A Time of Normalcy

Javanese ‘Coolies’ Remember the Colonial Estate

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Abstract

This article explores the idyllic portrait of a colonial estate depicted in the life narratives of former Javanese estate workers. The recollections of former workers do not reflect the existing narratives of plantation life and work on Sumatra's colonial plantations, but provide a different perspective on the colonial estate. The memories of estate life in the late colonial period recorded here provide an opening to explore how and why these elderly narrators engage the colonial past.

Keywords

Sumatra – colonialism – memory – nostalgia – coolies

The coolies who laboured on Indonesia's colonial plantations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have oft been portrayed as enduring a wretched and miserable existence. Frequently portrayed as the victim of deceitful and unscrupulous recruiters, the coolie is depicted as a naive peasant tricked into a life of bondage far from home. This image of the Javanese coolie is immortalized in Madelon Lulofs’s 1932 novel Koelie (published in English as Coolie in 1982). The story follows the fate of a young Javanese man, Ruki, who is lured from his idyllic village to the rubber plantations of Sumatra. Lulofs's fictional-
ized account of coolie life has been held to accurately depict the lifeworld of those who toiled on Sumatra’s plantations, so much so that in 1982 Anthony Reid wrote in a new foreword of the novel: ‘Whatever the limitations of this book, we have no better material for attempting to visualize the extraordinarily harsh world of the Sumatran estate labour force in the early decades of [the twentieth] century’ (Lulofs 1982: vii). Indeed, historical studies of Indonesia’s colonial plantations affirm many of the characteristics of estate life depicted in Lulof’s novel (Breman 1989; Lindblad 1999; Stoler 1985).

This well-known portrait of the Javanese coolie, so vividly portrayed by Lulofs, is not upheld in oral histories recorded with one-time ‘contract coolies’ still living in Sumatra. Instead, the memories of former plantation workers portray the colonial plantation and its management as benign. Rather than a tool of colonial oppression, the Dutch estate is remembered in life stories as a source of ‘sufficiency’, the wherewithal to maintain life and health. Set against the potent image of coolie life in colonial Indonesia built up in fictional and historical works, the memories of these elderly narrators are surprising and demand closer attention.

This article closely examines the memories of former Javanese ‘coolies’ who laboured on the Sumatran Kayu Aro1 tea estate in the early twentieth century. Recollections of the colonial past, recorded in oral history interviews with former workers still living on the estate today, reveal a version of the past which is confounding in light of the existing historical narrative. The reminiscences of these former plantation workers unsettle the well-known trope of the exploited and subjugated contract ‘coolie’, as the Dutch estate emerges in the life stories of elderly narrators as a symbol of security and sufficiency. This article will explore how former workers remembered the colonial estate within their larger life narratives and what these memories might tell us. The value of oral history, Alessandro Portelli reminds us, lies in the subjective. Oral history ‘tells us less about events as such than about their meaning’ (Portelli 2003:67). In their old age, Javanese ‘coolies’ recall the colonial estate as an irredeemable place of refuge, which tells us much about the meaning of the colonial within their greater life histories.

Elderly informants, interviewed during my fieldwork in 2010, recalled jaman Londo (the Dutch period) as a time of great economic and personal security.

1 A note on spelling: The brand of tea produced at the estate retains the original Dutch spelling of the name of the plantation, ‘Kajoe Aro’, though the district and the estate are now known by the modern Indonesian spelling ‘Kayu Aro’, which is the spelling I employ throughout this article.
For some, the colonial estate was remembered as a source of sufficiency, while others remembered that it provided plenty, even excess. Many interviewees looked back on *jaman Londo* as a model time, which they used as a reference point with which to contrast the turbulence and instability on the estate in later years. As such, the colonial period was also referred to by the elderly estate workers as *jaman normal* (‘the normal time’ or ‘the time of normalcy’) against which other periods were measured. The Japanese occupation of Kayu Aro was, by contrast, referred to as a ‘time of chaos’, while the independence struggle was termed the ‘season of suffering’. The significance of *jaman normal* as a distinctive period in Indonesian memory has been noted by other historians.² From the early years of independence, De Jong and Hüsken (2002:22) write, people began to refer to the late colonial period as *jaman normal*, ‘as if the Netherlands East Indies ha[d] been a haven of peace and calm’.

While one might expect colonial nostalgia to be present in the remembering of the elite, those who profited greatly from the Dutch colonial model, such nostalgia in the narratives of plantation workers, the so-called contract coolies, is a little more surprising. Contrary to expectations, former Javanese contract workers recalled the colonial estate fondly. Indeed, some remembered the relationship between the Dutch and their workers with marked sentimentality.

**Oral History on a Sumatran Tea Estate**

The Kerinci valley, once known amongst the Dutch as ‘the secret valley’, is a district administered within the province of Jambi in west-central Sumatra. The valley, bounded in the north by Mount Kerinci and in the south by the vast Lake Kerinci, is formed by a depression in the Barisan mountain ranges. In the north-western most corner of Kerinci lies the largest consolidated tea plantation in the world: the Kayu Aro estate. Opened in 1926, the plantation has been, and remains today, a source of livelihood for generations of migrant Javanese labourers, who began arriving in Kerinci some 85 years ago under the sponsorship of the estate’s Dutch management company. In the present day, the Javanese population inhabits approximately 30 villages scattered at the foot of Mount Kerinci, Indonesia’s tallest volcano. Collectively, these villages form the sub-district of Kayu Aro, named after the plantation which dominates its landscape.

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Described by one Dutch visitor in the 1930s as a ‘thee-paradijs’ (tea paradise) (Zentgraaff and Van Goudoever 1947:95), the Kayu Aro estate covers more than 3,000 hectares of land. The original plantation was established under the direction of the Dutch freestanding company Handelsvereeniging Amsterdam (Trading Society of Amsterdam), commonly known as hva. Today, it is one of the final remnants of Dutch economic activity in the region. Many of the former Dutch buildings remain in use: the administrator's house, the club, the tennis courts, the factory, and the hospital—reminders of the estate's not-so-distant colonial past. It was not until 1957, when Dutch assets in Indonesia were nationalized, that the Kayu Aro estate came under Indonesian state control. Today's plantation, which comprises much of the original Dutch estate, is managed by the Indonesian state-owned company Perseroan Terbatas Perusahaan Negara VI (PTPN VI).

