

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

1913 in Indonesian History: Demanding Equality, Changing Mentality

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(Received 7 March 2019; revised 24 April 2020; accepted 24 April 2020)

Abstract

In 1913, a new generation of Indonesians asserted their agency by publicly demanding equality in colonial society. Through four case studies—the prohibition of traditional forms of deference, the sudden popularity of Western dress, the adoption of new legal assimilation guidelines for Indonesians, and the discussion of employee rights at a railway company—we argue that this new assertiveness reflected a broad change in mentality that we consider a turning point in Indonesian history. By focusing on Indonesian agency, we challenge the Eurocentric periodization of the Indonesian past that emphasized WWI as a trigger of change.

Keywords: Indonesia; 1913; Anti-colonial nationalism; Turning Points; Changing mentalities

Over the course of a single year, 1913, a young Indonesian civil servant in Purwakarta refused to squat for his European superior; school teachers in Bandung collectively adopted Western clothing, particularly trousers and jackets; a railroad employee in Semarang demanded the same rent allowance as his European colleagues; and the number of legal assimilation requests by Indonesians surged. Although each of these standalone events appears marginal, when observed together, the confluence of many minor events shows that something more comprehensive and meaningful was happening in this year. In this article, therefore, we suggest that these events were indicators of a broad change of mentality among a new generation of Indonesians in 1913. Previously, several nationalist organizations were founded, such as Budi Utomo in 1908 and Sarekat Islam in 1911, but these had remained relatively small scale. 1913 saw the dams break, with an increasing number of young Indonesians becoming more self-confident, outspoken, and demanding equality in a colonial society that was highly unequal and discriminatory. They formulated their demands within the context of the colonial system, which was a necessary step towards political action at a later stage. We propose that this change in mentality constitutes a turning point in Indonesian history. Later developments, such as the Indonesian ‘national awakening’, cannot be explained without it.

In the history of colonial Indonesia,¹ scholars have tended to overlook this significant social change occurring in 1913. Although examples of young Indonesians demanding greater equality are plentiful, historians have thus far failed to see a pattern. These expressions of a new generation have been interpreted as incidents rather than symptoms of a larger development; hence, the narrative still predominates that the period immediately prior to World War I was the heyday of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. According to this narrative, it was the Great War in Europe and its global impact that eventually triggered a social and mental revolution and anti-colonial movements in the colonial world, including that in Indonesia.

We propose a different interpretation. We suggest that WWI was a catalyst, but not a cause of the social and mental changes in Indonesia. A significant change of mentality already occurred in 1913,

¹In this article we use ‘Indonesia’ or ‘colonial Indonesia’ to refer to the area that, at the time, was known as ‘the Dutch Indies’, and ‘Indonesians’ to refer to this territory’s inhabitants generally known as ‘natives’ or ‘indigenous people’. Although this usage—quite common among historians working today—is anachronistic, the alternative of adopting colonial terminology has more significant drawbacks.

before the outbreak of the war, and was initiated not by events on the European battlefields, but locally because of the emancipating efforts of Indonesians. We further suggest that by studying local developments and focusing on Indonesian agency we can get to a more profound understanding of the Indonesian past. Hence, we put forward the year 1913 as a more significant turning point in Indonesian history than World War I.

1913 as a Turning Point in Indonesian History

In histories of colonial Indonesia, the year 1913 is primarily associated with the publication of the anti-colonial pamphlet *If I were a Dutchman* by the Javanese nobleman Suwardi Suryaningrat (Soerjaningrat 1913a). In this critical piece, Suwardi famously used the forthcoming centennial celebration of Dutch independence from Napoleonic rule to expose colonial hypocrisy. He imagined that if he were a sincere liberty loving Dutchman, he would grant the colonised their independence. For his subversive tone, implicit political demands, and dissemination of the pamphlet in Dutch and Malay, Suwardi was exiled to the Netherlands, unable to return for six years.

Both the colonial state and later historians have considered Suwardi a nationalist pioneer, who was ahead of his time in articulating his criticism and formulating political demands (Anderson 1983: 116–119; Elson 2005; Shiraishi 1990: 63). In contrast, we believe his actions are better understood as a symptom of a wider development, of a new generation of Indonesians seeking emancipatory changes within colonial society. Suwardi's language and demands were not too dissimilar to those by his less famous generational peers in 1913. The interpretation of Suwardi as an anomaly, which suited the colonial authorities' interest, obscures the contemporary societal context that spawned him. Such an interpretation of events, still pervasive in the historiography, portrays the first decade and a half of the twentieth century as a time in which the colonial state reached new political and cultural heights, whilst experimenting with new 'ethical' forms of imperialism (the Dutch version of the civilizing mission), and as yet with little widespread anti-colonial resistance. This time of relative 'peace and order', a deceptive colonial catchphrase, supposedly only ended with the proliferation of political activism—in the form of associations, parties, rallies, unions, strikes, protests, and a more critical press—and resistance caused by the disruptive experience of World War I in colonial Indonesia (Bloembergen and Raben 2009; Cribb 1994; Locher-Scholten 1981: 55–117; Van Niel 1960: 101–158; Tagliacozzo 2010).

The global impact of WWI has frequently been highlighted as a pivotal moment that inspired worldwide anti-colonial movements and set in motion imperial decline, specifically in Indonesia. The war heralded a crisis of Western civilization, as the colonized began to openly question the alleged superiority of the colonizers considering the brutality of the warfare in Europe. Moreover, while the colonial powers willingly relied on the manpower and resources of the colonial world, they quickly reneged on their promises of greater self-governance (i.e. in British India) or even independence (i.e. for Arabs in the Middle East) in return for this support, spurring anti-colonial sentiments (Adas 2004). In addition, Woodrow Wilson's advocacy for the right to self-determination and promise of a re-evaluation of all colonial claims created a 'Wilsonian Moment' that inspired nationalist movements throughout the non-Western worlds in the following decades (Manela 2007; also see: Füredi 1994: 10; Shipway 2008: 10–16; on impact of WWI on Southeast Asia: Streets-Salter 2017).

Although colonial Indonesia was not directly involved in the global conflict because the Netherlands remained neutral, historians have nevertheless highlighted this period as a major turning point in the colony's history. The colony was isolated from the metropole because shipping and other forms of communication had become increasingly difficult, eventually causing an economic crisis and calls for political reform. Without reliable support from the metropole, colonial authorities considered mobilizing a 'native militia' in case the war reached the archipelago. Although this militia was never formed, the discussions around its formation gave Indonesians a sense of self-worth and the possibility to demand political concessions. The war years culminated in the 'November promises' of November 1918, when Governor General Van Limburg Stirum promised a range of political reforms. While these promises were ultimately broken in the early 1920s, these experiences allegedly triggered a change in political consciousness that was crucial in the Indonesian national awakening (Bosma and Raben 2008: 330–331; Van Dijk 2007: 579–630; Locher-Scholten 1981: 55–117; Streets-Salter 2017: 1–16, 88–110).

We believe this portrayal of World War I's impact, as the major turning point in the Indonesian national awakening, is misleading. Such a narrative easily and uncritically applies a Western-centric periodization to Indonesian history, that additionally suggests a Eurocentric interpretation of the downfall of imperial regimes. The implicit claim is that the ultimate cause instigating anti-colonial nationalist sentiments resulted from the self-inflicted wound of an intra-European war. At least in Indonesia (and presumably in many other regions) World War I was at best a catalyst, not an instigator, of developments that had roots in the decades before.

We do not intend to make light of the multifarious impact of WWI on Indonesia and Asia. However, we do argue that the narrative that WWI constituted a 'Big Bang', which rocked imperial Europe to its foundations and encouraged Asia to chart its own destiny, has actually blinded historians to the many indicators of social change that had already been set by Asians themselves, prior to 1914. In part, this historiographical bias can be explained by the preoccupation with explicit political protest and disobedience instead of more mundane and everyday forms of contestation as indicators of broad social change. This colonial perspective is privileged in the historiography of the national awakening, which traces its development from the founding of the first cultural and political associations (Budi Utomo in 1908 and Sarekat Islam in 1911), the subsequent growing political awareness of a small urban educated elite, to the eventual broad 'political awakening' during WWI (Elson 2005; Van Niel 1960; Shiraishi 1990). Instead, we argue here that changes of mentality that foreboded Dutch decline originated in colonial Indonesia.

