines, which was of course, 'unfree' domain. This failure to recognize local rights reflects a complete change in the government's attitude towards the Outer Provinces which had occurred since the beginning of the twentieth century, when the economic interests of the Dutch in the Outer Provinces began to assume a far greater proportion than ever before.

The rejection of recognition of the local rights was clearly stated in a decision of the Resident of Sumatra's West Coast in 1903, in which he stated that the government flatly refused to consider any future payment of *uang adat* for the Ombilin mines. Perhaps as a reflection of its uneasiness, the government resorted to using a rather vague term, mentioning only the 'compensation for *penghulu*’s rights'. This decision indicated that compensation for using uncultivated land would no longer be related to a specific percentage of exploited value, which was what the *uang adat* stipulated. As a concession, the *penghulu* and the inhabitants of the *nagari* were only allowed to collect forest products and cut timber for their own consumption in the 'free domain'.

Payment of compensation for land occurred only twice, and payments to buy rights or an annual rent were seldom implemented. Hence, it is not surprising that the matter of compensation for land continued to grow until the end of the colonial regime. In the years 1924, 1929, 1931, 1934, 1939 and 1940 both villagers and *penghulu* of the *nagari* protested to the colonial government about the indeterminate borders between the land of the company and that

---

8 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:56.

of the *nagari* and demanded compensation for the land used. The protest derived from the claims of the company to lands, which would otherwise have been used by the villagers to make "*kebun nagari*" or *nagari* gardens and dry fields. On the basis of its misapprehension of the law, the company claimed that this land was now its property, while secure in their knowledge of the *aadat* the villagers and *penghulu* were convinced that it was theirs. Therefore, the people of the *nagari* demanded the company and the Assistant-Resident draw up fixed borders to its land. The *nagari* referred its demand back to the negotiations that had taken place when the first mine opened. Both the company and the Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar/Solok had promised to show them a map, but failed to keep their promise.

Once the problem of compensation for land had been putatively decided, the colonial government started on the construction of railways and a harbour. The section of railway between Emma Harbour and Padang Panjang was constructed under the direction of Engineer IJzerman. It was followed in 1892 by the opening of the line between Padang Panjang and Muara Kalaban. Later on, the line linking Muara Kalaban to Sawahlunto was constructed. Two years later, the construction of the railways with a total length of 155.5 km between Emma Harbour and Sawahlunto was completed. In the same year, the construction of Emma Harbour was rounded off.

As the Dutch colonial government found itself in financial difficulties as a result of the Aceh War, it was unable to provide the large amounts of capital needed to construct these projects. One way around the problem was to use a cheap work force, and convicts were detailed to work on these government projects. This form of state coercion was characterized by miserable working conditions. Physical violence and terror imposed by both Dutch and indigenous foremen were the order of the day here. For misdemeanour or more serious transgressions, convicts were condemned to flogging with a bamboo cane, after having been trussed in a position in which their feet and hands were fastened to a pole for four days and nights, and they were not allowed to eat and drink.

It was reported that between 1912 and 1913 the rate of illness and death among the convicts labourers was very high (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:105). These execrable working conditions led to a heated discussion between the group of colonial officials involved, namely the Internal Affairs (Binnenlands Bestuur or BB) officials and the Director of Department of Persamaan 3-4-1940; Schrieke 1928:Chapter II; KITLV, Korn Collection, OR.435, no.368; Heuven 1931;62.

The seizure of individual land rights was a regular occurrence. One example is the case of a villager, named Simin Datuk Bandaro Sutan, Mohammad Yamin’s uncle, in 1931. He demanded compensation from the company for his lands, which had been used by the company to construct coolie barracks in the village of Sikalang. ARNAS-RI, MGS 12-3-1931 no.633/B. This is one of the causes of social unrest among the villagers around the mine which was later used by the communist leaders to mobilize mass support. See Schrieke 1955:83-144; Zed 1981; KIT, Microfiche no.212, MvO. Resident B.H.F.van Heuven 1934;62.

The construction was based on the governor-general’s Decree in 6-7-1887 no.123. Koloniaal Verslag 1887-1888:118 For more detailed information on the history of the Sumatran Railways, see Reitsma 1943.
Justice. Methods of punishment followed elsewhere were also put into practice at the Ombilin mines, as will be explained in the next section.

It was in this period that the construction of other infrastructure works in Sawahlunto was undertaken for the benefit of the company and the mining society. This included the construction of government buildings, housing complexes, market, schools, churches, mosques, clubs, a swimming pool, soccer field, and a cinema. These developments changed the face of Sawahlunto. It was no longer a small isolated village but a colonial mining town sheltering a society with a highly racially stratified social strata.

2. The Structure of a Mining Society
2.1. European, Chinese, and Indigenous People

The colonial government appointed Engineer J.W. IJzerman, the Chief of the Sumatran Railway, to run the Ombilin mine; he was also to be responsible for transportation and the marketing of the coal. Matters related to the production process would be the responsibility of an Engineer-Director, a position to be held for the time being by Engineer Godefroy (De Locomotief, 10-11-1896). In order to recruit a permanent Engineer-Director and to fill the ranks of high and middle-level supervisors, IJzerman went to the Netherlands. There he met a mining engineer, Pierre, whose appointment was approved by the Minister of Colonies, but this appointment coincided with a heated debate in the Dutch mass media. The debate concentrated on the question of whether or not the position of the engineer-director would or would not be independent of the chief.

As it happened Pierre did not remain in the job long. He put in his resignation eight months before his task was finished. He was faced by the dilemma of choosing between morality and obligation, as he explained in his highly detailed report, sent to both the Governor-General and to the Minister of Colonies.

These miserable conditions were beyond the control of the project leader. In giving his testimony concerning the process-verbal of the case of a work boss, J. Kuiper, dated 13 June 1914 in the Raad van Justitie, Padang, the project leader said that the work bosses should have known which convicts had to be sent to the hospital. He testified that he did not investigate this personally. The main problem, according to the Governor-General, was the lack of control exercised by the Governor of West Sumatra. Therefore, he had to be dismissed. Nevertheless, the Director of the BB failed to agree with this decision, saying that the Director of the prisons, the subordinate of the Director of the Department of Justice, was the person responsible for this case. The Director of the BB reported in cynical words the behaviour of this Director when he visited West Sumatra. He preferred to stay in Padang rather than to investigate the conditions of convict labourers in the field. For a more detailed description, see Bruinink-Darlang 1986:104-9.

His appointment led to debates among Dutch technocrats. Some of them regarded him unsuitable to run the mine because he was not a mining engineer and he had made mistakes in the construction of the Sumatran Railways. In fact the construction had caused a flood. For a more detailed discussion, see Soerabajasch Handelsblad, 22, 23-7-1896, Insulinde 26-5; 9-6-1896, De Telegraaf 1-10-1896 as quoted by De Locomotief 10-11-1896.
In his report he explained that:

The method of exploitation of this mine was vicious. I could not do anything to prevent it. I only paid attention to financial matters, because I was forced to increase coal production, reasoning that I would get f0.10 for every ton of coal produced (De Locomotief 10-11-1896).

A number of technical personnel who were working in Dutch and German coal-mines were hired as supervisors or overseers. Later on such men were recruited from the Polytechnic Institute in Delft and from the Mining School in Heerlen. In 1894 there were only ten Europeans recruited as supervisors at the mine. This number increased thirteenfold to 136 in 1918. The increase in the number of Europeans ran parallel with the creation of new functions and tasks at the newly opened mines located to the north of Sawahlunto. These positions included places for civil engineers, mining engineers, electro-engineers, and for geologists who had graduated from university or the mining school. These were the backbone of the technical staff involved in the process of production. In order to tackle administrative and health matters, the management recruited accountants and European and indigenous physicians.

After 1921, the middle-level supervisors were recruited from the Mijnbouw School that had been established in Sawahlunto in 1918. The major aim in establishing this school was to end the shortage of a skilled-labour force at state owned mining companies in the Netherlands Indies. Students were educated to become junior overseers whose task was to bridge the gap between the senior overseer and the foremen. The course lasted three years. Applicants had to have a Hollandsch Inlandse School (HIS) diploma, (a requirement changed to Meer Uitgebreide Lagere Onderwijs (MULO) diploma in 1925), be between 17 and 21 years old, and speak Dutch fluently. They should take their diploma after three years (Sinar Sumatra 7-7-1925).

During the first years after the opening of the school, most students came from Dutch families with members working at the Ombilin coal-mines or at other jobs in West Sumatra (Cosijn 1939:102). Thereafter, they were replaced by young men from the Indo families, whether from West Sumatra or from other places in Sumatra and in Java. Young indigenous men were very few in number. Those who did study at the school came mostly from the Minangkabau and Batak ethnic groups. Education combined theory and practice. In the morning from 6.00 a.m. until 2.00 p.m., they went into the mine. From 5 o'clock in the afternoon until 8 o'clock in the evening, they attended classes given in Dutch by engineers and senior overseers from the company itself.

---

15 This number was reduced in the years thereafter, especially during the Depression. In 1940, the total number of European people who worked at the mine was only fifty-three. See Verslag van de Ombilitenmijnen over 1918, 1919; Indisch Verslag 1941:313.

16 This School was closed for four years in 1934 because of the Depression, when the colonial government also planned to close the mine. In the first years, it had more than 100 students. Because discipline was very strict and the budget was very limited, this number decreased in later years. Interview with F. Boomzijn, 27-10-1994; Cosijn 1939:102. De Mijnbond 1939:100.
An interesting phenomenon in this education system is that the students who went into the mine studied not only all the details of the production process, but also worked together with the miners. Information gathered in interviews with former students from this school, reveals without a shadow of doubt that they worked precisely like miners. In other words, they started their career literally at ground level. They were paid like miners; for the first year the wage was one guilder per day, for the second year one guilder fifty, and for the third year it was increased to two guilders. Training was very arduous and difficult, because the job demanded physical strength. According to the Engineer-Director, this training was intended not merely to test their physical strength, but also to teach them how to lead the miners in a more civilized fashion.

The nationality backgrounds of the overseers were not much different from those on the East Sumatran plantations. The only characteristic typical of the European overseers who worked in mining companies was that they used German terms. This is not so surprising, because many of them, like K.A.A. Urban, originally came from Germany and had been naturalized, acquiring Dutch citizenship. In various sections of the mining sector, such as the gold-mines in Bengkulu, the tin-mines in Bangka (South Sumatra), the coal-mines in Pulau Laut (Kalimantan), Bukit Asam (South Sumatra), and Ombilin, many technical terms were written in German. In the Ombilin coal-mines, for instance, the words Glück Auf could be encountered both at the entrance of the mine and above the door of the clubhouse.

During the first years of exploitation most European overseers were about twenty years of age, single, and for a certain period they were forbidden to marry. Therefore, most of them took an indigenous woman who came from West Sumatra or from Java as nyai (concubine). It was one of the tasks of indigenous assistants, called "tukang lampu", to look for indigenous women, in addition to being assistant to the Europeans overseers in the mine. Apart from this, provision of female, the company had a special house for the young women in Sawahlunto which was in reality a brothel.

Recruitment of the European personnel, especially for top level positions, was based mostly on family relations or friendship networks. Therefore, it was common to find grandfather, father, children, or other members of a family working in Ombilin. The upshot

---

17 Interview with Mrs Kitty Urban (86 years old), wife of F.E.H.A Urban, a mine overseer, 11-11-1994; See also De Mijnbond 1939:172.

18 K A A Urban was a Dutch overseer who worked in the Ombilin mine. He married an Indo-European woman, Coornelia Doorland, and had twelve children. Interview with F.E.H.A Urban 15-11-1994.

19 It is interesting to note that the Dutch in Ombilin wanted to abolish all words in the German language and replace them with Dutch words during the Second World War. See De Mijnbond, 1939:35.

20 This is also similar to the case of East Sumatra. For a detailed and interesting explanation, see Stoler 1992.

21 It was not only European personnel who took "nyai", indigenous people did so as well. Besides this, the total number prostitutes or "kupu-kupu malam" in the local term, increased in Sawahlunto in 1914. See Sinar Sumatra, 10-2-1914; 1, 3-3-1914.
was the formation of a European community that had very close relations with one another. This made it difficult for the Engineer-Director and his superior, the Chief of the Mining Office, to move staff from one workplace to another, dismiss, or to degrade the positions of the company staff to a lower level, something which happened especially when the company was seized by plans to impose a more efficient management.

The second rank of the company consisted of Chinese and indigenous people with some educational qualifications. They were recruited to fill the lower positions such as clerks for the Europeans. Their role was to bridge the gap between the European staff and the coolies. Indigenous people were mostly Minangkabau, supplemented by a small number of Batak and Chinese. They started as wage labourers and after a number of years they were promoted to white collar positions with a monthly salary. To achieve such a promotion was very difficult and it was the exception rather than the rule.

Looking at the structure of the remuneration of the white collar workers, there were three groups of employees, each representing a racial division. The top group comprised the Europeans, mainly the tolok, to be found at the top level, in ‘Group C’. They received the highest salaries, and were also entitled to other social benefits, including furlough in Europe and a premium for every ton of coal produced. The top level lived in the vicinity of the main office of the company, in the area, which is nowadays called the "Menteng area", automatically carrying connotations of exclusivity.

The second group, B, consisted of Indo-Europeans. Although they performed functions or tasks similar to those of the Totok Europeans, they received lower salaries and fewer social benefits. The third group, A, can be divided into two categories, namely A 18, and A. Group A 18 also comprised Indo-Europeans with a work status similar to indigenous people, but they received a higher salary. The last group was group A, namely the indigenous people (Pertimbangan, 15-3-1930).

