

The Labour Inspectorate and Labour Conditions in the Outer Islands and Java, 1900–1940

Abstract

In this contribution an evaluation is given of the nature of the company inspection reports produced by the Netherlands Indies Labour Inspectorate and the way in which these can serve a source of information on late colonial labour relations. On the basis of an extensive reading of these reports a preliminary qualitative model is proposed for analysing labour conditions on western enterprises in late colonial Indonesia. Finally, the consequences of this model are discussed, both for the interpretation of quantitative trends and the comparison of labour relations in the Outer Islands with those in Java.

1. Introduction

The rise of a modern, national economy in Indonesia cannot be explained without giving proper attention to the labour factor as it existed in the late colonial period. Despite partial mechanization of production processes, increasing colonial production after 1870 and after 1910 in particular, and its widening geographical scope, contributed to a dramatically increasing demand for labour. Since the East Indies colony started to function more and more as one integrated labour market, the pressures of supply and demand at a 'national' level superseded those at the local level.

What happened in colonial Indonesia after 1900 was essentially a repetition on a bigger scale of what could be observed during the middle of the nineteenth century in Java. There the Cultivation System precipitated a growing demand for labour to cultivate, harvest, process and transport cash crops inducing people to leave their lands to work elsewhere. Although some publications give the impression that the Cultivation System bound the labour to the land, other studies (*e.g.* Hüsken, 1988) show that the growth of surplus extraction of the colonial state in combination with population growth led to increased migration in the search for new economic opportunities. Also the nature of the production

¹ This article forms a progress report of current research project on conditions of coolie labour undertaken jointly with J.Th. Lindblad. An extended and revised version of this article appeared as: Houben (1995).

processes within the framework of the Cultivation System, in particular with regard to sugar-cane, provoked new residential patterns. As Van Niel has observed, the portion of cultivated land used for government cultivations was less than 5 per cent, whereas the percentage of agricultural families involved was in excess of 70 (Van Niel, 1992: 72–74).

In the last few years our knowledge of the labour issue in the Outer Islands of Indonesia has improved markedly. In contrast, the economic history of Java between 1870 and 1942 still remains a weak spot in the historiography. This is partly due to reasons of research strategy, since colonial sources on the period 1830–1870 in Java abound, while, as the colonial state retreated from direct intervention in Java's economy after 1870, the historian is compelled to study the records of individual companies rather than clinging to the overall picture official documents seem to offer. Partly, this is also because historiographic attention shifts to the islands outside Java, where most of the income started to be generated.

This article is an attempt to repair some of the imbalances that have crept into our image of the economy of Indonesia in the late colonial period by taking both Java and the Outer Islands into account. It focuses on the problem of labour relations, a subject that, as Schulte Nordholt rightly observed, has remained underexposed in its own right partly because of the a-historical character of much of the contemporary development studies (Schulte Nordholt & Keppy, 1993: 5). Labour relations in the late colonial era were dominated by the rise of a modern capitalist economy, which led to an alteration in the ways in which labour was mobilized, to increasing differentiation in and migration of labour resources. These crucial issues will be looked at in greater detail. Before looking at the evidence, however, a discussion of the major source for this article will be adduced.

2. Labour Inspectorate reports as a source on labour relations

In 1908 the Netherlands Indies Labour Inspectorate (*Arbeidsinspectie*) was set up as a separate branch of the Department of Justice. Its creation was the outcome of a prolonged political debate in the Netherlands on labour conditions in the colony after the 1903 report of the public prosecutor J.L.T. Rhemrev on the ill-treatment of coolies on East Sumatran plantations (Breman, 1992^{3b}). Starting its work in East Sumatra, the activities of the labour inspectors quickly spread to the other Outer Islands of Indonesia, Java excepted. The capacity of the Labour Inspectorate rose from one inspector and three deputy-inspectors in 1908 to six inspectors and 16 deputy-inspectors in 1921, to whom must be added a number of Chinese and Javanese interpreters and clerks. The prime task of these officials was to supervise the implementation of the various Coolie Ordinances that, from 1880 onwards, regulated the relations between European employer and indigenous labourer. In 1910 an instruction charged the deputy-inspectors with the additional task of studying labour relations, redressing labour conditions and mediating in labour disputes (Heijting, 1925: 79–80).