The narratives of the colonial past explored in this article derive from a larger collection of oral history interviews recorded in 2010 with former Javanese estate workers in Kayu Aro. In 2010, I spent nine months living on the tea estate and recording the life narratives of two generations of elderly villagers, their stories collectively encapsulating the greater part of the twentieth century. These interviews were not limited to conversations about the colonial, but were aimed at recording individual life histories up to the present day. The time spent narrating particular events or time periods was determined by individual narrators. What emerged from these conversations about the past was the centrality of the colonial period in the way that elderly Kayu Aro residents made sense of their lives and understood their individual and collective destiny. While narrators in Kayu Aro placed great importance on the Dutch period, memories of the colonial in Indonesia have received little scholarly attention. The recent works of Rudolf Mrázek (2010) and Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler (2010) represent two exceptions which contribute significantly to our thinking about how the colonial is remembered in Indonesia.

Estate workers who narrated their life histories had, collectively, worked in almost every role available on the estate. Amongst the narrators were tea pluckers, weeders, tree fellers, and factory-workers, as well as tea garden overseers. Other narrators had worked as nurses, childminders, seamstresses, and shop keepers, providing services to estate employees. All narrators had, though, at some point in their lives been in the direct employ of the company. The majority of interviewees had experienced work in the tea garden, as either tea pickers or weeders. This reflects the dynamics of the greater working population of the tea estate, where the majority of workers are employed in the tea garden. The resulting collection of oral history interviews also represents the varied migratory experiences of twentieth-century estate workers. Narrators journeyed to
the estate in different time periods, arriving between the years 1927 and 1956. Others were born to parents who had arrived early in the twentieth century.

Only a small number of interviewees were able to remember the estate’s early years. Just one individual who was contracted in the first decade of the plantation’s operation was still alive and living in Kayu Aro in 2010. Mbah Gatot arrived in Kayu Aro on 1 June 1926 with 24 other men. When we met, he was aged 105 years old and hard of hearing, which limited his ability to participate in a structured oral history interview. He was, nevertheless, still able to share some of his life experiences. Those who were able to narrate most readily on this period were individuals who had travelled to Kayu Aro with their contracted parents in the early twentieth century and at the time of interviewing were aged between 85 and 100 years old. The situation was summed up by Mbah Buang who, having been unsuccessful in locating old workmates who might narrate for me, explained: ‘My life story is here in Kayu Aro, but other than me there are no longer any old people left in Batu Hampar. Throughout every afdeling (estate division), those above eighty are rare now. Many went back [to Java], and many more passed away here without ever going back.’ This article draws on the life narratives of thirteen former Javanese estate workers who recalled the late colonial period in the telling of their life stories.

**Contract Coolie**

Too often, labourers on Sumatra’s colonial estates are simply labelled as ‘coolies’, a term which is widely used, but which obscures individual lives. The population of labourers who fall into the category of ‘coolie’ in Indonesian history is extensive, encompassing Chinese, Indian, and Javanese labourers who worked on industrial projects ranging from tobacco, rubber, and coffee plantations on Sumatra to sugar plantations, roads, and railways on Java. Drawing on the available data, Termorshuizen (2008:278) estimates that ‘well over a million’ Javanese were contracted between 1890 and 1940 to work on plantations in the Outer Islands and Malaysia. The coolie label is used to generalize across geographical contexts and periods; it denotes poor, uneducated, and unskilled workers. Sunil Amrith (2011:47) sums up the many meanings of the word coolie by stating: ‘Whatever its origins, the term served to reduce the social and political lives of Chinese and Indian workers to their labour power alone; it was a

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3 The names given to narrators in this article are pseudonyms employed to protect the privacy of interviewees.
term of denigration, even dehumanization.’ For Indonesia, G. Robert Knight (1999:63) points to the complex ways in which the term was used as an ‘imperfect marker of the dichotomy of labour which was meant to distinguish the colony from the metropole and the colonised from the coloniser’.

It is fitting to write of coolies in an issue on colonial recollections because the coolie is a distinctly colonial being. The category of coolie derives its effectiveness from the dearth of individual accounts which might be used to demonstrate the diversity of experience among contract coolies. Deconstructing the coolie image, Breman and Daniel (1992:290) write: ‘There is a void, a silence: the silence of the coolies themselves. The resulting picture has been one of “coolie as victim”. The imagery is almost overdone: flotsam and jetsam, being cast adrift, a bricole, demoralised, debased and dejected.’ Life narratives can play a vital role in demonstrating the range and diversity of experience amongst colonial labourers. For Indonesia, unfortunately, there exist no writings by coolie labourers which might provide the coolie perspective. What we do have, however, are the memories of former contract labourers. These memories cannot replace contemporary accounts by coolies; rather, they tell a different story of the colonial past.

The narrated lives of retired plantation labourers construct a portrait of the colonial estate which differs considerably from the image which emerges in much of the existing literature on Sumatran estates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Stoler’s pioneering work on North Sumatra's plantations identifies ‘cramped and poor housing, wide-spread disease, high adult and infant mortality, along with verbally and physically abusive (and violent) labour relations’ (Stoler 1985:34). Similarly, Jan Breman paints a bleak picture of the life of ‘contract coolies’ on the plantations of East Sumatra throughout the nineteenth century, where ‘wretched living and working conditions’ meant that ‘disease and death must have been daily occurrences’ (Breman 1989:117). It is these conditions on Sumatra’s East Coast which have been immortalized in Lulofs’s Coolie and have come to represent the experiences of Sumatra’s estate labour force. It is difficult to reconcile this depressing picture of Indonesia’s colonial plantations with the memories of the elderly inhabitants of the Kayu Aro estate. Yet, to dismiss these disparate memories as mere fiction would be erroneous.

Documentary evidence suggests that the conditions on the Kayu Aro estate differed from those on the estates of Sumatra’s East Coast in a number of important ways. Existing work on Sumatra’s plantations have focussed almost exclusively on the East Coast; thus it is necessary to consider whether Kayu Aro differed in any significant way from these plantations. Lindblad (1999) points to the disproportionate focus on Sumatra’s East Coast in a chapter on coolie
labour outside East Sumatra, writing that ‘conditions of coolie labour in colonial Indonesia are virtually equated with conditions in East Sumatra’ (Lindblad 1999:79). This tendency for generalization based on East Coast conditions is ‘ever less tenable’, Lindblad argues, calling for further research on regions outside of Deli (1999:79). Archival and oral history work on the Kayu Aro estate indeed suggests that conditions on the East Coast do not adequately represent the situation in Kerinci.

Looking first at some of the distinctive elements of Kayu Aro, it is clear that the plantation was established with the goal of creating a different kind of estate. According to former director of hva Adriaan Goedhart, Kayu Aro, ‘built on fertile forest ground, was planned as the largest and most modern tea estate in the world’ (Goedhart 1999:76). The establishment of such a vast enterprise, where nothing but forest had existed before, was an ambitious plan, particularly in the absence of a local workforce. The formation and maintenance of a reliable labouring population in this period would be crucial to the estate’s success, and this was given priority. In order to attract and retain ready labour, wages on the Kayu Aro estate were set as much as thirty percent higher than on plantations on the East Coast. De Bruijn, the administrator of Kayu Aro, complained in 1936 that ‘[t]he cost of a coolie is much more expensive here, so it is fortunate that there is plenty of work for him’. Indeed, the higher wages on the estate proved a significant incentive for Javanese workers to remain in Kayu Aro.

