Miners, managers and the state: A socio-political history of the Ombilin coal-mines, West Sumatra, 1892-1996
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In the preceding chapters I have discussed the changing socio-political worlds of the mining society at the Ombilin-coal mines. These alterations cannot be separated from changes in the wider socio-political and economic context of the state. I am referring to fluctuations in economic development of coal and the changing (notions of the) role of the state. Fluctuations in economic development such as demand for coal, the Depression, inflation, and the changing control by the state affected how the management organized its control over labourers, and in their turn the miners' reactions to this. The politics of the miners towards the managers, whether those were of resistance or accommodation, unorganized or organized, should be understood in relation to these changes. Themes, which played an important role in the social-political relationships between miners and managers, were, violence, class, and ethnicity.

1. Actors and Linkages

At least four sets of actors were involved in the realization of these themes over the period 1892-1996. The actors were the miners, foremen, managers, and the (nation) state, including political parties and the military. Each had a different background and motives. From one period to another, the social, cultural and political backgrounds of the actors changed, and the pattern of social relations between the miners and their managers also shifted, but principally they had the same purposes, namely they were all struggling to seek security, protection, status, and power. Social relationships in the form of resistance or accommodation were reflected under both the authoritarian and non-authoritarian state.

The first group of actors was the miners. Initially they were typically young, physically strong males, and were not accompanied by their families. The miners were differentiated into categories created by the company (convict, contract, free and casual labourers), and into sub-groups (criminals, political prisoners), while ethnic differences were accentuated by the presence of Javanese, Sundanese, Buginese, Makassere and others) (Chapter III). Once they were employed at the mine it was as if they had entered into a closed box or had been trapped in the cage of production. Between the 1920s and the 1940s, the background of the miners changed. Convict and contract labourers gradually disappeared, and were replaced by free and casual labourers. A working class community emerged and was marked by the establishing of coolie villages in the midst of local society (Chapter IV). A sense of common identity as a working class group began to form. Social contacts between them and with local people also developed and intensified, especially after the Japanese occupation and the Indonesian Revolution. The miners emerged from the cage of production, some were involved in the battle groups, and others used economic local resources in order to survive in these periods of massive disruption. In the following period (1950-1965), the miners involved themselves in various political parties, trade unions, as well as social and cultural associations, which created multiple identities and solidarity (Chapters VI, VII). These ties cut across the social hierarchy of the mining society. Under
the New Order regime, the miners were put firmly back in the cage of production, and their multiple choice were removed as they were united from above into a ruling party (Golkar) and a corporate state organization (Korpri).

The second group of actors was the foremen. Foremen played an important role in transmitting the work discipline of the capitalist culture of the managers to the miners. This study shows that the kind of control they exercised would depend on their cultural background and political alliances. The foremen were divided into two groups: senior and junior foremen. Initially the senior foremen were Europeans, but after the 1920s they were Indo-Europeans. The presence of the Indo-European culture proved not only a bridge between the European and the indigenous culture; it had a positive effect on the formation of social relations with the miners as had happened in Java (Stoler 1985:648). After Indonesian Independence, the role of senior foremen was taken over by men from the Minangkabau ethnic group who politically were mostly leaders of the PSI or the Masyumi parties and their associated trade unions. The second group of foremen was appointed from among the miners themselves, and were mostly Javanese. Their involvement in politics began in the 1920s, when they became active in the communist nationalist movement in which they joined with local political leaders. After Indonesian Independence, they were leaders of the PKI and its mass organizations, forming a wider network with local and national communist leaders and the left-wing of military.

The third group of actors was comprised of the managers. All managers (Dutch or Indonesian) were different in background and political ideology. During the colonial period, when all managers were Dutch, each man who held the position had his own style of exercising control over labourers. Before the 1920s, when demand for coal was high in the service of the colonial state, the (Dutch) managers kept a very firm hand on the reins. But during the Depression and the final years of the colonial government in Indonesia, the managers showed a greater concern for the miners and stimulated the integration of the mining society into the town. In the post-colonial period, the ethnic, social and political backgrounds of the managers changed, affecting the style of management and social relations with foremen and miners. Before 1960 the managers were Minangkabau, members of the PSI and Masyumi parties, appointed on the basis of suggestions made by the mining society and the local officials. In the post-1960 period, they were non-Minangkabau, for the most part Javanese military and the decision to appoint them was made by the central government.