It is very difficult to calculate the total number of Indo-Europeans in Sawahlunto. Nevertheless, it is certain that the number increased in the 1920s, especially after the Mining School was established there. Culturally they formed a group apart from the Totok-Europeans. In other words, they had a Eurasian culture. This is important as, in principle, it could facilitate communication and social relations with the coolies, simply because unlike many of the Dutch, the ‘Indos’ could speak the language of the Malays, the Javanese and the Minangkabau. This much is known but to what extent the use of the mixed-language influenced their social relationship with the lower classes is unknown.

---

22 This was not restricted to the Ombilin mines, but it was a general trend at various state-owned mining companies in the Netherlands Indies. For instance, in the Bangka tin-mines, there were two groups of Europeans who competed with each other to get better jobs in the mine. In the Ombilin coal-mines, such competition was rare, because there was such solidarity among the Europeans. ARA, MvK, Mr 1925/969x. Letter of Director Mining Office to Director of BB, 22-8-1925.

23 Information about the use of mixed language can be found in the Miners' Trade Union newspaper, Soeara Tambang published since 1925.
Each group had its own association. The first was *Ons Belang*, formed in 1918 by the middle-level staff and later joined by Indo-Europeans who had graduated from the Mining School in Sawahlunto (*Tjaja Sumatra, 18-11-1918*). This association was intended to help its members to obtain the basic necessities of life at a price cheaper than at the market in Sawahlunto (*Tjaja Sumatra, 13-10-1920*). The traders at this market always sold such goods at very high prices, especially during the First World War. Spreading its wings in the years which followed, the association organised various other activities such as a football club.

There were associations among the indigenous people employed at the lower level, most of which were formed after 1920. These associations could be based on place of origin and workplace, but also on interests and hobbies such as sports, music and the like. This will be explored in more detail in Chapter IV.

The third group was that of the indigenous foremen. They had an important role as mediators between junior overseers and coolies. There were two categories of foremen: junior and senior foremen. These categories differed only in their degree of work experience. A junior foreman was directly responsible to a senior foreman, while conversely the latter was responsible to a junior overseer. There is no information available on whether the foremen had an association or not.

When the first mine was being laid out, the manager selected a small number of coolies who were given the tasks of dividing the workload, and of supervising the work being carried out. Unfortunately, the literature has little to say about the background of such foremen. The appointment of such a man was based on the expectation that he had the capacity to direct a work group. According to information that I have collected from interviews, the selection of foremen was also based on physical strength and bravery. These requirements were necessary because the coolies were convict labourers, and working underground in the mine carried a high risk.

In 1894 there were seventy indigenous foremen, appointed from among convict labourers, with the task of being responsible for about 1,500 coolies. They received wages of 12 guilders per month for a junior foreman and 15 guilders for a senior foreman. Most of them did not live with labourers in the barracks. They lived in villages such as Durian and Surian near the barracks. Later on, when contract and free labourers were recruited, the foremen were also selected from among these groups.

In the early years of exploitation, there was not much social distance between a foreman and an overseer, because seventy foremen were directly responsible to ten European overseers. Numbers were still small, so that the manager and the European overseers could control the labourers directly. But as time passed, social distance increased because the group of junior overseers infiltrated between the European staff and the workers.

As mediator, the foremen had the function of translating all disciplinary measures that were imposed by European overseers on the labourers. Although there is no information on the form of communication between the two sides, a foreman probably had difficulties because

---

24 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR.435, no.368; Heuven 1931: 14.

most European overseers could not understand local language. However, gradually such difficulties were certainly reduced, especially after the function of overseer came into the hands of Eurasians. They could, as mentioned before, speak and understand the indigenous languages such as Javanese, Minangkabau, and Malay.

The fourth group was that of the coolies. They, the backbone of the process of production, were uneducated people whose work was based entirely on their physical strength. The recruitment of coolies, and their backgrounds will be elucidated in the following section.

2.2. Coolies or Miners

The coolies or miners were typically physically strong, young males with no family structure. This means that they were recruited individually without family, wife or children. The miners can be divided again into sub-groups, sub-cultures, and ethnic groups. Viewed from the division by management, the coal-miners consisted of convict, contract, free, and casual labourers. On the basis of ethnic groups, they consisted of Javanese, Sundanese, Buginese, Madurese, Makassarese, Chinese, and Minangkabau – each group bringing its own culture. For example, the Javanese people, who came from a peasant culture, had a different ethos from the Buginese and Madurese people who came from maritime cultures. The former was gentler than the latter. Practices which may have been taboo in one ethnic group might not be in another.

The wide divergence in the cultural backgrounds of the miners gives rise to many questions. To what extent did their different cultural backgrounds influence working relations and the work ethic of the miners? Each ethnic group had certain idiosyncratic character. To what extent did these different characters influence social relations within and between various categories of the miners? If the presence of convict labourers, especially those who were criminals, encouraged violence, then in what ways was the culture of violence created or strengthened? All these questions will be answered in the next section. Before this can be done, it is essential to explore the process of recruitment and the development of the various categories of the miners.

The workers were recruited from outside the area itself. The recruitment of local people as contract labourers was difficult, because they were not familiar with working under a contract system. Recruitment for the mine was even more difficult, because the local population was unwilling to work underground. This reluctance derived not only from the fact that work was extremely gruelling, but also because their traditional cosmology considered the underworld to be a place unfit for human beings therefore the very idea of working there could provoke horrible fears. Therefore, not long after coal reserves were found, the problem of labour supply was already being given high priority among colonial administrators at the local level (Stibbe 1884:698-9).

This labour problem was finally solved through the intervention of the central government. The Department of Justice detailed inmates from prisons located in Batavia, especially from the most overcrowded prisons of Glodok and Cipinang. They were put to work as convict labourers, and originally there were not only detailed to labour at the Ombilin coal-mines, but were sent to work on the construction of railways and other public works projects. Therefore, soon after their arrival at West Sumatra, the Resident assigned them to various public works projects in that region.
In the beginning, the prisoners who worked as convict labourers in West Sumatra consisted of Javanese, Balinese, and Buginese, with labour contracts of not more than one year (ARNAS, Register 1891-1907:412). Later as the shortage of labourers became more pressing, the government was forced to recruit longer term prisoners with sentences of more than five years. The management was to pay the Department of Justice 27 cents for every day work by the convict labourers. But the management never paid it. Therefore, in the beginning of twentieth century, the Director of the Department of Justice warned the management that the company had to pay the Department of Justice compensation for employing convict labour. Despite this, these warnings were never seriously heeded by the company.

Convict labourers were divided into two categories: political prisoners and ordinary criminals. The political prisoners were people who had rebelled against the colonial government, which therefore regarded them as dangerous. Ordinary criminals were people who had been sentenced, sometimes even on several occasions, for committing such crimes as murder, manslaughter, or theft. Most of them were also bandits who according to the stories of local people in Sawahlunto, possessed ilmu kebal or black magic. This categorization, of course, would define the boundaries of treatment and control among them. They can again be divided into two categories according to the duration of their sentences: those sentenced for one to five years, and the others for five to fifteen or even twenty years. The convict labourers were called kettingganger in Dutch, or orang rantai in the local language, because they wore chains around their necks and leg irons around their ankles to prevent them escaping.

In the earliest phase of exploitation, 366 convict labourers were commandeered for work at the first mine in the village of Durian (ARNAS-RI, Register, 1891-1907:412-13). A year later, the total number had increased to 1,500, employed at various kinds of tasks. Convict labourers who were physically strong were detailed to undertake the heavier work such as bringing in the wood to construct supports, hewing coal, and pulling the coal-wagons. Those who were physically weaker were placed on light jobs such as a watchman at the barracks, or nursing fellow convicts -- the latter especially in the first years of exploitation when the company did not have sufficient medical personnel.

Apart from the convict labourers, the local Minangkabau people and the inhabitants of Nias were recruited as casual labourers. They were placed in the jobs that were indirectly related to the process of production, whether in the underground or in the open-pit mines, working as carpenters, and at transportation jobs. They worked without a contract. From the outset, they did not want to work with the convict labourers, because they considered their status higher than other. The management ensured their workplace was separate, simply to avoid them influencing other labourers to make protests against the management.

The recruitment of casual labourers was not satisfactory because the supply was irregular and uncertain. Consequently, the management perennially complained about the shortage of labour, as did Engineer Th.F.A. Delprat in 1898. He mentioned that in April 1898

---

26 Stories about them have assumed the proportions of a collective memory among the people in Sawahlunto, and these have been transferred from generation to another.

27 Mining Archives, Dwangarbeiders te Ombilin Steenkolenmijnen, code VI-A/85, Letter of Delprat 11-2-1899 no.127 to Governor-General.
there were about 2,405 convict labourers in Sawahlunto. But in May, this total had been drastically reduced to 1,504, including those who were being treated in the hospital. About 901 convict of labourers were taken to assist in the Aceh War, working as coolies in Pidie by transporting goods essential to the war effort. The last number of 1,504 had to be reduced to 374, because others had finished their contract. This means the total number of convict labourers in May 1898 was only 1,130.

The shortage of the convict labourers influenced the average production per capita. During the closing months of 1898, new convicts were recruited and their total increased to 2,649. Delprat complained that this did not result in any higher production, because most of them were unskilled and therefore not productive at all, which was indicated in the daily production of coal per head. In December 1898 and January 1899 this was no more than 0.2 tons. Delprat did not consider the summary transmission of knowledge or a brief socialization process sufficient to create professional miners. Transmission of knowledge through training in mine certainly required a long time. This was recognized by the managers who succeeded him, under whom the productivity of convict labourers with longer working experience was higher than that of newcomers.

In the years which followed, the recruitment of convict labourers was continued, but then fluctuated again. Some were sent to Aceh, but there were other demands on the supply as well. Faced by a shortage of personnel, time and again the colonial government found itself obliged to use prisoners. The colonial government needed to send prisoners as coolies to assist the Dutch military forces which were engaged in Jambi, Sumbawa, and other places in the Archipelago, quite apart from the protracted conflict in Aceh.

To replace them, the government once more tried to recruit local people, but again with disappointing results. The Engineer-Director could not depend on them, because they only worked for a short time, about two or three weeks, and returned home after receiving their wages. Not only were they undependable, their productivity was lower, at approximately two-thirds of that of the convict labourers. Therefore, for the time being, the recruitment of casual labourers was stopped.

In 1899, there was no change in total number of convict labourers. Exacerbating the difficulty in the recruitment, many of those recruited fled from the mine. Therefore, the government tried to seek new alternatives by recruiting Chinese contract labourers from Singapore. This was the year in which the Governor-General issued a decree which allowed the recruitment of the Chinese as free labourers. At the beginning of 1900, there were 600 Chinese labourers recruited from the centre of the Chinese labour force market in Singapore. After a health check, however, only 464 of the total were declared fit to work in the mine. In

---

28 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:99.

29 Suggestions about recruiting Chinese people had been discussed since 1898. ARA, MvK, Mr 1898/527.

30 ARNAS-R1, Governor-General's decision, August 3-8-1899 no.17. The form and content of the labour contract for the Chinese can be found in enclosure IV, in the Hoetink's report. ARA, MvK, Verbaal 27-3-1903/13.
1901, about 136 Chinese contract labourers were recruited, so their total came to 2,649.\textsuperscript{31} After a fairly shaky start, the recruitment of the Chinese had to be discontinued, not only because the state of their health was so bad, but also because those who had been passed as fit did not want to renew their contract for another period. This is similar to what happened in Malaya, where Chinese labourers showed an aversion to working as coal-miners because they had no opportunity to become shareholders. These were not the main reasons, though. The principal reason was the high cost of the recruitment of the Chinese contract labourers, owing to competition from East Sumatra and Bangka.\textsuperscript{32}

To solve the problem of the shortage of labourers, management started to recruit labourers from Java, especially in the period after 1901. The recruitment began via the harbour of Semarang, through the Soesman recruitment agency, and also through other recruitment agency such as \textit{Algemeen Delisch Emigratie Kantoor} or ADEK. Semarang, was not the only the place of recruitment. Batavia and Surabaya also provided their fair share. The first attempts at recruitment were unsuccessful, because once again the labourers recruited were not in good health. Therefore, the Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar, De Rooy suggested in 1903 that health checks for the labourers had to be imposed more strictly.

The total number of convict and contract labourers recruited from Java during the period 1901-1903 is shown in Table III.1. In 1901, the total number of labourers recruited, indicated a promising result of 2,047, but this figure had dropped to 300 in 1903. Apart from convict labourers, many of the contract labourers were Sundanese, mostly recruited in Batavia. Therefore, the Assistant-Resident Tanah Datar, H.G. Heyting, suggested recruiting twenty-five unmarried Javanese women from the southern part of Kedu who were expected to marry male contract labourers. Apart from this, Heyting also suggested building a coolie village for 200 contract labourers in Sawahlunto. The establishment of this coolie village was intended to produce a work-force that would, in the long run, obviate the difficulty in recruiting labourers from Java.

![Table III.1: Total of the labourers who signed the contract for the Ombilin-coal mines, 1901-1903.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1902</th>
<th>1903</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convict labourers</td>
<td>1,608</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract labourers</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>1,014</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,047</td>
<td>1,615</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ARA, MvK, Mr. 1903/698. Letter of Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar, H.G. Heyting, to Director of BB, 29-7-1903.