Kayu Aro also differed from many plantations on the East Coast in the composition of its labour force, specifically the number of women employed. Many of the social ‘problems’ identified on the plantations of North Sumatra—‘prostitution, venereal disease, sodomy, [and] illegitimate offspring’—can be attributed, as Stoler (1985:45) notes, to the scarcity of women on those estates. Unlike rubber and tobacco plantations, which employed large numbers of young, single men, tea plantation labour utilizes a higher ratio of female workers. It was possible, therefore, for young, married couples to be recruited for work in Kayu Aro, and this contributed to more favourable living conditions for workers in comparison with the East Coast. Van Klaveren (1997:113) writes that the propensity for Javanese coolies to bring their families meant that they were more permanent workers than the Chinese. From the beginning, the predominance of families in Kayu Aro meant that the composition of the population

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4 Inventory Number 15, Archief W.A. van Goudoever, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.
5 Inventory Number 15, Archief W.A. van Goudoever.
differed significantly from many other plantations. In addition, the Kayu Aro estate was established at a time when the plantation industry had come to realize that the sustainability of the labour force depended on family recruitment (Stoler 1985:38).

The variations in living conditions between Kayu Aro and plantations in East Sumatra may be partially attributed to the powers bestowed on individual HVA administrators. Due to the isolated location of some HVA estates, the company delegated greater powers of determination to Dutch managers. According to the HVA company historian Brand (1979:48), ‘[a]s the estates were widely dispersed, HVA tended mainly to decentralized decision-making.’ Thus, conditions were not uniform across plantations. Houben and Lindblad (1999:22) argue that the variation in labour management was so great in late colonial Indonesia that it is no longer possible to uphold ‘a monolithic and static image of the “coolie”’. As such, micro-histories which focus on a single region or plantation are necessary in order to demonstrate the breadth of experience across time and place. On Kayu Aro, the larger number of families and decentralized management meant that the coolie experience there differed in some significant ways from that on Sumatra’s East Coast.

The distinctive conditions of the Kayu Aro estate, however, are not enough to adequately reconcile the sharp differences between the memories of plantation life recorded in former workers’ narratives and the prevailing picture depicted in secondary sources. The difference may, in part, be due to the nature of the source material. Existing work has built up a portrait of the coolie’s world based on documentary evidence, much of it quantitative and assembled from the colonial viewpoint. Labour Inspectorate reports have been particularly well utilized to piece together a picture of the contract workers’ world.6 Unfortunately, data which might show whether rates of death, disease, and infant mortality were as high on the Kayu Aro estate as in North Sumatra do not exist.

While much written evidence documenting the conditions on the Kayu Aro estate has been lost, life narratives offer insights that written sources cannot. Indeed, Breman (1989:9) laments that the source material with which he deals ‘lacks many particulars that are necessary to give colour and shape to the story of the coolies’. Of course, oral histories do not communicate a picture of the past as it happened. Rather, they tell us how informants saw their past or, at least, how they now think they did. While existing literature

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6 Houben and Lindblad (1999) and Breman (1989) draw heavily on the annual reports and individual inspection reports of the Labour Inspectorate.
has demonstrated that labouring and living conditions on Sumatra’s estates were dire, the question of how coolies themselves perceived life and work on Sumatra’s colonial plantations remains. Did contracted Javanese workers necessarily perceive life on Sumatran estates to be miserable and wretched? Unfortunately, we cannot know how contract labourers who arrived on the Kayu Aro estate in the early twentieth century perceived life and work under the Dutch at the time. Oral histories, however, allow us to hear how elderly Javanese remember the colonial estate as they look back on their lives.

In the Care of the Dutch

Former estate workers’ recollections of the colonial7 grappled with some of the well-known features of life on the colonial plantation and colonial labour relations. The relationship between the plantation management of Kayu Aro and its workers in the early twentieth century was clearly defined in the memories of former workers. In a material sense, the estate would provide workers with food, housing, clothing, cooking implements, and medical care. According to Mbah Buang: ‘If we speak of the Dutch time, everything was normal. The food was taken care of, the clothing was taken care of, there were no problems.’ In return, the workers were expected to provide reliable labour. Workers’ narratives demonstrate, however, that it was the elusive feeling of security and stability that most attracted them to estate work. Workers often remembered that during the Dutch period they felt untroubled. Narrators explained that as an estate worker you became the ‘responsibility of the Dutch,’ and so for many this period is remembered as a unique time when they did not have to worry about anything. Mbah Cilik explained: ‘We did not have to wonder “what will we eat?” That was already guaranteed.’

Narratives of former workers emphasized the benefits of colonial rule on the Kayu Aro estate, while ignoring oppressive modes of labour control.8 Some

7 In speaking of ‘the colonial’ in workers’ recollections, I am referring to narrators’ memories of the colonial period on the Kayu Aro estate. Interviewees did not speak of the Dutch in remembering their lives in Java. This is, perhaps, because the colonial period in Kayu Aro was clearly defined by its abrupt end; thus there was a worthwhile distinction to be made between ‘the Dutch time’ and ‘the Japanese time’. Furthermore, the Dutch in Kayu Aro played a central role in the everyday lives of the plantation workers, one which they did not occupy in their lives in Java.

8 The works of Stoler (1985) and Breman (1989) provide a significant counterpoint to the memories of former Kayu Aro workers. While elderly Kayu Aro residents narrated their memories
narratives, though, hinted at the less desirable aspects of life on the colonial estate. For workers who were contracted to the estate in the first half of the twentieth century, their movement was restricted to within the boundaries of the estate. According to Mbah Satina: ‘Back then, we were not free to travel around, we could not just roam here or there, you know. We had to stay on the estate; we had to stay in Kayu Aro here.’ When pressed for a reason why she thought this was the case, she had difficulty finding one. Finally, she came to an interesting conclusion, asserting: ‘Because we were the responsibility of the Dutch, yes, because of that it was. But the important thing was there were no difficulties.’ For Mbah Satina, her immediate concern was that she did not experience hardship. That her freedoms may have been restricted in return for the benefits she received seemed peripheral to her understanding of estate life. For many narrators, the chief benefit of being under the care of the Dutch at this time was in ‘not experiencing hardship or misery’. Even those narrators who did not necessarily remember this as a time of great happiness or prosperity remembered that they felt no hardship; life was ‘normal’.