In this article we thus aim to 'decolonize' European narratives of the decline of empire by focusing on the year 1913 in the history of colonial Indonesia. This year may have seen few shocking events, but if studied closely, we can discern a whole range of small but significant symptoms—much more than in the years before—of a wide-ranging shift of mentality that would turn out to be of great consequence. Our approach in this article differs from studies that focus on a single year to examine longer-term trends, as a type of vignette (Huang 1982; Tagliacozzo 2010; but cf. Tagliacozzo *et al.* 2015). Instead, we argue that 1913 was not a "year of no significance" (Huang 1982), but rather a crucial turning point in Indonesian history. In doing so, we are also making a claim about what constitutes a historical turning point. As we explain in the introduction to this special issue of TRaNS on *New Turning Points in Southeast Asian History*, 'turning points' are always a historiographical construct, a way of retelling history that highlights certain elements and leaves out others. Therefore, we do not see 'turning points' as objective, intransigent historical truths; rather, we view it as a heuristic device that helps us think about alternative ways in which Southeast Asian chronologies and histories can be ordered (cf. Vann 2002: 326). Thus, re-evaluating the year 1913 as a turning point illuminates that previous historians have generally overlooked the events of this year in favour of earlier or later developments, leading to incomplete interpretations of Indonesian emancipation from colonial rule.

Conventional historical periodisations—as found in textbooks or course syllabi—tend to focus on major political events. For modern Indonesia, these might include the end of Dutch East India Company in the early 1800s, any of the string of colonial wars in the nineteenth century, the announcement of the 'Ethical Policy' in 1901, the founding of Sarekat Islam as the first anti-colonial movement in 1911, WWI from 1914–1918, the Japanese occupation in 1942, or the proclamation of independence and the beginning of the Indonesian Revolution in 1945. The year 1913, lacking a singular defining event, does not fit such a mould. Rather than in major events that supposedly change the course of history, we are interested in changes of mentality (both of colonizers and colonized!) that are often more fluid but no less significant.

Changes in mentality are articulated in subtle discursive ways. In that sense, the year 1913 may seem a somewhat arbitrary choice: many of the developments we describe have deeper roots and were by no means completed in a single year. How do we then account for the sudden and widespread change in mentality that we observe in our research? There was not a single trigger event in 1913 that caused a sudden social transformation, but rather, we propose, change resulted from a convergence of long-term developments that tipped the balance of societal change decisively in a new direction. In other words, the year 1913 was a fortuitous culmination point of developments that had percolated for decades. Many of these developments have been the object of previous studies, such as the announcement and impact of the Ethical Policy, the increasing availability of Western education and acceptance of

modernity—specifically science, technology, and consumerism—by young Indonesians (Groeneboer 1998; Locher-Scholten 1981; Luttkhuis 2014: 99–206; Van der Meer 2017; Mrázek 2002; Van Niel 1960; Schulte Nordholt 2011). In addition, Indonesians increasingly displayed a new global consciousness inspired by the rise of Japan as an imperial power, the Chinese revolution of 1911, and Islamic Modernism originating from Egypt and the Ottoman Empire (Van Dijk 2007; Formichi 2015; Laffan 2003; Taylor 2012). Then there was the nascent political consciousness that sprouted with the founding of Budi Utomo in 1908 and started to gain traction with the establishment of the Sarekat Islam in 1911 (Korver 1982; Nagazumi 1972; Shiraishi 1990). Finally, the development of the vernacular press was a crucial facilitator of these historical processes (Adam 1995; Anderson 1983). As stated previously, the consequences of these events' coalescence in 1913 have largely been overlooked.

In the following, we provide four micro-stories that pivot around the year 1913: the debate over the so-called *hormat* circular, which prohibited the use of 'outdated' deference forms by civil servants; the rising trend of Indonesians wearing 'Western' clothes; the adoption of new guidelines for the legal assimilation of Indonesians under European statutes; and the discussions about employees' rights of 'Native' employees in one particular railway company. These stories are a selection taken from our own research on early twentieth-century Indonesia. We encountered many similar incidents that might have been used to illustrate the same point (Luttkhuis 2014; Van der Meer 2014).² Together, these examples of everyday conflicts and interactions signal that something was brewing in Indonesia. 1913 was the first time that the new educated Indonesian elites, mostly in the urban centres of Java, openly demanded a place at the colonial table. Moreover, the shift in mentality was shared between colonizers and colonized alike. Thus, we propose in this article that the roots of European imperial decline are to be found in intra-colonial conversations and negotiations, not on the European battlefields.

Demanding Equal Treatment: The *Hormat*-Circular of 1913

Our first case study examines a major scandal that unfolded in 1913, triggered by seemingly minor confrontations between Javanese civil servants and European officials in the provincial town of Purwakarta (West-Java). These unrests began when a Javanese clerk, Raden Prawiradinata, decided he would no longer show traditional deference (known as *hormat*) towards his colonial superiors, such as crouching (*jongkok*), sitting on the floor (*sila*), bringing one's hands together to the face (*sembah*) as a gesture of respect after speaking, and conforming to the Javanese language hierarchy wherein a superior is addressed in high Javanese and responds in low Javanese. His act of obstruction was part of a series of events from which a wide social movement spun out. It forced the colonial government to chide its own officials by issuing a circular prohibiting them from demanding traditional Javanese forms of deference from their colonial subjects. The experiences and actions of Prawiradinata that directly led to the *hormat*-circular demonstrate the centrality of Indonesian agency in bringing about a significant change in mentality among colonizers and colonized alike.³

Following a successful period as clerk in the indigenous civil service in the colonial capital Batavia, the young and ambitious Prawiradinata was transferred to his new post in Purwakarta, a small town in Java's interior. His enthusiasm with his career advancement quickly evaporated as he discovered that conservative attitudes were pervasive outside the colonial capital. In December 1912 Prawiradinata clashed with his European superior, the Assistant Subdistrict Administrator A.A.C. Linck, who in a confrontational tone accused the clerk of not submitting paperwork by a certain deadline. Startled by this accusation, Prawiradinata answered in Dutch—signalling he expected equal treatment and would not offer traditional deference—that he personally had delivered the paperwork to Linck's office.⁴ This infuriated

²All four cases discussed in this article recount events on Java, confining the results of our research here to that island. However, some of the consequences reverberated over the other islands of Indonesia as well, and some similar incidents happened elsewhere.

³This history is reconstructed based on correspondence found in Leiden University Library (UBL), Collection Hazeu, H 1083, no. 29, Superintendent for the Education of Young Natives T. Hellwig to Advisor for Native Affairs G.A.J. Hazeu, 25 February 1913.

⁴While conversing in Dutch was customary in the colonial capital, elsewhere civil servants were still expected to adhere to the Javanese language hierarchy. This helps explain both Prawiradinata and Linck's viewpoints during this encounter.

Linck, who barked that everyone in the civil service complained about Prawiradinata's sluggish work ethic and that he would "not be lied to by a native."⁵ These remarks, invoking the trope of the lazy native, were clearly an attempt to reassert his authority over this, in Linck's eyes, insolent colonial subject. However, in the ensuing battle of wills, Prawiradinata persisted and vowed—still in Dutch—he was not lazy nor a liar. Linck dismissed Prawiradinata, but filed an official complaint with the local *Bupati*, the indigenous district head. Tellingly, when Prawiradinata appeared before the *Bupati*, he was not questioned about the missing paperwork, but rather about his allegedly impolite and boorish behaviour towards a colonial official. In other words, the officials were primarily upset by the lack of traditional deference Prawiradinata had performed.

The encounter between Prawiradinata and Linck reflected the mounting tension between the protagonists of progress and tradition in colonial society. Confrontations like these became more frequent in and outside the civil service and had their origins in nineteenth century colonial policies (Van der Meer 2019). Following the return of colonial territories from the British in 1816, the Dutch construction of the colonial state in Indonesia relied heavily on the preservation of traditional elites. On Java, they were known as the *priyayi*, a governing upper class consisting of nobles, officials, and administrators (Van den Doel 1994; Sutherland 1979; Ravensbergen 2018). The Dutch collaboration with the *priyayi* was not based on intermingling or even power-sharing, but rather on a notion of parallel elites: Dutch officials and Javanese *priyayi* were (supposedly) equal, but separate (Sutherland 1980). However, the colonial administration initiated a deliberate cultural accommodation aimed at legitimizing colonial authority through the adoption of Javanese deference rituals, symbols of power, language hierarchies, sartorial regulations, lifestyle, and even architectural styles. Linck's expectation that Prawiradinata would show him traditional Javanese deference stemmed from these policies (Van der Meer 2014).