Official intervention in labour relations in Java dated from 1919, when, in the wake of a motion in the *Volksraad*, a Labour Commission was established to report on the issue of wages. In 1926 the Labour Office (*Kantoor van Arbeid*) published a inquiry into the labour conditions in the metal industry in Surabaya following the 1925 strikes there (Rapport, 1926; Ingleson, 1979: 295–309). In 1929 the famous Principalities Tobacco Inquiry (*Vorstenlandsche tabaksenquête*) followed, the outcome of critical questions about the exploitation of female *batik* producers raised in Dutch parliament during the defence of the colonial budget for 1925 (De Kat Angelino, 1929). Finally, in 1939–40 a coolie budget investigation (*koeliebudgetonderzoek*) was carried out in Java in order to find out whether wages tallied with the costs of living (Huizenga, 1958). However, a regular survey of labour relations, as this existed in the Outer Islands, was never enforced in Java throughout the late colonial period.

Two serial sources, until now largely neglected in the historical literature, were produced by the Labour Inspectorate. Annual printed reports were published, containing quantitative regional data on the number of coolies, their ethnicity and legal status, wages, deaths, diseases, violence and desertions. In collaboration with J.Th. Lindblad these data have been entered into a database and are in the process of being analysed systematically. In the *Algemeen Rijks Archief*, at least for the period 1910–1920, the original inspection reports of individual Western enterprises drawn up by the inspectors and their deputies can be consulted for systematic qualitative analysis.

It should be acknowledged that using colonial Labour Inspectorate data for an in-depth study of late-colonial labour relations opens up its own methodological pitfalls. Some observers, both past and present, reject Labour Inspectorate data as these originate from an institution that was apparently hand-in-glove with the colonial government, which in turn supposedly supported the interests of Western capitalist employers. It is my contention that it is too much of a simplification to treat all government institutions as one. After 1900 the Netherlands Indies administration went through a process of decentralization aimed at establishing a full-fledged state structure in the colony. Competition between various government departments was bound to occur, as were ideological formulations of task orientations. As shown elsewhere, the Labour Inspectorate often cultivated a neo-Multatulian spirit against the interests of employers and the European civil service (Houben, 1994).

In 1910 Labour Inspector D.G. Stibbe was already protesting against the ideas of the socialist J.H.A. Schaper, who had created the impression in the States-General (the Dutch Parliament) that the officials of the Labour Inspectorate were spineless tools in the hands of the employers.² It was the explicit duty of the inspectors to report any offence against the Coolie Ordinances to the judicial authorities, who could then fine or, in the worst instance, install a ban on the recruitment of coolies by a particular enterprise. Admittedly, labour inspectors

² Algemeen Rijks Archief (ARA), The Hague: Koloniën (Kol.): Vol. 791. Verbaal 2 January 1911, no. 55.

were dependent on the co-operation of other functionaries to enable them to punish employers but their repeated presence on the premises of individual enterprises was likely to function as a kind of deterrent to rapacious planters.

In 1930 the head of the Labour Office, A.G. Vreede, wrote a lengthy report on the functioning of the Labour Inspectorate in practice and his observations are of relevance to the discussion here. Initially the inspecting personnel was only posted permanently in the plantation centres of East Sumatra and Aceh. A few inspectors, who visited the other islands by steamship once or twice a year, were based in Java. In the mid-1920s a *dislocatie* (decentralized posting) of inspectors was decided upon. This meant that representatives of the Labour Inspectorate were stationed in other centres of Western economic activity, so inspectors could be found also in Tanjung Pinang, Bengkalis, Padang, Banjarmasin, Tanjung Karang and Palembang.

The inspection method normally included notice 24 hours in advance that a labour inspector would visit the enterprise. This announcement stirred up much discussion over the years. On the one hand it was felt that a truer impression of labour conditions would be obtained without any prior notice of inspection. Yet it was acknowledged that under a system of sudden inspections, the manager of the enterprise might be absent and unable to discuss matters with the labour inspector on the spot. Unannounced inspections were also expected to take up more time so that fewer enterprises could be inspected. The system of advance notice was in force from 1908 until 1927 and reinstated in 1930.

