

INVITED ARTICLE

“Do Not Harm the Decorum”: Mixed Courts and Cloth in Colonial Indonesia

Sanne Ravensbergen

Department of History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
E-mail: sravens@umich.edu

Various elites in colonial Indonesia eagerly embraced the brand-new technology of photography from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Men and women commissioned photos to be taken, by professional photographers, of themselves, their families, and their surroundings.¹ The images were used for business cards and holiday greetings or were carefully arranged in family photo albums, thus turning photographs into three-dimensional and dynamic objects.² Colonial archives also contain photos of the mixed law courts where Indonesian, Dutch, Chinese and Indo-European men held judicial positions administering law over the non-European population of the colony. The law court photographs, the earliest dating back to the 1860s and the most recent from the 1930s, show a number of diverse individuals gathered and placed in an organized seating arrangement. The black-and-white images display how spaces—whether inside court buildings in the cities or outside in the countryside—were transformed into legal arenas via a plurality of people, paper, and cloth. The photos provide us with not only

¹ Gael Newton, “Silver Streams. Photography Arrives in Southeast Asia 1840s–1880s,” in *Garden of the East. Photography in Indonesia 1850s–1940s*, ed. Gael Newton (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2014), 18–19. The first commercial photo studio opened in Batavia in 1857 and, in 1872, the first Javanese professional photographer, Kassian Céphas, opened his commercial studio in Yogyakarta: Matt Cox, “Kassian Céphas, a Self-Made Man,” in *Garden of the East. Photography in Indonesia 1850s–1940s*, ed. Gael Newton (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2014), 65.

² Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart. “Introduction: Photographs as Objects,” in *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (London: Routledge, 2004), 1; Susie Protschky, “Camera Ethica Photography, Modernity and the Governed in Late-Colonial Indonesia,” in *Photography, Modernity and the Governed in Late-Colonial Indonesia*, ed. Susie Protschky (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 25; and Prita Meier, “The Surface of Things: A History of Photography from the Swahili Coast,” *The Art Bulletin* 101 (2019): 48–69.

a breadth of information and a fascinating history of photography and law, but also indirectly grant access to other historical material visible in the photos. One of these is the range of textiles used in the courtroom, which are often not described in the written archives or always preserved, due to their fragile nature. Through a closer reading of photographs, we can see the use of cloth in the colonial courtroom.

The black-and-white stills caused color to disappear, but, in reality, the courtrooms were vibrant constellations. Indigo and brown *kain panjang* (long cloth, worn around the hip), yellow *payongs* (formal umbrellas), and a green tablecloth filled the space. The criminal cases tried by the regional mixed courts (the *landraad*) were often deemed of minor importance to those in power; in the photos, we only see the back or the side of local suspects and witnesses sitting on the floor, their faces turned away from the camera. Yet, considerable colonial correspondence and regulations were devoted to the careful curation of an amalgamation of the highest regional representatives of a variety of groups in the courtroom, including the cloth that was worn by these men, placed somewhere in the room, or draped over the table. Simultaneously, complex Javanese hierarchies were translated onto and through cloth, and its colors and patterns were used in the courtroom. Beyond being merely staged curiosities, or props, in a colonial courtroom that functioned as a “theatre play”—as this was how the photos were often described through the colonial gaze³—the materials in the pictures reveal a courtroom of semiotic richness and plurality, where different actors were signaling distinct messages to multiple audiences. As is common in courtrooms, the placement of furniture and the location of judicial actors were used to purposefully emanate legitimate power and justice⁴. But in these mixed courts, it was the display of a pluralistic world and jurisdictional layering that mattered more than a monolithic reflection of state law.

Studying cloth here, with its visible and invisible messages, allows us to study the various layers of (mis-)communication that were inherent to a mixed courtroom filled not only with a number of objects but also a plurality of languages, symbols, political interests, and legal cultures. In her recent work, Laura F. Edwards presents a legal history of clothing in the nineteenth-century United States that gives a female perspective on what was considered valuable property needed to survive in a society, in particular a colonial one. She shows how both married and enslaved women could legally make a claim to textiles even though they had very limited claims to other kinds of property.⁵ The value of cloth and clothing, whether it is predominantly financial or cultural, or both, provides an alternative archive and expands legal history conversations about the move beyond textual judicial sources that have in recent

³ Liesbeth Ouwehand. “Photographic Representations of the Performing Indonesian,” in *Recollecting Resonances: Indonesian-Dutch Musical Encounters*, ed. Bart Barendregt and Els Bogaers (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 31–60.

⁴ John Hazard, “Furniture Arrangement as a Symbol of Judicial Roles,” *A Review of General Semantics* 1 (1962): 181–88.