The proclamation of the Ethical Policy in 1901, the Dutch equivalent of the civilizing mission discourse, heralded an important change in the representation and legitimization of colonial authority. As part of this new civilizing discourse the Dutch contrasted their modernity, rooted in their scientific and technological prowess, with the perceived backwardness of Indonesian culture and society. The Ethical Policy justified colonialism as a moral obligation to develop and modernize the land and people of the archipelago. The continued reliance on traditional Javanese forms of deference was seemingly incompatible with this new direction in colonial politics. Through the issuance of several decrees, the colonial authorities sought to align the discourse and appearance of colonial authority. For instance, in 1904 the first *hormat*-circular was issued, which encouraged European civil servants to refrain from demanding traditional Javanese deference from the colonized. The issuance of similar decrees in 1906 and 1909 demonstrated the ineffectiveness of these measures. The circulars were not binding, but more akin to guidelines. This meant that conservative European officials could cling to the traditional deference demands, which they continued to believe were necessary for the maintenance of colonial peace and order.⁶

A new generation of young Indonesians emerged during the first decade of the twentieth century, and they contested the discrepancy between the theory and practice of colonial representation. Prawiradinata personified this new generation. He received his education at a premier European secondary school, the Gymnasium Willem III in Batavia, and habitually conversed in Dutch, wore Western clothing, associated freely with European friends and teachers, and always sat on chairs in their presence. Prawiradinata considered himself civilized, modern, and part of a wider world. He read both the colonial and burgeoning vernacular press in which young Indonesians openly expressed themselves and debated their place in the world. For instance, in the *Bintang Hindia* (Star of the Indies), a periodical, he could read discussions about the failure of European officials to comply with the *hormat*-circulars.⁷

Perhaps most importantly, the vernacular press may have increased Prawiradinata's global consciousness by discussing Western political ideology, the rise of Imperial Japan, the British Indian nationalist

⁵UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, no. 29, Hellwig to Hazeu, 25 February 1913.

⁶*Bijblad op het Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* no. 5946 (1905), no. 6496 (1907), no. 7029 (1910).

⁷Raden Mas Kertowinoto. 1905. "Jongkok dan sembah." *Bintang Hindia* 3(3): 38–39. "Hormat," *Bintang Hindia* 3(3) (1905): 74–75. Mangoenkoesoemo, Goenawan. 1905. "De Javaan en zijn hormatgebruiken," *Bintang Hindia* 3(14/15/16): 166, 178, 190–191.

movement, the granting of the Philippine national assembly by the United States in 1906, the victory of Chinese nationalists in 1911, and Islamic Modernism in Egypt (Van der Meer 2019: 511–521; Shiraishi 1990). Through the proliferation of print culture, steamships, railroads, cars, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, religious pilgrimage, and labour migration, Prawiradinata's world rapidly transformed into a smaller and more interconnected place. This increased exchange of information on a global scale stimulated him and his peers to consider colonial subjecthood as a globally shared experience that required a shared solution. Thus, inspired by local and global developments, Prawiradinata's generation founded the first cultural, religious, and political associations in Indonesia, such as Budi Utomo (1908) and Sarekat Islam (1911). This enabled them to lay bare the hypocrisy underlying the civilizing mission discourse. While Suwardi was perhaps the most outspoken representative of this generation in 1913, it was not Suwardi's public advocacy but the insistence on being treated as an equal by Prawiradinata and others like him that finally resulted in a radical overhaul of the exercise of colonial authority (Van Dijk 2007: 19–72; Formichi 2015: 241–260; Laffan 2003; Van Niel 1960: 31–100; Shiraishi 1990: 1–90).

In the weeks following his confrontation with Linck, Prawiradinata continued to be thwarted, knocked on, and offended. In early 1913, he reached out to his former high-school mentors: The Superintendent for the Education of Native Youth T. Hellwig and the powerful Advisor for Native Affairs G.A.J. Hazeu. In February 1913 he met with them and shared his humiliating experiences in Purwakarta. He emphasized that he looked for their support in the “struggle for [his] rights”, meaning he wanted to be treated as a human being, as an equal, as someone who did not have to cower for another. In their conversations Prawiradinata expressed his desire for a more harmonious relationship within the civil service and between colonizer and colonized in general. After these meetings Prawiradinata wrote to Hellwig that “all fear is redundant, as I place my trust in you and Dr. Hazeu to seek protection of my rights.”⁸ This was a bold move by the young clerk, as he must have realized that intervention by his former mentors might only escalate relations in Purwakarta further.

The two progressive European officials, both staunch protagonists of the Ethical Policy, were saddened and angered by Prawiradinata's experiences, which they believed were symptomatic for the backwards culture in the civil service in general. In a written request for information to Linck's superior, the Assistant-Resident J.C. Bedding, Hellwig praised Prawiradinata for his work ethic and modesty, and contrasted it by emphasizing Linck's fondness with “servile deference” and predisposition to “submissive behaviour,” to explain the events in Purwakarta.⁹ In early March, Hellwig visited Purwakarta to discuss the situation with Bedding personally. The latter acknowledged that Prawiradinata had been wronged. Not only had he submitted the paperwork in time, Linck's behaviour towards him was inexcusable. However, he suggested that Linck's outburst needed to be considered in context. European civil servants, according to Bedding, regularly dealt with the unreliable character of the natives, a trait he described as intrinsic and unchangeable. He therefore proposed to reprimand Linck but keep the matter out of the spotlight to prevent any harm to colonial prestige.¹⁰ Although Hellwig was surprised by Bedding's words, he was pleased to see Linck being ‘punished’ for his behaviour with a transfer and a promotion to Semarang in April 1913.¹¹ Prawiradinata's assertive move seemingly paid off.

In the meantime, Prawiradinata had found an additional manner to advocate for his rights. Together with several other young Western educated civil servants he became involved in the establishment of a local branch of the Sarekat Islam in March 1913. The driving force behind this initiative was the local public prosecutor (*Jaksa*) Raden Sumarsono, a fellow graduate from the European school Prawiradinata had attended, and someone who had similarly clashed over deference etiquette with his European superiors. At meetings of the Sarekat Islam they impressed upon the audience that if they wanted to be treated as equals, regain their dignity, and compete in colonial society with the Dutch and Chinese, they had to organize and educate themselves. The message clearly resonated in Purwakarta. Within months the association already had 15,000 members. These developments startled colonial officials. For instance, Assistant-Resident Bedding considered the association a threat to colonial

⁸UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, no. 29, Raden Prawiradinata to Hellwig, 28 February 1913 and 23 March 1913.

⁹UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, no. 29, Cohen to Hellwig, 25 February 1913 and Hellwig to Bedding, 28 February 1913.

¹⁰UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, no. 29, Bedding to Hellwig, 10 March 1913; Hellwig to Hazeu, 23 March 1913.

¹¹*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 26 April 1913.

peace and order and sought to obstruct its development. Although he blamed Sumarsono in particular for these developments, from his correspondence it becomes clear that he was bothered by the assertive attitude of Western educated youth in general (Soerjaningrat 1913b: 48).

For Prawiradinata, the continued struggle with European civil servants, first over deference and now over the Sarekat Islam, ensured that the prospect of a long civil service career lost its charm. In June 1913 he accepted a position with the People's Credit Union in Purwakarta, which paid better, had a progressive work environment, and where he felt he could more directly work towards the socio-economic progress of his people.¹² With the departure of the young clerk, the ire of European officialdom was directed towards Sumarsono. When he became involved with the *Indische Partij* (established by Suwardi Suryaningrat and his associates Cipto Mangunkusumo and Eduard Douwes Dekker) by distributing Suwardi's pamphlet in Purwakarta, the Assistant-Resident forcefully intervened. The pamphlets were confiscated and Sumarsono charged with incitement of hatred and anti-revolutionary mindedness. Bedding proposed to discharge and incarcerate his dissident public prosecutor.¹³ Learning of these events, Prawiradinata journeyed to the home of the Advisor of Native Affairs Hazeu on 18 August 1913, where he personally testified that Sumarsono was not seeking to overthrow colonial rule, but merely striving for the emancipation of the Javanese. Prawiradinata impressed upon Hazeu that the "tradition of rigid conservatism" was the real problem in Purwakarta, as his own treatment by Linck as "an inferior being" demonstrated. In addition, he attested how even Bedding expected indigenous civil servants to sit on the floor and present a *sembah* after speaking.