In 1926 several cases of severe maltreatment of coolies came to the light on enterprises in Bengkulu and East Sumatra. In the *Volksraad* questions were asked about how these abuses could have occurred when no traces had been observed during the visits of the labour inspectors at that time. The upshot was that at the beginning of 1927 it was decided that prior notice of inspections would be abolished. After that the number of cases of coolie maltreatment declined. However, in 1928 and 1929, when the number of coolie attacks on European supervisors suddenly rose, the planters sought publicity, arguing that increased coolie violence was an outcome of the new inspection method. Several meetings between the employers' organization and the Labour Inspectorate followed, in which it was argued that all parties concerned, *e.g.* the planters' organizations, the colonial civil administration and the Labour Inspectorate, should collaborate more closely. The planters added that inspection without prior notice had lowered the prestige of employers in the eyes of the labourers.

In 1930 the old inspection method was resumed, although inspection without prior notice was still explicitly left open as an option. Enterprises which had a good reputation could count on prior notice of inspection one day in advance. The inspection was considered to be effectuated on the basis of 'mutual trust and consultation', while keeping the prestige of the management of the enterprise high. Labour inspectors were asked to display by their attitude, behaviour and wording that they were only exercising public control, whereas the *kuasa* (power) was still in the hands of the *tuwan besar* (planter) and the *tuwan-tuwan assisten* (supervisors). Twelve criteria were laid down which would still provoke

an unannounced inspection: a coolie attack; more than two convictions in six months for beating a coolie (*klapzaken*); more than 5 per cent convicted coolies resulting from violations of the Coolie Ordinance; more than 3 per cent desertions; a case of deprivation of liberty or extortion; deliberate wage reduction; work on rest days and compulsory overwork; inadequate housing; inadequate medical treatment; information about signs of less than favourable labour conditions; conflicts resulting from poor working conditions.³

On the basis of data on the actual working of the Labour Inspectorate it has become sufficiently clear that the study of inspection reports warrants caution. They contain information on day-to-day affairs on Western enterprises but at the same time, because the labour inspector acted as a kind of mediator between the public authorities and the management of the enterprise, it is to be expected that this information has been in several ways. Not everything could be seen by the inspector on his tour of the enterprise. Certain discreditable incidents could be left out of the written records when, for instance, an oral agreement was made between the inspector and the manager that the shortcomings would be rectified. Yet, regular inspections (in principle all major enterprises were visited at least once a year) allowed the labour inspector to note changes on an individual enterprise, certain key numerical data were taken directly from the company records and could not easily be manipulated, breaches of oral agreements could have judicial repercussions. These factors weigh up against some of the disadvantages of the source.

Looking at career data of labour inspectors gives the impression that most of them were recruited from the middle ranks of the colonial bureaucracy and that they possessed working experience in postings outside Java. Amongst them were many former *controleurs*, assistant-residents and former military officers. Up to the end of the colonial era it was not unusual for regions outside Java to be administered by military officers. After their early retirement these men could augment their income by accepting work as a labour inspector for several years. What is important to note here that the hands and feet of the Labour Inspectorate did not consist of youthful pen-pushers but of experienced administrators who, it can be assumed, would be able to stand up to the pressures exerted by managers of the enterprises visited.

The activities of the Labour Inspectorate with regard to the surveillance of labour relations were reduced after 1930 for two reasons. First, the economic depression compelled the colonial authorities to implement severe budgetary cuts that affected the Labour Inspectorate just as they hit other government departments. Second, the abolition of the Coolie Ordinance in 1931 swept away a large part of the task assigned to the labour inspectors since 'free' labour was not considered to warrant regular on-the-spot inspections.

The Labour Inspectorate reports are the most detailed and regular source of information we have on labour conditions on Western enterprises outside Java. How then should these be used for historical purposes? As will be argued below,

³ ARA: Kol.: Vol. 3178. Verbaal 21 October 1930, no. 20.

reading through the evidence allows us to develop a systematic set of criteria that influenced labour relations. This analytical model supersedes the list of criteria on good or bad labour conditions as was laid down by the Labour Inspectorate in 1930, which is of importance in itself because it shows what, in that period, was considered to be acceptable and what not. Also, a qualitative analytical model of labour conditions allows for a better interpretation of quantitative evidence. Finally, it makes a comparison between labour conditions in the Outer Islands and Java possible.

3. A preliminary qualitative analytical model of labour conditions

Over a number of months I have been reading through dozens of the unpublished inspection reports of the Labour Inspectorate covering the period 1910–1920. This endeavour was not so much aimed at acquiring information on labour conditions in particular enterprises or in certain regions but instead to develop an awareness of the causal relationships employed explicitly or implicitly by the labour inspectors themselves when they had to explain why the labour situation on an enterprise was good, satisfactory or bad. It should be remarked that this proved to be a very complex exercise, since often certain chains of causal factors rather than single causes were involved. Furthermore, in addition to some basic linear causal relationships, a configurational set of causes appeared to be at the root of labour relations on Western enterprises.