⁵ Laura F. Edwards, *Only the Clothes on her Back. Clothing & the Hidden History of Power in the 19th-Century United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 3–6.

years emphasized the physical spaces in which legal ideas were formulated, including spaces outside of the courts,⁶ as well as the hidden, yet central figures such as clerks and scribes in processes of lawmaking and legal practice.⁷

The agency of local litigants, the work of indigenous legal agents, and geographical implications have increasingly gained attention in the study of colonial legal cultures and have shown the necessity of including spatial perspectives on law. The visual dimensions of lawmaking offer a distinct way to think about “doing law” in a colonial context. In Java, paper as a written document, proof of legal validity, or symbolic representation of a legal tradition, was important,⁸ although less so in the context of criminal cases administered by the colonial mixed courts. It was the space of the court session, and the temporal moment within which the case occurred, that was of greater impact; here objects often spoke louder than words.

This essay will explore the textiles visible in four courtroom photos commissioned by Indonesian, Dutch, and Indo-European men in positions of power on the island of Java in the second half of the nineteenth century, taken by professional photographers, and with different aims for representation and preservation of the means and importance of the mixed courtroom. The first photo presented is the oldest surviving photo of a mixed court in Java. It was taken by the British photography studio, Woodbury & Page, in the 1860s, at the request of Adhipati Ario Tjandro Adhi Negoro (Tjondronegoro) of Pati in North Java (Figure 1).⁹ One of his four sons, Hadiningrat, later vividly recalled the arrival of the photographer in the nearest large city, Semarang: “I was an apprentice of the first Woodbury, who arrived in Semarang around 1863. Photography back then was relatively harder, because one used wet plates and had to prepare everything yourselves. Nowadays, all this has become so much easier.”¹⁰ While the young Hadiningrat learned about the techniques and art of photography, his father, Tjondronegoro, had photos taken of his four sons, his retinue, and himself, and, of course, of a (staged) law court session.¹¹

The photo represents a court session of a *landraad*; a regional law court that administered mostly criminal and smaller civil cases involving Indonesians, Chinese, and other non-Europeans. In the larger Javanese cities, such as

⁶ See for example: Pratiksha Baxi, “Introduction: Picturing Sociological Scenes – Social Life of Law in India,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 53 (2019): 4.

⁷ Some exemplary works include: Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj. Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Paul Halliday, “Authority in the Archives,” *Critical Analysis of Law* 1 (2014): 110–42; and Bianca Premo and Yanna Yannakakis, “A Court of Sticks and Branches: Indian Jurisdiction in Colonial Mexico and Beyond,” *The American Historical Review* 124 (2019): 28–55.

⁸ Tom Hoogervorst, “Legal Diglossia, Lexical Borrowing, and Mixed Juridical Systems in Early Islamic Java and Sumatra,” in *Islamic Law in the Indian Ocean World: Texts, Ideas and Practices*, ed. Mahmood Kooria and Sanne Ravensbergen (London: Routledge, 2021), 40–64.

⁹ This was Walter Woodbury, who moved back to London in 1863. After that, his brother, Albert Woodbury, joined the business in 1864: Newton, “Silver Streams,” 21; and Steven Wachlin, *Woodbury & Page: Photographers Java* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994).

¹⁰ C.J. Hasselman, “Pangeran Ario Hadiningrat, een Javaansch pionier,” *De Gids* 79 (1915): 249–300.

¹¹ *Ibid.*



Figure 1. Landraad in Pati (Java, Indonesia), by Woodbury & Page, ca. 1865. Seated on chairs from left to right: Chinese Captain Oei Hotam; unnamed court member; court member Raden Adipati Ario Tjondro Adhi Negoro, bupati (regent) of Pati; president of the court P.W.A. van Spall; secretary (griffier) H.D. Wiggers; unnamed court member; penghulu (Islamic advisor) hadji Minhat. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 3516.

Batavia, Semarang, and Surabaya, court sessions took place in court buildings that resembled the neo-classical style of their European counterparts, such as the Council of Justice (*Raad van Justitie*), although on a smaller scale with less impressive pillars. At the *landraad*, the buildings were smaller, the procedures were shorter, and the punishments were harsher. In smaller towns in the countryside, *landraad* court sessions were held on the front porch of the house of the Dutch resident or in the *pendopo* (open meeting hall) of the Javanese *bupati* (regent), as in Tjondronegoro's photo.¹² Positioned fourth from left in the photo, Tjondronegoro looks directly into the lens. There are two other Javanese judges present sitting on chairs, flanked by the Chinese

¹² C.W. Wormser, *Drie en dertig jaren op Java. Deel 1: In de rechterlijke macht* (Amsterdam: W. ten Have, 1941), 35. Green tables in European law courts were a widespread phenomenon, from the fifteenth-century Court of Common Pleas in England, to the sovereign councils in the French empire, to early twentieth-century township courts in Russia and present-day law courts in Poland. I thank Jane Burbank, Michael Gauvreau, Nancy Christie, Lukasz Korporowicz, and David J. Seipp for sharing this information during the *Law and History Review* conference in 2020.