\textsuperscript{31} KILTV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:81.

\textsuperscript{32} ARA, MvK, Mr 1901/99/113/551/755.
This suggestion finally died away with a whimper, because the manager, Engineer W. De Jongh, discarded it, reasoning that the company was unable to bear the cost of the construction.

The contract arrangement for labourers was subject to the Penal Sanction, namely a punishment clause which would be imposed on labourers who did not obey the labour agreements stipulated in the Coolie Ordinance. This was what was called the A-contract, with a duration of three years, popularly known by the local indigenous people as "Sudah Djoeel Djiwa Tiga Tahoen" (sold my soul for three years). The contract could be renewed for another one or two years after the completion of the first term, depending on performance. If their work was good, then they got a new contract omitting the Penal Sanction, which was called the so-called B-contract. The B-contract system was initiated in 1910. Owing to the small premium offered only a few people were interested in becoming a B-contract labourer or free labourer, reported Stibbe, the Labour Inspector, in 1911. Heeding this report, management raised the premium from 25 to 35 guilders for a one-year contract. The premium for a renewed contract for the second was 60 guilders and for the third year 70 guilders.

The growth of the number of labourers based on categories during the period 1900-1938 is shown in the following graph (Graph III.1). The total number of labourers at the Ombilin coal-mines rose until the first half of the 1920s. The increase in this number was mainly related to the growth in coal production. Convict and contract labourers dominated the numbers until the 1920s. After that, they gradually tended to disappear and were replaced by free labourers. Contract labourers continued to work until 1934, and convict labourers until 1938.

Unlike the situation in coal-mines in Japan, China, and Vietnam, generally speaking, the labourers who worked in coal-mines in the Netherlands Indies, including the Ombilin coal-mines, were male. This was not because working in a mine was seen as too arduous and therefore unsuitable for women, but has much more to do with management policy in financial matters. Recruitment of contract female labourers from Java to work in the mine, whether in coal-mines (Ombilin, Bukit Asam, and Pulu Laut) or tin-mines in the Netherlands Indies was regarded as unprofitable by the management.

The labourer recruitment procedures set out above are different from those in operation in Japan, China, and Vietnam, because the problem was different. In these areas, the supply of labour, whether male, female or even child labourers, was not as difficult. Workers could be recruited from people in the areas in the vicinity of the mine. Even in Japan, since the beginning of the Tokugawa period, for instance, many people had wanted to work as miners, because the status of miners was regarded as high, equal to that of samurai. Though the colonial administrators had made comments on the absence of female labourers and the abnormal life of the coal-miners in Ombilin, the company remained convinced that it was unprofitable to recruit the female labourers.

33 KITLV, Korn Collection OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:86.
34 KITLV, Korn Collection OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:86.
35 The miners were seen as 'Samurai of the field' and were given special privileges. See Notehelfer 1984:16.
Therefore, until the end of the colonial regime, the company opposed the recruitment of female labourers in large numbers. Consequently, the total number of women employed there was very low. To give an example, in 1911, there were 4.2 percent of female labourers out of the total number of male contract and free labourers. In 1923, this figure had been reduced to 0.5 percent. Women did light jobs such as sorting of coal. Generally speaking, the female contract or free labourers tended to marry male contract or free labourers.

Graph III.1: Development of Labour Force 1900-1938
(in thousands)

Quite often the contract or free labourers immediately ransomed the female contract labourers at a cost of 80 guilders for one female labourer (in 1911) to the company, so that if the female labourer was already free, she could become a wife for a contract or free male labourer. This cost was too high, so that not many of the male labourers were interested to ransom a female contract labourer from the company. On the suggestion of a Labour Inspector, this ransom was reduced to 50 guilders, hoping male contract or free labourers would be able to free the female labourer, so that they could marry her and begin a proper family life. Unfortunately, it was unsuccessful, because the women recruited remained few in number.

2.3. Organization of Work

The division of labour and the work rhythm that were imposed by the management were part of

---

36 In 1929 the total number of female contract labourers increased to 3.4 percent. In this total did not include ronggeng, namely women who were entertainers, dancers, and prostitutes who were recruited and worked on a contract basis. In 1927, there were 50 ronggeng women in Sawahlunto. See KITLV, Korn Collection OR 455. no.368, Heuven 1931:98.

37 ARA, MvK, Mr 1925/2313, the Inspection Note of the Labour Inspector P.A.J Noordink 16-8-1925.
modern capitalist culture, consisting of a regular work rhythm, clock time, discipline, and task orientation (Thompson 1967). This certainly diverges from what Thompson has pointed out as the division and work rhythm in the pre-capitalist culture, characterized by irregularity, no great need for discipline, and fluctuating working hours and tasks, depending on the weather and the season. The process of change from pre-capitalist to capitalist culture was not a linear process, as Thompson claimed, and it was even, as stated by Cooper, complicated further by the emergence of conflict between modern and traditional values (Cooper 1992). Neither work rhythm nor disciplinary habits are easy to change in a relatively short time, because above all, they are integrated into the social and cultural customs of a society.

The labourers worked in groups. Each group consisted of five to fifteen people, depending on the workload, and was led by a foreman. The task division of this group was as follows. About two or three people had to hew coal from the face, which then was put into a basket and taken to a coal-wagon. These coal-wagons weighed between 500 to 700 kilos, were pushed by men on the level, but then had to be pulled up to the main gallery (Van Lier 1915:14). Manual transportation required many labourers and it was heavy work which demanded great physical strength. From the main gallery, the coal was then transported outside for a distance of two or three kilometres by a small locomotive powered by electricity (Van Lier 1915:15). Until the beginning of twentieth century, the coal that had already been brought outside the mine was carried by horses or buffaloes to the sieve-house. Later, this was replaced by cog-wheel railway powered by electricity. The coal was then washed and sorted. The sorting of coal was done by the labourers who were physically weak, or by female labourers. The coal was sorted into two or three grades, and afterwards transported by train to Emma Harbour at Padang for export.

Labourers who worked in groups could be subdivided into three time shifts. The first shift worked from 6.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m.; the second group worked from 2.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m., and the third from 10.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. In 1901 it was reported that the labourers who worked the first shift had to get up before 4.00 a.m. One of the watchmen beat a gong in front of the coolies' barracks to wake them up. Precisely at 4.00 a.m. they had to be at the village of Durian for roll-call, after which the foremen reported on any of the group members who were absent and why. Illness was the sole acceptable reason, and if the assistant or overseer doubted the genuineness of the complaint, the labourers could be forced to work. At 6 a.m. work started.

Every fortnight, the shifts were changed, but the members of the group remained the same. Every shift had to finish its own task. If not, the next shift could not take over its work. Each shift was led by a European junior overseer who was responsible to his senior overseer for the workload of his shift. The senior overseer supervised the work either underground or in the open-cut mines. The final responsibility rested on the shoulders of an Engineer-Director, known locally as the Tuan Besar.

The heart of the mining operation was done mainly by the pickmen working on the coal face itself. These pickmen participated in opening the tunnel and, once this had been done,
working the coal at the face, generally using a pick locally called a *beluncing*. Because the seams often inclined sharply, the pickmen were frequently unable to work standing up and had to hack away at the coal lying on their backs. Certainly, the major requirements for a pickman was to be physically strong enough to do the job and to be relatively young. Unfortunately, there are no sources which give an idea of the average age of these pickmen. But considering the type of work they were required to do in the Ombilin coal-mines they were relatively young, probably between twenty and thirty years old. This much can be gleaned from complaints by the management about the labourers who were physically weak and invalids. To overcome this recurring problem and in order to ensure that only labourers who were physically strong were employed, Engineer-Director A.H. van Lessen suggested a stricter health check among new recruits in Java. He was prompted to take this step because only 188 of the 785 of newcomers were in good health after being checked by the medical staff in Sawahlunto in 1904.

As the labourers went into the mine they were checked one by one by the foremen, supervised by the overseer, to see if they had brought any forbidden items such as cigarette and matches into the mine. The objects mentioned above are very dangerous and can easily cause a fire in the highly combustible atmosphere in the mine. The presence of noxious gases makes work in coal-mines much more difficult than in other underground mining. Besides these substances, they were also forbidden to bring knives, keris (creese) or other sharp objects, which were regarded as dangerous. Inside the mine it was dark and hot. The temperature varies: near the entrance of the mine it is about 27 degrees Celsius, but further from the entrance or from the air compressor channels, it was far hotter. The problem was that the thickest coal seems are the deepest, and there the temperature is highest, varying between 32 and 36 grades Celsius. Therefore, the nature of mine work itself is extraordinarily arduous and requires a cool head, care, and a serious attitude—in reality great mental strength to match the physical prowess required. Nevertheless it has also been assumed that this sort of gruelling labour only to reinforced the supposedly brutal character of the convicts.

At 10 a.m. the labourers could take a half-hour break. They did not need to go out. Snacks, consisting of lapek-lapek, made from sticky rice with grated coconut and palm sugar, or sometimes keupat (made from sticky rice with coconut), or pisang goreng (fried banana), with tea, were brought into the mine by people whose specific task was to this was. The break inside the mine was regarded as more efficient and effective than allowing the labourers to go outside. As explained above, each group had to finish all the tasks assigned to it before the end of its shift. The foremen reported these tasks to the overseers, and the labourers could then have lunch and go back to their barracks afterwards.

It seems that the working hours were longer than regulations officially allowed. In 1899, the contrôleur of Sawahlunto, L.C. Westenenk (1899-1900), registered the working hours of the labourers. In his report, he mentions that the shortest and longest presence of the convict

---

39 ARA, MvK, Mr 1904/1151. Letter of A.H. van Lessen 3-6-1904 to the Chief of exploitation, W. de Jongh.

40 PTBA Ombilin Collection, *Mijn Politie Reglement*, article 15 no.5. This small book contains all work regulations for the mine, and is still in use to day.
labourers at the work place was between 11 hours 45 minutes and 15 hours 55 minutes respectively, because of the long distance between their barracks and the workplace. The labourers had to walk several kilometres from their barracks to the mine. The long working hours were clearly contravention of the Article 15 of *Staatsblad* 1871 no.78. They also contributed to the high number of deserters among the convict labourers. Therefore, Westenenk asked the government for the exact work time to be followed.

After finishing their task, officially the labourers were free to do whatever they wanted. But in fact this was not so. The manager not only controlled the process of production, but also the life of the labourers outside the mine. For instance, the company allowed them to go out after the watchman had given them permission. The contract labourers were permitted to leave the barracks until 9 p.m., but the convict labourers had to be back by 6 p.m. According to the manager, the purpose of this rule was to give the labourers more time to rest, so that the next day they would be in good condition. But incontrovertibly the company also clearly forbade social contacts with the local people, because such relations were regarded as dangerous, possibly leading to a more independent spirit among the miners.

As explained before, there was no ethnic division of work in the Ombilin to match that found in East Sumatra, except with regards to the Minangkabau (often called Melayus by the Dutch) and the Nias people. What was more important for the company was that the labourers recruited must be skilled and physically strong, because they were expected to do heavy work, such as constructing galleries, setting up supports and digging the tunnels, cutting wood and bringing it into the mine. All these jobs were done as a group by the labourers who constituted a mixture with regards to both ethnicity and status of contract. Little is known about their opinions on the work rhythm and discipline, or about the influence of the division of labour and the formation of group solidarity. Although no information is available about the formation of group solidarity, seems a natural result of being thrown together in groups in this way. The local newspapers reported that the labourers never deserted individually, but collectively. Such groups of runaways consisted of about two or five, led by a leader, possibly, someone who might have been a big boss among the labourers.

Until 1920, the quantities of coal produced by the labourers steadily increased (Appendix 1). In 1892 production was only 1,758 tons, but in 1901 it had reached 198,000 tons. Production was usually to fulfil internal colonial demands, mostly for the navy, followed by the railways, state-owned companies, and steamships of the merchant marine. Up to 1910, the colonial government counted on obtaining most of its coal from this mine, shown by the fact that about 95 percent of coal produced by the Ombilin, was consumed by the government (*Verslag van het steenkolen* 1918:11). This means that the colonial state acted as both producer and consumer. This consumption figure later decreased gradually to 50 percent in 1920, not because of the production from Ombilin decreased, but because the total production of coal throughout the Netherlands-Indies had risen. The growth of coal production was the result of the opening up of private coal-mining companies, especially in Kalimantan. Apart from being used by the state, the Ombilin coal was also consumed by private steamship companies, cement

---

41 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435 no.368; Heuven 1931:28.

42 According to the information I have obtained from local people, the convict labourers who were permitted to go out were still chained.
factories, and small industries in West Sumatra, but it was not exported until the 1930s. The favourable market for coal led to high profits for the colonial government. In 1896 the company obtained a profit of 188,342 guilders, which increased to 694,516 guilders in 1900. The highest profit of 1,320,000 guilders was in 1919, owing to the high demands for coal, especially during the First World War.

The key factor in increasing coal production was not the introduction of new mining technology, but the expansion of the mine area and the increasing number of labourers, at least until 1924 (Graph III.1). At the beginning of the exploitation, there were only two mines: Lunto and Durian, but as the years passed, new mines were opened, one in the village of Surian in 1914, and another located in the village of Sungai Durian in 1917. In terms of manpower, government policy tended to work with convict labourers because they were cheaper, as seen in Table III.2.

Table III.2. The Daily Cost of the Contract and Convict Labourers 1905-1916 (in cents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Contract labourer</th>
<th>Convict labourer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mining Archives, Steenkolenpolitiek, no. IV-32B. A letter of the Director of the Mining State Companies to the Governor-General, 27-2-1918.

