Coolie Transformations – Uncovering the Changing Meaning and Labour Relations of Coolie Labour in the Dutch Empire (18th and 19th Century)

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Coolie labour is often defined as indentured contract-labour migration, and its history is associated especially with the coolie trade from the 1830s and 1840s onwards. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* for example, describes the term "coolie, or cooly" as being used "in a special sense to designate those natives of India and China who leave their country under contracts of service to work as labourers abroad" (1910: 77). It provides a second, somewhat more open definition as well, mentioning that the term is "generally applied to Asiatic labourers belonging to the unskilled class as opposed to the artisan" (ibid.).

As in international historiography, Dutch studies of the history of coolie labour have focused almost exclusively on case(s) of coolie labour in the 19th century Atlantic and Asian colonial sphere fitting the first definition. These histories have been dealt with in two main historical narratives. For the Dutch West Indies, this is the history of Indian indentured contract-labour migrants (*koelies*) brought to Suriname starting in the late 19th century after the abolition of slavery. For the Dutch East Indies, this is the history of Chinese and Javanese contract labour under 'penal law' increasingly employed in the mines, on plantations, and in other industries in colonial Sumatra in the 19th century. The argument often recurs that the Dutch colonial state and entrepreneurs of the West- and East Indies based their practices of employing coolie-labour on the (earlier) British experience. The British experience, in turn, is traced back to the

employment of Indian indentured contract labourers in the early 19th century (Northrup 1995).

This narrow definition of coolie labour as indentured contract migrants, and the narrative tracing the invention and employment of coolie-contracts back to the early 19th century British experience, seems to provide only a partial understanding of the origins of the coolie concept, contract labour, and mechanisms of labour exploitation. It does not include various other (longer-running) histories of work, labour relations, and exploitation in imperial-context, some of which are actually explicitly related to the notion of coolie labour in different parts of the world. The Dutch (early modern) imperial history provides an interesting case for the history of bonded labour and understanding social relations delineated with the notion of coolie.

In the 17th- and 18th-century empire of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Asia, the term *koelie* (coolie) was a pivotal, but ambiguous concept. The notion essentially referred to work or workers, but could include different labour relations and people of rather different social standings. The concept of coolie not only had different meaning in different regions that were part of the early modern Dutch empire, but also seems to have changed over time. In the 18th century, there seems to have been a strong regional difference between the two most important regions of the empire of the VOC, varying from temporary wage-labour (Southeast Asia) to tributary labour relations (South Asia). In the 19th century, the term coolie changed, including within the Dutch empire, and became synonym for the (formally and informally bonded) contract labour. This chapter explores the evidence for this, indicating that the historical trajectory of the concept of 'coolie labour' is not as clear-cut as it is often presented in studies on Asian contract migration. In order to do so, it explores the concept of coolie labour in different historical contexts and from different perspectives, looking at labour relations, social status, meaning, and the actual work involved. Through this explorative approach, it aims to break open dominant narratives in order to recover the different and changing meaning of the concept of coolie during especially the 18th century in Southeast Asia (particularly Batavia and surroundings) and South Asia (particularly Ceylon).

A LONG HISTORY OF COOLIE LABOUR

The notion of coolie as indentured contract labour has led to lines of enquiry focusing mainly on the origins of this specific type of indentured contract migration with specifically Asian workers, and less on either the historical

development of concepts of coolie labour or even that of contract labour in general. Again, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1910: 77) might serve as an interesting illustration of this line of enquiry:

"It is scarcely possible to say when the Indian coolie trade began. Before the end of the 18th century Tamil labourers from southern India were wont to emigrate to the Straits Settlements, and they also flocked to Tenasserim from the other side of the Bay of Bengal after the conquest had produced a demand for labour. The first regularly recorded attempt at organizing coolie emigration from India took place in 1834, when forty coolies were exported to Mauritius; but it was not until 1836 that the Indian government decided to put the trade under official regulations."

Similar perspectives have dominated in other historical studies. "The word *coolie*" has, for example, been seen as "a product of European expansion into Asia and the Americas" (Jung 2005: 679). The coolie as indentured contract worker is traced back to the "experimental contingents of indentured Indian laborers [who] were introduced to Mauritius in 1830 and 1834" (Meagher 2008: 30). The abolition of slavery, of course, had a major impact on the expansion of indentured migrant contract labour. Between 1834 and 1839, the sugar planters of Mauritius 'imported' over 25,000 Indian workers, contracted for five-year periods. This has often been seen as the beginning of indentured contract migrant labour. As some historians claimed: "Sugar planters around the world, stimulated by the success of the experiment in Mauritius, sought to adopt similar systems of indentured labor" (Meagher 2008: 30). And indeed, it is pointed out, Asian migrant contract workers appeared in the French colonies (already in the 1830s onwards), in British Malaysia, the Pacific Islands, Australia, etc.