In constructing linear causal links, a distinction is made between material and immaterial treatment. Material conditions cover the following items: wages, housing, medical facilities, death and disease. Immaterial conditions are reflected in punishment, violent incidents, desertions and complaints from coolies. Two basic linear causal connections crop up in the inspection reports. First, bad material treatment usually also entailed a bad immaterial situation. Second, and in contrast to the first observation, good material treatment did not guarantee good immaterial treatment.

A notable example of the first sequence are the so-called Kissing estates in South Sumatra. These consisted of the Oeloemanna, Krindjing, Danau Alai, Pager Agoeng, Pematang and Pasoemah enterprises. W.F. Kissing acted as a superintendent for all these, under the motto, as one labour inspector observed, of ‘grab all one can get’. Only young inexperienced supervisors (*assistenten*) were employed, who were completely at the mercy of Kissing. All sorts of cost-cutting strategies were deployed as far as material provisions were concerned. Coolies could not achieve an ordinary wage level because the tasks assigned to them were too big. Kissing himself, however, blamed this on the ‘inferiority’ of the labourers. An indictment was brought against Kissing alleging that he had hit a contractant with a whip. Later he was accused of having severely battered a woman suspected of theft.⁴

⁴ ARA: Kol.: Vol. 791. Verbaal 2 January 1911, no. 55; Vol. 1894. Verbaal 2 October 1918, no. 1.

The second sequence is illustrated by the Salida plantation employee Mendels in West Sumatra. Although housing was adequate and the death rate even favourable, numerous complaints were lodged against Mendels, who apparently abused and beat up his coolies. After a lengthy interrogation by the labour inspector, Mendels admitted: 'I beat the workers now and then and I think this is necessary, when one works with contract coolies!'. The manager of the plantation was then informed by the labour inspector that Mendels was not fit to be in charge of a group of labourers and that a continuation of this maltreatment might invoke a suspension of the recruitment of coolies in Java for his enterprise.⁵

These examples show that, following a linear method of explanation leads attention to be focused on certain individuals and their mentality. Elaborating the number of these examples with sordid details not only suggests that most European managers and supervisors on Western enterprises were racists but also seems to lead to the conclusion that good or bad labour conditions depended almost wholly on the white-skinned human agents of capitalism.

However, a configurational set of causal relationships allows a much broader kind of analysis. The diagram included in the appendix may improve our understanding of the factors involved, at least as far as they come feature in the Labour Inspectorate reports. Labour conditions thus form the outcome of the interplay of four main factors: the coolies themselves; the enterprise they were working on; the situation in the region and locality in which they were employed; and finally the influence of the Labour Inspectorate. Each of these four main factors can be divided up into several sub-factors. These run as follows (Appendix):

A. Coolie

- (1) Newly arrived from Java or not (in connection with physical and psychological adjustment).
- (2) Changes in the size of the coolie population.
- (3) Situation on the (local) labour market (push and pull factors involved in coming to the enterprise; alternative job opportunities or not).

B. Enterprise

- (1) Starting phase or not.
- (2) Financial position or profitability of the enterprise.
- (3) Branch of economic activity (agriculture, mining or forestry; within agriculture differences between coffee, sugar-cane, rubber).
- (4) Size of the enterprise.
- (5) Location of the enterprise (proximity to inhabited centres or communication lines).

C. Region

- (1) General geographical and health situation in the region.

⁵ ARA: Kol.: Vol. 1803. Verbaal 9 March 1918, no. 40.

D. Labour Inspectorate

(1) Impact of inspections of labour conditions.

In the overlap of these four main factors we find the essential components of the labour conditions as they actually existed. On the one hand this was the complex of health/illness/death; on the other hand the complex of desertion-violence/punishment. According to the inspection reports health/illness/death were connected with housing (both size and quality), medical facilities and wage level as far as this affected food consumption. Desertion/violence/punishment were connected, as we have already seen, with the behaviour of European individuals and that of the non-European *mandor* but were, of course, also attributed to bad labour conditions on an enterprise as a whole. A typical observation of the labour inspectors in this respect was that the 'spirit' amongst the coolies was bad.