Therefore, although there were suggestions about replacing convict labourers with contract or free labourers in the pioneering era, the government continued to steer some course difference for financial reasons. Given the cost difference, it is not surprising that the company preferred to work with convict labourers until the 1920s (Graph III.1).

What the colonial government did during this time was similar to measures taken by the Spanish government. During the same period, the Spanish government increased the production of coal by expanding mine areas and recruiting labourers in larger numbers than before. Discussion on this, see Shubert 1987:46-65.
3. Working and Living Conditions

3.1. Payment System

Labourers who worked in the mine were paid according to category and workplace. Of the four categories, convict labourers received the lowest wages and the casual labourers the highest. According to a regulation issued in 1892, convict labourers earned 7 cents per day, though in reality they received only 5 cents of this in 1902 (Hoevernaars 1903:6). In addition to this, the convict labourers also received a premium that was paid twice a month in cash for working overtime. In 1910 the wages increased to 11.5 cents per day. Apart from paying these wages, the company was also obliged to repay 27 cents per labourer per day to the Department of Justice as compensation for a working day by a convict labourer. In practice, this compensation was paid only in the early years of exploitation and was only 13 cents. After that, the company never paid another cent, arguing that the cost of living incurred by convicts, such as clothes, meals, housing, and medical care, had to be borne by the company.

There were some differences in the payment system of the three remaining categories of labourers. The casual labourers were paid 50 cents a day, but they did not receive social benefits, such as medical treatment, housing, clothes and meals. Moreover, they did not stay at the barracks like the contract labourers or free labourers under the contract B.

The contract labourers also received higher wages than convict labourers. In 1903, they got 30 cents for working in the underground mine and 20 cents for working in the open pit, housing, clothes three times a year, and medical care. In 1910 their wages increased to 30 cents for the open pit and 40 cents for the underground mine (Joustra 1927:27). Advanced payment of 60 guilders was given to married contract labourers and 40 guilders for unmarried ones.

Free labourers received higher wages than the contract labourers did. In 1910 they got 50 cents per day for working in the open pit and 65 cents for the underground mine. However, they had to pay meals at 18 cents a day from their own pocket, but they received compensation of 2.50 guilders for a set of cloth. They did not want to use it, because the colour was almost the same as that of the convict labourers. Hence, in 1913 the Engineer-Director ordered other clothes in a different colour.

There was no differentiation in the payment system between male and female contract or free labourers such as applied at other places in the Outer Provinces (Leenarts 1994:75). When


45 The policy of the head of exploitation, IJzerman of paying 13 cents to the Director of the Department of Justice aroused the anger of the Minister of Colonies, Bergsma. In his letter to the Governor-General, 8-10-1895 no.3/2763, he said that IJzerman was taking too many liberties, and therefore, he suggested that the Governor-General should take action in this case. See Mining Archives, *Dwargarbeiders te Ombilin Steenkolenmijnen*, code VI-A/5.

When they began, female contract labourers received 20 cents, plus meals three times a day. For those who wanted to renew their contract, wages were increased to 30 cents a day, probably because the Engineer-Director wanted to attract female labourers to work in the mine in larger numbers with the thought, no doubt, that they would provide suitable partners or wives for the contract labourers. This female-friendly policy did not work and the number of female labourers remained very low.

Wages were paid according to the quantity of coal produced by the various shifts. The quantity of coal was defined by the company with due note of the thickness or thinness of the seam of coal. In 1911 it was reported that 80 percent of the average contents of the total number of coal wagons received was defined as the daily task. For this, the labourers received contract wages. They also earned a premium if they produced more coal than required for the contract wage. This means that the labourers were never paid wages lower than those they had contracted for. In other words, the labourers who did not finish their task were fully paid. Not allowing its altruism to run away with itself, the company reserved the right to fine the labourers who were regarded as lazy and who tended to shirk.

Payments were paid on a fortnightly basis on Saturday, at counters set up by the company. The labourers were handed a card with their name, number, and the total of their wages, from which the debts and fines were subtracted. There were two persons at every counter charged with the task of paying the wages, an indigenous clerk and a European overseer. The European overseer took the card, verified the name on it, and then read the total amount to be paid after which the clerk would finally pay it out.

Besides their daily wages, the three categories of the labourers also received two kinds of premium, one for industriousness and good conduct such as high attendance rate, and the other was a premium for the total amount of coal produced above average. In the local language, this was called premi arang or coal premium. There is no information about this for the early years. In 1919, the Labour Inspector, Van Ardenne, reported that 180 coolies received 5 cents more than their contract wages, eighty-eight coolies 10 cents, four coolies 40 cents, and two coolies 50 cents. In 1923 it was reported that a contract labourer had received a premium of one guilder for diligence. The premium for above-average production of coal would be awarded if the labourers could produce one-third (1/3) more than their task required. They would be given 50 percent extra wages. In 1923, about 30 percent of the contract labourers received this premium.

A correspondent in the local newspaper, Tjaja Sumatra, reported an incident in Sawahlunto during the payment of wages in 1918. He mentioned that the mining town was very busy, the streets between the village of Durian and Sawahlunto was very crowded because many labourers walked from or to Sawahlunto to receive their wages. Every Saturday, the Sawahlunto market was also crowded. The local traders knew exactly what the time of the labourers were being paid. It was very common for the price for daily basic needs to increase automatically. See Tjaja Sumatra, 9-8-1918.

A brief note was written by Engineer-Director, W. de Jongh on the requirements for the payment of wages, clothes, food for the contract labourers, 26-7-1909. ARA, MvK, Mr 1911/218.

ARA, MvK, Mr 1919/2161, Report of Van Ardenne, 21-7-1919.

Verslag vd Arbeid Inspectie, 1923/1924, 1925:45.
received premiums of on average 3.24 guilders, and in 1924, 20 percent of the contract labourers received 3.68 guilders more per month.\textsuperscript{51}

The wages and premiums were raised from time to time, as explained above. In 1920, the wages for contract labourers in the Ombilin were higher than those in the plantations of West Sumatra. Nevertheless, the increase in wages did not mean the payment for each unit of coal produced also improved. It was compatible with an increase in production per capita per year as shown in Table III.3. If the average production per capita per year for a labourer was only 49.5 tons in 1901, by 1910 it had increased to 76.0 tons. This indicates two things. First, the labourers had been schooled to be more skilled, professional miners, and they learned from each other. The labourers with long work experience not only transmitted their knowledge to newcomers, they also became specialized in certain jobs in the mine. Second, this also indicated the greater the increase in the production, the more money the labourers earned. This increase could be earned by working harder, but under strict control which allowed the labourers to be punished by flogging if they were disobedient.

Table III.3 Average Production per head per year, 1901-1916

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Production Per head (in tons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>60.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>67.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>65.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mining Archives, Steenkolen Politiek, no. IV-32B. Letter of the Director of Government Companies to Governor-General 27-2-1918.

\textsuperscript{51} Verslag vd Arbeid Inspectie, 1923/1924, 1925: 45.
It seems an inescapable fact that there was a relationship between per capita increase in productivity and the exercise of violence, as indicated in 1905, in which 80 percent of the convict labourers were punished by flogging, a figure which had increased to 300 percent in 1909-1910. This means, on average, a labourer was sentenced to a flogging three times a year. After 1913 the average production of a labourer dropped considerably, because many skilled labourers had finished their contract, and the newcomers still had to learn how to cut coal as quickly as possible. The shortage of skilled labourers was discussed by the management in the context of the high rate of mine accidents (Table III.5).

Generally the labourers spent some of their money on gambling, opium, a partner for homosexual relations, and prostitutes which were specially arranged by the company to ‘bind’ the labourers, as reported by Van Kol in 1902, and brought up again in later years (Van Kol 1903:26). Money in cash received by the labourers (especially the convict labourers) as a premium for their overtime was used to bribe the foremen in the effort to put on lighter jobs, or to turn a blind eye to illicit actions and to forbidden deeds by the management such as bringing sharp objects into the mine (Sinar Sumatra, 15-5-1926). In order to prevent this abuse, revealed in the reports brought out by labour inspector in 1917, the Engineer-Director R.J van Lier, forced new convict labourers to save their money (Joustra 1926:227). Almost immediately the total amounts of savings rose to 6,500 guilders, compared to only 500 guilders in the previous year. However, this forced saving policy was doomed to failure, because bribery continued to be rife in the years that followed.

Every weekend, during their leisure time, with their wages rattling in their pockets, the labourers spent money on various organized activities, both in Sawahlunto, and in the coolie barracks. Traditional performances such as ronggeng, tandak, and the like were put on by the company. The company recruited and contracted the group of ronggeng or tandak for at least six months at a time. Later on, the dancers were replaced by new, more beautiful, younger women dancers who were usually also prostitutes. Some former dancers did not return home but remained in Sawahlunto and married contract labourers. Others who chose to remain reverted to prostitution in Sawahlunto (Sinar Sumatra 10,12-2-1914). All these occurrences were run-of-mill and they are retained in the collective memory of the old people there.

3.2. Health Conditions

Health conditions in the first years of exploitation were very bad. Between 1896-1900, the health of the labourers can be broken down as follows. In 1896, on average 45.6 percent of the convict labourers were treated at the mine hospital in Sawahlunto or in Bukittinggi. Of this total,
20.2 percent patients had malaria, 16.4 percent patients had been injured by flogging, and 9 percent had died. In 1899 the total percentage of labourers treated in the hospital had fallen to 39 percent, dropping to 29 percent in 1900.\textsuperscript{55} The number of malaria patients was reduced because the medical staff treated them with quinine. Nevertheless, that does not mean that the health conditions of the labourers had improved.

As time passed, the death rate and the members suffering from illness tended to drop. In 1902, only 16.4 percent of the convict labourers were treated in the hospital and the death rate was as low as 3.98 percent. For contract labourers, it was 18.9 percent and 4.03 percent respectively. Most fell victim to hookworm and pneumonia. Although there was a differentiation in the figures between the convict and contract labourers, after 1902 the rate of death and illness for both these categories showed a general decline. In 1912 8.52 percent of the convict labourers was treated in the hospital with a death rate of 3.59 percent. The comparable figures for contract labourers were 4.2 percent and 1.23 percent.

In the period 1912-1930, the death rate of the contract labourers ran parallel to that of East Sumatran plantations.\textsuperscript{56} Thereafter it could be argued that, as noted in the reports by the Labour Inspectorate officials, the health of the labourers was very satisfactory. Bearing these figures in mind, people could assume that though working in the mine was very gruelling, it seems to have little effect on the state of health of the labourers.

The reality was not quite so rosy. Figures reported did not paint a real picture of the health of the miners. Reasons for this are that the labourers who died outside the hospital as a result of mine accidents, or those who were killed or who committed suicide or died as a result of other violence were not registered. This sort of registration was the responsibility of the company and not of the medical staff. In 1902, Van Kol found many convicts died at work, falling prey to illness, but also succumbing to maltreatment meted out by other convicts. The mortality rate arising from criminal or violent actions among the labourers themselves in the Ombilin mines was higher than that of Senembah Company, East Sumatra. Dr. W. Schuffner had made comparison between these two examples as shown in Table III.4.

Quite apart from the violence which seemed part and parcel of the miners' lives, mine accidents were another factor which affected the health of labourers. Table III.5 shows that in the first years of exploitation, the mortality rate as a result of mine accidents tended to be high. For example, in 1896, eleven convict labourers died, quite apart from those who suffered injuries. A good example of the havoc wrought by the mine accident can be seen in the period June and July 1915. In one month there were five mine accidents.

\textsuperscript{55} Verlag vd Exploitatie over 1900, 1901: suplement 18.

\textsuperscript{56} Verlag vd Exploitatie over 1908-1916, 1917; Verslagen Ombilin-mijnen over 1917-1920, 1921; Langeveld 1978:294-368.
Table III.4 Average Mortality per year owing to Violent Actions among the Labourers in Senembah Company and the Ombilin Coal mines, 1913-1916 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Senembah Company</th>
<th>Ombilin coal mines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contract labourers</td>
<td>Contract labourer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*) In the first sixth months of 1916.


The worst accidents, in which ten died and seventy-two were injured, happened on 14 June and 6 and 21 July (Padangsch Handelsblad 23, 29-7-1915). The causes of these mine accidents were variously an explosion of gas and the collapse of a mound, but both could be directly linked to the lack of skilled labourers.

The numbers of skilled labourers or professional miners had fallen, because most of them had finished their contract and had returned home, and the new labourers who replaced them were not yet familiar with the world of the mine (Padangsch Handelsblad 29-7-1915).

Table III.5. Average Mortality of labourers owing to mine accidents, 1896-1915 (yearly)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1912</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In order to dispel the bad atmosphere, the company held a special ritual meal for the labourers.\(^\text{57}\) Considering the above data, the report of the labour inspectors cannot be
treated as the only reliable source of information on the mortality rate as Houben (1996) has done, at least not in the case of the Ombilin coal-mines.

3.3. Housing

In the pioneering era, the company constructed coolie barracks, containing accommodation for 100 to 120 labourers. These barracks consisted of two long sheds, not divided into rooms, in which the married and unmarried labourers lived together. There was also one shed known as the Tangeri Rantai, since it was used for convict labourers, located near the soccer field. The building was a simple construction with 'bamboo' walls and earthen floor. In 1904, new barracks, isolated from the first, and called Tangeri Tanah Lapang, were constructed with its interior divided into small rooms.