Mbah Karto, a second-generation estate worker (his parents having taken up contracts in the early twentieth century), worked as a day labourer before becoming a plantation employee. ‘I entered the plantation and from there my life was determined,’ he said. For Mbah Karto, the appeal of permanent estate work was the security for his family. He explained, ‘As for people who worked for the company, they didn’t have to think about anything.’ While estate work provided a stable living, especially for large families, most workers survived at a subsistence level. After thirty years of estate work, Mbah Karto found himself retired, living on a small company pension without any assets. Nevertheless, he remembered his life on the estate during the Dutch period fondly. He recalled that while the estate was under the management of hva he felt untroubled and carefree: ‘Back then, those of us who were the responsibility of the company were never confused, never without.’ Here, the colonial plantation is equated with security and remembered in terms of its economic benefits.

Elderly Javanese estate workers, though, did not characterize their relationship with the Dutch as purely transactional. Instead, they depicted an intimate bond between the Dutch management and their Javanese workers. Narrators described the Dutch attitude towards them as sayang—a word often used to
describe the feeling of love and affection a mother or father would feel toward their child. In this case, it is perhaps best translated as fondness, or caring. Mbah Rasinem accompanied her parents to Kayu Aro in 1930, aged three. She remembered her childhood on the estate under Dutch management, as well as working with the Dutch after independence. Speaking of the relationship between the Dutch managers and the Javanese workers, she said: ‘I remember the Dutch were always fond (sayang) of the workers.’ Mbah Ramelan utilized the same language when he recalled: ‘The Dutch were very fond (sayang) of my father. Because my father worked the lathe in the workshop; also, he was very clever at running the film projector. So a lot of Dutch people were very fond of my father. Fondness it was, truly!’ Surprisingly, elderly Javanese remembered an intimate, familial relationship with the Dutch rather than a relationship in which they were subjugated. Former workers located themselves and their former employers within a framework of fictive kinship in their life narratives.

Workers remembered not only ‘the Dutch’ as a collective, but also individual Dutchmen with whom they imagined a bond. Without difficulty elderly interviewees recalled the assistants who had overseen their afdeling. The remembered rapport between assistants and the Javanese residents of their afdeling is exhibited well by an exchange between Mbah Juni and Mbah Tomo, who were interviewed together. The village secretary was also present during this interview, as Mbah Juni explained how their assistant, Tuan Van Der Saag, had departed before the Japanese occupation:

village sec.: After that did you ever see him again?
Mbah Juni: No, there was another Dutchman, but he was Tuan Balt, that was around 1950. It was Tuan Balt who came back here.
Mbah Tomo: It was said [Tuan Van Der Saag] wanted to pay a visit to the population here.
Mbah Juni: Look in on us.

Their assertion that, although he had not returned to work at the estate after the war, Tuan Van Der Saag wished to ‘look in on’ (tilik) the workers, is indicative of the relationship of fictive kinship characterized by Javanese (and also Dutch) narratives. The continuing bond that they imagined stretched beyond the realm of work, suggesting a personal attachment.

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9 The use of the word sayang may also be taken to indicate that the Dutch felt a sense of compassion toward their workers.
Elderly narrators seldom equated the Dutch they knew on the estate with colonial power. Mbah Karto made a distinction between the Dutch he encountered in his everyday life in the early twentieth century and Dutch colonial rule. ‘It was their country that was the colonizer, not the people one by one,’ he explained. ‘Their country just happened to be the same. Individually they were kind; there was no problem with them.’ The good character of the Dutch in Kayu Aro was also affirmed by Mbah Karto with a story of their generosity toward the staff:

My brother worked with the Dutch, a ‘Dutch cook’ he was called. If, for example, a chicken was roasted for the midday meal, if there were leftovers, they never asked where it went. Sometimes it was finished up by us out the back and there was no problem. They never said: ‘Who ate that chicken!’

Indeed, many narrators seemed to have difficulty reconciling the Dutch they were familiar with on the estate with the Dutch who colonized their country. Different terms were used to distinguish between the Dutch employees of hva and the Dutch colonial administration. The Dutch employed on the estate were almost always referred to as simply Londo, colloquial Javanese for ‘Dutchman’. The Dutch colonial administration, however, was more often referred to with the impersonal term penjajah (colonizer). Beaulieu-Boon (2009:305) points out that the experience of colonialism is ‘mediated through personal contacts with the colonialist’. Workers’ memories of the Dutch colonial period in Kayu Aro are distinguished by memories of the Dutch men and women who featured in their daily lives.

The sentimental terms in which the former estate workers of Kayu Aro remembered the Dutch presents a contrast to Stoler and Strassler’s oral history work with elderly Javanese servants, who remembered their former Dutch employers with a marked lack of sentimentality (2010). The domestic workers interviewed by Stoler and Strassler interacted with their Dutch employers in the home, a proximity more conducive to the establishment of intimate ties than the tea estate where most Javanese encountered the Dutch only in the tea gardens or in passing on the roadside. Yet while Stoler and Strassler’s informants provided sparse accounts of their time working for the Dutch, former estate workers in Kayu Aro shared rich stories of the colonial period.

Beaulieu-Boon (2009) proposes an alternative explanation for the unsentimental and business-like narratives of domestic work and childminding which former Javanese servants shared with Stoler and Strassler. Beaulieu-Boon's
own work examines the life narratives of Indonesians now living in North America, and her doctoral thesis identifies a number of positive memories of the Dutch shared by her informants. She argues that the official narrative of the past in post-colonial Indonesia, which casts the Dutch as the enemy, can be seen to direct the recollections of former domestic workers interviewed by Stoler and Strassler. Moreover, Stoler and Strassler’s interviews with Javanese servants were conducted during the final years of the New Order regime, an era when history and memory was carefully directed. Underscoring the danger of remembering, first during the revolutionary years and later under the New Order, Beaulieu-Boon (2009:318) writes: ‘Imagine the consequences of recounting stories of the closeness of your relationships with the enemy ... Better then, to forget Dutch children, the families, the life, the job, the photos, indeed, the entire era.’ Yet the elderly narrators at the centre of this article spoke candidly about their time working for the Dutch.

There are a number of reasons why memories of the colonial in Kayu Aro have not been reconfigured or silenced in the way one might expect. The isolated location of the Kayu Aro estate is key to understanding the shape of memories recorded there. Studies which point to the pervasiveness of a singular national narrative until the fall of the New Order tend toward a Java-centric view of affairs. Beaulieu-Boon attributes the nature of her informants’ memories to the fact that they left Indonesia and, therefore, were beyond the reach of state memory-making and far from the kind of danger which would give cause for them to publically silence such memories. In Kayu Aro individuals were likewise isolated, though to a lesser extent, from the activities meant to reshape individual memories in line with a new nationalist narrative. Oral history interviews in Kayu Aro revealed that the national narrative did not provide a structure for elderly narrators’ accounts of the past. More often, life narratives were shaped by personal and local events.

