

# Breaking the Boundaries

## *The Uniekampong and Modernization of Dock Labour in Tanjung Priok, Batavia (1917–1949)*

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### Introduction

Who does not know them, the wharf-labourers of Tanjung Priok, the sturdy, robust blokes, who animate the docks? There are no men working harder and more tirelessly than the dockers of Tanjung Priok.<sup>2</sup>

The harbour workers of Batavia were extolled in this fashion in an advertisement for *Abdijsiroop*, a cough syrup, published in the Dutch newspapers in Java in 1907. These labourers were the epitome of toughness and strength as they had to endure very harsh working conditions. 'They are constantly exposed to the elements and many among them catch a cold, mostly left unattended because they just keep on going'.<sup>3</sup> This advertisement packed a punch, as it not only confirmed the tough reputation of the harbour workers, but also drew attention to their tough working conditions. Their health and hygiene situation was a delicate issue as diseases, malnutrition, and bad housing hampered the development of a stable docker population in the seaport of Batavia. Of course, no panacea was readily to hand.

The lives of the dockers were played out against the background of a modernization process in an isolated area of Batavia, namely the port of Tanjung Priok. The port was constructed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century

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2 'Wie kent ze niet de bootwerkers van Tandjong-Priok, de stoere flinke kerels die het havenbedrijf verleevendigen? Er zijn geen arbeidzamer en onvermoeider menschen, dan de bootwerkers van Tandjong-Priok' (*De Locomotief* 18-2-1907).

3 'Zij zijn altijd aan weer en wind blootgesteld, vandaar dat er velen onder hen zijn, die eene koude vatten, welke meestal verwaarloosd wordt, omdat zij er mede blijven doorloopen' (*De Locomotief* 18-2-1907).

as the first deep-water ocean harbour in the archipelago. Rapid technological developments in transport and shipping as well as the new economic impetus injected by a growing world market required a fundamental shift in the organization of labour in the ports, and consequently in the living and working conditions, which in their turn changed the use of urban space in the dock areas. This chapter focuses on the rise of the Uniekampong, which was a compound for dockworkers, established in 1919 by the main shipping companies in an attempt to answer to the perpetual scarcity of labour in Tanjung Priok.

The Uniekampong developed into a central labour pool and left its mark on the labour issue in the port, as it deliberately broke through the traditional organization of dock work. Casual labour was gradually replaced by more permanent forms of labour. This process of decasualization, which took place in many other ports in the world in the same period, involved a centralization of the labour market, disciplining and registration of the labour force, regular payment and a guarantee of income, as well as an improvement in working and living conditions (Weinhauer 2000:582).

The Uniekampong marked not only a radical break in the organization of labour, but was also an embodiment of new perspectives on labour conditions and housing. From the early 1900s, housing received growing attention from the authorities and companies and, after 1910, the port authorities showed a heightened interest in the living conditions of the Priok population. Ethical motives aside, employers like shipping companies also took more interest in the working and living conditions of their men because they recognized that social improvements could result in a higher productivity.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe this interplay between economic, social, and physical-spatial modernization in the port of Tanjung Priok, specifically exemplified by the case of the Uniekampong. The research is based on archive material in the Netherlands and Indonesia, supplemented by newspaper articles. The core of the data is formed by the Uniekampong papers in the collection of the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM, Royal Packet Navigation Company) in The Hague.<sup>4</sup> The remit of the labour inspection did not extend to work in the docks and when the situation in the port had to be described, this was done in general terms.

This chapter aims to provide a contribution to Indonesian historiography in which dock labour, like other 'industrial' labour, has so far been underrepresented. In a predominantly rural society, most labour studies have focused on

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4 Nationaal Archief, The Hague (NA), Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij-Koninklijke Java-China-Japan Lijn (KPM), 2.20.35, 197-199.