captain and the Islamic advisor, the *penghulu* at the left and right sides of the table, respectively. Seated at the center of the table is the Dutch resident presiding over the court, assisted by an Indo-European secretary. The *jaksa* (prosecutor) is standing on the left. Seated on the floor are several assistants with paper files laid out in front of them, while the two suspects are seated in front of the table with their backs to the camera. Also visible are thick law books on the table, papers piled up, a gown, a tablecloth, a Quran, hats, uniform coats, and decorative patterns on the sarongs of the Javanese court members. The umbrella carrier of one of the high-ranked court members peeks out from behind the table. What did the abundance of cloth in this courtroom make visible exactly? How? And to whom? How can we distil these messages from the materiality of the mixed courtroom?

Both the Dutch colonizer and the Javanese *priyayi* would use cloth as a means to strengthen their rule.¹³ The Dutch court president would always ensure that the large table in the courtroom was covered with a green tablecloth, even when the court was organized outside, which, from a European perspective, represented a table where men of power made important decisions.¹⁴ The Javanese population, perhaps over time, recognized the green tablecloth as a law court object, but inscribed their own meanings upon it. In post-colonial Indonesia, law courts continue to have green tables (*meja hijau*), although the color green is more commonly associated as being representative of Islam.¹⁵ The verb “*dimejahijaukan*” (to be taken to the green table) means “to be taken to court.” In Suriname, another former Dutch colony, the expression “*naar de groene tafel slepen*” (to drag someone to the green table) similarly signals the continuation of the symbolic workings of green cloth.

Despite the emphasis on the green table as the centerpiece, the Dutch were not seeking to entirely reproduce a Dutch courtroom in their colonies. Instead, they saw strength in a plural courtroom where each legal actor—whether it be the prosecutor (*jaksa*), judge, clerk, or *penghulu*—was expected to wear their ‘traditional’ costume, meticulously described in the formal regulations (*staatsblad*). In Java, especially, the *landraad* with its abundance of court members, advisors, and officials in formal attire as well as its broad range of objects, consciously made visible colonial rule based on a system of “dual rule.” By the early nineteenth century, the sultanates of Cirebon (1445–1807) and Banten (1527–1813) in West Java and the outer regions of the central Javanese Mataram empire (1586–1755) had become “the government lands” of the Dutch colonial state. Only in the former center of Mataram, a geographically

¹³ Henk Schulte Nordholt, “Introduction,” in *Outward Appearances. Dressing the State & Society in Indonesia*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology Press, 1997), 1–37; Arnout van der Meer, *Performing Power: Cultural Hegemony, Identity, and Resistance in Colonial Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 20.

¹⁴ See for example: Leiden University Library, H 1206, Collectie M.J.A. Oostwoud Wijdenes, “Belevenissen van een rechter in voormalig Nederlands-Oost-Indië,” 11.

¹⁵ From the twelfth century onwards, green has been a unifying color across the Islamic world, being associated with paradise, resurrection, and the Prophet Muhammad: Michel Pastoureau, *Green: The History of a Color* (transl. by Jody Glodding, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 49.

limited area referred to, in Dutch, as the “kings lands” (*Vorstenlanden*), the Sultan of Yogyakarta and the Sunan of Surakarta remained in place. The “government lands” covered most of the island however. There, a more direct colonial rule was executed while the pre-colonial regional elites, the *priyayi* class who had been local representatives of the Javanese kings and sultans, continued exercising their regional power. Tjondronegoro and his prestigious *priyayi* family strategically occupied several important *bupati* (regent; highest regional Javanese official) and chief *jaksa* (prosecutor) positions in nineteenth-century Java.¹⁶ Specifically, the layers of cloth in the mixed courtrooms allowed for multiple ways of communicating in different legal languages. Jurisdictional layering was made visible in the courtroom through cloth. A black robe, a *kain panjang*, and a turban coexisted seemingly seamlessly, veiling the inequalities and contestations inherent to a colonial situation of legal pluralism.¹⁷

For the *priyayi*, it was *batik* that was central to their cultural and political identity. Cloth in the Indian Ocean world has a long and rich history of international trade networks, with Indian and Chinese cotton and silk being traded to all corners of the ocean, including Java.¹⁸ Cotton planting and weaving happened in Java, too, and was mostly for domestic use.¹⁹ After 1800, Javanese textiles became less connected to Indian Ocean influences and were increasingly identified with the typical patterns and techniques of Javanese *batik*. North-coastal districts (*pasisir*) used more “gaudy colors” such as yellow, green, and red. Central-Javanese *batik* was predominantly deep blue and brown.²⁰ The most expensive *batiks* were made with a *canting* (a Central-Javanese technique executed with a hot-wax pen that would become dominant across Java after 1800), whereas the prominence of the Sundanese (Western Java) *simbut* technique using rice paste declined.²¹ The Central-Javanese technique of using a *canting*, or wax-pen, meant that the patterns on the fabric were being “written” and

¹⁶ Heather A. Sutherland, *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite: The Colonial Transformation of the Javanese Priyayi* (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979).