For the Dutch West Indies, especially the plantation colony Suriname, coolies are emphasized as having been a new solution for replacing slave labour in the second half of the 19th century (ibid.: 260). In the Dutch West Indies, slavery was abolished in 1863, but 'freed' slaves were obligated to continue to work until 1873. It is emphasized that British examples were followed and British recruitment networks used to employ contract workers from British India. From the 1890s onwards, Javanese and Chinese contract workers were recruited from the Indonesian archipelago. Studies on the Dutch East Indies focus mainly on 19th century Sumatra and other parts of the 'outer districts' of the Dutch colony in the Indonesian archipelago (Houben and Lindblad 1999). Indentured contract labour was perceived by colonial authorities as a necessary solution to mobilize and recruit labour in economically unfavourable circumstances and to attract labour to – and control labour in – expanding plantation industries in

undeveloped and less populated areas such as Sumatra. Special *koelie ordonnanties* – coolie ordinances or penal laws – were installed for these purposes (Breman 1992). Towards the end of the 19th century, the Dutch imperial system leaned heavily on the work of coolies, who toiled as indentured contract migrants on plantations, in mines, on roads, in harbours, and in factories in Suriname, Sumatra, Banjoewangi and other places.

It is possible, however, to provide a longer perspective on the history of coolie (and contract) labour relations. Such longer historical investigations into the early modern period, seem necessary, as recent historical findings and critiques urge us to move away from the classic historical narrative in which Europeans were the instigators of new, modernizing economic and political developments in an Asian world which was not familiar with market economies and characterized by 'despotist' modes of production prior to European colonialism (cf. Stanziani 2014; Banaji 2011). Instead, recent research indicates the presence of developed economic institutions, the widespread character of labour markets, and high levels of monetization in specific parts of South, East and Southeast Asia.[1]

It has been emphasized that markets and coercion are not exclusive, but can easily function together (cf. Banaji 2011). This is important in relation to the role of different types of unfree and free labour relations in (labour-intensive) routes to economic development. In debates on global economic development, labour-intensive paths are increasingly attributed a key role in the global diffusion of industrialization and economic development, and emphasized as the dominant trajectory "in most of Eurasia" (Stanziani 2014: 9; cf. Austin/Sugihara 2013). It has been argued that labour-intensive routes to economic development placed increasing pressures and constraints on labour and labour relations throughout the 18th and 19th century. Even more so, it has been argued that such labour-intensive production systems could be based on slavery and other forms of coerced labour, which was perceived as efficient and modern by contemporaries (cf. Mann 2012; Winn 2010).

At the same time, however, the labour-intensive ways of production in early modern Asia, especially under the VOC, could easily lean on either casual wage labour, slave labour, corvée labour, or contract labour. Often, workers in different labour relations worked side by side in the same working environments at the same time. These new perspectives indicate the importance of studying longer historical lines of labour relations and coercion, including that of coolie

1 On monetization and (maritime and military) labour markets see Lucassen (2014, 2012), Gommans (2002), Van Rossum (2014).

labour. The development of coolie labour relations in the long run within the Dutch empire provides an important case in testing new approaches of global labour history as well as developing new perspectives and explanations of what actually happened during this period of early globalization, increasing colonial domination, and diverging European and Asian routes of economic development.

COOLIES, PORT WORK, AND FREE LABOUR?

Let's start our exploration of coolie labour relations in the centre of the Dutch East Indian empire. In Batavia, the term *coolie* generally indicated wage labour. There was a long tradition of referring to the wage labourers working in the port as coolies. When the Batavian harbor head was lengthened in 1692, extending it further into the sea, it was reported that the costs "would soon be compensated for by the resulting reduction of the coolie wages" (Coolhaas et al. 1960-2007, vol. 5: 442) for loading and unloading the ships. From 1765, it was decided to recruit Chinese hirelings, referred to as coolies, to load and unload the ships before Batavia (Van Rossum 2014: 197-198).

In a study on 'free labour' in Java, Peter Boomgaard points out that "the term coolie" is "a convenient symbol for the appearance of free wage-labour. Its etymology, containing elements of unskilled labour, dacoitry and wages, neatly sums up the developments with which we seem to be confronted, namely, the creation of social underclass, neither slaves nor clients of Javanese patrons, cut loose from their village mooring, and living by their wits" (Boomgaard 1990: 44). He traces the emergence of the term coolie on Java to "around 1670", pointing out that "it is either related to the Western Indian caste or tribe of the Koli, associated with unskilled, menial labour and dacoitry, or to the Tamil term *kuli*, associated with wages" (ibid.).