There was another change in 1910. In order to be able to keep an eye on cleanliness in the rooms and to prevent the labourers from running away, the company had given preference to dividing the sheds into larger rooms. However in this year, D.G. Stibbe, the Inspector of Labour, suggested the shed be divided into smaller rooms, to give the labourers a feeling of security and some privacy. It might also go some way towards preventing stealing which was fairly endemic when people were away working their shift. The division of a shed into small rooms had also been demanded by the labourers, management commented, especially by married couples for personal reasons as many wives simply remained at home when their husbands were away working.

Up to the changes introduced in 1910, there were at least three types of barracks constructed. The first type of building was a dormitory with a long row of beds and was intended for the unmarried labourers. Then there were barracks with rooms for married labourers, and there was also one sort of dormitory building for unmarried labourers with a few special rooms for married men. Barracks for married labourers were provided with a large common kitchen and a big bathroom used by couples and all their family members. It was reported that by 1914 the barracks were semi-permanent buildings, constructed of stone and wood. Such buildings were not concentrated in one village, but spread out following the development of the new mine locations. During the first period of development the barracks were located in the area surrounding the town of Sawahlunto. Later on, more were constructed near the villages of Surian, Sungai Durian, Durian, and Sikalang, in the wake of the newly opened mines to the north of Sawahlunto.

58 ARA, MvK, Mr 1911/2237. Letter of Engineer-Director, Van Tiel, 13-5-1911.

59 Life in the barracks was rife with competition and conflicts. Quarrels arising from jealousy were a frequent occurrence, as was petty theft of firewood, food and other small things. In the kitchen and at the public bathing place there was constant gossip, ranging from personal affairs to property. This is still the same today. Information on this was obtained in interviews with some old women, and children of the contract labourers who at one time or another had lived in the barracks during the colonial period.
The officials of the Labour Inspectorate reported that housing conditions for the labourers in the Ombilin coal-mines were very satisfactory. If there were any complaints, they generally had to do with the lack of security in the barracks, the number of houses, and the division of dwellings. These conditions cropped up in reports several times, featuring especially in 1910, 1916, and 1924. Tackling a more concrete problem, the Inspector of Labour, A.H.N Kruysboom, reported the lack of accommodation in 1916. About 940 of the total number of 1,930 contract and free labourers had to seek accommodation outside the barracks, renting private rooms in the houses of local people. This was indeed permitted under the Coolie Ordinance for West Sumatra. Even after the company constructed new barracks, until 1925 the labourers preferred to stay in private lodgings, so that the barracks that had been constructed remained empty. From the point of view of the Inspector of Labour both the number and the quality of the barracks were satisfactory, an opinion not shared by the labourers who claimed that the housing was in poor condition, particularly that provided for those who were unmarried. Lodging in dormitory barracks without rooms and without privacy was risky for them. The barracks also had inadequate supplies of facilities such as water. In 1917, for example, the coolies in barracks in the village of Durian had to walk several kilometres to Sawahlunto to buy water. In order to prevent theft, more than once the Labour Inspectors suggested constructing barracks building for one shift only. But until the end of colonial government, the management never took them up on this suggestion.

3.4. Food

The labourers were given food by the company three times a day. This consisted of a varied menu comprising rice with vegetables and meat, eggs, and salt fish. In the mines the labourers also had snacks distributed to them at rest breaks, consisting of local dishes such as lapek-lapek, pisang goreng and ketan, washed down by tea. Married labourers, who were not paid money in advance and had not been fined during sixth months, could arrange for their own food. In 1918, the unmarried labourers could apply to the kitchen for rice, but in 1919, when rice was difficult to obtain and then only at a high price, this regulation was abolished. Besides those perks, the labourers who were treated in the hospital were also given food free of charge.


ARA, MvK, Verbaal 27-3-1903/13.

Until 1912, food for labourers was provided by a supplier contracted by the company. Unfortunately, no information is available which would throw more light on this supplier and how he worked. It is known that company, having given the distribution of food to a third party, had no control over what was provided and the upshot was that the quality of the food was very poor and any variation in menu was very limited. The crux of the matter was it was impossible for the company to control the supplier fully, because the duration of his work contract was limited. Quite apart from the legalistic consideration, the administrative staff of the company rarely took the trouble to monitor the actual quantity of food that was cooked and distributed to coolies. Although the portions were small, the price the supplier quoted the company was also far from cheap.

Contracting out the food supply meant that nutritionally the labourers were ill served, and this eventually affected the company. Being insufficient in term of quality and quantity, the contract system also proved very costly to the company. Therefore, in 1912, it decided to take over the food supply itself and it appointed a Dutch overseer and three caretakers to be responsible for this task.\(^\text{64}\) This was also not a success, as in 1918 the company established a modern kitchen in Sawahlunto to cook larger quantities of food. Even after this the problem remained unsolved because the corruption and collusion which had now become ingrained continued to dog the supply of food well into the future.

In 1900 the controleur of Sawahlunto, L.C. Westenenk, reported there were problems with food distribution. Many labourers who worked the second shift were not being provided with food at their barracks. This was the reason they were always attempting to run away. The same problem was also reported by Van Kol in 1902, and by the Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar, L.W.H. de Munnick, in 1912. The reason they gave was there was no food for some labourers, because the supplies had already been looted by former fellow coolies who had escaped from the mine. Given this fact, he suggested the management strengthen control over food distribution. In the following years (1912-1916) the complaints centred on the lack of variation and the small portions of rice (1917-1918). The latter problem was still being reported by Deibert, the Inspector of Labour, when he visited the mine in 1924. He said that there had been no progress made in the distribution of food compared to the situation four years earlier. By then the faulty food supply to the labourers had become a public secret. Although an improvement in the quality of the food had already been achieved, the paucity of the helpings remained an endemic problem.

The reasons for the problem of the lack of food were very complicated and structural, including the looting of food by fellow labourers, or those who were treated as jagoen brutal (rascals) by escaped labourers, by watchmen, or by people who were working in the kitchen. The Chinese supplier, and even the administrative personnel of the company, connived with each other to manipulate the total amount of rice supplied. It was reported that indigenous people who had the task of distributing the food were unable to prevent rascals from taking the food of the labourers away when the food was distributed. Therefore, in 1929 Mr. De La Parra, a

\(^{64}\) ARA, MvK, Mr 1912/1277. Extract from the registration of decision of Governor-General of the Netherlands Indies.
member of De Raad van Justitie (Court of Justice) at Padang, told the Engineer-Director that in the Ombilin coal-mines: “they are nothing but a pack of thieves at your place”.

4. Control and Violence

Sawahlunto had already degenerated into ‘a criminal colony’ W.J. Rahder, the contrôleur of Sawahlunto said at the end of the nineteenth century. His statement revealed his disappointment at his inability to maintain security, peace, and order among the population of the town because of the presence of the convict labourers. His power no longer carried any authority. The disappointed statement brings me to a question: what was going on in that town? What kind of control did the state or management exert on the miners? This section will focus on the forms of labour control imposed by state or management and the ways in which system of control operated.

Complying with the policy of the colonial government, the management employed flogging as a means of punishment in order to obtain obedience among the labourers. It also imposed the Penal Sanction and used police officers to maintain order. The Penal Sanction applied to those labourers who had signed a contract based on the Coolie Ordinance. Punishment by flogging with a rattan cane was primarily used on convict labourers, when all else had failed, as the severest form of punishment.

The contract labourers fell under the stipulation of the Coolie Ordinance issued in 1880, which covered labour relations and had been drawn up to protect the interests of plantation capitalists in East Sumatra (Tjoeng Ting Fong 1947:63-65). The issuing of the Coolie Ordinance sprang from the concern of plantation managers about the irregular supply of labourers to the estates in East Sumatra. Many of them, who had been recruited at a high cost, often took to their heels after working for only a few months. The Coolie Ordinance laid down the procedure for work, ranging from the recruitment stage up to the completion of the contract. In other words, this regulation was used as an instrument of control allowing the colonial government to "bind" the labourers to the workplace, using the Penal Sanction to punish labourers who infringed the regulations.

The Penal Sanction was in force elsewhere in the Netherlands Indies, imposed on labourers who had signed a contract under the Coolie Ordinance. If they did not fulfil the requirements of the contract, for example, by running away or avoiding work, they could be punished. Under Articles 9 and 10 of the Coolie Ordinance, which were passed in 1886, contract labourers could also be punished if they were involved in a protest against their foremen, or for fighting. For this group, flogging was the ultimate form of punishment, used

---

65 Mining Archives, Arbeidersvoorziening van de Mijnbedrijven IV. Letter of Engineer-Director, V.H. Ploem 10-8-1929 no.14/secret to the Head of State of Mining Companies in Bandung.

66 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:20.

67 Paul Consten (1996) in his article discussed the practice of punishment by flogging for prisoners, and discussion between the liberal and conservative political figures on punishment by flogging and its abolition during the period 1830-1870.
when other forms of punishment were no longer effective. It was imposed by the controleur of Sawahlunto, who acted as magistrate, on labourers who had infringed the regulations, after he had received formal complaints against them by the company.

The organized control exercised by the colonial state through the imposition of physical punishment was not merely a symbol of colonial power in its role as keeper of peace and order over the subjugated society. More subtly, it was justified by a perception in the capitalist culture of the 'lazy mentality' of the indigenous people, and a work discipline was not oriented towards production. Therefore, by imposing strict controls, the colonial government hoped to concentrate on the work aspect, so that as much as possible coal could be produced. A second stereotype entertained by the colonial administrators was that strict control, by brute force if necessary, was important for the convicts.

In its quest to maintain 'peace and order', the management recruited indigenous people either from the Minangkabau and the Batak areas who could be categorized as semi-military group. They were armed and wore a black uniform (Hoa Po, 13-2-1915). They stood guard over and escorted the convict labourers to and from the mine, assisted by police officers. In the pioneering era, there were about thirty people who were recruited to be involved in semi-military groups, mainly from the village of Talawi, to police convict labourers inside and outside both the prison and the mine. When the controleur of Sijunjung was transferred to Sawahlunto in 1896, ten additional police officers were added to the force.

The colonial administrators were convinced that strict control by police officers was, of course, essential to ensure that the labourers were obedient to the management. Above all they were needed to keep the convict labourers, who frequently brawled with each other, in check. At times they set fire to the mine or threatened the safety of the local people in Sawahlunto. The controleur complained that the presence of convicts had created 'a criminal colony' in Sawahlunto, as I quoted at the beginning of this section. Sawahlunto had become unsafe both for the labourers themselves and also for the local people, as was recounted time and again by Dutch local officials in charge of that area in the years which followed.

In the early twentieth century, the number of convicts rose, and more police officers had to be recruited. A Dutch priest, J.J. Hoevenaars, who visited that town in 1899 and again in 1902, reported that the number of police officers was steadily increasing, from twenty four in 1899 to about forty-eight in 1902, and reached to eighty-two in 1910. In January 1912, two brigades of police officers were deliberately moved from Padang Panjang to Sawahlunto and made responsible for the major task of curbing the constantly rising rate of desertion. In 1919 the number of police officers at Durian was increased, because the total number of convict labourers had risen leading to an upsurge in crime (Hoa Po, 16-1-1915; Tjaja Sumatra, 26-11-1919). It was reported that since November 1920, between ten and fifteen police officers had to go into the mine because there had been so many criminal incidents there, including brawls,

---

68 In 1917 control at the prison in Sawahlunto was not longer under the Controleur, but was taken over by the Director of the Prison who had his own personnel. KITLV, Korn Collection, OR.435, no.368; Heuven 1931:14.

69 Hoevenaars 1902:9; ARA, MvO L.W.H. de Munnick, microfiche no.824.

70 Mining Archives, Politie Personeel Oembilin, VI-B.no.343.
killings, and arson in the Sawah Rasau mine, which was a very productive source of coal (Tjaja Sumatra, 9-12-1920). Because of these events, the police officers were moved from Durian to the village of Sungai Durian.

The Dutch officials believed that strict control would prevent labourers from escaping and would increase the productivity of the labourers. The more coal the labourers produced, the more reward they would receive. In fact, such a system of control was unauthorized, in other words illegal, because in its implementation abuse of power and violence were very normal, used as a matter of course by the agents of the state and of the management such as foremen, police officers, and caretakers.

Desertion among the labourers was not a simple matter and it was triggered off for multiple and contradictory reasons. The blame cannot be laid solely on the misuse of power as explained above. Desertion contradicted itself as an index of despair, and violence juxtaposed against its function as a source of benefits. The following description clearly demonstrated that there was a collusion between labourers and foremen to make plans to escape from the mine, and then for the escapees to allow themselves to be brought back to the mine in the hope that whoever had recaptured them would receive a large reward or bounty which would be shared out. In 1892 there were only two deserters, but as time passed the number rose steadily to eighty-two in 1893, followed by figures of 116 in 1894, and 182 in 1895. The reasons for the violence were many and varied. Often the cause was the eternal struggle to lay hands on scarce resources such as cigarettes, money, sex (especially women, or a homosexual partner), and to be put on light jobs. Pak Rusman’s story reveals this competition and conflict to gain access to scarce resources.