¹⁷ Colonial legislation in 1859 (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Algemene Sekretarie, Exh. Geheim 6-7-1859-Y1) decided that only pilgrims who had performed the pilgrimage to Mecca were allowed to wear Arab garments such as a turban: Kees van Dijk, “Sarong, Jubbah, and Trousers. Appearance as a Means of Distinction and Discrimination,” in *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997), 58, fn. 8.

¹⁸ Pedro Machado, Sarah Fee, and Gwyn Campbell, *Textile Trades, Consumer Cultures, and the Material Worlds of the Indian Ocean: An Ocean of Cloth* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Mary-Louise Totton, “Virtual Cloth in a Javanese Candi,” in *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies*, ed. Ruth Barnes (London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 117.

¹⁹ Pierre van der Eng, “Why Didn’t Colonial Indonesia have a Competitive Cotton Textile Industry?” *Modern Asian Studies* 47 (2013):1019–54.

²⁰ Alit Djajasoebrata, *Flowers of the Universe: Textiles of Java* (Amsterdam: LM Publishers, 2018), 28–29, 79.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26–28, 49. *Kain simbut* was still present in Western Java in the early twentieth century at the village level, however. The *priyayi* Djajadiningrat family also owned *kain simbut* heirlooms: Rens Heringa, “Upland Tribe, Coastal Village, and Inland Court: Revised Parameters for Batik Research,” in *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Mary Kahlenberg (New York: Delmonico Books, 2010), 126–27, 132.



Figure 2. Court session of a mixed court in Banten (Java, Indonesia), 1888. Seated on chairs from left to right: Court member Mas Ngabei Wirjadidjaja, patih of Anjer; court member Entol Goenadaja, wedono of Cilegon; court member Toebagoes Jachja, wedono of Kramatawoe; unnamed court member; court member Raden Mas Pennah; president of the court Mr. Heringa; secretary Mr. Blommestein; jaksa Mas Astrawidjaja; unnamed penghulu. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 5300.

could therefore be read, as Farish Noor has argued: “Batik is [...] a form of visual and textual narrative that can be read (after all, batik is *written*, remember) and the answers to the questions that it poses before the eye of the modern viewer can be found in the material itself.”²² A quick reading of *batik* in the Tjondronegoro photo, for example, immediately tells us that the Javanese law court member seated on the right is wearing a *kain panjang* with a pattern named *ceplok*, a geometrical rosette pattern of *batik* referring to his aristocratic lineage and position.

Batik patterns signaled the status and political power of the *priyayi*. A photo from Cilegon (Banten, West Java) in 1888 shows a dramatic example of this (Figure 2). It is a photo of an actual session of a circuit court (*ommeegaande rechtbank*; a traveling mixed court for severe cases) held to convict the suspects of a large revolt in Banten. A number of Javanese *priyayi* and Dutch officials were attacked by protesting farmers during the revolt.²³ The Javanese court members in the photo were local *priyayi* who had been directly targeted. Some of the people revolting had been shot dead during the army’s intervention, and others were tried by the circuit court, convicted, and sentenced to hard labor or death. Ninety-four locals from Banten, some of whom had

²² Farish A. Noor, “Everything in its Place. Reading Batik as a Marker of Social-Spatial Relations,” *BeMuse* 3 (2010): 38.

²³ Sartono Kartordirdjo, *The Peasants’ Revolt of Banten in 1888* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).

been acquitted by the circuit court, faced a “political measure” (*exorbitante rechten*), and were exiled to another Indonesian island for an unspecified period of time.²⁴ The photo of the court session is one in a series of photos taken by a professional photographer, likely hired for the occasion, who had come from Bandung. News photography was not common yet, but the series of photos were clearly taken to cover the harsh punishment of the suspects in the revolt. Other photos in the collection show groups of prisoners and their punishment. Photos like these were later printed as lithographs in colonial magazines and newspapers, giving them news value.²⁵ Visibility was evidently important to the Dutch colonizer who largely ruled via the established authority of the Javanese *priyayi*. For the *priyayi*, this meant they were balancing a powerful yet precarious position. This photo could have been beneficial for either colonial government or *priyayi* messaging, or both. It is unknown who commissioned this photo in Banten. We do know that the photo was preserved in the family archive of the Sundanese Djajadiningrat family from Banten and published in the memoirs of Achmad Djajadiningrat whose father, Entol Goenadaja, was the *wedono* of Cilegon (third from the left). Achmad Djajadiningrat was still very young at the time of the revolt, but in his memoirs, he wrote: “Each morning I went to the court session with my father. I accompanied him to carry his documents and law books.”²⁶