That same evening, Hazeu wrote a lengthy correspondence to the Governor-General wherein he presented the young clerk as an "absolutely reliable" character witness. Based on his conversation with Prawiradinata he argued that the real threat to colonial peace and order emanated from the civil service rather than from young Indonesians. It was the arrogance of European officials and their persistence in demanding humiliating forms of deference that "literally drive *our* [sic.] young Javanese to imprudence, anger, vexation, and eventually a pressing desire to rid themselves from such officials."¹⁴ These anxieties emerged from the strikingly different social environments that Western-educated Javanese, like Prawiradinata and Sumarsono, encountered during their studies as compared to their civil service careers. As students they were treated as equals, but as civil servants they were looked down upon, considered racially and intellectually inferior, and expected to conform to "outdated" deference forms. Hazeu feared "serious consequences" for colonial rule if the culture within the civil service was not modernized, as the Javanese "no longer tolerate these humiliations as they used to."¹⁵ Hazeu proposed the issuance of a renewed and more stringent *hormat*-circular to force civil servants to comply with the hegemonic discourse of the civilizing mission. Governor-General Idenburg was persuaded by Hazeu's assessment and within days issued a *hormat*-circular based on Hazeu's recommendations.

The *hormat*-circular of 22 August 1913 was far more threatening than its precursors in previous years. The circular opened with an extensive overview of the preceding circulars, after which it concluded that a considerable part of European officialdom had willingly ignored these. The circular made it clear that those who continued to oppose the wishes of the government would face disciplinary sanctions. It further stated that there was no reason to fear the national awakening of the Javanese, which "instead should be interpreted as the first result of the long-lasting attempts to uplift the natives."¹⁶ Finally, the circular stressed that civil servants served the people, not the other way around. In a long confidential attachment to the circular addressed specifically to European officials, Hazeu impressed upon its recipients that they were not superior to the highly educated young Indonesians. The attachment included several anonymous case studies, including Prawiradinata's and Sumarsono's experiences in Purwakarta, to illustrate the government's dissatisfaction with the behaviour of its civil servants. The *hormat*-circular and the confidential attachment, which was leaked to the press within weeks, unleashed a fierce debate in colonial society.

¹²UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, 29, Prawiradinata to Hazeu, 30 June 1913.

¹³UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, 29, Hazeu to Idenburg, 20 August 1913.

¹⁴UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, 29, Hazeu to Idenburg, 18 August 1913.

¹⁵UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, 29, Hazeu to Idenburg, 18 August 1913.

¹⁶*Bijblad* no. 7939 (1914). The 'secret' attachment can be found in: UBL, Collection Hazeu, H 1083, 57, Nota bij de *hormat*-circulaire van 22 Augustus 1913.

The impact of the *hormat*-circular was magnified by the authorities' desire to demonstrate their goodwill towards the Sarekat Islam and the emancipation of the new generation of young Indonesians. During the closing months of 1913, the Adjunct-Advisor for Native Affairs, D.A. Rinkes, toured Java together with Umar Said Cokroaminoto, president of the Central Sarekat Islam, to offer his aid in establishing local branches of the association. At mass meetings, Rinkes presented the *hormat*-circular as evidence of the good intentions of the colonial government towards the Javanese people. This was a very powerful message, to have a prominent Dutch official state, in a vernacular language no less, that one was no longer obliged to sit on the floor, crouch, or present a *sembah* in the presence of European civil servants (Van der Wal 1967: 346–353).¹⁷ Before long, the audience at these meetings carried banners stating that “The Javanese no longer wants to squat like a frog.”¹⁸ In the years that followed, the *hormat*-circular remained an important topic on Sarekat Islam's agenda.

From 1913 onwards the vernacular press was filled with reports of abuses of power. European and indigenous civil servants and private employers were often accused of demanding outdated forms of deference and insisting on sartorial hierarchies. Crucially, the *hormat*-circular was published in Malay in several publications, reaching an audience that must have far outnumbered that of Suwardi's *Als ik eens Nederlander was* (*Circulaire* 1914: 6–11).¹⁹ Suwardi's pamphlet served as a source of inspiration for critical pieces in the vernacular press. Articles with titles such as “If I were a Resident/Bupati/antagonist of the Sarekat Islam” appeared frequently.²⁰ The criticism in the vernacular press was not only directed at European officials, but included the abuse of power by more traditional *priyayi* as well. A striking example can be found in the periodical *Doenia Bergerak*, which published an article titled “If I were a Bupati.” According to the author in this satirical piece, if he were a *bupati* he would ignore the *hormat*-circular, receive the highest titles and honours, crush those who refuse to squat before him, reintroduce feudal services, and appoint his family members to the highest positions (*Regent* 1914: 2–6). As the proliferation in the vernacular press of articles discussing the *hormat*-circular shows, it had a significant impact on what is often described as the Indonesian national awakening.

While Prawiradinata's experiences were not unique, it was his perseverance and his willingness to escalate the situation in 1913 by engaging allies within the colonial administration that eventually resulted in a significant change in the representation of colonial authority. The genie was out of the bottle. Prawiradinata's non-conformity *vis-à-vis* his European superior also illustrates that it was his local initiative that pressured the central colonial authorities to enforce changes. The foremost consequence of the *hormat*-circular was that it provided a new generation of Indonesians with a growing self-esteem and self-consciousness. Nothing reflected this new mentality better than the accompanying change in clothes.

Expressing a New Consciousness: Dressing like an Equal

The *hormat*-circular triggered a rapid change in the outward appearance of young Indonesians. From September 1913, the colonial and vernacular press started to report how young Indonesian professionals, including teachers, pawnshop personnel, railroad employees, clerks, and civil servants, replaced their sarong and headscarf with trousers, a jacket, shoes and a hat (Mangoenkoesoemo 1913).²¹ They donned Western dress to clarify that they would no longer submit to traditional Javanese forms of deference. According to one observer, there was “a sociological relevance” to this transformation as “with every new age a new costume comes into vogue and anyone who still doubts the dawn of the liberation of the people in the Indies, should, with a little sociological insight into these symptoms come to the conclusion to change the décor” (Teekenen 1914: 46). The author argued that the contestation of the ethnic

¹⁷*Kolonial Tijdschrift* (KT), 3 (1913) 519, referring to *Oetoesan Hindia*, no. 24. KT, 3 (1913) 526, referring to *Djawa Tengah*, no. 7.

¹⁸KT, 3 (1913) 1410, referring to *Kaoem Moeda*, no. 165.

¹⁹*Kaoem Moeda*, 25 November 1915.

²⁰KT, 3 (1913) 685, referring to *Kaoem Moeda*, no. 40. KT, 3 (1913) 690–91, referring to *Oetoesan Hindia*, no. 39. KT, 3 (1913) 804, referring to *Pantjaran Warta*, No. 66. KT, 4 (1913) 943, referring to *Pantjaran Warta*, No. 87.

²¹KT, 3 (1913) 222, referring to *Pemberita Betawi*, no. 262. KT, 3 (1913) 382, referring to *Pemberita Betawi*, no. 294 and 296. KT, 3 (1913) 513–14, referring to *Kaoem Moeda*, no. 24. *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indie*, 2 February 1914. *De Sumatra Post*, 13 February 1914.

sartorial hierarchy by a deliberate change in appearance would result in a significant change in the colonial relationship.

The vernacular press contained ample examples showing that it was the *hormat*-circular that inspired these young intellectuals to dress ‘up’ in a European fashion. For instance, in some places they founded voluntary associations in which its members would only dress in a European fashion and interact according to international forms of deference (Soerjaningrat 1914c: 191–192).²² The exiled Suwardi Suryaningrat reacted to these developments from afar, exclaiming:

“Bravo! This proves the unwillingness to be treated as inferior in the future. This is what happened when one was dressed in indigenous clothing. If one appears European in the Indies, one looks more prominent. That is the right that the indigenous peoples demand for themselves, to be prominent and engaged.” (Soerjaningrat 1914b: 180)

The traditional conservative groups in indigenous society fiercely contested the sudden acceleration of the westernization of indigenous appearance. Most members of the traditional high *priyayi* class rejected any change to the sartorial hierarchy, afraid to lose their traditional privileges and their position of ‘parallel elites’ in the colonial society to younger, more educated lower *priyayi* and the nascent middle classes. For instance, the Bupati of Malang called on two indigenous teachers in his district who had exchanged their traditional outfits for a European one. He demanded an explanation as to why they had done so. Both teachers answered that European dress was neater, more virtuous, and more practical. It also took far less time to dress-up in European clothes than in a Javanese outfit.²³ Times were clearly changing.