The term *coolie* was not limited to Batavia. In other VOC-ports as well, the workers loading and unloading vessels were referred to as *coolies*. In a court case concerning the presumed smuggling of opium by the VOC-merchant Jan de Roth in 1744, declarations by port workers indicate the loading of vessels before Malacca by inland sailors and hired *koelij jongens*. Interrogated by Company officials, the hired coolie workers Cadir, Pittiromal, and Alludien, from Malacca, refer to themselves as "Coolies and free moors" – "Coelies en vrije mooren". They had been "called" near "the boom" – the toll of the water entrance of Malacca – by the "gentief" (Jew) Steven Mirandje in order to transport some chests from a vessel to a house. Their co-workers Oedeman, Polee and Asseen were also categorized as "Coolies and free Moors", referring themselves also to

the "other Coolies". They received their wage at piece rate, two shillings for the transport of a chest (Boomgaard 1990: 167-167).

The term *coolie* was even employed by the Dutch for port workers in places such as Japan. The German scholar in the service of the VOC, Engelbert Kaempfer, described how in Deshima in the 1690s "some Kuli's march before carrying the gowns in boxes, one carries the board or table, on which the gowns are to be laid". Again, *coolies* seemed to be used especially to refer to hired port workers, working as casual wage labourers. Kaempfer narrates how they hired workers in the – very restricted – port area of Deshima or Nagasaki: "We were busy with packing up our baggage, hiring a sufficient number of Kuli's, or Porters, and fifteen horses for our journey." After an earthquake in October 1691, Kaempfer recalls that "[…] a Kuli, or porter, was apprehended at the gate, as he was coming away from our Island [Deshima], and some Camphire was found upon him, upon which Mr. Reinss, of whome the prisoner confess'd he bought it, was immediately carried before the mayor of the town. The Kuli himself, the merchant for whom the Camphire was bought, and his landlord were by order from the Governor secured by their Ottona's, and laid in irons". The next day, all VOC-ships "were searched, one after another." Some days later, three smugglers were caught. Although they had bought "some goods of the Chinese", Kaempfer (1727: 179) recalls "our Kuli, and some more of our servants were ordered forthwith to quit their work, and to run after the fugitives".

Company sources for Japan refer to coolie workers mainly in relation to theft while loading and unloading ships. In 1673, it was reported from Japan that "in the unloading of the ships, we had been granted great liberty, but the mischief of the coolies or labourers, who were given a free hand in their operations by the translators, has led to unbearable theft".[2] In 1729 it was mentioned, for example, that the cargoes departed from Japan were in order, with the exception of the "powder [or icing] sugar as a result of the theft by the coolies".[3] In 1692, it was decided that tin would now be melted and transported in pieces of 50 pounds apiece as a measure to counter the theft of tin by coolies loading and unloading the tin at Malacca.[4]

Not only theft and discipline, but especially also the cost of coolie labour was a continuous concern. After Company servants failed to "employ hirelings" in 1683, who were considered too expensive as they had to be paid on top of the rent of the vessels, it was decided to send 50 slaves "as coolies" to Jambi to

2 Generale Missiven, vol. 3, 848.

3 Generale Missiven, vol. 9, 34.

4 Generale Missiven, vol. 6, 27.

support the ten Company servants working there.[5] In 1708, reports complained about the "narrow and fast running river" of Jambi, making it impossible to sail upstream, leading to "incredible high costs" with regard to "ropes and coolie wages".[6] Two years later, after the ship *Andromeda* had run aground in the river of Jambi, it had to be unloaded by coolies, who were paid 1/8 rijksdaalder and a ration of rice per day.[7] Similar considerations, and especially comparisons between different labour relations, continually recurred. In 1702, "the requested 30 slaves" could not be sent to Malacca with the ship *Susanna*, as a consequence of which "they had to work with hired coolies".[8] In 1687, it was reported that 100 slaves had been transported from the Coromandel coast to Malacca, because the "scarce" coolies were too expensive, costing 8 stuivers per day.[9]

"COELIE SOEKEN" IN BATAVIA

Although many references involve the loading and unloading of ships, coolie labour was not restricted to port work. In 1730, it was reported from Jambi, for example, that "20 coolies had worked 44 days on raising the fundaments of the south-side of the [Company] lodgings".[10] In 1757, it was reported that it was allowed, in order to speed up the progress of works on the fortifications, to send ships carpenters and other artisans to Ambon, as well as to "recruit coolies amongst the inhabitants".[11] Two years later, reports on the financial accounts of Banda mention the "high costs" of coolies and other posts, such as building materials.[12] From the Coromandel coast it was reported in 1738 that the peeling of the nely was more expensive with a peeling mill than treading it, because the costs of the pots, copper boilers, and firewood excluded the costs of the mills, the wages of European servants and the coolie wages.[13] Other references mention coolie work or coolie wages involved in construction, ship repair (or deconstruction), logging wood, cutting stone, etc.