In the photo, Entol Goenadaja and other *priyayi* court members are wearing remarkably large “forbidden” (*larangan*) batik patterns on their *kain panjang*. The so-called “forbidden patterns” of batik originated from Central Java and were only allowed to be worn by aristocrats of high rank. In particular, the repetitive and wavy pattern of *parang rusak* is very visible. In the nineteenth century, *parang rusak* was one of the two remaining *larangan* patterns; the other was *sawat*. As was decided in the 1811 treaty between Raffles and Sultan Hamengkubuwono II of Yogyakarta, a batik with a *parang rusak* pattern would solely be a family cloth and could only be inherited. *Parang rusak* in Malay means “broken dagger,” although an alternative explanation is that it takes its name from the Javanese word *pereng* which translates as “slope of coral reefs.” In this explanation, the pattern would not display broken daggers, but rather high waves breaking on the coral reefs of the Indian Ocean in South-Central Java, near the Yogyakarta sultanate. An old legend told the story of Sultan Agung meditating while overlooking the Indian Ocean. Observing the waves slowly crashing against the cliffs provided him with the wisdom of persistence to overcome hard challenges.²⁷ In the context of punishing the participants in the Banten revolt, and the need for the *priyayi* to

²⁴ Koloniaal Verslag 1889, 4; Koloniaal Verslag 1890, 2; and Kartordirdjo, *The Peasants' Revolt of Banten*, 265.

²⁵ Thierry Gervais, Gaëlle Morel, and John Tittension, *The Making of Visual News: A History of Photography in the Press* (London: Routledge, 2017), 26.

²⁶ Achmad Djajadiningrat, *Herinneringen van Pangeran Aria Achmad Djajadiningrat* (Amsterdam: Kolff, 1936), 52.

²⁷ Djajasoebrata, *Flowers of the Universe*, 115; Lee Thienny, “Decoding the Forbidden ‘Parang’ Designs in Raffles’ Batik Collection,” 3rd Malaysian Postgraduate Conference (Sydney, July 4–5, 2013), 185–86.



Figure 3. Parang Rusak batik pattern, Yogyakarta (Java, Indonesia), before 1891. National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands, RV-847-77.

re-establish their power, this pattern was a logical choice. Besides, the large and repetitive pattern of *parang rusak* is meant to be seen (and read) from a “respectful distance,”²⁸ as in the courtroom where the suspects, witnesses, and audience observed the court members, seated higher on their chairs, from afar. In other instances, messaging through *batik* could be subtle and open to multiple interpretations. As a *batik* expert, Alit Djajasoebrata, who grew up in a Sundanese *priyayi* family, told me: “A specific *batik* pattern or detail on my *kebaya* (dress) could send a signal to one other person in the room without anyone else noticing.”²⁹ In the context of the courtroom, though, the distance between people was supposed to be a bit bigger. The suspects sitting on the floor—often alone because almost no one on trial in a mixed court could afford a lawyer—had to look up to see the faces of the men on the chairs. Yet, the pattern of the *batik* was right there in front of them at eye level. *Parang rusak* is often considered a rather rough pattern, not very refined at first sight, but powerful and aristocratic nonetheless (Figure 3).³⁰

Considering the Central-Javanese origins of *parang rusak*, it is remarkable that this photo was taken all the way across the island at the Sundanese West Coast in the former Banten sultanate. The port city of Banten had been a thriving international and cosmopolitan center of trade, with traders coming

²⁸ Noor, “Everything in its Place,” 40.

²⁹ Personal communication with Alit Djajasoebrata (December 10, 2019).

³⁰ Noor, “Everything in its Place,” 40.