Former domestic workers interviewed by Stoler and Strassler expressed an anxiety about speaking of the colonial, which was not evident in Kayu Aro. Their work (2010:178) recounts the apprehension of one man, concerned he may later be tried, who asked: ‘Am I going to be tried, Mas? ... Don’t later say, “That man used to work for the Dutch”.’ Elderly narrators in Kayu Aro displayed no anxiety specific to sharing memories of the Dutch, which suggests that remembering the colonial in Kayu Aro carried a lesser threat than the same act of remembering in Java.10 Beaulieu-Boon (2009:300) points to the importance

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10 A number of those I interviewed were, however, initially apprehensive about taking part in
of ‘recording multiple colonial perspectives’, given the differences between expat memories and memories recorded in Indonesia and the Netherlands. It is important to note, however, that there is also great diversity to be found amongst those remembering in Indonesia itself.

Violence

Mbah Buang, who experienced work as both a messenger boy for the Dutch in his youth and, later, as a worker in the tea garden, described the Dutch on the Kayu Aro estate as well mannered. He laughed self-consciously as he imitated one Dutchman’s use of high Javanese, a level of speech which Mbah Buang possessed little command of himself:

The Dutch here, they were polite. They didn’t strike us, nothing like that, there was none of that. In fact, the Dutchmen here could speak Javanese. For example, he might ask: ‘Kenopo nggak dijikok iku?’ (Why was this leaf not picked?) We would just say ‘Nggeh doro;’ (Yes master). They would inspect the plucking and if they spoke to the workers they would use high Javanese too, ‘nggeh’ (yes), ‘boten’ (no), like that, haha. We respected the Dutch because, well, we followed the Dutch, the Dutch were our leaders, we were fed by them, and we were paid by them, so if we didn’t respect them, how would that be?

Mbah Sampan’s assessment of the Dutch under whose authority he worked was simple: ‘The Dutch were good, there was no problem with them. In fact, they were never mad. Really they weren’t. It was only the [Javanese and Sundanese] overseers who were often angry.’ Mbah Buang and Mbah Sampan, both second-generation Javanese who arrived with their parents in the estate’s early years, raised the subject of violence independently. Both narrators were responding to the question: ‘What was it like to work for the Dutch?’ Their respective assertions of ‘They didn’t strike us’ and ‘They were never mad’ refute the familiar tales of violence on the colonial plantation, a narrative which they seem to address, though it remains unspoken.

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11 Many interviewees told of verbal abuse and physical punishments meted out by Javanese overseers. Some narrators had themselves been violently reproached for working too slowly or not reaching daily targets for picking.

an oral-history interview, particularly women, who often had little experience in narrating at length.
Archival sources reveal the violence on the Kayu Aro estate which has been erased from the collective memory of the plantation’s former workers. In 1929, *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* reported that a significant number of attacks on assistants had been committed by contract workers on the Kayu Aro estate.\(^\text{12}\) According to the report, ten attacks on Dutch personnel had taken place since the estate’s opening three years earlier. Assistant De Bruijn was the subject of three attacks. The third assault, in 1929, was reported in newspapers in the Netherlands East Indies and the Netherlands. In this attack, Assistant De Bruijn’s kneecaps were reportedly smashed by a contract worker.

Stories of violence, perpetrated by or against the Dutch, are distinctly absent from the oral histories recorded in Kayu Aro. Linda Hutcheon (2000:195) writes that nostalgia is ‘rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire’. Forgetting, therefore, plays an important role in remembering the colonial estate. The erasure of memories of violent labour relations exhibits the function of nostalgia in the life narratives recorded. Frances Gouda (2008:240) observes that ‘the historical memory of Indonesians as well as Dutch people appears equally entangled in a spider’s web of remembering and forgetting, as if imprisoned, in the words of Pierre Nora, in a “dialectic between souvenir and amnésie”’. Indeed, it is impossible to disentangle the memories of elderly Kayu Aro workers; truth and fiction, fantasy and reality all combine to form narratives of the colonial. The rare intersection between memory and the archive in this case allows us to catch sight of the colonial nostalgia in narrators’ recollections.

Luisa Passerini (1983:196) writes that ‘[t]here is no “work of memory” without a corresponding “work of forgetting”’. Memory work is a task of selection and organization in which particular memories are prioritized and given significance above others. We can never exhaust the memory of an individual narrator, so any account is necessarily partial. This ‘unfinishedness’ of oral history, Portelli (1981:104) argues, is one of its defining features. Thus, the stories former contract workers chose to tell of the colonial estate must be read with care. Indeed, what narrators chose to elide was at times as interesting as what they revealed.

\(^{12}\) *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, Batavia, 3-11-1929, no. 58.
Memories of the colonial estate should not be analysed in isolation. Former workers’ recollections of their lives before they became ‘contract coolies’ allow memories of plantation life to be analysed as part of an individual’s greater life history. Workers’ life experiences in Java coloured their perceptions of what they found on arrival in Kayu Aro. The life stories of contract workers recorded in Kayu Aro indicate that the reasons Javanese signed contracts which ultimately saw them transported to Kerinci were consistent. The first generation of workers who took up contracts were, by all accounts, amongst Java’s poorest. Mbah Gatot, who signed a contract in 1926—‘with just a thumbprint’—explained: ‘Back then [in Java], it was misery. Finding food and clothing was truly difficult, you know, you couldn’t imagine it now.’

Vincent Houben (1999) has developed a theoretical model for the assessment of the quality of life of contract labourers in the early twentieth century. Factors which ought to be taken into account in interpreting the coolie’s quality of life, he argues, include the life of the individual coolie before recruitment:

Was the coolie recruited on a voluntary basis or not? What was the situation in his home region and what was his/her personal state of affairs? These questions pertain to the reasons behind leaving Java and the level of motivation felt by the workers to fulfil the obligations of their contract.

Houben 1999:116

While Houben’s model is theoretical, oral histories demonstrate that reasons for leaving Java are indeed pertinent to understanding the individual labourer’s experience of estate life and how they remember this experience in the context of a life review. The life narratives recorded in Kayu Aro answer the very questions posed by Houben and tell us something about coolie life that economic theories of labour cannot; namely, how contract coolies felt, or, at least, how they now remember they felt, about estate life and work.