The main factors can be illustrated in greater detail. According to the inspection reports, as far as coolies were concerned, one general complaint of the employers was the poor physical condition of the workers sent to them by the recruiters in Java. This might have been as much a consequence of their physique at the moment of embarkation as it was later connected with their adjustment to a new disease environment (Shlomowitz, 1990). As far as the coolie's position on the labour market is concerned both the situation in Java and that in the region of destination should be taken into account. In several regions outside Java enterprise made a deal not to employ coolies from each others' plantations, so that the coolie whose contract expired was forced either to sign up again or to return all the way to Java. Thus alternative job opportunities were barred. Another factor that affected labour conditions was a sudden rise or decline in the size of the coolie population on an enterprise. If an enterprise expanded and the number of imported labourers rose suddenly, this led to excessive pressure on existing material facilities.

As far as the enterprises themselves were concerned, labour inspectors observed that those that had recently been started were still insufficiently geared towards offering a reasonable level of facilities to their workforce, whereas the work in the initial phases (clearing the jungle, for instance) proved to be very arduous. The profitability of the enterprise also influenced the level of coolie facilities. If profits were meagre or non-existent, cost cuts were imposed and these affected the coolies most. An interesting feature of the influence of the enterprise on the labour conditions was the type of activity undertaken. As might be expected mines proved to be the worst places in which to work, quite apart from the fact that many Javanese feared to go underground. Utterances like 'saya tidak kuat kerja di lobang' were frequently heard. The size of the enterprise concerned had a notable effect on labour conditions. Large oil companies like the Bataafsche Petroleum-Maatschappij provided excellent facilities for their workers, whereas small-scale, explorative enterprises often revealed unfavourable conditions. The *panglong* (lumbering) enterprises in Southeast Sumatra were notorious for bad labour conditions (Erman, 1994). In connection

with this on 7 June, 1916, the Director of Justice sent a circular letter to all civil servants in the Outer Islands announcing that the recruitment of coolies for new enterprises would henceforth be forbidden unless certain requirements regarding coolie maintenance were fulfilled.⁶ Finally, the location of an enterprise also affected labour conditions. There was a difference between isolated enterprises in peripheral areas and those in the vicinity of each other or near the inhabited world. Isolation did not contribute to good labour conditions.

With regard to working conditions, the general situation in a particular region was influential too. Some regions in Indonesia were unhealthier than others. A major source of disease was, of course, malaria. Swampy areas in Riau, Palembang and Southeast Kalimantan had a bad reputation. Although in the 1910s and 1920s a considerable offensive was started by Netherlands Indies public health authorities, for instance through the creation of central hospitals, rates of death and disease continued to vary by region (Boomgaard, 1986).

Finally, we come to the impact of the activities of the Labour Inspectorate. This is a debatable issue. Breman argues that he remains sceptical about real improvements in the lives of coolies in the post-1900 period and that the Labour Inspectorate acted not as an opponent but as an ally of plantation capitalism (Breman, 1992a: 47). As stated above, I think the Labour Inspectorate, although not wholly impartial and often not trusted by the coolies themselves, did try to mediate between the coolies, the planters and the interests of the colonial state itself. It took the improvement of working conditions seriously and also tried to achieve some progress by adopting a flexible stance towards the managerial staff of an enterprise. On the other hand, a study of multiple inspection reports and their follow-up reveals that the repeated visits of the inspectors, and the threat of sanctions placed the estate owners under enough pressure to ensure they took steps to ameliorate unsatisfactory material conditions.

It was because of a tendency of the Labour Inspectorate to concentrate on the material aspects of labour conditions that we find that most of the attention in the inspection reports was devoted to the cluster health/illness/death. The capacity and quality of housing and hospitals were elaborated on in great detail. Wage levels also attracted the attention of the inspecting authorities since the purchase of food was directly connected with the intake of calories and thus with the functioning of the workers' immune system. A meticulous compilation of rates of illness and death for every enterprise visited was pursued and the fluctuations in the levels linked up with the material provisions. Yet there was no fixed percentage that formed the boundary between what was considered acceptable and non-acceptable. My impression is that death rates above 40 per 1000 were considered far too high, whereas those under 20 per 1000 did not give cause for further comment.