Dressing-up in a European manner was often not politically but socially motivated. Educated Javanese wanted to either evade deference demands, associate themselves with modernity, or both. However, the conservative *priyayis* criticised the young Javanese as hypocrites, claiming that they no longer showed respect to their social superiors, but still demanded traditional deference from their social inferiors. The previous Advisor for Native Affairs, Snouck Hurgronje, had already warned for this double standard when he responded to the request of Indonesian doctors to dress in a European fashion in 1902. The educated Javanese were aware that they were intellectually the equals or even superiors of the traditional elite, but socially stood well below them. As a consequence, plenty of these intellectuals sought to improve their social standing without completely breaking down the aristocratic hierarchy (Mrázek 2002: 129–160).²⁴

The sudden widespread adoption of European dress among the educated Javanese raised questions about the national and ethnic identities of the indigenous peoples. Could one be true to one’s ethnicity and cultural background wearing a pantaloons? Could one still be considered a nationalist? These questions were discussed by Sutatmo Suriokusumo and Suwardi Suryaningrat in the periodical *De Indiër*.²⁵ Sutatmo was one of the most vocal advocates of Javanese (as opposed to Indies/Indonesian) nationalism and a fierce defender of Javanese dress. In two articles he shared his shock and amazement about the ‘fast and unexpected change of clothes’ that he witnessed during the fall of 1913. Sutatmo quickly established a correlation between the changes in outward appearance and the *hormat*-circular in August 1913. According to him, by wearing a pantaloons and a hat, one could demand respect and evade humiliating deference demands from those who considered themselves one’s superiors. Even if it is tempting, he urged his compatriots not to dress-up:

“As a means to evade insults and avoid conflict, European dress for us Javanese is not recommended, not even to shed servile tendencies. A slave is and will remain a slave even if he wears the costume of a king. Who tries to hide his servile character with a pantaloons and a hat is a dissimulator.” (Soeriokoesoemo 1914: 9)

²²KT, 2 (1913) 1632, referring to *Bintang Soerabaja*, no. 214.

²³*Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 2 February 1914.

²⁴Dressing ‘up’ in European fashion was not necessarily a nationalist or anti-colonial statement, but a sign of self-advancement.

²⁵*De Indiër* was a weekly founded by the *Indische Partij* in the Netherlands after their leaders, Douwes Dekker, Cipto Mangunkusumo, and Suwardi Suryaningrat were exiled from Java in 1913.

In Sutatmo's eyes, Europeans did not respect the person wearing the clothes, but the clothes themselves. He therefore urged his compatriots to act like *Satryas* (Hindu caste of warriors and kings) by demanding equal treatment while wearing traditional Javanese clothing. True nationalists should don indigenous dress to inspire and rally their people for their cause, not estrange them by wearing a European outfit (Fakih 2012; Van Miert 1995; Shiraishi 1981).

Sutatmo's Javanese nationalist opinion on the changes in colonial society drew a strong rebuttal from Suwardi Suryaningrat, at the time a clear protagonist of a more inclusive Indies nationalism (although he evolved to a more traditionalist stance in later decades). According to Suwardi, nationalism is not deposited in a sarong or headscarf, but in the hearts of the people. He agreed that Javanese dress should not be too easily discarded, but at the same time one should be open to the benefits of European dress. For instance, European dress is more affordable and practical in daily usage. But most importantly, Suwardi argued, European dress emancipates the indigenous people by exempting them from servile obedience:

“Time and again it is surprising to witness the change in the servile attitude and manners, yes even of the opinions, into unforced, frank, but always eastern-polite manners, because of a change of clothes.” (Soerjaningrat 1914a: 136)

Where Sutatmo lamented that Europeans only respected the pantaloons and not its bearer, Suwardi believed this advantage could be used to emancipate the indigenous people. For him, European clothing was a “weapon with which we force the colonizers, to give our people their rightful rights” (Soerjaningrat 1914a: 138).

The debate over dress was indicative of the growing self-consciousness of the new generation of Indonesians. In a sense, both Sutatmo and Suwardi were reading nationalist messages into clothing practices, that may not have reflected the intentions of the people who wore these clothes. In mid-1913, the sudden proliferation of European dress styles was as much about demanding equal treatment and respect as it was about sending a political message. The main protagonists of this change were the staggering number of relatively anonymous young Indonesian professionals who suddenly exchanged their wardrobes, and not political actors like Sutatmo and Suwardi. This was not about asserting Javanese or Indonesian autonomy or even independence, but rather about claiming their rightful place as respected actors within colonial society. People like Prawiradinata and his fellow pantaloons-wearers made a quiet but unmistakable statement, towards the European colonizers and their Javanese elders, that they considered themselves equal. Some would even go one step further: they would demand to be given the same legal status as their European peers.

Legal Equality for the Many: From Parallel Elites to Notions of Modernity

The discussions surrounding the *hormat*-circular and the sudden proliferation of European dress styles among educated Indonesians show that a change in mentalities was underway among Indonesian lower *priyayi* and professional middle classes. These changes had a long pre-history, but they suddenly came to a culmination, and burst into the open in the year 1913. The thrust of both scandals is clear: the new “modern Indonesian elite” (Van Niel 1960) was no longer willing to accept an old order in which the parallel but separate elites of European colonial administrators and the traditional indigenous aristocracies shared power in ruling the Indies. The public outrage surrounding the *hormat*-circular and the sartorial hierarchy is only one way in which this development expressed itself. Behind the quieter scenes of colonial administration, similar changes can be observed, as is evident from discussions surrounding the legal system in the Indies and its notions of citizenship.

Like most colonial societies in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the Dutch East Indies had a plural legal system (Fasseur 1997; Luttikhuis 2013 and 2014). Dutch Indies' law categorized the population of the colony into ‘Europeans’, ‘Natives’, and ‘Foreign Orientals’. Legal pluralism had far-reaching consequences: Europeans, Natives, and Foreign Orientals were not only subject to different criminal and civil statutes, but were also prosecuted in different courts, subject to different penitentiary conditions, tax regimes, voting rights, militia duties, etc. Social positions were highly influenced by legal status: for example, pay scales

and career opportunities in the government and private employment were not officially segregated per legal status, but in practice employers mostly adhered to this model. Unsurprisingly, for most purposes ‘European’ legal status was preferable over ‘Native’ or ‘Foreign Oriental’ status: European status was the privileged status.²⁶

The legal categorization in the Dutch Indies was based on article 109 of the *Regeringsreglement* (RR; Government Regulation: the *de facto* constitution of the Indies state). Article 109RR was colloquially known as the ‘race criterion’ and defined who was ‘European’, ‘Native’, or ‘Foreign Oriental’ (for legal purposes). Although race or ethnicity was obviously a leading rationale behind the way these categories were defined, there were many frayed edges at which the legal definitions and conventional notions of race did not align. The original article 109RR had been drafted in 1854, but efforts to work out inconsistencies in the adopted definitions led to a major redraft of the law being adopted in 1906. This article determined that European law would apply to (the legitimate descendants in the male line of): 1) all Dutch citizens, 2) all other people “originating from Europe”, 3) all Japanese, and 4) everybody from a country with a Western-style family law (a veiled way of saying: everybody from a White and/or Christian country, i.e. the United States, Australia, etc.). Natives were defined as “all those who belong to the indigenous population of the Dutch Indies”, whilst everybody else was defined as Foreign Oriental (mostly Chinese, Arabs, etc.) (Engelbrecht 1940: 62–63; Fasseur 1997; Lutikhuis 2013).

Finally, article 109RR comprised one rather curious feature that particularly interests us: it included a clause giving the Governor-General of the Dutch Indies the right to declare European law “applicable” to any other people. This process, informally known as *gelijkstelling* (“equation” or “assimilation”), essentially opened the possibility for people to be declared European for all (legal) intents and purposes. This way of entering the European legal group had officially been in existence from the very inception of article 109RR in 1854, but throughout the nineteenth century it had been used extremely sparingly. In the decades before 1893 a total of 159 people were granted European status in this way. The 1890s and 1900s saw a gradual uptick in *gelijkstellingen*, with the number reaching 100 a year for the first time in 1907. During and after the 1910s, *gelijkstelling* became a mass practice, with at least several hundred ‘Natives’ and ‘Foreign Orientals’ being granted European status every year—significant numbers, considering that the entire European population of the Dutch Indies by the interwar years only counted 200,000–300,000 (Van Marle 1951–1952: 108–116).