5 Generale Missiven, vol. 3, 998.
6 Generale Missiven, vol. 6, 579.
7 Generale Missiven, vol. 6, 643.
8 Generale Missiven, vol. 6, 200.
9 Generale Missiven, vol. 5, 133.
10 Generale Missiven, vol. 9, 153.
11 Generale Missiven, vol. 13, 123.
12 Generale Missiven, vol. 13, 365.
13 Generale Missiven, vol. 10, 156.

In the rural areas of Batavia, the so-called *ommelanden*, coolies performed various kinds of work. The VOC employed coolies via casual wage-labour relations. In 1743, Company coolies were mentioned to be working on the transport of drinking water in Batavia.[14] In 1750, it was decided, in order to reduce the high expenditure on coolie labour, to make sure district heads supervised the work better, to check "whether the recruited workers did indeed do their service and make the workers sign the weekly administrations".[15]

In the city of Batavia, a lively urban coolie labour market existed. The "ordinance for the coolies" ordered by Van Imhoff (1743) attempted to regulate this market by instructing the recruitment of labour should be organized through the city district heads ("wijkmeesters"). The main characteristics seemed have remained unchanged. The workers involved could be both free ("vrije mooren") or unfree workers ("slaves" being hired out or hiring out themselves). The workers in this urban coolie-labour market were used for labour that was performed in general services (carrying, loading/unloading, unskilled work) and could be hired per hour, per half day, or per day.[16]

At least before the regulations of 1743, the hiring of coolies seems to have been rather similar to the practices we encountered in the case of Malacca. Ship surgeon Johannes Knol from Colombo, for example, declared that he had taken along "a certain slave who he had called to him as [a] coolie" (Van Rossum 2015: 40-58). September of Bengal, slave of the wife of Johannes Geldzak, declared that "he had been called by a surgeon with only one eye when he was on the Middelpuntbrug [bridge in the center of Batavia] in order to carry some goods he had bought at the passer [market]". Knol would have promised him a ducaton after he had finished the job.[17]

In this lively urban coolie labour market, free workers, slaves, runaways and others could find work. Slaves were actively sent out by their masters to earn money, which they had to return (in part) to their owners. This was referred to as "bringing" "coolie money" ["coelij geld" or "coelij brengen"] (van Rossum 2015: 58).[18] An Indian sailor who had deserted his employment as contract worker in the service of the VOC survived in Batavia and its environment for some years, making a living by "coelie soeken" – "seeking coolie labour" (van Rossum 2012: 53) or day-to-day employment.

14 Generale Missiven, vol. 11, 107.

15 Van der Chijs, Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek, vol. 5, 648.

16 Van der Chijs, Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek, vol. 5, 379.

17 Nationaal Archief (NA), Archief van de VOC (VOC), 9375, case 18.

18 NA, VOC, 9424, case 63.

CORVÉE AND 'VOLUNTARY' COOLIES IN CEYLON

Concepts of coolie labour were not only employed in Southeast Asia. As it is often referred to as originating from South Asia, it is interesting to take a closer look at evidence of coolie labour here. In Ceylon, just as in Batavia, a broad range of work could be labelled "coolie labour". Reports on the construction works of fortifications near Trinconomale late 1780s provide an indication of the wide range of work. In July 1788, "10 heads coolies" were sent with two vessels carrying wood for the construction works.[19] In August 1788, in total 1,060 coolies were employed in the works of two forts at Trinconomale. The coolies were mentioned to be "872 large and 182 small boys".[20] Similar numbers were reported in the following months. They were employed in the loading and unloading of ships, in the warehouses, for masonry, in the gunpowder mill, for carpentry, in wood logging, in the constructing of palisades, and in the weaponry room. Another 48 coolies were employed in the public works of Trinconomale.