...many of my friends were afraid to go into the mine. They were scared, afraid of the chain gang (convicts). Most of them tended to be homosexual (suka sama sejenisnya). We were contract labourers, and were very young. They competed with each other to lure us, coaxing us with cigarettes, money, and light jobs. I gave in, because I was afraid of being attacked by those very strong, and brave men. That was the story. When I was working, one of the men brought me secretly to a dark place. He kissed me. The next day, I got money and cigarettes. What was important for me, was, I was safe, secure, and protected. If his other friends knew, they would be jealous too. They would fight with each other. Basically, the conditions were very terrifying. The overseer was also terrified. (Interview with Pak Rusman, 19-4-1995)

KITLV, Korn Collection OR 435, no. 368; Heuven 1931:18.

Pak Rusman was from Purworejo, Central Java, and came to Sawahlunto in 1918, when he was seventeen years old. He worked in the Sawah Rasau underground mine, where there were many convict labourers. According to him, he was sold by his neighbour to the recruitment agent to be sent to Sawahlunto as a contract labourer. In the 1950s, he became contractor for the company supplying sand to fill the empty mines in which the coal had been exhausted. He was counted among the successful persons in the village of Surian. He married seven times. In the 1980s, he returned to his village in Java several times, especially at the Lebaran. Besides visiting his family, he would go to look for his neighbour to take revenge. He was not successful in this. Hence, he did not want to stay there forever (Interview with Pak Rusman, 20-4-1995).

Original text: “...banyak teman-teman saya yang takut masuk lubang, takut sama orang rantai. Mereka banyak yang itu lho Bu, suka sama sejenisnya(homo). Kami orang kontrak, masih muda semuanya. Mereka...
This story illustrates that violence could grow out of the competition and conflict to get partners among the homosexual labourers. For Pak Rusman, protection and security in the very dangerous life underground were his main reasons to become a partner of a homosexual convict labourer. Thus, homosexuality had a double contradictory function.

Homosexual behaviour was very common among convict labourers. When Van Kol visited the mine, he listened to the testimonies of the foremen. Almost all the foremen said that they liked ‘anak jawi’ or ‘buyung-buyung’, a term which was referred to a homosexual partner. According to the report of the local administrators, preventing homosexuality was virtually impossible. There were very few women prisoners at the prison of Sawahlunto and the number of female contract labourers was very small.

Ethnicity was another of the many factors that caused internal tensions among the labourers. As I have explained above, the miners were divided into sub-ethnic groups. Apart from Minangkabau and Nias, various other ethnic groups such as Madurese, Buginese, and Javanese worked together. This ethnic conflict flared up in the Sawahlunto underground mine (Soeara Boemipoetra S.S. 7-7-1928). Internal tensions usually began with infractions of what were regarded as ‘taboos’ by certain ethnic groups. They started from individual fights between members of different ethnic groups which could develop into pitched battles. This large-scale fighting could develop into group solidarity among the labourers of the same ethnic group.

Group solidarity based on an ethnic element was used by labourers as a tool for solving conflicts, especially when the authoritarian colonial state did not give room to them to channel grievances.

Two stories below reveal how ethnicity became a source of internal tension and concomitantly of group of solidarity. On 13 September 1917, precisely at the time the convicts assembled in the village of Durian for a roll-call at 2.00 a.m., a Madurese wielding a very big, sharp axe killed two Buginese outright. He smote three times until the victims died. The following day, some Buginese went looking for the Madurese to be killed (Tjaja Sumatra, 13-9-1917). This was to protect their friends of the same ethnic group. Still in the same month, on 1 October, 1917, a convict labourer from Betawi, who had escaped from the mine, was brought back to the prison. He picked a quarrel with a convict labourer from the Island of Madura. In the ensuing fight, the latter was injured and had to be treated in the hospital. Some days later, he was sent back to the prison, and, seeking revenge, he collected friends of the same ethnic group, and a mass fighting broke out in which sharp objects were used. Some people were injured and died (Tjaja Sumatra 1-10-1917).

Two important things should be noted here. First, the control of labour by imposing physical violence employed by the colonial state was unsuccessful. The local Dutch officials failed to see this. They claimed that the high rate of desertion was because of the poor housing conditions and the lack of control. Secondly, the labourers were no strangers to physical violence. Its causes were manifold but basically boiled down to struggling for power, status, and protection. In the struggle, ethnicity was used as a tool in solving the conflict and building up group solidarity.
In 1895 housing conditions were improved and the number of police officers increased. But most of them preferred to sleep rather than to exert themselves. Hence, the level of desertion did not drop radically. The reasons for running away were not hard to find. According to W.J. Rahder, controleur of Sawahlunto (1895-1896), the real reason was a lack of discipline. Hence, there was no alternative but to discontinue forced labour at night. The convict labourers worked under the supervision of European and indigenous foremen. Neither group could be said to do its work properly. Many indigenous foremen failed to exercise adequate control and even ran away themselves because they did not receive their food, which was robbed by friends. The foremen also could not be supervised by European overseers, because many of them slept away from the mine. As far as Rahder could see, lack of control was the heart of the matter. Such conditions would not have occurred, said Rahder, if the Dutch overseers supervised the indigenous foremen and the labourers properly. For example, they did not even bother to supervise the night shift. The manager was painfully aware of the lack of control of the night shift, but he was not prepared to abolish the night as suggested by the controleur. His attitude is understandable, because he was not really free to make such a decision. This had to be taken by the Head of Exploitation, IJzerman, a very enthusiastic person who had promised to produce coal as much as possible (De Locomotief 18-11-1896).

Even though the number of police officers was increased, the number of desertion even rose. Rahder argued that the true reason for desertion was the heavy and dangerous work in the mine. The death rate was very high, namely 15 percent of the total number of convicts in 1895, not including those miners injured or killed who were victims of mine accidents. Rahder also protested about the sending a short sentence convict labourers "buiten de ketting", reasoning that it was not fair to treat them on a par with convicted criminals whose devil-may-care bravado tended to lead to taking great risks in the mine. As the rate of desertion among labourers reached mammoth proportions, the local Dutch officials finally woke up to its causes. They tried to grasp the causes of the internal problems and finally came to the conclusion that the lack of control by police officers, and the European and indigenous foremen was not enough to explain such a blatant, widespread phenomenon. The local Dutch officials both Rahder and his cadet L.W.H.de Munnick (1895-1896), stated that although the police strength had been increased tenfold, it was still not in a position to prevent fighting among criminals. Therefore violence as the result of inadequate policing seems to have been a major incentive to flee.

The criminal actions among the convict labourers are indicated in the following figures. In 1897, the crime rate was unusually high, namely 241 cases. After this it fluctuated, there being forty-eight in 1898, sixty-nine in 1899, seventy-two crimes in 1900, and sixty in 1901. Later on, there were fifty-three crimes committed in 1908, thirty in 1909, and thirty-four crimes.

---

74 The report of De Munnick to the Resident of the West Coast of Sumatra titled "Nota over de onveiligheid onder de dwangarbeiders en contractanten te Sawahlunto, hare oorzaken en hare bestrijding ". Unfortunately, I was not able to find the complete report, only some quotations. See KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435.no.368; Heuven 1931:20.

75 KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:19
in 1910 among convict labourers. De Munnick, Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar, in his report to Resident of the West Coast of Sumatra on 30 August 1913, commented on the convict labourers as follows:

In groups of a hundred and more they depart from the convict quarters... on their way to the mines in the greatest confusion, and everyone goes his own way... anyone who bears a grudge against his fellow sufferers, and wants to seek revenge, does so... where else on earth will such a situation like this be found, where the most desperate criminals, amongst them (desperados), are allowed to wander around freed and without any supervision? The police does its best to catch those labourers who have armed themselves with knives and haul them up before the magistrate for punishment, yet time and again they are able to lay their hands on knives, from where? is the logical question: mostly from the workshops... But feuds or motives of revenge are not the only causes of the crimes committed.

De Munnick had also interviewed four convicted criminals who had been brought to Sawahlunto. When those criminals heard it they would have to serve their sentence in Sawahlunto, they were immediately struck by fear and began making plans to escape soon after arriving there.

Table III.6 The Practice of Caning among Convict Labourers (1900-1910)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Population of convicts</th>
<th>Practice of Punishment by caning(percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>2,619</td>
<td>1,563(60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>2,402</td>
<td>1,182(49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>2,108</td>
<td>1,032(49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>1,443</td>
<td>1,133(79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>1,448</td>
<td>1,029(71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>1,179</td>
<td>774(66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>1,207</td>
<td>1,416(117)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1,565</td>
<td>1,815(116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>1,736</td>
<td>3,893(224)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>1,665</td>
<td>4,946(297)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>1,673</td>
<td>4,785(286)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:29.

ARA, MvK, MvO Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar L.W.H. de Munnick 1913, microfiche no.824.

See the report of De Munnick to the Resident of the West Coast of Sumatra titled "Nota over de onveiligheid onder de dwangarbeiders en contractanten te Sawahlunto, hare oorzaken en hare bestrijding" in KITLV, Korn Collection, OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:34.
The frequency of the practice of flogging convict labourers can be seen from Table III.6. As was said before, labourers who refused to work and ran away from the mine were punished by flogging with a cane. In 1900 for instance, only 60 percent convict labourers was condemned to a flogging. The controleur of Sawahlunto reported in more detail that of 1,563 convict labourers punished in the year: twenty strokes of the cane had been ordered in 1,194 cases of desertion and for possession of knives or keris or other sharp implement; fifteen strokes in 246 cases of desertion but voluntary return; and ten strokes in 130 cases of idleness during working hours (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:118). In 1902, Van Kol reported about 100 desertions per month and these were punished by flogging (Van Kol 1903:33). These figures tended to increase. In 1909, on average, a labourer was sentenced to a flogging almost three times in a year. In 1910, the controleur of Sawahlunto, Th. C. Rappard (1909-1910) again reported that the practice of flogging with a cane was widespread.

In September 1918, when the Chief of the Prisons, Nienhuys, visited Sawahlunto, he reported that the conditions there were very serious, because the many deserters were convict labourers. The lack of control exercised by paltry armed guards, the labyrinth of mine tunnels, totalling more than one hundred, and the hilly, jungle-clad surrounding countryside, all conspired to make it fairly easy to run away. He reported that during the first eight months of 1918, 1,475 convicts had run away from the mine. 542 convicts had been brought back by the local people, who were rewarded. In the first years of operations the company gave five guilders as a bounty for a labourer brought back to the company. In 1918, on average the company had to pay out a monthly total of 600 guilders in rewards. L.F.W. Reijkers, the Assistant-Resident of Sawahlunto (1917-1918), said cynically that the payments were more or less a regular source of income for local people (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:138).

Casting around for a way to stop convict labourers from running away from the mine, Nienhuys suggested to Engineer-Director, R.J. van Lier that he had to move them to the Pulau Laut coal-mine, from where escape would be more difficult. But Van Lier refused to go along with the suggestion. If the convicts were sent away it would be impossible to exploit the mine on a regular basis at a time of a high demand for coal. The ultimate solution was to reform the system of control over the convicts and concentrate them at an isolated mine with adjacent barracks. The first move was made in 1919 by replacing caretakers who had been appointed by Engineer-Director, with the prison staff under the supervision of Director of Prison, thereby introducing a stricter regime of control (ANRI, GB 3-4-1919 no.25). This proved successful as the total number of deserters was reduced from 3,000 in 1919 to 2,000 in 1920. There was yet

---

78 See Verslag van het Gevangeniswezen 1926:43; KitLV, Korn Collection OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:35; Bruinink-Darlang 1986:138. According to information I have obtained from interviews with some villagers from Kubang and Sijantang, men who had special expertise could easily catch the escaped convict labourers.

79 The Resident of South-East Borneo also disagreed with this suggestion, mainly due to safety reasons for his region.

80 In the next five years (1921-1926), the rate of desertion among the labourers at the Ombilin coal-mines increased considerably. See Bruinink-Darlang 1986:139. For more detailed explanation, see Chapter IV.2.1.
another, more clandestine reason for the drop in absconding was that reward system was abolished in 1918 (Verslag over de Hervormingen 1926:138). Under this system the foremen used to make deals with convict labourers, recapturing even forcing them to run away. The labourers then allowed themselves to be recaptured by the foremen who later on would demand a reward from the company for their efforts (Verslag over de Hervormingen 1926:44).

Punishment by flogging, according to Assistant-Resident of Sawahlunto, was not a solution, and was even in contravention of a regulation in Staatsblad 1871 no.78 which stated that flogging convict labourers with a cane was the severest punishment, only to be used as a last resort. The violent discipline and harsh working conditions, he argued, formed a vicious circle, because the convict labourers tended to flee from the unbearable conditions and this, in turn, made the local people feel unsafe. The villagers from the areas surrounding the mine such as Sijantang and Kubang, for example, were very afraid of them. In their fear, they tended to neglect their dry-fields or returned to their homes from the market of Sawahlunto as quickly as possible. There were many cases of stealing, injuring, killing and rape committed on the local people by the convict labourers. Not surprisingly, the local people had negative perceptions of them, which persisted at least until the second decade of twentieth century.

Desertion was also a recurring problem among the contract labourers. They could be punished by flogging. It was reported by a Labour Inspector that between 1907 and 1909 the contract labourers were flogged on an average of 2 to 2 1/2 times in a year. The manager refused to accept the results of this Labour Inspector's investigation. He claimed that only 42 percent of the contract labourers had been subjected to this punishment. From data collected by the magistrate, it is known that four labourers received twenty-two strokes, one labourer twenty-four strokes and one labourer thirty-seven strokes. Labourers punished would automatically have their contract extended, because the work they did while being punished did not count against their contract. The Assistant-Resident found that the labourers tended to be sentenced to punishment often because, although they had worked for nine years, it transpired that they had not yet finished their first three-year contract.