In its investigation of immaterial conditions, the Labour Inspectorate was less inquisitive, unless major incidents such as the murder of an European *assistent* occurred. Gross maltreatment or repeated complaints of beatings of coolies

⁶ ARA: Kol.: Vol. 1803. Verbaal 9 March 1918, no. 40.

were, however, brought before the local magistrate. That this official often proved to be slack in the handling of a case of this nature or only imposed low fines cannot be blamed on the Labour Inspectorate. As we have seen above, with regard to *klapzaken*, desertions and so forth, there were fixed notions of what was acceptable and what was not.

4. Interpreting some quantitative data

Having all these causative sequences and clusters in explaining labour conditions at hand, we now can turn to some of the quantitative evidence, in order to see whether we can explain some trends more convincingly. Several major trends emerge from the figures contained in the annual reports of the Labour Inspectorate:

(1) The size of the coolie population in the Outer Islands was related to economic conditions in general. The picture for East Sumatra also applies to other regions. In the afore-mentioned region from 1911 until 1920 the number of Javanese contract labourers rose from slightly less than 80,000 to over 210,000. Between 1921 and 1924 there was a decline followed by a boom amounting to almost 235,000 persons in 1929. In the 1930s a downturn set which coincided with the switch to unindentured labour (Houben, 1992).

(2) Mortality amongst coolies was slowly decreasing, although regional variation continued to exist and East Sumatra led the other regions. Mortality normally varied between 5 and 15 per 1000, although some regions, such as West Sumatra, remained notorious for high death rates.

(3) Immaterial conditions are reflected in coolie abuse, coolie punishments and violence perpetrated by coolies and there was a marked increase in the number of recorded incidents between 1925 and 1930.

These quantitative trends should now be related to the four spheres of causality outlined above:

(A) *Coolie*: The size of the coolie population closely followed the growth patterns in the export production of the Outer Islands in Indonesia, rising from 1910 until 1925, accelerating during the boom years 1925–1929 and decreasing afterwards. The percentage of newcomers cannot yet be verified but certainly rose markedly between 1925 and 1929.

(B) *Enterprise*: As time went by many enterprises struggled beyond their starting-phase and acquired more financial stability, at least up to the depression of the 1930s.

(C) *Region*: In the 1910s and 1920s, the general health situation in the Outer Islands improved, although differences between relatively healthy and unhealthy regions continued to exist.

(D) *Labour Inspectorate*: Over the years the actions undertaken by the Labour Inspectorate proved to be successful in so far as material conditions on enterprises were involved.

It is interesting to note that the years 1925–1929 stand out clearly as a time of troubled labour relations. This can partly be connected to particular economic developments (booming activity which provoked the heightened influx of labourers from Java, leading to an increased pressure on the existing material provisions on the enterprises and worsening immaterial treatment) and partly was also the fruit of a more scrupulous supervision of labour relations by the Labour Inspectorate by means of unannounced visits. What the relationship between these two factors was exactly is difficult to determine.

In his 1930 report, the head of the Labour Inspectorate, A.G. Vreede, seemed to imply that due to better inspection serious coolie maltreatment had been curbed more effectively than before but that, conversely, violence from the side of the coolies themselves (coolie attacks on supervising personnel) suddenly increased. The statistics show that more supervisors were sentenced for coolie abuse in 1927 and 1928 than in the years immediately preceding or following. In my view this has to be connected to a large extent with the increased zeal shown by the Labour Inspectorate in those years. Be that as it may, the fact that in 1929 and 1930 in East Sumatra alone 10 plantation supervisors were killed and 146 wounded as the result of coolie assaults clearly points in the direction of an unfavourable configuration of the four main factors responsible for labour conditions in general. Of particular importance was the sudden addition to the labour force of many newcomers, who were confronted with worsening material (level of provisions) and immaterial (for instance inexperienced supervisors) conditions.

5. Comparing labour conditions in the Outer Islands and Java

In a recent article Wertheim has compared conditions in sugar estates in Java with labour relations in Deli. His main observation is that the differences between the situation in the Deli area and Java were less fundamental than one might have assumed. In Java companies, in the face of the abundance of available manpower, did not pay much attention to health care and paid very low wages (Wertheim, 1993: 283).

To what extent can the analytical model of labour relations proposed in this article improve an assessment of the situation in Java compared to the one overseas? Of course, as Wertheim has conceded, there were huge differences between the labour situation in Java and in the Outer Islands. Java was densely populated and had a long established tradition of plantation enterprises, on which the entrepreneurs of late colonial times could build. Also, in and around the major towns of Java we see the rise of industrial activity of a kind that was not to be found in the Outer Islands. The railways also provided job opportunities for many. Finally, indigenous industries—*batik* and *kretek*—created a substantial profit-oriented economic sector parallel to the Western sector, something that in the Outer Islands only can be observed in the case of rubber.