Explaining why his parents had signed up for plantation work, Mbah Sastro stated very simply, ‘If we’re talking about life in Java, there was not enough.’ The term Mbah Sastro employs here is ‘cukup’. David Penny and Masri Singarimbun (1973) have written on the Javanese concept of cukupan, which means ‘to have enough’. According to Penny and Singarimbun (1973:2): ‘The Javanese peasantry, both its rich and its poor, has long had a concept of what constitutes “enough”. The word they use is cukupan. It is applied to what they see as being

‘Nggak Cukup’—Not Enough
the reasonable needs of the ordinary peasantry.’ For those who do not have enough (*nggak cukupan*), ‘it means not enough land, not enough work, not enough pay for the work that is actually done, and not enough access to health or educational services’ (Penny and Singarimbun 1973:2).

For Mbah Sapari’s parents, who arrived in Kayu Aro in 1935, Penny and Singarimbun’s definition of ‘not enough’ is fitting. Mbah Sapari explained, ‘In Java there was no work, food was insufficient, clothing too, so my parents came here.’ Inability to secure enough land, work, and, correspondingly, money in their home villages in Java was a clear motivation for many who accepted work on Sumatra’s plantations. Mbah Markanti told of how her family consistently went without food in Java because her parents could not secure paid work. She told us: ‘Nowadays we eat three times a day, but back then, in Java, sometimes we ate just once a day. Rarely could we eat three times a day. There was not enough.’ Mbah Sampan recalled that he and his mother possessed only the clothes they wore: ‘When we came to Kayu Aro, we just had our clothes, just a shirt and a sarong. If you are very poor, you don’t have anything to bring you know. So we didn’t bring anything here. Just our clothes.’

Interviewees in Kayu Aro could often be identified as originating from regions of Java which experienced overpopulation and rice shortages in the early twentieth century. One such region from which a significant number of workers originated was Purworejo in Central Java (Houben 1999:29; O’Malley 1989:134; Hasan 1987:176). Indeed, five interviewees in Kayu Aro came from this regency, which was known for its overpopulation and poverty in the early twentieth century.

The Javanese employed in Kayu Aro had seldom experienced stable employment in Java. Those who were contracted to work on the plantation had largely worked as day labourers (*buruh harian*) in their home villages. The remuneration for this work was small and the work seasonal, affording little economic security. Mbah Sastro, whose parents were contracted to work on Kayu Aro in 1933, described his parents’ employment before taking up plantation work. He explained:

In Java my father worked on other people’s land, planting rice. As for my mother, she was a petty trader. She sold beef, tempeh, whatever she could buy at the market she would resell. I sometimes accompanied her to the places where she was selling, before I left for school, you know. But the profits were very small. Back then, when I was still small, my father was a person without means, my mother was a person without means.
Often interviewees expressed the view that plantation work on the Outer Islands was the only stable employment available to peasants from densely populated areas of Java at the time. Houben (1999:29) notes that ‘[m]any landless lived a life of misery and poverty, roaming around and looking for means to earn a living’, a valuable population for recruiters. For those without any prospect of regular employment, like Mbah Sastro’s parents, plantation work presented an appealing opportunity.

Contrary to the narratives recorded in Kayu Aro, the archetypal coolie is a peasant, seduced away from his land. The contract coolies portrayed in Lulofs’s novel own livestock and cultivable land in Java (1982:15). As such, her novel represents only pull factors, such as the desire to become rich, and ignores the poverty of life in Java as a motivator (Lulofs 1982:19). The possessions of Ruki and his grandmother in Coolie amounted to ‘the house, the buffalo, the rice-field, the hen and her chicks. And it was all they needed’ (Lulofs 1982:15). Such a list of assets, however, represents relative prosperity compared to the possessions described by the elderly Javanese of Kayu Aro. Houben (1999:29) likewise observes that ‘[t]he romanticized picture of innocent village folk, being dragged away from their padi fields is not wholly true’. When I asked Mbah Gatot what he brought with him on the trip to Sumatra he appeared bewildered. After a pause he responded: ‘What could we bring? We did not have anything! We just had the clothes we were wearing. Just a shirt and a sarong. We were people without means, you know. We had just the clothes on our bodies. I wore just a shirt and a sarong. The main thing was we were not naked.’ Others who undertook the journey in these early years described meagre possessions: a sarong, a pair of shorts, a piece of cloth, a comb. These paltry belongings amounted to the worldly goods of those contract labourers who arrived on the Kayu Aro estate in the early twentieth century. Not one among those interviewed—or their parents—had owned any productive land or working animals in Java. Most of those narrators, however, now owned a small plot of land in Kayu Aro; some owned an ox. Such possessions offer an important insight into the early lives of those who adapted to estate life and settled permanently in the region.

Former contract workers’ memories of life before they embarked on the journey to Sumatra enhance our understanding of their experience of estate life. Memories of food featured prominently in workers’ narratives of life in Java and Kayu Aro. According to elderly narrators, being able to eat rice was a sign of prosperity for Javanese peasants at the time. As such, the offer of rice was a significant incentive for contract workers in the early twentieth century. Mbah Buang remembered the hardships of life in Java before his parents were contracted to work in Sumatra in 1937. That deprivation was embodied in
having to eat *tiwol* (a kind of rice substitute made from dried and shredded cassava). As he explained: ‘Before my parents were contracted we ate *tiwol*, so my father wanted to take up a contract. He said, “Let’s not eat *tiwol* any longer”. Payment in cash and in kind, guaranteeing a certain standard of living, was a persuasive offer. In the words of Mbah Buang:

There was a registration for those who wanted to sell their soul to Sumatra, to the Dutch. Those who were looking for people to register said, ‘There you won’t eat *tiwol*, you will be rationed rice,’ ah, like that it was. ‘If you work with the Dutch in Sumatra you will be rationed rice, you will be paid with money.’ Persuasive it was. In fact we arrived here and it was true, we were given rice, [and told] ‘tomorrow you work’.

For Mbah Buang, plantation work had met his modest expectations. He said he had never had any desire to return to Java or move off the estate. ‘For what?’ he asked, ‘There we had nothing. Here everything is sufficient.’ A shortage of rice, a scarcity of workable land, and insufficient wage labour opportunities all contributed to the decisions of the Javanese who came to Kayu Aro in the first half of the twentieth century. While living and working conditions in Kayu Aro may not have been ideal, they were nevertheless seen as an improvement upon life in Java. Narrators’ recollections of Java are characterized by insufficiency, while the colonial estate symbolizes sufficiency.

**Poverty as a Powerful Motivator—Mbah Sampan’s Narrative**

Mbah Sampan’s story of his journey to the estate illuminates the combination of push and pull factors which led Javanese to take up estate work in the early twentieth century. Mbah Sampan, though young at the time, was one retired plantation worker who vividly remembered the journey from his home village in Java to the isolated Kerinci valley.