from all across the Indian Ocean, until the Dutch seized the port and established a trade monopoly in the seventeenth century and conquered the sultanates of West Java (Banten and Cirebon). The Mataram Kingdom (1582–1755) in Central Java was divided into four, and later two, with palaces in Yogyakarta and Surakarta, which increasingly focused their attention on the “preservation and development of their arts and cultural heritage and on maintaining the social hierarchy with its sophisticated rules through various forms of dance, theatre, puppetry, *keris* (dagger), literature, *batik* and culinary refinement.”³¹ Whereas in Central Java, the Sultan of Yogyakarta and the Sunan of Surakarta remained in position, the Sultan of Banten was indefinitely expelled by the Dutch in the early nineteenth century.³² The Central Javanese *batik* designs of the eighteenth century in cream, indigo, and brown would become the classical *batik* associated with the central Javanese rulers. Over time the Banten *batik simbut* was increasingly replaced by the Central Javanese way of *batik canting*, possibly under influence of the Djajadiningrat family.³³ Although *priyayi* would remain true to their regional *batik* traditions, *batik* also referred to their status and societal prestige. Java had an “overdetermined social environment” with a complex array of class, political status, language, religion, and connections: “Motifs and patterns of *batik* were used as markers of identity and difference.”³⁴ The Sundanese and the Javanese had ambivalent relations, but, in this case, the Central-Javanese *batik* served a purpose for the Sundanese *priyayi* whose power had been attacked so directly during the Banten revolt. By wearing these *parang rusak* patterns to court, Sundanese court members were signaling to the local observer their status and expertise as judges and *priyayi* as well as their kinship to Javanese rulers in Central Java.

Whereas the bottom and upper part of the *priyayi* uniform referred to Javanese hierarchies, the *batik kain panjang* (long hip cloth) and the black *kuluk kanigara* (hats)—the middle part of their uniform—indicated their connections to colonial rule.³⁵ In law courts, *priyayi* court members wore a black jacket, and, for special occasions, they changed into a blue coat. Their royal blue coats and decorations were meticulously described, in 1870, in colonial regulations, and changed while climbing the ranks of the colonial bureaucratic system.³⁶ A *wedono*, a person of middle-tier *priyayi* rank, would wear a royal blue coat with nine buttons each embossed with a crowned letter “W” and silver embroidery. His coat would be lined with yellow satin. All these details in the *priyayi* hybrid uniforms spoke to different, and sometimes overlapping,

³¹ Djajasoebrata, *Flowers of the Universe*, 33–36.

³² Atsushi Ota, *Changes of Regime and Social Dynamics in West Java: Society, State and the Outer World of Banten 1750-1830* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

³³ Personal communication with Alit Djajasoebrata (December 10, 2019).

³⁴ Noor, “Everything in its Place,” 39.

³⁵ Covering the breast was influenced both by Islamic and European ways of dressing: Kees van Dijk, “Sarong, Jubbah, and Trousers. Appearance as a Means of Distinction and Discrimination,” in *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997), 51.

³⁶ *Bijblad op het Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* (1870), no.2308: “Bepalingen omtrent de kostumes van Inlandsche hoofden en ambtenaren.”



Figure 4. Drawing of the *landraad* of Pati, by Jeronimus, ca.1867. In: *De Indische Archipel: tafereelen uit de natuur en het volksleven in Indië* (texts by A.P. Gordon, D.W. Schiff, A.W.P. Weitzel et. al. Drawings and paintings of C. Deeleman, J.D. van Herwerden et al.), ed. Frederik Charles Theodorus Deeleman and S. van Deventer Jsxn. (The Hague, 1865-1876), Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 47A69.

audiences, but were mostly unreadable by anyone outside of colonial Indonesia, and, in the case of the *batik* patterns, by most Europeans. It is telling that when a drawing was made of the Tjondronegoro photo by a Dutch artist for a Dutch audience, the *batik* patterns, and the exact color of the *payong*, were left out—whereas the Dutch—whereas the green tablecloth made its appearance (Figure 4). This drawing, in turn, would be the inspiration for a scene in the novel *De Godin die Wacht*, at least 30 years later, by Dutch author Augusta de Wit. The scene, describing a *landraad* session, effectively encapsulated the colonial gaze and gave the courtroom the feeling of a theatrical farce. The decorated screen in the photo and drawing, probably initially placed there by the photographers for a better photographic result, was described in the novel as a standard feature of a colonial courtroom providing “a suggestion of European order and comfort, contrasting strangely with the darkening shadows of real native life behind the fences of the courtyard at the back.”³⁷ The image of the *landraad*, through the interpretation of the client

³⁷ Augusta de Wit, *De Godin Die Wacht*, 1903. Reissue and introduction by Tessel Pollmann (Schoor!: Conserve, 1989), 79.



Figure 5. Court session of a *landraad* in Java, ca.1890. Exact location unknown, all persons depicted are unnamed. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 90757.

and photographer, and thereafter the Dutch viewers, artists, and an author was partially imprinted and formed by photography.