The divergent social and economic landscape in Java compared to that of the Outer Islands can be assumed to have produced different labour relations. Yet, certain sectors do make a comparison fruitful and one of these is the tobacco plantations in Central Java. The Principalities Tobacco Inquiry (published in 1929) is of particular interest here for several reasons. The investigation was carried out by P. de Kat Angelino, a labour inspector normally posted outside Java and thus imbued with ideas about labour relations that were prevalent in those regions. The large tobacco estates of Central Java could also well bear comparison with the same sort of large-scale agricultural enterprises in the Outer Islands. Finally, the enquiry was carried out in 1928 and it would be interesting to see whether immaterial problems similar to those in the Outer Islands confronted the planters also in Java.

If we summarize the findings of the Principalities Tobacco Inquiry and systematize them according to the proposed analytical model, we arrive at the following observations:

(A) *Coolie*: Since the coolies worked in their own surroundings (many of them were *kuli kenceng* or 'core'-villagers) no adjustment to new surroundings was needed (except to the kind of work required). Also, he/she was not bound by a penal clause in a written work agreement and alternative job opportunities were potentially available on either other enterprises closeby or in neighbouring towns. The insularity influencing labour relations in the Outer Islands was a stranger to Central Java. One negative factor was the population pressure in Java, which led to a unfavourable relationship between labour demand and supply.

(B) *Enterprise*: Many of the tobacco enterprises in the Principalities were a continuation of older firms, although from 1910 onwards several new ones were established. Their profitability seemed to fluctuate more than in Deli because of less stable climatic conditions. On the other hand, since most of them were part of one mega-enterprise, the Klatenske Cultuur-Maatschappij, immediate financial straits did not materialize. Costs for material provisions for coolies were relatively low since most of the labourers continued to live in their own villages. As far as medical provisions were concerned according to the Labour Inspectorate report all that was necessary had been done. From 1900 onwards several local hospitals were established and in 1927 a central one had been opened in Klaten.

(C) *Region*: Boomgaard and Gooszen offer some clues on the general health situation by region, although accurate death rates are still difficult to establish. On the whole in Java mortality was on the decline between 1900 and 1940, the crude death rate reaching the level of 24 per 1,000 in the late 1930s. On the other hand, influenza and plague sometimes led to incidences of high mortality, especially in the Principalities. In the 1930s there was, however, a particularly striking decline of mortality in Yogyakarta due to the activities of the Medical Service in the field of public hygiene (Boomgaard & Gooszen, 1991: 58–60).

If we take a random sample of crude mortality in Yogyakarta and Surakarta in 1915, we arrive at a level of 16.6 and 14.6 per 1,000 respectively. These figures are comparable to those on enterprises in the Outer Islands, especially since the Central Java figures refer to the population as a whole whereas death rates on enterprises in the Outer Islands comprise only the age group between 20 and 50.

(D) *Labour Inspectorate*: Regular inspections were not carried out in Java. Assuming that these contributed to better material conditions on Western enterprises in the Outer Islands, it can be argued that in this respect the situation in Java was less positive.

A firm quantitative basis is lacking in the Principalities Tobacco Inquiry. No figures are provided for death rates and disease or for coolie violence. Thus an outright quantitative comparison with the material and immaterial labour situation in the Outer Islands still faces major obstacles.

6. Conclusion

In this article I have tried to argue that reports from the Labour Inspectorate, despite some methodological pitfalls, are very important sources of information on labour relations in the Outer Islands of colonial Indonesia. Moreover, after reading the original inspection reports, a causal matrix has been constructed that offers possibilities for a more sophisticated analysis of labour relations than the good-bad dichotomy that has prevailed in the historical literature so far. It also raises the level of specificity of the questions that can be tested against the available quantitative material. The period 1925–1929 stands out as a particular interesting one to study in closer detail, as by then a convergence of increased influx of coolies, a better survey of labour conditions by the Labour Inspectorate and a high incidence of coolie unrest coincided. Finally, if the analytical model of labour conditions is used to compare labour conditions in the Outer Islands and Java, the picture for Java tends to be better than that for the Outer Islands, although a firm quantitative basis for this impression is still lacking.

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Appendix. *A qualitative analytical model of labour conditions.*