Mbah Sampan believed he was 10 or 11 years old in 1927, when he arrived on the Kayu Aro estate with his mother. At the time of our interviews, he estimated his age to be around 95 years old. Mbah Sampan’s story of migration to the estate is one he narrated carefully and retold in three life history interviews. Each time, the story began as Mbah Sampan remembered being woken by his mother in the dead of the night on the pretence of accompanying her to the market. His twin brother and older sister slept nearby, but his mother insisted they be left to sleep. Mbah Sampan remembered travelling for four hours on foot with his mother to reach the post office in Madiun, East Java, by sunrise.
Although he did not know it at the time, Mbah Sampan's mother had left her two eldest children as they slept, so as to be eligible for estate work. Mbah Sampan explained, 'We had a house, but it was completely run down, so when my mother was contracted it was just left behind, left behind with my siblings in it.' Mbah Sampan's mother told him not to worry, that they would return soon for his siblings, but his mother never returned to Java. ‘It was always said we would go back, but we never went back,’ he lamented each time he narrated this story. The truth, he believed, was that his widowed mother had escaped to Sumatra from a life of heavy responsibility and poverty in Java.

Once retired from estate work, Mbah Sampan had travelled to Java in search of his twin brother, whom he found still living in their natal village. His brother recalled that after days of searching for their mother, news had reached the siblings that she had ‘gone to Deli’, a phrase commonly used by Javanese to speak of those who have taken up plantation work in Sumatra, whether on the East Coast (‘Deli’) or elsewhere. Mbah Sampan was at times critical of his mother’s decision not to return to Java. During one particular recording of his life narrative, Mbah Sampan spent a significant period of time reflecting on his mother’s decision, firstly to enter plantation work, and secondly to remain in Kayu Aro until her death. As if trying to make sense of his mother’s behaviour, he said:

> You know, it should have been that she went back, she said she would go back, but the truth is she never did. Once she entered the plantation everything was guaranteed, everything was taken care of, so I think ... really, I think she could not be bothered to return. She lived as long as she did and never returned.

For Mbah Sampan, the task of narrating and reflecting on his mother’s life served the additional purpose of allowing him to frame his own life story and rationalize his existence in Kayu Aro today.

Mbah Sampan’s story is not necessarily unique, except perhaps in the manner in which his mother stole away in the night. I heard many stories of children left behind in Java so that parents might be eligible for estate work. Rules stipulated a maximum of two children per head of family or, in some cases, only one. Mbah Rasinem told of how her parents waited for her younger sister to be weaned before immediately taking up contracts. ‘I was born in 1927,’ she recalled, ‘I was a child of three years old when my parents were contracted. As soon as my younger sister could walk my father and my mother were contracted.’ Mbah Rasinem was unsure with whom her sister was left, but she reasoned it was likely to have been with relatives. Like Mbah Sampan’s mother, and
many others, Mbah Rasinem’s parents never returned to Java. Mbah Rasinem explained: ‘They were contracted for three years. After three years we should have returned to Java, but there was no money, so they entered another contract, and then entered another contract, and so up until now I am still here.’ Like Mbah Sampan’s narrative, Mbah Rasinem’s telling of her parents’ journey to the Kayu Aro estate operates to make sense of her life on the estate today. For if Mbah Rasinem’s parents had adhered to their plan, and returned to Java at the completion of their contract, she would almost certainly not be living on the Kayu Aro estate today. Thus, Mbah Rasinem perceived her fate as determined by her parents’ decision to take up contract after contract.

Importantly, Mbah Sampan’s story touches on one of the significant appeals of plantation labour under the Dutch, and helps to explain why many workers remained on the estate far longer than they originally planned. Seeking to understand his mother’s decision to stay in Kayu Aro, he said, ‘Once she entered the plantation everything was guaranteed, everything was taken care of.’ It was under Dutch management that the estate workers of Kayu Aro experienced the greatest level of economic and physical security. Mbah Asma told of how, once she arrived on the estate, she no longer had to worry: ‘When we arrived in Kayu Aro the situation here was normal, there was enough of everything, clothing was sufficient, there was plenty of everything.’ Narratives emphasized that basic food and clothing (sandhang-pangan) was guaranteed (dijamin) if one was employed by the Dutch. Interviewees used a variety of expressions which foregrounded notions of security and stability during the late colonial period; these were terms such as ‘fulfilled’ (dicukupi), ‘measured’ (diukir), and ‘taken care of’ (diurusi).

In remembering the Dutch period, narrators placed significant emphasis on the guarantee of rations for workers’ dependents. The company’s provision of rice for the children of estate workers provided a substantial incentive for Javanese to remain on the plantation in the late colonial period. The role of the colonial estate in providing for workers’ offspring was demonstrated by the label assigned to children raised on the estate, who were often referred to as ‘children of hva’ (anak hva). Mbah Karto explained: ‘There was no limit to how many children the company would take responsibility for. It was not limited. Back then, many children meant much prosperity indeed.’ Mbah Karto and his wife raised nine children, who were all considered the ‘responsibility’ of the company and received rice rations accordingly. With ten dependents, he joked that under the Dutch he was ‘like a rich man’ when he collected the family’s rice allocation from the depot. A number of narrators remembered this to be an important benefit of estate employment in the past. According to Mbah Sutarmi: ‘If you had ten children on the estate, those children would
all become the responsibility of the estate. But if you had as many children as
that in Java, you would be at a loss (bingung) as to how to find enough rice.’ That
each dependent was counted (dihitung) in the calculation of in-kind payment
was a significant feature of the colonial plantation in workers’ memories.

As a child, Mbah Buang worked as an errand boy for the Dutch. He told of
how he was able to use his modest income to purchase small luxuries at the
market. He remembered:

When I was still small, before I had reached the age of circumcision, I
worked for the Dutch. Two years. I worked as a lackey; they would send
me here and there. I was paid too. Twenty-five cents a month. I could buy
a shirt, a buttoned shirt. I was still young so my rice was included in my
parents’ rice allocation, so I didn’t need to buy food. I bought a shirt.

Mbah Buang’s story of working as an errand boy depicts life under HVA as a
time where disposable income was possible. While the purchase of a shirt may
appear extremely modest, it is significant in light of narrators’ recollections
that in Java they possessed just one set of clothes—those which they wore.
According to Mbah Markanti: ‘In Java, I had just one sarong and one shirt.
When I bathed I would wash them and then put them back on, still wet, you
know.’ Mbah Buang remembered a buttoned shirt to have been a great prize for
his childhood self. Thus, it is important that narrators’ memories of life on the
estate be read within the framework or their previous life experiences.