The turning point in this development came in 1913. The original intention in 1854 had been to award the privilege of legal assimilation only to a small number of isolated individuals (mostly those adopted wholesale into European families, or Eurasians with a European father who had neglected to acknowledge paternity). But the increasing pressure of requests to be assimilated caused the colonial administration to rethink. From the 1880s through the early 1910s, the colonial administration sent out a string of circulars explaining that *gelijkstelling* was only available to people who exhibited a clear “suitability for European society”. The last of these circulars was published in 1912. Aspects that supposedly proved such “suitability” for European society in the eyes of the administration changed gradually over the years, but they focused on such things as an upbringing or education in a European social sphere, proficiency in Dutch or another European language, an elevated social position, or the profession of Christian belief.²⁷ But in 1913 the administration, seemingly suddenly, changed direction.

The colonial administration had been pushed to its change of heart by a small but growing group of assertive Indonesians (and Chinese) demanding to receive equal treatment. As part of a wider re-evaluation of legal pluralism inspired by the prevailing ideology of the ‘Ethical Policy’, the administration at this time was starting to implement several other small steps towards legal unification (Fasseur 1992; C.C.v.H. 1922). Thus, on 1 October 1913, the first government secretary of the Dutch Indies government, E. Moresco, sent a letter to the heads of all regional colonial authorities. He explained that the government saw the need to expand the use of the institution of legal assimilation. Moresco explained:

²⁶For some purposes, ‘Native’ status could also be preferable, e.g. agricultural small holdings could only be owned by Natives (*Verslag commissie Visman*: 52–59).

²⁷*Bijblad* no. 4029 (1884), no. 4998 (1894), no. 5245 (1897), no. 7679 (1912).

“In assessing the requests to be assimilated with Europeans, the principal criterion will from now on have to be considered the legal needs of the interested parties, meaning that the demand of suitability for European society will be dropped. After all, it will often be the case that Natives or other persons of Native status exhibit perfectly sufficient civilization and development [...], without also having acquired the mores and customs of Westerners to the extent, that one could say they no longer fit in their original environment. Such people were heretofore mostly denied assimilation, but now that our focus has shifted to the question into the legal needs of the petitioner, such will no longer be the case.”²⁸

Attached to Moresco’s letter was a new standardized form that the local officials were to use to assess the petitions for assimilation by their Native and Foreign Oriental subjects. These guidelines mainly asked about matters pertaining to an applicant’s education, general level of “development”, his/her social standing, and most importantly the reasons that he/she desired assimilation (Luttikhuis 2013).

The effect of the new guidelines was immediate. People were allowed to request European status for practical reasons (such as favourable career paths), as long as they were sufficiently educated. The numbers reflected the change: 1913 already saw a total of 204 assimilations, after which the assimilations jumped to 400 in 1914, 463 in 1915, and 598 in 1916. The numbers plateaued slightly in subsequent years, but they never returned to pre-1913 levels (Van Marle 1951: 111–116).

A typical example of the beneficiaries of this newly expanded regulation is Mas Soengkono, a 33-year-old forestry overseer in Rembang regency, central Java. Soengkono was well educated and spoke fluent Dutch: he had graduated from a European primary school and had spent five years at the *Dokter Djawa* school (a school for native auxiliary doctors that became renowned as a breeding ground for Indonesian nationalists). Soengkono first applied for European legal status in August 1912, together with his wife—a Javanese woman without formal education and unable to speak European languages—and his six children. After initially getting bogged down in bureaucracy, he renewed his application with a second petition in February 1914 (hence falling under the new post-1913 rules). Although Soengkono declared that due to his education he was “sufficiently informed of European circumstances”, never did he claim to “feel European” himself or pledge allegiance to a European lifestyle. Rather, his reasons for desiring a change of status were decidedly practical. First, he explained that in his job he had the same duties and responsibilities as his European colleagues but received lower wages. Second, and most importantly, Soengkono wanted to provide his children with a “good upbringing” and therefore wanted to send them to the European primary school near his home. Perhaps surprisingly, the local and central authorities were happy to grant Soengkono’s wishes: none of the officials assessing the application had any objections. Soengkono was deemed sufficiently educated, and he had legitimate reasons for wanting European legal status.²⁹

The existence of the institution of *gelijkstelling*, and its application to people like Mas Soengkono, teaches us that privilege in colonial society was not only about race, but also about class, education, and culture. There were ways, for a minority of ‘Natives’, to enter into “civilized society” and acquire the corresponding privileges. Although the official criterion for assimilation now became the “legal need” for European status, the reality of applications shows that those exhibiting appropriately ‘European’ behaviour—specifically in education and linguistic skills and in dress, cultural competencies, professional occupation, religion—remained more likely to be successful, even after 1913 (Luttikhuis 2013: 547–551). However, it is also clear that with the new guidelines, the colonial administration was signalling that it saw Indonesians and other non-Europeans as potential equals: still, generally, on a lower level of ‘civilization’, but not *fundamentally* different and inferior. The colonial administration did not change its approach out of its own goodwill, but was led there by increasing vocal demands for equal treatment by a growing number of Indonesians.

Many of the assimilated Europeans were middle rank employees in some branch of the colonial administration or in Western private business. The last decades of colonial rule saw a protracted

²⁸*Bijblad* no. 7962 (1914). The circular was dispatched in 1913, but officially published in the state bulletin in 1914. Emphasis in original.

²⁹Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI), Collection Algemene Secretarie Bogor, Bt. 18 March 1915 no. 9.

campaign by the colonial government and by private employers to “indianize” their payroll. They wanted to expand the ranks that could be filled with employees of non-European background, often based on financial considerations—once a particular job was predominantly occupied by Natives their pay grade was invariably downgraded—but also partly for ideological reasons (Van den Doel 1987: 558–561; Lindblad 2004: 28–46). Those with assimilated status were part of this development. “Indianization” of employment in the Dutch Indies has usually been treated as a phenomenon of the 1920s and 1930s (Van den Doel 1987; Lindblad 2004 and 2008). But the guidelines for legal assimilation, discussed here, show that the mental groundwork for this development had been laid before WWI. The major milestone signalling the mental shift saw the light of day in 1913.

As explained above, colonial rule in the Dutch Indies in the nineteenth century of course had a much longer history of collaboration with indigenous agents. But the mental shift that 1913 signalled for both European colonizers and Indonesians was a move from envisioning each other as ‘parallel elites’—supposedly equal but separate—to considering each other as placed on different steps of the same hierarchical ladder. The following case study elaborates that Indonesians now increasingly claimed to be—and were increasingly accepted by their European colonial counterparts as—actors who could legitimately claim rights or privileges; such claims were frequently rebutted, sometimes also accepted, but at least taken into consideration. The consequence was a protracted negotiation, consisting of thousands upon thousands of small-bore confrontations, in which Dutch ‘colonizers’ and Indonesian ‘colonized’ fleshed out what they meant or should mean with notions of civilization, development, and modernity.

Workplace Equality: A Recurring Demand

The legal discussions about who could be assimilated to European status sometimes sound rather byzantine: in the end, what was the actual difference between “suitability for European society” and “legal needs” of assimilation? How did Indonesians participate in these legal debates? And what were the real-life consequences of such changes for people’s daily lives in colonial society? In this final case study, we delve deeper into one important aspect of daily life in the colony: workplace (in)equality. We examine the realities of race relations among the staff of a conglomerate of four private railway companies, which were active on North-Central Java, the so-called Sister Companies (*Zustermaatschappijen*) (Luttikhuis 2014: 207–335).³⁰

Railway companies represented a particularly ‘modern’ industry in the Indies. Railway lines were concentrated in the urban centres, particularly on Java. The workforce consisted of manual labourers (the overwhelming majority of whom were Natives) and trained engineers (most of whom were European) on one hand, and a sizeable contingent of white collar workers of varying ranks, on the other: train conductors, station masters, common desk clerks, middle and upper management. This type of clerical work provides a typical example of the prestige of white-collar work in Western businesses in the colony: especially in the lower ranks it was often not particularly well paid, but it had a social standing far above manual work. It also represents the typical positions that in the last decades of colonial rule were subject to increasing “indianization”. The growing Indonesian (urban) middle class was entering the workforce in great numbers, transforming the outward appearance of white-collar work in the colony as well as their sense of identity (Van den Doel 1987; Lindblad 2004).