In contrast to experiences on plantations in East Sumatra, despite the fact that so many contract labourers were punished, the company did not really suffer. Those contract labourers in the Ombilin coal-mines who were sentenced to be punished were not thrown into prison, but were forced to do hard labour without pay on public works, or they were taken to the underground mine under police escort where they had to work side by side with convict labourers. In short, the contract labourers who were punished not only served out their contract

In order to make Sawahlunto safe in 1915, the convict labourers were not allowed to go out after finishing their work. Koloniaal Verslag, Mededeelingen van Staatkundigen 1916:18; 1918:16.

In August 1911, Max Poser, a driver at the German-Dutch mining company in West Sumatra, saw an official with his wife and child in Batusangkar, or Fort van der Capellen, killed by an escaping convict labourer who was fleeing from the Ombilin coal-mines. See Poser 1955:21. There were still similar cases being reported in the local newspapers (Tjaja Sumatra and Sinar Sumatra), mainly for the years between 1910-1930.

capped by an extension of the contract, but were virtual convicts as well. Therefore, the fate of the contract labourers in the Ombilin coal-mines was not merely worse than that of their fellow coolies in East Sumatra, they were also brutalized by the local conditions. This contention is supported by the fact that behaviour of the contract labourers who worked there for an extended period of time tended to resemble that of like criminals. In other words, the contract labourers underwent a reverse process of socialization turning them into convict labourers, mainly to protect themselves.

Heeding the suggestions made by the Governor of West Sumatra, in 1910, the Governor-General decided to abolish punishment of labourers by flogging, with an exception of those who were habitually recalcitrant and did not want to work. Flogging was replaced by solitary confinement. But five years later this regulation was changed again, and contract labourers were once more sentenced to be flogged. The magistrate found this justifiable, on the grounds that contract labourers could only be punished for a certain number of days by solitary confinement in prison for refusing to obey labour regulations. Therefore, many contract labourers who tried to escape from prison before their sentence had expired were punished by flogging.\textsuperscript{84} From the annual reports of the Ombilin coal-mines between 1917-1924 it is known that the percentage of contract labourers who were punished was higher than 55 percent. In comparison to other places such as East Sumatra and the Belitung tin-mines, the level of punishment for the contract labourers in Ombilin coal-mines was the highest. In East Sumatra the magistrate and administrators of the companies were warned if labourers were punished at a rate of more than 5 percent.\textsuperscript{85}

These figures reveal the ambivalence of the government's attitude. Assuming a humanitarian guise, the colonial government warned private companies about punishment at a punishment rate of more than 5 percent. Yet, the case of Ombilin coal-mines, a state-owned company, had punishment rate of more than 55 percent. Hypocritically, the government kept silent, even though the floggings imposed there were more sadistic than those of the privately owned companies in East Sumatra. Not only that, the penalties were much more severe. The Ombilin contract labourers sentenced to flogging were forced to work on public works projects since 1903 and in the underground mine, where they toiled alongside convict labourers.\textsuperscript{86}

Most of the contract labourers who were punished were newcomers who were afraid to go into the mine, because they were not familiar with working in an underground mine. This problem, which could have been largely obviated, was exacerbated because the Engineer-Director often did nothing about the allowing newcomers to undergo a familiarization process. Hamstrung by the lack of a labour force, and being nagged to keep up the rate of production, the company put newcomers straight into the underground mine. As reported by Inspector of

\textsuperscript{84} ARA, MvK, Mr 1915/247. Report of Inspector of Labour, Kruysboom 18-11-1914.

\textsuperscript{85} ‘Donkere mijnen’ 1926:54. In the Belitung tin mines only 6.4 percent of contract labourers were punished in 1917, and in 1924 this figure fell to 3 percent, see Erman 1995:180.

\textsuperscript{86} ARNAS-RI, Governor-General's Decision, 4-3-1903/1467. This decision was based on suggestions made by Assistant-Resident De Rooy. He noted the total number of working hours a day among labourers on punishment detail. In 1902 the company would suffer losses of 15,796 working days if 1,175 labourers who were punished, did not work.
Labour, D.G. Stibbe in 1910, the newcomers failed to come up to expectation. They went into the mine and looked around them, were terrified and tried to run away, but being unused to the whole situation and unfamiliar with their surroundings, they were caught and punished.

The practice of punishment by flogging with a cane had a deleterious effect on the health of the labourers. After submitting to such a beating, the labourers had to be treated at the mine hospital in Sawahlunto. Some of them recovered and were taken back to the mine. Others became permanent invalids or died. Examples of such cases occurred in 1901 and 1910. In 1901, 185 labourers were treated at the mine hospital, after undergoing flogging with a cane, while in 1910 50 percent of the total number of labourers treated at the hospital were the victims of such sanctions. The labourers often suffered serious injuries and recovery was difficult. Water in the underground mine was not good for the seriously injured labourers, suffering from open wounds. The problem was that before they had recovered properly from their previous injuries they were flogged again. Thinking over these conditions, the Resident of West Sumatra declared that the flogging had to be stopped. To prevent the risk permanent injury and chronic invalidity, the management improved medical care, especially for patients injured by flogging. But this reprieve lasted for only a short time, from March to May 1910, then the intensive medical care began steadily to be reduced, because the hospital had too few rooms and insufficient medicine to treat the increasing number of injured or sick labourers coming there as a result of caning.

The practice of flogging was not only ordered by the Assistant-Resident who was responsible for the flogging, it also inflicted on the indigenous people. This was another reason why the labourers refused to work or run away from the mine. The foremen, bodyguards, and police officers, whose task was to discipline the labourers, tended to abuse their power. The foremen and police officers punished labourers by flogging even before the latter were brought before the Assistant-Resident. The correspondents of *Sinar Sumatra* and *Tjaja Sumatra* described the behaviour of these peoples as bestial. Driven to despair, and feeling they had nothing to lose, convict or contract labourers alike took revenge by attacking them.

Control over labourers by flogging occurred in the context of the dire need of colonial government for coal in large quantities. The demand for coal was very high, especially during the First World War (1914-1918) when the state had difficulty in importing coal from other countries (Ritz 1935: 281-305). Thus, there was a positive correlation between a high demand for coal and the practice of flogging and poor work discipline. To ensure its coal, the state tried to monopolize the most important coal-mines in the Netherlands Indies. Therefore it seemed necessary to discipline labourers by violent punishment if the coal supplies were deemed essential to the economy were to be kept up.

This explanation gives rise to some ideas. The first supposition is that the labour regime imposed by the state was not successful in maintaining work discipline in the Ombilin coalmines. The second is that low work discipline was expressed in term of a high rate of desertion and refusal to work. Thirdly the low work-discipline was not merely a reaction against the physical violence that the state imposed on the labourers to discipline them, it was just as much the offspring of the culture of violence that was already embedded among the labourers themselves. This culture of violence originated largely from the presence of criminals as convict

---

Sinar Sumatra 12-2, 1914; 11-4-1914; 9-5-1917; Tjaja Sumatra 13-8-1917; 23-8-1917; 21-9-1920.
labourers, from the murderous competition to get scarce resources. These brutal conditions were made worse by the policy of the management and ultimately of the state that tended to treat various categories of labourers similarly in matters of punishment, food, clothes, and workplace. Quite apart from these external reasons, were the psychological problems of fear engendered by 'mijnwees' (mine phobia) and the violent actions of the foremen—all these had an inevitable effort on people's morale and their will to work.

The layers of the culture of violence inexorably influenced the low rate of labour discipline. This phenomenon shows that until the second decade of the twentieth century, physical violence was generalized at every level; miners, foremen, and the state. Finally, in exercising discipline by flogging, the various actors of the state worked from different points of view which will be explored in the next section.

5. Discussion on Violence and Terror Control

It is misleading to say that all state agencies have a uniform policy in imposing control over people. The Ombilin case can be taken as an example to see how the actors within different state agencies in the Netherlands Indies both vertically and horizontally displayed different agendas. Control of labour by violence and terror imposed by the colonial state had caused a heated discussion between various state agencies. These agencies had different points of view and tried to impose their power in the same arena, namely in the Ombilin coal-mines. To understand the different opinions of the colonial officials, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the position of the Ombilin coal-mines in the wider context of the state, and the role of the state agencies, either directly or indirectly, in the mines. There were, at least, five agencies involved in the Ombilin coal-mines (Appendix 3). When exploitation began in 1892, the colonial government decided that the Chief of the Sumatran Railways would be the person responsible for the exploration, as well as for subsequent transportation and the marketing of coal. The Chief was stationed first at Bukittinggi, but moved to Padang in 1907. Until 1917, the production process of coal in Sawahlunto was managed by a technician with the title of Engineer-Director.

In 1917, these two state-owned companies, the Sumatran Railways and the Ombilin coal-mines were split up. Then the Ombilin company was placed under the supervision of the Mining Service, which was itself under the aegis of several different higher authorities. When operations began, the responsible official was the Director of Education, Religion and Industry (Directeur van Onderwijs, Eeredsienst and Nijverheid). He remained in charge until 1907. His task was then transferred to the Department of Government Companies (Gouvernements Bedrijven, DGB) for the next five years until 1922. From 1922 until 1942, the DGB was part of the Director of Public Works (Directeur van Burgerlijk en Openbare Werken), so the company also automatically fell under its auspices. The Engineer-Director of the Ombilin coal-mines made contacts through this maze of hierarchy, discussed management policy and took decisions after conferring with his superiors.

The duty of the Mining Service was to take charge of conducting exploration, controlling the exploitation of all existing mineral resources, and inspecting both the state-owned

---

88 ARNAS-RI, Governor-General Decision 29-8-1892 no.12; ARA MvK, Mr 1907/1466.
and private mining companies (*Encyclopaedie van Nederlands-Indië* 1921:853). The Head of the Mining Service had no real direct power to control the Ombilin company, but he was responsible for supplying the technicians needed by all state-owned mining companies. Although they were enumerated on paper, not all of the tasks were fully implemented by the Mining Service. There were never any question of regular control, except in 1901 and 1902. In 1914 a discussion arose about who was responsible for making inspections at the Ombilin coal-mines, was this the head of the Mining Service or the Inspector of Labour? The former wanted to assume all tasks that were usually done by the latter, but this wish never realized.

The Engineer-Director discussed all matters to do with the company with the Chief of the Mining Service and the Director of Government Companies. This was a lengthy procedure, which differed from the way matters were run in private companies, where the procedure was shorter, because the key role was in the hands of the director of the company. In state-owned companies like the Ombilin coal-mines, the director automatically represented the power of the state, and had to bow to the will of his superior. Therefore, from the comments made by the Governor of West Sumatra, it can be gleaned that he thought the Engineer-Director should have made more suitable decisions, adequately reflecting state policy which would obviate the need for state intervention.

Beside the state agencies mentioned above, there were another two government institutions which played an important role in the Ombilin, namely the Department of Justice (*Departement van Justitie*) and the Department of Internal Affairs (*Departement van Binnenlands Bestuur* or BB). The Department of Justice was responsible for recruiting convict labourers, issuing regulations on labour relations, and inspecting labour conditions every year. This department supervised the Director of Prisons and the Labour Inspector. Through his subordinate, the Director of Prisons, the Director of Justice recruited convict labourers, while the Labour Inspector was responsible for inspecting labour conditions and advising the company on how to improve the working and living conditions of labourers. From 1907 until 1922 the Labour Inspectorate was under supervision of the Department of Justice. Afterwards, it was shifted to the Labour Office, which had branches in the Outer Islands for special supervision.

The Department of Internal Affairs (*Departement van Binnenlands Bestuur* or BB) had an important role in recruiting contract labourers, keeping peace and order, and punishing labourers who disobeyed work regulations. This task was carried out by its officials at the local

---

89 ARA, MvK, Mr 1914/2181. Letter of Director of Government Companies, contained a question on whether the inspection of labour conditions in the mines should be taken over by a mine engineer or not.

90 ARA, MvK, Mr 1915/423. Decision to control labour conditions in the mining industries was not taken over by the mining inspection, a sub-division of the Mining Service.

91 ARA, MvK, Mr 1911/407, secret letter of the governor of West Sumatra to Governor-General, 21-6-1911/1141.

92 Discussion on the history, tasks, and the role of Inspector of Labour in improving labour conditions in the Netherlands Indies, see Houben 1996.
level, namely the *controleur* of Sawahlunto, the Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar (1892-1917) or Solok (1917-1942), and the Resident/Governor of West Sumatra. As explained in Chapter II-3 in this instance, the job of the BB officials was created to indulge the interests of the company, namely to control convict labourers. In 1893, J.W. IJzerman, the Chief of Sumatran Railways Exploitation and the Ombilin coal-mines requested the Governor-General to station a BB official at Sawahlunto. One year later, in 1894, the Governor-General in Batavia issued a decree by which the *controleur* of VII Kota who was stationed in Sijunjung, had to be transferred to Sawahlunto (ANRI, Governor Decision 11-6-1894/2). The *controleur* was given facilities by the company and together with ten police officers, had the task of controlling the convict labourers outside the mine, and of punishing them on the basis of the reports made by the company. This move meant that the local BB administrators had no power to control the labourers inside the mine.

What was the relationship between the *controleur* and the Engineer-Director? Right from the outset, the relationship had not boded well (see Chapter II-3). According to former Assistant-Resident B.H.F Heuven, the Engineer-Director assumed the dominant role. Again in 1911, the Engineer-Director, Van Lier, complained that the daily control made by the Dutch local officials conflicted with aims of the company, because each was working from a different perception of the situation. Therefore, the daily checks made by these officials led to strained relations between them, in the matter of the implementation of the power of BB officials and their subordinates against the labourers.