Quinine and Castor Oil

Former estate workers in Kayu Aro remembered the free medical care pro-
vided on the estate as an important benefit of working for the Dutch. Javanese
workers recalled that in this period they and their dependents were required to
undergo regular medical examinations. Mbah Buang remembered particularly
well the periodical check-ups carried out in the early twentieth century:

There was a hospital, it was in Bedeng Delapan then, and every three
months a worker from the hospital would come to each afdeling, every
afdeling A B C D E, up to H, it would rotate, and every three months we
would be examined and treated for any illness.

Many interviewees laughed and became embarrassed when they narrated the
experience of being examined by a Dutch doctor or nurse upon arrival at the
estate. For the Javanese workers this was often an entirely new experience, and they remembered the check-up in detail. Mbah Gatot laughed: ‘I thought, “My, what is this!” I had never known of a medical examination. I had to take off my shirt, take off my sarong too. It was thorough! Then they gave me some medicine. Free it was too!’ Narrators were clearly impressed by the level of attention paid to their health, along with the provision of medicines at no charge. In contrast, the cost of medical care nowadays is prohibitive for many villagers in Kayu Aro. Many are unable to afford the costs associated with being examined or treated at the local hospital. Narrators portrayed this time of free medical care as ideal. According to Mbah Buang’s wife: ‘During the Dutch period there was not allowed to be any illness. I myself was never ill; at most I had a cough, and that was at most. The children, too—every three months they would be examined.’

It was, of course, in the best interests of the Dutch estate management that they maintained a healthy working population. According to Stoler (1995:34–35), workers found to have any serious illness were usually swiftly repatriated. It seems, however, that workers have adopted a framework for remembering medical attention which fits their own narrative of the colonial past in Kayu Aro. Lulofs’s fictional writings portray medical treatment as an anxiety-inducing experience for contract workers. Imagining the thoughts of a rubber plantation coolie awaiting treatment, she writes (1933:124): ‘They were sure to make him swallow quinine or castor-oil in the hospital. That was not bad, as long as the doctor did not cut him. He was really afraid of that. He was a new contract coolie and had had no hospital experience.’ Lulofs’s depiction of the nervous contract worker awaiting hospital admission is in keeping with the stories recorded in oral history interviews. For many newly contracted workers, like Mbah Gatot, a medical examination was a bemusing encounter with the unknown. For workers unfamiliar with Western medicine it is likely that the prospect of examination or treatment by a doctor or nurse provoked some fear. Any such feelings appear, however, to have been forgotten in today’s accounts of former contract workers. The medical check-ups are remembered within the framework of Dutch paternalism and care for the workers. Given that in Java these individuals had little or no access to medical care, and that on today’s plantation the hospital is frequently without a doctor, the estate’s colonial period is now remembered as an idyllic time.
Conclusion

In Kayu Aro today, the estate’s colonial past is a source of pride for many who are too young to remember the Dutch period. A headline in a regional newspaper in 2011 declared that ‘[t]he Queen of the Netherlands is faithful to Kajoe Aro tea’. The article goes on to assure readers that ‘[t]o date, the queen of the Netherlands still drinks Kajoe Aro tea’. This seems unlikely given the tea produced in Kayu Aro is not exported as a single-origin tea but, rather, is blended with other teas. Yet it was a claim I heard often during my time living on the plantation: Kayu Aro tea was much loved, especially in the Netherlands. Former workers expressed pride in the quality of the tea produced on the estate, particularly during colonial times. One elderly former worker recalled: ‘Back then, it was all hand plucking. The quality was very fine. Every morning the administrator would taste the tea plucked from each afdeling. These days they just use shears.’ This imagined connection with the Dutch, through the medium of tea, reveals the significance of the colonial past on today’s estate. The oft-repeated claim that the queen of the Netherlands drinks Kayu Aro tea is symbolic of the narratives told by elderly estate inhabitants, which suggested that there was an intimate bond between the Dutch and their workers. Such claims, made by present-day workers as well as former workers, underline an ongoing fascination with the colonial past in Kayu Aro.

The narratives of former estate workers should be read as stories which speak to the present. For the majority of narrators, the Dutch period was an era of cukupan. But for workers who were suffering hardship in their old age the Dutch time was remembered as especially prosperous (makmur). When Mbah Karto shared his life story in 2010, he was living alone in a modest but very tidy home. Reflecting on his life as a plantation worker, Mbah Karto gestured around his dwelling, bare except for the mat we were gathered on. ‘I don’t have anything, all these years working and I don’t have anything;’ he declared. After retiring from plantation work in the early 1980s, Mbah Karto had accepted a payout from the plantation company in lieu of an ongoing pension. After an ill-advised, and ultimately disastrous, investment, he and his wife found themselves destitute, with no assets other than their house. Since then, Mbah Karto has struggled to eke out a living. These days he grows root vegetables in his house garden and trades the surplus with neighbours to obtain onions, chillies, and sometimes potatoes. In the context of his current hardship, Mbah

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14 Tambunan, ‘Ratu Belanda setia pada teh Kajoe Aro’.

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Karto remembers the Dutch period as a time of ‘excess’ (*kelebihan*), a time of ‘prosperity’ (*makmur*). Most importantly, it was a time when his needs were guaranteed (*dijamin*). It is within the framework of his failed attempt to make it on his own outside of the estate that Mbah Karto looks back on the colonial era with nostalgia. The function of colonial nostalgia, Bissell (2005:240) writes, is that ‘[t]he past provides precisely an imaginative resource—a realm rich in invention, critical in possibility—for people struggling with the present, hoping to secure what can no longer be found in the future’. Indeed, Mbah Karto’s memories of stability under the Dutch appear to be enhanced in the context of the economic uncertainty he now faces.

Narratives of the colonial past in Kayu Aro are further coloured by memories of the deprivation and suffering experienced by the estate workers during the Japanese occupation. Ruth McVey (1996:22) writes of the nostalgia with which Indonesians looked back to the colonial period, the normal time, after the unrest and instability they subsequently endured: ‘Life may have been oppressive then but at least, it was imagined, you knew where you stood.’ Indeed, the function of *jaman normal* in former workers’ remembering is that it symbolizes a rare time of security in lives of hardship and uncertainty. The life stories recorded in Kayu Aro show that security and stability are remembered as the most important features of estate life for contract workers in the early twentieth century. In particular, life narratives illustrate the impoverished conditions in Java from which workers came. As bleak as the living conditions for a contract worker on Sumatra’s plantations may have been, it seems life was even bleaker for the poorest amongst Java’s population. Faced with unemployment and starvation, life in Kayu Aro, where one’s food, clothing, and housing were guaranteed by the Dutch, seemed good by comparison. Oral histories allow us an important insight into how former contract workers recollect and re-imagine key features of the colonial estate. Memories of former estate workers thus reveal an important new perspective on *jaman Londo*— that of the one-time contract ‘coolie’.

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