

Correspondence

Houben/Lindblad Reply to Jan Breman's Review Article 'New Thoughts on Colonial Labour in Indonesia' (JSEAS 33, 2)

Jan Breman is a well-known expert on Asian labour history and sociology, and his remarks on our joint book are readily welcomed. However, the review itself raises a number of controversial issues, which merit a response as certain arguments put forward in our book have been dealt with in a different way than Breman suggests. In the early 1990s a debate was already conducted with Breman on the basis of a book review by Vincent Houben of Breman's monograph on coolies in East Sumatra.¹ Breman quotes from this debate in his review article but does not provide the context in which certain remarks were made. Instead of re-visiting an old discussion, we prefer to bring forward a number of points brought up in his review article.

We agree with Breman that the core issue of our difference of opinion is the nature of the colonial state, for which colonial policy towards indentured labour – among other issues – can be used as a yardstick. We also agree that coolies, both male and female, led a life of misery and were victims of a system that was created and upheld by the colonial state. In fact, the reader will find many telling examples of this in our book. What we do not support is the kind of generalisation Breman proposes, namely that the colonial state was evil, its officials being mere tools in the hands of capitalist enterprise and therefore causing the misery to which the coolies were subjected. Such equations are satisfactory for those who want to trumpet anti-colonialism but they hardly explain how colonial repression in the past really worked.

In order to gain an insight into how the system operated, we need to differentiate between localities, periods, firms and even individuals. This is exactly what our study wishes to achieve. First, we want to get away from the conventional exclusive focus on labour relations in colonial East Sumatra around 1900 by looking at other regions and other periods as well. Second, we have tried to include more variables into the discussion in order to reach more elaborate and nuanced conclusions, rather than simply reiterating that life on the plantation or in the mine was horrible. This is the novelty of our study, which Breman has difficulty with since it disturbs simple black-and-white portrayals of the colonial past. It is regrettable that Breman in his review does not do full justice to the scope of our study by mentioning the several regional case studies included.

A central point in Breman's criticism is our use of the records, especially the unpublished ones of the Labour Inspectorate in the Netherlands Indies. He thinks that

1 J. Breman, *Koelies, planters en koloniale politiek; Het arbeidsregime op de grootlandbouwondernemingen aan Sumatra's Oostkust in het begin van de twintigste eeuw* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1987). The English translation, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia*, appeared after two years whereas the Indonesian translation, *Menjinakkan Sang Kuli; Politik kolonial pada awal abad ke-20*, appeared a decade later; V. J. H. Houben, 'Colonial History Revisited: A Response to Breman', *Itinerario*, 17, 1 (1993): 93-7.

these records cannot be trusted since they are the product of the colonial administration and therefore by definition heavily biased. In our book we explain why we certainly do not take these sources at face value but try to use them critically, bringing out the wealth of detail from on-the-spot observations and the interesting trends that can be deduced from the statistics. We acknowledge that the Labour Inspectorate was not powerful enough to bring about substantial changes in the coolie system, but that does not undermine the merit of the source as such. To come back to the central issue of contention, according to us, colonial states were complex entities with several agencies working side-by-side but not necessarily in the same direction, although the ultimate outcome of colonial policies may suggest so. This explains why on the one hand labour inspectors could write devastating internal reports on coolie matters, while, on the other, the colonial government as an institution took no effective action to combat the existing abuses. The original reports are, however, from an historian's point of view, as telling as the voices of protest that were regularly raised in the indigenous press. Their level of informedness does not of course guarantee a complete picture and much may have remained unseen, just as critical press articles may not have told the complete story.

There are some additional minor points we would also like to respond to. It is not fully correct to identify us solely as 'colonial historians', as opposed to historians of Indonesia, and as representatives of the Leiden school of European overseas expansion. Houben is an expert in Javanese history and language. In addition, he has over the last five years been working as a professor of Southeast Asian history in Germany. Lindblad is an economic historian who has also written widely on economic developments in Indonesia since independence and in the region of Southeast Asia at large. Both contributed to a new textbook in the modern economic history of Indonesia appearing in 2002.

Bruinink-Darlang's study of 1986 was cited in a 1994 article by Houben on the Ombilin mines and it is not quite correct to imply that the authors did not know about this study.² Breman also appears to miss the tone of understatement in one observation by Lindblad that is labelled 'extraordinary in many ways', incidentally without elaborating on the 'many' ways, where this conclusion serves precisely to caution against drawing too far-reaching conclusions from the improvements reported. Nor have we been insensitive to gender. In many instances the he/she form is used to indicate that coolies could be either male or female (pp. 1, 3, 31, 71 ff.). Also shifts in sex ratio have been commented upon several times, making clear that it was connected to shifts in ethnicity and to economic cycles (pp. 52-3, 58-9, 66-7). The sex ratio of 2.9 in 1920 implies that one in four coolies was female. To what extent the social climate in the coolie compounds was affected seems to be a side-effect rather than a cause of this phenomenon.

In sum, on some issues we agree more with Breman's point of view than he cares to concede. His factual criticism, moreover, is mostly unfounded, while on the central issue of how the history of the colonial state should be written, in the end the reader should decide.

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2 V. J. H. Houben, 'Profit versus Ethics. Government Enterprises in the Late Colonial State', in *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia*, ed. R. Cribb (Leiden: KITLV, 1994), pp. 191-211.