The fourth group of actors was represented by institutions of the state, colonial and post-colonial, which were characterized by changing forms of control and attitudes. In the early years of exploitation, various state agencies had differences of opinion about labour control by flogging (Chapter III.5). In the second decade of the twentieth century, the state agencies’ views on labour control shifted from flogging to coercion or from non-economic to economic coercion. After Indonesian Independence, when the state became a nation (Anderson 1983), this phase was marked by strong control exercised by the nation/people and the weak control of the state. These conditions were reflected in Ombilin history, when politics embraced the mine. Political party leaders, at both local and national levels, set their sights on the mine and mobilized the miners for their own political interests. These conditions were complicated by the effects of local political development, the PRRI rebellion, different interests of the leaders of the political parties, and the left and right wings of the military group. The strong control exercised by people in the mine was reflected by open protests made by the miners against the managers.
The year 1960 was a political watershed, after which state actors moved into more sharply polarized positions between the supporters of communist and non-communist parties. All of these permutations and combinations were expressed in the daily life of the mining society.

2. Violence, Class, and Ethnicity

Violence, class, and ethnicity were important threads, which were inextricably woven into the social relations in the mining society. During the period under study, these three persisted although they developed and changed, assuming different accents and intensity. Sometimes ethnicity and class overlapped, and sometimes not, depending on the motives propelling the actors, and socio-political pressures of the state. Violence was often used to enforce control, but conversely, for the miners, it was also a means to articulate group solidarity and resistance. In the early phase, when there were no alternatives, ethnicity was used as an instrument to solve conflicts. Later, new structures emerged such as trade unions, political parties, and associations which offered alternative bonds of solidarity, and while ethnicity never ceased to be an important instrument of group solidarity, it tended to run parallel to class.

The first period (1892-1920) was the time of virtual imprisonment, in which the miners could be imagined in the metaphor of rats in a closed box, living at the mine, and isolated from social contacts with the local people. During this “prison” period, physical violence was generalized at every level; miners, managers, and the state, and it can be divided into three different forms: 1) random, incidental, and individual; 2) by groups; 3) institutionalized. The first type of physical violence was the sort, which erupted through individual conflicts. The second type was the outcome of conflicts between groups, gangs, big men, and between different ethnic groups. Both the first and second types, individual and collective conflicts, had their roots in the competitive struggle to get scarce resources such as food, money, women or a partner for a homosexual relationship. Both the first and second types of violence invariably ended with fighting, injuring, and even killing, either inside or outside the mine. The enclave of Ombilin became a criminal colony. Here I want to underline that it was primarily homosexuality which expressed internal tensions among the miners and played an important part in the brutalized violence in the prison of Sawahlunto, replicating the situation found among the prisoners in India (Arnold 1994:156).

The second type was marked by ethnic violence, which was expressed by mass fighting between the different ethnic groups among the miners. The use of different languages, feelings of ethnic superiority, and the quest for scarce resources, could all lead to ethnic violence, which was marked by individual and collective fights. This study has found that until the second decade of the twentieth century, the intensity of ethnic violence was high. Latent ethnic consciousness takes on a whole new meaning when a group has to compete with another ethnic group, especially when the situation is fraught by tension. The evidence turned up by this study shows that ethnic eruptions could occur between Madurese and Buginese, or between Madurese and Javanese. The ethnic violence persisted after the independence, but by then it was intensified by intermingling with class and political interests.

The third type of violence was institutionalized by the colonial state. When the demand for coal was high, the colonial state introduced physical violence as a tool of control over the
miners to force them to work to obtain maximum results. The flogging institutionalized by the colonial state cannot be attributed merely to the introduction of the miners to capitalist culture; it was just as readily spawned by state fears of the politics of resistance by the working class, especially given the presence of criminals. Punishment by flogging was very common, normal, and far worse and more sadistic than in the East Sumatran plantations and in the Banka and Belitung tin-mines. There was no great degree of consensus among various state agencies about such violence, though broadly speaking until the second decade of the twentieth century, the colonial state continued to believe in it as the only effective means of control.

During the second period (1920-1942) the Ombilin coal-mines entered a new world, when a colonial company needed a professional labour force and more efficient control. This period was marked by the decline in individual and ethnic violence. The regime of control by flogging imposed by the colonial state lost its legitimacy, because it was misused, manipulated, corrupted, and colluded in by state agents such as overseers, foremen, caretakers, and guards to advance their own interests. The decline in violence and ethnic conflict was set in motion by structural changes such as the style of state control, shifting from flogging to social sanctions, the changing composition of the labourers, and the emergence of the mining community. The management began to realize that, first and foremost, a regime of physical violence, even though it may have been regarded as fairly normal in those days, did not benefit the company. Secondly it became more aware of the tension and potential for physical violence among the existing groups of the miners. Having woken up to the importance of decent conditions, the management tried to create a secure and conducive environment for them. Changes in labour control by management were caused by the high degree of resistance shown by the miners, expressed in running away and avoiding work.