In their first decades, the Sister Companies (founded in 1881) had applied a basic differentiation of their personnel into European *ambtenaren* and Native *beambten*. The difference between these two terms, “*ambtenaren*” and “*beambten*”, is somewhat confusing. Both terms mean ‘official’, ‘clerk’, or also ‘civil servant’. The difference is merely one of gradation, in which *ambtenaar* suggests a higher position than *beambte*. Hence, Europeans were employed in white-collar occupations, whilst Natives were employed as labourers or at best in the most menial white-collar positions.³¹

³⁰The four companies were formally separate entities, but worked closely together, sharing one board of directors. The company archives are available in the Dutch National Archives: NL-HaNA, 2.20.14.01, 2.20.15, 2.20.16, 2.20.17, 2.20.18, 2.20.19.

³¹See articles 1–3 of the “Provisions concerning the Personnel”: NL-HaNA, Gemeenschappelijk archief Zuster-Spoorwegmaatschappijen, 1880–1975 (henceforth: ZSM), 2.20.14.01, 177.

But the difference between *ambtenaren* and *beambten* would become highly important. The Sister Companies decided to overhaul their employment regulation during their rapid growth in the 1900s and early 1910s.³² Increasing numbers of Native employees, with sufficient education and proficiency in Dutch, were pushing to be allowed to rise through the ranks into positions that had previously been reserved for Europeans. As a consequence, the company decided to formally overhaul its employment structure. Per 1 January 1913, a provision was added to the official “Provisions concerning the Personnel” of the Sister Companies decreeing that any Native *beambte* could be allowed to enter the ranks of *ambtenaren* if his superior declared him sufficiently qualified.³³

Foreseeing a further rise in the number of Natives pushing for entry into the *ambtenaren* ranks, the management of the Sister Companies soon wanted to further formalize the criteria for workplace equality. Elegantly bookending the year 1913, the directors (based in The Hague) wrote a letter to their representatives in the Indies on 31 December, explaining:

“The striving for development that is revealing itself among the native population of Java, will eventually have to lead to a change in the workplace hierarchy between European and native employees. We deem that the time has come to consider this issue. [...] [The] simple differentiation between *ambtenaren* and *beambten* based on race can naturally not be preserved, when significant numbers of Natives offer their services, who qualify through their education for the ranks of *ambtenaren*. For now, the rare cases of this nature can still be solved through the provisions in Art 3 sub b of the BP. [The provision referred to above, BL/AM] But if their number increases, no other norm for the differentiation between *ambtenaren* and *beambten* can be adopted than that of competency. We imagine that the prospective *ambtenaar* [...] will then have to pass an exam [...]. This condition of an exam [...] will have to be demanded of Europeans and Natives on equal footing.”³⁴

Only by the late 1920s did the presence of ‘Natives’ among the *ambtenaren* reach significant numbers.³⁵ But the seeds were sown in 1913. The first Indonesians had started to demand equality of opportunity and had thus set in motion a mental change that took hold for the long term.

The changes had come not as a unilateral progressive move by the European management, but rather as the consequence of a negotiation between the European directors and managerial representatives and a small but growing number of assertive Indonesian employees. Indonesian employees—part of the same ‘new elites’ that started to wear European clothes around this time, that protested antiquated deference rituals, and some of whom requested legal assimilation—from the early 1910s onwards became increasingly vocal in their demands for equal treatment, and began to contest discriminatory policies. They assertively styled themselves as part of the same social space as their European colleagues. Even if the management sometimes refused to heed their claims (often for financial reasons), it accepted that they had legitimate claims. The management was forced to concede that the demands of these ‘developed’ Natives could not be dismissed out of hand.

This process of negotiation and accommodation, starting in the early 1910s but building throughout the rest of the decade and beyond, becomes very apparent in a related discussion within the Sister Companies. The Sister Companies offered a rent allowance to those *ambtenaren* who lived in expensive towns, to cover the extra expenses of living in these areas. The allowance had been designed specifically for European employees because they presumably had more trouble than native employees in finding housing suitable to their standards.³⁶ When the first Indonesian employees were granted access to the *ambtenaren* ranks, the rent allowance policy was not automatically expanded to include them. But already

³²For the discussions on this reform: NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 93, Dossier No. 920; there especially: Letter from board of directors to chief agent, 19 March 1915; Letter from chief agent to board of directors, 16 September 1915; Letter from chief agent to board of directors, 28 May 1930. Also see: NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 56, Dossier No. 704-III-b, Letter from chief agent (G. Diephuis) to board of directors, 20 December 1928.

³³NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 177.

³⁴NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 920, Letter from board of directors to chief agent, 31 December 1913.

³⁵See the discussions in: NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.10.14.01, 920. Also see NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 56, Dossier No. 704-III-b, Letter from chief agent (G. Diephuis) to board of directors, 20 December 1928.

³⁶NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.10.14.01, 90, Dossier No. 909–910; NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.10.14.01, 93, Dossier No. 919.

in the very same year, in December 1913, a clerk by the name of Raden Mochammad Jusuf requested to be granted this same allowance (Luttikhuis 2014: 302–305).³⁷

Jusuf is an interesting case study in the overlapping identities and ideologies of the ‘new Indonesian elite’ that entered the stage of public consciousness in 1913. Like Prawiradinata and Sumarsono in the discussions on deference rituals, Jusuf could in hindsight be interpreted both as an ‘early nationalist’ and as a loyal colonial subject, depending on one’s perspective. Jusuf was born in 1881 in Pekalongan on the Northcoast of Central Java and graduated from the school for native chiefs (*Hoofdenschool*) in Magelang, in which he was taught a Western curriculum.³⁸ Otherwise, very little is known about Jusuf’s early life. He joined the Semarang branch of the Sister Companies in 1912 as a clerk 2nd class, on a starting wage of fl.40/month. Over his twenty-year career, he would gradually advance to the rank of *commies* (senior clerk) with a monthly wage of fl.375, a very considerable sum for a ‘native’ employee on an equal or even superior level to the majority European employees in the company.

Outside his career in the Sister Companies, Jusuf had a parallel life as an activist. It is in this capacity that we occasionally encounter Jusuf in the historiography on Indonesian anti-colonial nationalism, although as a decidedly marginal character (Van Dijk 2007: 457–458, 472; Korver 1982: 239–240; Shiraishi 1990: 99–103). In early 1913, he became a founding member of the Semarang branch of *Sarekat Islam* (SI). Jusuf was also a member of the SI central committee and the editor-in-chief of its magazine *Sinar Djawa*. He became the editor of Indonesian-language railway trade union journal *Si Tetap*. Finally, in 1914 he joined the Dutch-run *Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging*, the predecessor of the Indonesian communist party. Still, Jusuf never became a true radical. His primary claim to fame in the historiography remains a widely publicized debate with the later communist leader Semaun in 1917. Jusuf defended a cooperationist stance for the SI against Semaun’s urgings to take a more confrontational course against the colonial administration. According to Jusuf, Indonesians “need not shout with a loud voice; it is enough to send a representative to the Governor General, for instance. ... [I]f we shout, thousands of people will know our objections and this can generate the seeds of hatred” (Shiraishi 1990: 101). Jusuf lost the debate and was ousted shortly after as the Semarang SI branch chairman in favour of Semaun. After that, he faded into the background of a nationalist movement that was rapidly radicalizing.

Because of his stance in the debate with Semaun, Jusuf is generally remembered as a feeble character. A.P.E. Korver in his study of the early years of *Sarekat Islam* describes Jusuf as “calm, temperate” and claims that he ultimately had little influence (Korver 1982: 240). Takashi Shiraishi, an influential historian of the nationalist movement, characterizes Jusuf as an “old guard SI leader”: “Jusuf’s basic idea was begging, not with loud voice but with soft voice, so that the government should not be offended and the people not get excited. [...] In contrast, Semaun’s idea was straightforward, strong, and revolutionary” (Shiraishi 1990: 102). But Jusuf’s advocacy for the advancement of Indonesians within the Sister Companies tells a different tale. Already in 1913, mere months after he joined the company, he made his first assertive request for equal treatment, and throughout his career he would continue to badger his superiors to honour their rhetorical commitment to meritocracy. Although Jusuf was not a radical in the mould of Semaun, within the Sister Companies his first attempts in 1913 to demand to be heard by the directors was trendsetting—and ultimately successful.