The fear of Javanese mysticism and silent force (*stille kracht*), supposedly threatening to undermine the colonial apparatus at any time, was not only vivid in De Wit's mind, but also in that of the Dutch officials, especially in the Javanese countryside. In the courtroom, this anxiety over invisible forces played out in the search for magical amulets that could be hidden in the headscarves of the witnesses. The amulet was understood to nullify the powers of the oath taken by the *penghulu* who was holding the Quran above the witness's head (Figure 5). A lie in the witness account would not hurt the witness anymore. Mirjam Shatanawi's research has found a remarkably large number of paper amulets stored in Dutch museums. They were sent to the Netherlands by Dutch colonial judges. In the Netherlands they were often not even opened, frequently dismissed as unassuming scribbles on paper.³⁸ Treated without the care, and without the fear—or at least emotion—that the Javanese and, indeed, the Dutch in Java had when they found them, these amulets are a reminder of the various forces that were ever-present in the *landraad*. Cloth became a place of concealment and magical power.

This particular *landraad* photo, the third photograph in my analysis (Figure 5), is a highly curated scene. The photo is taken at the end of the nineteenth century in a studio in Batavia, and displays the oath-taking by

³⁸ Personal communication with Mirjam Shatanawi, Research Associate at the National Museum of World Cultures (August 26, 2020).

the *penghulu*, staging a “typical” event from a *landraad* session. These photographs exemplify the colonial gaze *par excellence*. They emphasize the different and the exotic, centering the Dutch *landraad* president versus passive Javanese members. The suspects and witnesses sitting on the floor are wearing striped coats. This was *lurik*, a firm, woven, and striped cloth worn by rural Javanese men, unmarried women, and servants of the Sultan in Yogyakarta.³⁹ The lined pattern refers to service and humility. Or was it perhaps the photographer who made the choice, here in his studio, for the suspect to wear a striped coat as a reference to the European (not necessarily Dutch or Indonesian) understanding of striped prisoner’s uniforms?⁴⁰

Around the same time, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as the *landraad* photos increased in number, *landraden* became less important to the highest Javanese *priyayi*. In an increasingly more complex and time-consuming colonial bureaucratic system, they would leave the *landraad* sessions to lower *priyayi*. The Dutch resident presiding over the *landraad* had by then been replaced by an “independent” Dutch judge, making the mixed courts less important to the higher Dutch administrative officials as well. The *landraad* turned into a more mundane place, a lower court from the perspective of the Javanese and Dutch administrative higher elites, and the courtroom became the realm of the new growing class of jurists in the colony instead. Photos taken of the *landraad* now became part of identity formation of colonial lawyers representing a street-level colonial power through law.

The final photo discussed in this essay (Figure 6) is preserved in a thick photo album in between family snapshots of the Indo-European family Du Cloux.⁴¹ The *landraad* photo draws attention because there are only a few that show the professional work environment of the man of the family, Charles Philippe du Cloux. The rest of the album contains photos of a younger Du Cloux—his moustache grows more impressive with each passing year, and childhood photos of his wife, Mary Du Cloux-Halewijn, her sister, Annie, and their *baboe* (Indonesian nanny). There are photos of Indo-European men playing cards, an Indonesian servant carrying water, and two daughters growing up, with the turning of each page. Du Cloux was born in Pankalangebalei, near Palembang in South Sumatra. He studied law at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. In his dissertation about the responsibilities of innkeepers for the property of their guests, the colonial Indonesian context is

³⁹ Wahyono Martowikrido. *Lurik: sejarah, fungsi, dan artinya bagi masyarakat* (Jakarta: Proyek Pembinaan Museum Nasional, 1994), 57–59; Rens Heringa, “Upland Tribe, Coastal Village, and Inland Court: Revised Parameters for Batik Research,” in *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Mary Kahlenberg (New York: Delmonico Books, 2010), 125–26; and Djajasoebata, *Flowers from the Universe*, 99.

⁴⁰ The practice of dressing prisoners in vertical stripes was especially common in the United States, and in certain British and German prisons as well as in a number of penal colonies: Michel Pastoureau, *The Devil’s Cloth: A History of Stripes and Striped Fabric* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 55–56.

⁴¹ Pamela Pattynama, “Interracial Unions and the Ethical Policy. The Representation of the Everyday in Indo-European Family Photo Albums,” in *Photography, Modernity and the Governed in Late-Colonial Indonesia*, 133–62.



Figure 6. C.P. Cloux (center), president of the *landraad* in Banyumas, during a court session, 1897-1903. Also depicted but unnamed are the Indonesian court members, *jaksa*, *penghulu* and secretary. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV no. I 19285.

remarkably invisible, but in his last thesis statement (*stelling*) he refers to his Indo-European background when he states that only those with experience in the colony should be appointed as governor general of the Netherlands Indies.⁴² Halfway through the photo album there is the *landraad* photo of Du Cloux after he had been appointed as *landraad* president in Banyumas (Figure 6). He is at the center of the *landraad* session surrounded by Javanese court members: the *jaksa*, *penghulu*, a guard and secretary. The names of the Javanese actors in these early twentieth-century photos in European and Indo-European family albums are almost always unknown.