Violence and ethnic conflicts change in nature, because nationalism and class emerged as bridges between different ethnic groups of the miners, weakening the omnipotence of ethnicity as a distinguishing factor. Nationalism and class, as these were propagated by the leaders of the Sarekat Rakyat and the PKI, proved to be means of bonding together various social groups inside (foremen, clerks, police officers) and outside the mines (petty traders, teachers, local peasants, and religious and political leaders), which were all struggling to achieve Independence. This demonstrates that at the Ombilin mines, nationalism and the ideology of the class struggle proved strong enough slogans to bridge ethnic differentiation, and to cut across social hierarchy, thereby integrating some of the disparate indigenous groups in the mine into the society in the town. This new channel transposed the forms of miners’ resistance towards the managers, shifting these from individual, unorganized resistance to collective and organized protests expressed through a set of strikes culminating in the uprising of 1926/1927. In this regard, labour protests can be explained as the manifestations of the desire of different social groups to achieve their own interests, mirroring the situation found among coal-miners in Jharia, India (Ghosh 1995).

The uprising was abortive. Many of those who had participated were arrested, imprisoned, and even executed. This event was followed by a period marked by stringent state control and the Depression, a bleak time in which the company faced difficult years trying to market its coal. The influence of these internal and external conditions meant that violence ebbed and ethnicity faded in significance as management, foremen, and miners began to become more accommodating towards each other in their joint battle to survive. The reciprocal process of accommodation between miners and managers also stemmed from the changing composition of the mining society. It was no longer composed of convicts or contract labourers, but of miners
who had made a free choice to work there and were accompanied by their families. The presence of the Indo-European culture among overseers and the shift in the managers’ attitudes, leading them to be concerned with the social life of the town society, also made a cogent contribution. Control by the state was strong indeed, but socially the mining society was open, and was even integrated into town society by the efforts of managers. In this context, the former enclave society gradually lost its shape. This emerged even more plainly as the years passed, the border between mining and town society became very blurred, especially in the wake of the Japanese occupation and Revolution.

The Japanese occupation (1942-1945) and the Indonesian Revolution (1945-1949) were a gloomy time for the company, marked by a dramatic decline in coal production. During this period, violence was firmly back in the saddle, but it was no longer ignited by ethnic conflicts. Under the iron hand of the Japanese company, Hokkaido Steamship Co.Ltd., the miners found themselves again relegated to the status of *romusha* or convict labourers, employed by the company not just in the mines, but also to projects to supply the Japanese war needs. The burdensome economic pressures strengthened class solidarity, both within one ethnic group and between different ethnic groups. However, solidarity between different ethnic groups was no longer breached when young Minangkabau members from the *Barisan Maut* killed some rich Javanese at the beginning of the Revolution. During the brief Dutch return to the mine in 1948-1949, Javanese remained loyal to the mine, and this led to new outbursts of ethnic conflict between the Javanese who were labelled ‘*kacung Belanda*’ or Dutch lackeys, and the local people who were involved in the struggle for the Republic.

During the period of 1950-1965 (Chapters VI, VII) violence in ethnic and class relations reached an even higher pitch, often inter-mingling. Violence occurred between different ethnic groups with disparate ideologies, namely between the communist Javanese foremen and miners in opposition to the socialist and Masyumi Minangkabau managers and overseers. Ethnic identity and political alliances reinforced each other, and this is testified to by the wider alliances of the Javanese foremen and miners with local, national communist leaders, and between the Minangkabau socialist and Masyumi overseers and managers with their own linkages. Their shared ethnic identity and political alliances strengthened the position of the Javanese foremen and miners in facing managers. This period was characterized by a set of strikes in 1953.

In the 1950s, violence erupted in ethnic and class relations when the coal industry was trapped in a bleak Indonesian economy and state control faltered. While the state remained weak, the nation (the people) invaded the state and their grip was strong through the formation of political parties and mass organizations (Anderson 1983). Those conditions provided the mining society with many alternatives for solving conflicts through membership of various political parties, trade unions, and socio-cultural associations. Quite apart from the violence marring ethnic and class relations, physical violence within one single ethnic group also re-emerged, becoming especially marked after the *Bina Karya* people were recruited in the 1960s. As among the labourers during the colonial period, the motives for resorting to physical violence were the same, namely to obtain scarce resources such as food, water, and women.