Initially, Jusuf’s assertive request to his managers met with a mixed response. His direct superior, W. Oltmans, was sympathetic: Oltmans granted that the “lifestyles” of European and Native *ambtenaren* still differed but thought it would be “inconsistent” not to include people like Jusuf in the rent allowance. The highest representative of the Sister Companies in the Indies, G. Casperz, concurred with Oltmans. Together the two men advised the directors in The Hague to change the rent allowance policy.³⁹ But the directors were more divided on the issue. After some heated internal debate—one of them remarked: “this is in the future, we should not run ahead of the evolution”⁴⁰—the directors decided not to follow the advice of their representatives in the Indies. They explained:

³⁷NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 90, Dossier No. 910, Letter from head of exploitation SJS to chief agent, 9 December 1913.

³⁸NL-HaNA, Personeelsdossiers Zuster-Spoorwegmaatschappijen 1880–1972, 2.20.15, 165.

³⁹NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 90, Dossier No. 910, Letter from head of exploitation SJS to chief agent, 9 December 1913; NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 90, Dossier No. 910, Letter from chief agent to directors, 18 December 1913.

⁴⁰NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 93, Dossier No. 910, Memorandum 2 February 1914 (name of author illegible), see the marginal comment there.

“There are differences between the life circumstances of Europeans and Natives that cannot be separated from the difference in race and religion; [...]. An allowance towards the rent is only provided to married *ambtenaren*. When this arrangement was drafted the thought was of a marriage according to Dutch law and based on Dutch customs; the reason for the allowance in that case is that such a marriage is inevitably followed by the move into a home suitable for a European, for which rent prices in the Indies are relatively high. We do not appreciate the value of marriage to the Javanese any less than to the European, but in our opinion, it is clear that the financial consequences as explained above are much less likely to result.”⁴¹

Less than five years later, in March 1918, Jusuf once again posed the same request. This time, he was no longer a lone voice in the wilderness. Eight colleagues accompanied him. The petitioners claimed that “many European *ambtenaren* received the rent allowance, who live under the exact same circumstances as [we] do.”⁴² Their direct superior once again agreed, explaining that “our native *ambtenaren*, who all belong to the more developed among their countrymen, and many of whom are clothed in a European style,” could not be said to be living any differently from “our lower Indo-European *ambtenaren*, in particular as regards their homes.”⁴³ This time, the directors followed the advice of their representative in the Indies. In a different discussion regarding the pension rights of widows and children of their native employees, they had recently granted that the company would henceforth recognize marriages of native *ambtenaren* on an equal basis with European marriages. As they had conceded this, they felt they could no longer deny the validity of the argument put forth by their native *ambtenaren* regarding the rent allowance.⁴⁴

The directors’ hands were forced in this case, mere years after the initial request had been submitted, by a combination of two factors. Firstly, they felt an urge to follow step by step the inherent logic of the meritocratic arguments that they themselves had started to advocate in 1913—i.e. advancement through exams rather than racial privilege. When ‘Native’ employees started to appeal more forcefully, and in larger number, to the notion that they were not only formally equal but also living similar lifestyles, the directors found it difficult to retreat to their pre-1913 arguments. Secondly, in this case the intervention of WWI had a substantial impact. In 1913 the directors felt informed enough about the situation in the Indies to make their own judgment call. However, in 1918, after communications with the colony had been cut off for over three years, they were no longer so sure about their own judgment and decided to follow the advice of their representatives on the ground. In short, then, WWI was not a cause of these developments; the Native *ambtenaren* had started making their demands in 1913, and they had managed to convince the company representatives in the Indies at the time as well. The war functioned as a catalyser. 1913 was the year in which mentalities started to shift, whilst the war years ensured that these shifting mentalities could spread.

Whilst the slow but determined efforts by Jusuf were certainly not as spectacular as the public exploits of his more famous debating rival Semaun, a characterization as “softly voiced” is certainly misguided. Within the Sister Companies, Jusuf was heard loud and clear, and ultimately managed to convince the management that his claims had to be taken seriously. Moreover, his efforts inspired more Indonesian employees to follow his path. His 1913 request had been a solo effort, but the 1918 petition was seconded by eight colleagues. By 1928, when Jusuf filed yet another petition (this time requesting equal rights to a European furlough), he was joined by 36 colleagues.⁴⁵ In short, the Indonesian movement grew and radicalized in the years after 1913. But without the initial impetus in 1913 of people like Jusuf—and his many contemporaries mentioned in the pages above—starting to speak up in their own social circles, the growth and radicalization would not have been possible: without Jusuf, no Semaun.

Besides highlighting the importance of the 1913 discussion and the catalysing effect of WWI, the story of Jusuf’s petitions attracts our attention to one further crucial aspect of the developments that started in

⁴¹NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 90, Dossier No. 910, Letter from directors to chief agent, 3 February 1913.

⁴²NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 90, Dossier No. 910, Letter from chief agent to directors, 18 March 1918.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 90, Dossier No. 910, Letter from directors to chief agent, 28 June 1918. On the pensions’ discussion: NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 93, Dossier No. 920.

⁴⁵NL-HaNA, ZSM, 2.20.14.01, 59, Dossier No. 713a3, Letter from Jusuf and 36 other native *ambtenaren* to chief agent, 30 November 1928.

1913: the fundamental difference between colony and metropole. Throughout the discussions in the Sister Companies, the directors of the company, who were based in The Hague, were much more hesitant to go along with demands from Native *ambtenaren*. They had not yet made the mental shift in 1913, and in 1918 only followed reluctantly. Meanwhile, the actors in the Indies—the Indonesians *and* the Dutch/European representatives of the company!—were much further along. The mental shift happening in the early 1910s was the product of an internal discussion in the colony, between colonial Europeans and Indonesians. As such, it also signals the increasing mental autonomy of the colonial state and society from the metropole. The colonial model of modernity was made in Southeast Asia, not made in Europe.

Conclusion: 1913, Turning Point by a Thousand Cuts

One may wonder whether any of the four developments discussed in this article, centred around the year 1913, was as world-shattering as to constitute a ‘turning point’ in Indonesian history. Many of the events described in this article may seem like decidedly small-scale confrontations, even trivial. However, we suggest that these case studies are the surface glimpses of a larger current that started to flow in the year 1913. The cases described here are merely four among others. From our own research alone, we could list a host of other events and developments that unfolded in 1913: the first so-called Kartini-schools were opened in which Indonesian girls received Western education, the highly influential Sarekat Islam journal *Oetoesan Hindia* was first published, the State Railways ended racial segregation on their trains after complaints by its indigenous passengers, the practice of concubinage in the army was prohibited, feudal services and privileges were abolished, and member of the Semarang city council H.F. Tillema published his treatise *Van wonen en bewonen*, starting a discussion about housing policies and city improvement. The list could easily be extended with examples from the work of other historians.

These small-bore confrontations show a pattern that signals the rapid acceleration of a mentality shift, wherein a new generation of educated, mostly urban Indonesians demanded greater equality, respect, dignity, and broad social change. This change was reflected in more outspoken attitudes, consumer practices, sartorial choices, and in new deference rituals. After connecting our research—a testament to the benefits of scholarly collaboration—we were surprised how this drastic change in mentality had been overlooked. In 1913, several longterm developments converged, creating an environment in which, firstly, new Indonesian elites found the confidence to raise their voices for the first time, and secondly, colonial authorities were willing to enter into conversation with them.

This leads us to a crucial result: once we realize that major changes in colonial Indonesia were already afoot prior to WWI, we also need to start thinking about ‘decolonizing’ European narratives of the decline of empire. The roots of imperial disintegration cannot be found on the battlefields of Europe or in intra-European strife; we need to look at intra-colonial conversations, among and between colonizers and colonized alike. 1913 became a turning point in Indonesian history because large numbers of Indonesians each in their own small way started to push the wheel to turn their own history.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank the presenters and discussants in our double panel at EuroSEAS 2017 in Oxford at which we first presented this paper (Jennifer Gaynor, Cesar Suva, David Phillips, Ruth de Llobet, Sara Legrandjacques, and Matthew Cohen). We also thank Henk Schulte Nordholt, our ‘Under Construction’ discussion group at KITLV, and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable feedback. Funding for the research on which this article is based was provided by NUFFIC (The Hague), European University Institute (Florence), KITLV (Leiden), and Colby College Social Science Grant 01.2277.

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