The following description deals with various opinions about inflicting punishment by flogging with a cane. The discussion arose in various years 1901-1903, 1906 and 1910, and involved various actors of the state, beginning from the lowest and ascending to the highest level, or from Sawahlunto, Padang to Batavia and The Hague. The following discussion unequivocally exposes the different points of view between central and local Dutch administrators, between the *controleur* and the Engineer-Director of the Company, and between the *controleur*, and the Assistant-Resident of Sawahlunto. Such conditions had made the position of the Engineer-Director even more difficult as disclosed by Th. F.A. Delprat (1899-1905) the Engineer-Director.

---

93 KITLV, Korn Collection OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:15. Letter of IJzerman 23-8-1893/746 to Governor-General.
94 KITLV, Korn Collection OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:89.
95 KITLV, Korn Collection OR 435, no.368; Heuven 1931:87.
96 ARA, MvK, Mr 1911/2237, the reply letter of the Engineer-Director, Van Lier to the Inspector of Labour, 12-10-1912.
He said that he felt that he was being held over a barrel in having to deal with all this official tug-of-war.

The circumstances at Sawahlunto are somewhat more complicated than might appear at first glance and this is because various authorities, each responsible to its own head are trying to work within extremely limited area (ARA, MvK, Mr 1902/543).

The letter of the Chief Engineer quoted above was written when the issue of punishment by flogging with a cane, was being debated by the actors of the colonial state. The discussion on punishment by flogging was initiated by the findings of the investigation carried out by Dr A.G. Vorderman, the Inspector of the Public Health Department, who visited Sawahlunto in April 1901. Vorderman reported that the deplorable conditions to which the convict labourers were subjected were quite shocking: inadequate medical care, high desertion rate, frequent and regular flogging with a piece of rattan.

In his report dated 20 July 1901, Vorderman mentioned that the labourers were given inadequate medical care. In the mines, orderlies, who were themselves forced labourers, would frequently mistreat patients in their charge. The medical inspector gave a number of poignant examples to illustrate his statement that in the relations among the workers in this penal colony callousness ruled supreme.

Desertion among convict labourers was very high, as explained in the previous section. For example, in 1901 nearly all of the labourers who deserted, were recaptured very soon afterwards, either brought in by the local inhabitants for a bounty in cash, or forced to return to the mines because they realized the impossibility of trying to survive in the surrounding jungle. The few who managed to remain undetected may well have perished in the hostile terrain.

Those convict labourers who had escaped and been recaptured were flogged. Vorderman reports that they were brought to the controleur who sentenced them to this corporal punishment, which was seen as a corrective tool for deserted labourers to more discipline in future. In the hospital, six labourers thus punished died of exhaustion. Other individuals had to be treated in the hospital for months before they recuperated. Vorderman had also seen how the convict labourers were illegally thrashed by their foremen and how a police guard (politi oppasser) practised hard, accurate hitting against a banana stem that was tied to the caning stake (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:116). It was hardly surprising that, according to his calculations, one out of every seven coolies who was flogged in this way ended up in the hospital. They frequently died of their wounds or became permanent invalids. The foremen of the mining gangs had themselves risen from the ranks of convict labourers, being detainees who, in the eyes of the higher ranks, had distinguished themselves by 'good behaviour'. Hence, he advised that the foremen no longer be permitted to use this kind of punishment as a symbol of their power. He suggested to the Director of Justice that the punishment by flogging be replaced by curtailment of the premium system.

In his letter dated 9 August 1901, the Director of Department of Education, Religion, and Industry had admonished the Director of Justice to abolish punishment by flogging, because it was inhuman. It was not to be carried out until it drew blood and the victim was on the point

---

97 In his report, he corrected the total number of the labourers punished. In 1900 it was not 1,275, but 1,570 on the basis of the report of the controleur of Sawahlunto to Governor of West Sumatra. See
of collapse from fear and physical exhaustion as reported by the controleur of Sawahlunto to the Governor of West Sumatra. He argued that experience had taught that merciless lashes (onbarmhartig slaan) would not have a positive effect on the labourers but would be more likely have a reverse effect.  

The Director of the Department of Justice did not respond immediately to the suggestions of Vorderman and the Director of the department of Education, Religion, and Industry. He ordered B. Hoetink, Advisor on Chinese Affairs, to visit the Ombilin coal-mines. Hoetink arrived there only a few months after Vorderman had visited the mine. His report diverged from that of Vorderman. He began his report with providing a good impression as quoted below:

First and foremost it has struck me that the system of punishment for the Natives really proves itself here. Those condemned to undergo punishment at Sawahlunto are forced to carry out regular and useful toil. However, it is absolutely not in keeping with the Native character to find regular work pleasant and whenever he is obliged to do it, he will do his best to give it a wide berth (ARA, MvK, Vb. 27-3-1903/13).

Hoetink did not deny the appalling conditions reported by Vorderman, which can be seen from his admission that the corporal punishment was barbaric. But he said that it was indispensable if order and discipline were to be maintained. Needless to say cruelty was naturally inadmissible, and he suggested that lashes with the cane should be given in such a way that although they were painful, they did not cause injury. He described desertion as a sort of epidemic which had assumed enormous proportions even on the best tobacco plantations in Deli: an evil which was just as infectious as suicide. Little could be done about the high-handed activities of the foremen. The foremen had to use the cane to protect themselves from attacks by the convict labourers. Those who used excessive violence laid themselves open to revenge, which might cost them their lives. Indeed, occasionally a foreman would be murdered, even though he had not been guilty of maltreatment.

Hoetink ended his report with a remark that labour conditions in Ombilin were in fact better than on the plantations that he had visited in the course of his duties. His conclusion was virtually the same as what he had written in his other reports, for instance, on the living conditions of the Chinese contract labourers in the tin-mines on Belitung Island in 1904 (Erman 1995:185). It was his considered opinion that there was no reason to take special measures. This opinion tallied precisely with that issued by his superior the Director of the Department of Justice, later on.

On 20 May 1902, the Director of the Department of Justice answered the letter of the Director of the Department of Education, Religion, and Industry. He declared in writing that he


98 Figures on the practices of lashes with cane and its causes see Chapter III.2.2.
did not agree with the abolition of punishment by flogging. He considered, it had to be retained in order to maintain law and order among convict labourers. His opinion was based on Hoetink's report, and on ideas put about and familiarised by the BB officials, and the comments of Engineer-Director and Chief of Exploitation in Sawahlunto (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:118). Rather casually he said that he previously knew of the merciless lashes. The use of flogging by foremen was needed, according to him, to protect themselves. In order to pass sentence by flogging, the medical staff had to investigate which part of the body could be beaten.

It is important to note the comments of the Engineer-Director and the Chief of Exploitation on punishment by flogging. They were afraid that the light lashes suggested by the Director of Education, Religion, and Industry and his subordinate, the Chief of Mining Service would not be fearful enough for the convict labourers, because they were well familiar with violence. Thus, there were actors who were included in the group of Director of Justice, the two engineers, the controleur of Sawahlunto, Labour Inspector Hoetink, and the Director of Department of Justice himself. There is no information available to explain the hidden motives of the actors.

The Director of the Department of Education, Religion and Industry responded to his colleagues’ decision, by saying that such conditions should not prevail in state companies like the Ombilin coal-mines. He was perhaps suspicious of the motives behind the report, because at the same time, the government appointed a special commission to investigate the labour conditions in the East Sumatra plantations. According to him, the government was not consistent. On the one hand, the government criticized the private companies which had practised violent discipline by flogging undisciplined labourers, but on the other hand, the government itself gave a very bad example.

The Governor-General finally forwarded all documents to the Afdeling AI of the Minister of Colonies in The Hague to be discussed by high-ranking officials in the Netherlands. But it seemed this matter had to be kept secret. The staff member in this afdeling (department) AI, had all documents. On 1 April 1902, he sent a letter to the Minister of Colonies, saying in general that all the reports were good. He did not mention the objections raised by Vorderman about the abuse of the practice of flogging as a punishment, but only referred to regulations about medical care. The point of view given by the Director of the Department of the Education, Mr. Abendanon, only commented in the following words:

\[
\text{The Director of Education, Religion, and Industry has got himself steamed up above all about flogging with a rattan cane, which is still sometimes imposed on the convict labourers here (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:121).}
\]

Punishment by flogging went on, but it apparently did nothing to make the labourers more obedient. In fact, the number of deserters, and the refusals of work from among the labourers rose higher as demonstrated in the previous section. It was democratic in this respect at least, there was no differentiation between convict, contract and free labourers when it came to flogging.

Discussions about punishment by caning re-emerged time and again in 1906. In December 1906, the Minister of Colonies sent a letter to the Governor-General asking whether it was still necessary to sentence prisoners to a flogging (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:121). This prompted the Governor-General to ask the opinion of the Director of the Department of Justice. The Director of Justice felt it was necessary to maintain flogging as a deterrent and re-issued the regulation on the basis of the opinions of local BB officials throughout the Netherlands Indies. The Raad van Indie really agreed with this suggestion, but disagreed on reissuing the regulation. One of the members, Mr. C.H. Nieuwenhuys, dared to differ and spoke his mind on the recommendation of the Director of Justice. In his view it was impossible to approve of flogging. He wrote as follows:

Occasionally this punishment is appropriate and frightening, but not for habitual criminals. No one has ever demonstrated that flogging with a rattan came in more highly effective as a preventive measure than other punishment (as quoted in Bruinink-Darlang 1986:133).

He argued that the reasons given by the Director of the Department of Justice and the local BB officials were not at all genuine. Because, as quoted above, nobody could prove that punishment by flogging was preventive (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:133). In order to solve this problem, he then suggested substituting other punishment, for instance by extending the working hours or by assigning heavier tasks. The Governor-General agreed with his suggestion. Therefore, he sent a letter to the Director of Justice saying that this Department would have to carry out investigations as suggested by the members of the Raad van Indie.

It seems that the problem of flogging as a punishment could not be solved. Therefore, for a second time, the Governor-General asked the advice of the members of the Raad van Indie. This body was for maintaining this form of punishment simply because of the lack of prison staff. However, the Raad van Indie felt the need to add some new regulations, especially in relation to the practice of solitary confinement combined with hard labour. On the basis of these suggestions on 29 July 1908, the Governor-General sent a letter to the Minister of Colonies, saying that the Director of Justice and almost all Residents wanted to retain flogging (Bruinink-Darlang 1986:136). Finally, agreement was reached on solitary confinement with hard labour, and punishment by flogging still continued.

ARA, MvK, Mr 1907/827. Letter of the Governor-General to the Director of the Department of Justice, 4-8-1907.


The Raad van Indie asked the Director of the Department of Justice to compile annual statistics about the practice of flogging and other punishments in the prisons. It is impossible to establish whether this task was ever undertaken. But it was certainly not found in het Verslag over de Hervormingen van het Gevangeniswezen over de Jaren 1911 tot en met 1916. In the report of 1916-1920, the total number of deserters and the practice of flogging, including the deserters in the Ombilin coal-mines will be found. See Bruinink-Darlang 1989:136.
Although matters might have quietened down for a while, they flared up again. In 1910, the Governor of West Sumatra intervened in the problem surrounding the discipline of the labourers. He issued a decree in 1910 banning flogging for those contract labourers who were sentenced under the Penal Sanction. It was replaced by solitary confinement, with additional hard labour. This was the first time a BB official at local level had demonstrated his power to discipline the labourers. The Governor of West Sumatra felt this was a whole different ball game from previous occasions when the controleur of Sawahlunto had bowed to the wishes of the Engineer-Director.

After the new regulation had been implemented, a long discussion ensured about who was responsible for the high number of labourers punished by flogging (Van Empel 1994:76). This discussion raged between the local BB officials and the Engineer-Director. The controleur of Sawahlunto and the Governor apportioned the blame to the Engineer-Director, because the labourers had been checked before they were punished by a physician who was an employee of the mine, and not therefore an independent agent. The Engineer-Director rejected this argument and said that he had never exerted pressure on the physician. The debates were endless. Eventually, the Governor-General decided to close the matter once and for all and silent the debate.

The above description indicates that the intervention of the local BB officials took place in 1910. The attitude of those local BB officials was clearly different from those employed in the BB department in Batavia who clearly supported the Director of Department of Justice and the company. It is interesting to see why the intervention happened just in that year. The comments of the Governor-General showed clearly that there was a difference of opinion between the Dutch BB administrators at local and central level. The Governor intervened because his subordinates, the controleur and the Assistant-Resident of Tanah Datar were being pressured by the Engineer-Director who had strong backing from Batavia. In this regard, it is interesting to follow the comments of the Governor of West Sumatra in his secret letter to the Governor-General on February 1911.

In view of the fact that the head of exploitation found so much support in Batavia...this branch of service [i.e. the Ombilin mine] was like a state within a state and some predecessors were afraid of nothing so much as a confrontation with it.

The discussion of discipline by violence and terror between the various actors of the state was not finished yet. This problem was to be discussed again in 1920s.

103 It is interesting to note the comment of the Governor of West Sumatra on this in his secret letter to the Governor-General, dated 13 February 1911. He cynically said that the private company did not differ much from the state owned company. See ARA, MvK, Mr 1911/407.

104 ARA, MvK, Mr 1911/407. Secret letter of the Governor of West Sumatra to Governor-General, 13-2-1911.