Ethnicity does not seem to have been one of the factors, which determined ideology, especially after the PRRI rebellion. One indication of this is the fact that the Javanese miners shifted their allegiance from the communist to the socialist trade union, considering this a wise move when the leaders of the communist union were captured by the adherents of the PRRI. When the Central Army from Jakarta arrived in Sawahlunto to protect the town from attacks by the PRRI, a mixture of ethnic alliances and class-based politics emerged. One symptom of this
was the close relationship between the Javanese miners and the members of central military who were also mostly from Java and were sympathizers of the PKI. The Javanese military acted as protector of the Javanese miners and foremen. This was a time during which ethnicity was not particularly relevant to the Minangkabau labourers in determining their political ideology as it had been previously when they were involved either in the Masyumi or socialist trade unions. With their security at stake, and in search of economic and political protection, most Minangkabau labourers, especially those who lived in the frontier areas, became members of the communist trade union. This would seem to suggest that neither Javanese nor Minangkabau ethnicity was a definitive factor in determining ideology, but the search for security and protection became the main priority.

After 1960, and especially in the period around 30 September 1965, the sharp political tensions at the national level between communists and non-communists were also expressed in the daily life of the mining society, between the SBTI-SOBSI and PKTB-SOKSI, within and between members of different associations. Political tensions shaped ethnic, labour relations and labour control. Ideological and ethnic conflicts were sharpened by the one-sided intervention of the military manager who compromised with the miners. Under these circumstances, violence among the miners and between the Javanese miners and foremen and Minangkabau overseers was based on economic and political interests, especially during the period of high inflation in the Indonesian economy. Class struggle ideology, which had been introduced by the PKI, suited the miners’ battle to improve their living conditions.

Like the colonial state in the period after 1926/1927, the New Order regime (1965-1996), which was backed by military, put emphasis on its policy of economic development and political stability, and on the distancing of the common people, whom they preferred to designate as the floating mass, from politics. The Ombilin managers, both military and technocrats, put the miners firmly back into the cage of production, forcing them to become compulsory members of the Golkar party. Under the New Order regime violence continued, but ethnic conflict decreased and class conflicts were suppressed. The managers and overseers practiced various forms of intimidation on the miners to force them to acquiesce in the discipline of Golkar (Chapter VIII). This strategy failed as far as generating obedience among the miners was concerned. The politics of resistance continued unabated, and in its characteristics it resembled the strategies of the colonial period, namely individual and unorganized resistance.

In the introduction I formulated a series of questions (p.7) which I have attempted to answer in the course of my study. My success in this respect was uneven. Informal relationships are by definition poorly documented, political sensitivities and fears still inhibit discussions of the more recent past. Nonetheless, I hope that this study will contribute to discussions of the socio-political relationships involving the world of production and to great extent recognition of continuities and differentiation of past and present.

The lesson the Ombilin coal-mines can teach us is that above all miners were not are passive objects, whether they be under an authoritarian or non-authoritarian state. They form a social force of their own. They have incontrovertibly given shape to their own role in the history of Ombilin.

This study ends in 1996, two years before the New Order regime came to an end. Nevertheless, problems of ethnic violence have continued and even increased in frequency and intensity. The Reform Cabinet is trying to open closed channels in an effort to solve smouldering conflicts, taking a leaf out of the Old Order regime’s book from the 1950s. Nevertheless, economic problems remained difficult to solve, seemingly even insurmountable. As social and
economic conditions deteriorate, ethnicity has again become a source of conflict. My hopes are that conflicts may be overcome in a future nation state in which human dignity, democracy, and a fair economic development are central points of concern.
After 1966, and especially in the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s, the sharp decline in the number of armed combatants and the subsequent improvement in the living conditions of the general population led to an easing of international pressure on Indonesia. This situation encouraged the implementation of economic development programs, which were designed to improve the quality of life for the general population. The New Order government emphasized economic development and social welfare programs, which were aimed at reducing poverty and improving the standard of living for the majority of the population. The government also implemented land reform programs and provided financial assistance to farmers to boost agricultural production.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the focus of the government shifted to the development of industrialization and modernization. The government implemented policies to attract foreign investment and promote the growth of the private sector. The government also implemented education and health programs to improve the quality of life for the general population. The government also implemented programs to reduce the impact of natural disasters and environmental degradation.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the government implemented policies to reduce poverty and improve the standard of living for the general population. The government also implemented programs to improve the quality of education and health care. The government also implemented policies to reduce corruption and improve the transparency of government operations.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the government implemented policies to reduce unemployment and improve the standard of living for the general population. The government also implemented programs to improve the quality of education and health care. The government also implemented policies to reduce corruption and improve the transparency of government operations.