Landraad presidents in these early decades of the twentieth century often complained that their work was not visible enough. In particular, those *landraad* presidents who thought of themselves as “fathers” who guided their “children” (by which they meant Indonesians) to a better path would complain about the assumed invisibility of the *landraad*. They would take photos of themselves in the *landraad*; “exotic” pictures, especially as new arrivals to the colony, and sent pictures to family in the Netherlands, showcasing the entire range of elites in traditional outfits. Meanwhile, in the colony, there was barely a European audience for the actual *landraad* case sessions. In contrast to sensational cases tried by the European *Raad van Justitie* (Council of Justice) when

⁴² Charles Philippe du Cloux, *De Verantwoordelijkheid van Herbergiers En Logementhouders Voor de Goederen Der Bij Hen Logeerende Reizigers: Art. 1746-1748 B.W* (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 1881).

European victims or suspects were involved, and the spectator's gallery would fill up quickly, *landraden* were seen as spaces where only "boring theft cases" were tried. This was in spite of the fact that these courts held the power to impose severe punishments of up to 20 years of hard labor in chains.⁴³ Despite their relative invisibility, the *landraad* was not invisible to those whom it imposed its rule upon; the mixed courtroom continued to make colonial rule visible and tangible at the regional level.

And although the *landraden* became less prestigious, the importance of cloth in the space of these courts continued and the green tablecloth, as well as the hybrid uniforms, were still important elements of the courtrooms. Visibility of the colonial state remained crucial to the Dutch colonizer who continuously largely ruled via the established authority of the Javanese *priyayi*. Thus, when in 1920, the Association of Javanese Civil Servants requested that the government allow them to wear the white colonial costume that they usually wore when on duty ("*om in het wit te mogen verschijnen*") during *landraad* sessions instead of their "traditional" costume, the request was turned down on the advice of the Supreme Court, which wrote to the director of justice: "The court finds that it (...) would harm the decorum."⁴⁴

Photos of mixed courts in colonial Indonesia are catalogued in archival collections simply as a "*landraad* photo," but each of the four photos discussed above belongs to a different genre and tells a distinct story about imperial law, mixed courts, and legal pluralism. There were photos commissioned by Javanese members of the courtroom to express their political identity, there were those commissioned for purposes of colonial propaganda and to reinforce power, some were taken in a photo studio to stage a "typical" event from the colony, and others were personal photos, taken at the request of Dutch or Indo-European *landraad* judges, to send to family in the Netherlands and elsewhere, showing their workplace. In each of these photos, the visual staging of the *landraad* through cloth provides us with an alternative archive offering new venues to explore the workings of legal plurality in a colonial context. It reveals and draws attention to a jurisdictional layering that productively questions the binary of direct and indirect rule.

The green color of the tablecloth, the *batik* design on the outfits of the Javanese court members and their hybrid uniform coats, the headscarves and striped coats of the suspects, the turban of the *penghulu*, and the black gown of the *landraad* president: although these photos do not reveal

⁴³ See for example: W. Boekhoudt, "Een afscheidsgroet aan de jongeren onder mijne oud-collega's," *Indisch Tijdschrift van het Recht* 107 (1915): 317–52.

⁴⁴ Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Algemene Secretarie, Besluit February 16, 1920, no.67. In 1909 it had been decided to allow Javanese officials to wear the white European costume except during court sessions of the *landraad* during which the old (in 1870 modified and modernized with a black jacket) traditional costume had to be worn: Bijblad op het Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië (1909), no.6973: "Aanvulling der bepalingen omtrent de kostumes van Indische hoofden en amtenaren." The emphasis on each ethnic group wearing their own costume dated back to regulations of the Dutch East India Company (VOC, Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) in the seventeenth century: van Dijk, "Sarong, Jubbah, and Trousers," 45.

everything, they add new materials and voices, especially those of the local court members and other local actors who are hardly mentioned in the written colonial sources. The photos are so abundantly “filled” with people, paper, and cloth, that we constantly change the aperture, to focus on something or someone else. What one observer might see, the other might not. And this would not have been so different at the time. The material objects in the courtroom sent their own distinct messages and signals, sometimes tailored for the entire audience, sometimes only for certain observers. The plurality of cloth provided possibilities to impose colonial rule, to insert oneself (simultaneously) in an alternative hierarchy or to resist.

Acknowledgments. The author thanks Alit Djajasoebata, Liesbeth Ouwehand, and Anouk Mansfeld for conversations and for providing access to collections, as well as Gautham Rao and the anonymous *Law and History Review* reviewer for their comments.

Sanne Ravensbergen is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan <sravens@umich.edu>.

Cite this article: Sanne Ravensbergen, “‘Do Not Harm the Decorum’: Mixed Courts and Cloth in Colonial Indonesia,” *Law and History Review* 40 (2022): 533–548. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248022000438>