In this case, the concept of coolie not only referred to precarious labour relations, wage labour, or specific types of work, but also indicated social or group status. The local population of Ceylon was obligated to render specific taxes and corvée labour duties, corresponding to their status as landowners, labourers and membership of castes or communities. As a labour relation or social status, *coolie* could refer specifically to a type of corvée labour, a specific type of labour service demanded by the VOC from local populations. Alicia Schrikker explains that, for example, "the lower echelons, called *naindes*, usually formed the largest group and performed manual labour. They had to undertake specialized or coolie-labour for their headmen and the king depending on their caste. This labour was used for a variety of projects including road repair, irrigation and general building activities for the benefit of the community, but it was also used for private activities of the headman" (Schrikker 2006: 17). These *oeliam*-services – the obligatory corvée labour – required from local populations could take "the form of the Company's heavy coolie-work like dragging timber" (ibid.: 90), the loading and unloading of ships, work on fortifications as, mentioned in the case of Trinconomale, and other tasks.

As part of their system of labour extraction, the VOC administrated information on the labour services and on communities involved in land administrations, demographic registers and administrations of corvée services. The administration of corvée services of 1755, for example, contains "the name role

19 Sri Lanka National Archives (SLNA) 1/3164.

20 SLNA 1/3164.

of the hereafter mentioned Coolies, who were to be leaving on this morning [July 8, 1755] under supervision of the Lascorin Pintollewaddoegenainde with the second merchant and controller of Colombo the Honourable Michiel Hemme". The role listed a total of "25 heads" coming from rural districts in the hinterland of Galle, being "16 heads [coming] from the [district] Talpe Pattoe" and 9 from the district Gangebaddepattoe. One day earlier, a group of "60 heads in total" had been sent from various other districts. The "name roll" mentioned that these "Coolies had been send this morning under supervision of the lascorin named Hittigoddegamme Hewanainde in the direction of Galle in order to be send further to Colombo".[21]

Demographic registers indicate the different groups and services. In 1684, VOC accounts mentioned in total 11,280 coolies, which counted roughly for four per cent of the population and seven per cent of the total working population in maritime provinces under Dutch control (De Zwart 2014). A "translated Singalese register ola" of September 1751 listed all the male "Naindes, Wahadjas and Coolies residing under the [district] Talpepattoe" with their names, positions, and ages. In the district, there were "431 Naindes", "72 Wahadjas" and "260 Coolies". Of the 206 coolies, it was noted that 158 were "in service", 26 were schoolboys, 5 were "old and not in service anymore", 3 were ill, 41 were "out of this country, amongst which 1 old", and 32 were "active in various other services".[22] In the district Gangebaddepattoe there were "176 Naindes", "19 Wahadjas" and "79 Coolies".[23] In the district Wellebaddepattoe there were 144 Naindes, 21 Wahadjas, and 60 Coolies, and in the district Wallallawille Corle 342 Naindes, 96 Wahadjas, and 73 Coolies.[24]

As coolie-labour in the context of obligatory corvée labour related to both the social status of people and to the specific work involved, the use of the concept of coolie was sometimes ambiguous (cf. Tappe, this volume). As early as 1660, under the rule of Van Goens, it is mentioned that the work on the fortifications of Galle was temporarily stopped in order to let the coolies work on their land.[25] After a ship from Surat ran ashore in 1717, and the crew abandoned the vessel out of fear of the Sinhalese, the cargo of the ship was transported inland "with 300 coolies and 372 beasts of burden". In 1742, it was reported that some 3,800 bales of cinnamon were undelivered due to the "random and

21 SLNA 1/443.

22 SLNA 1/2758, 28.

23 SLNA 1/2758, 29.

24 SLNA 1/2758, 30-31.

25 Generale Missiven, vol. 3, 329.

disobedient behavior of the servants of the King". It was ordered that the bales should be transported by "the coolies of the mahabadde".[26] In other instances, the reference to coolie as a category of work is more explicit. In 1706, for example, it was reported that "30 chalias were left at the dessave as coolies"[27]. These workers were members of the chalias community, which was obligated to perform corvée labour for the VOC, consisting mainly of peeling and transporting cinnamon.

Court records administrating the incarceration and release of convicts also show this broad application of the concept of coolie in the context of corvée labour obligations, indicating both work and status. On January 20, 1751, five local workers were sentenced in Galle to three months' convict labour. Four cinnamon peelers were convicted over "not delivering their obligated cinnamon tax", while the "Chalias Coolie" Nabradoewe Jantjea was convicted "over being absent from his obligated service".[28] In April 1751, the cinnamon peeler Dikwellege, also named Hoenadenige Philippoe, and Philippe, "alias Poerandera Coelij", from the Mahabadde were condemned to 15 years' convict labour at the Company's public works. In October 1750, it was ordered to release from their chains the "Singalese Coolies with the names Kiembieje Wampra Goddea and d'Koeretia, because they had served their sentence of six months [of convict labour]".[29]

Coolie labour could also be employed outside the sphere of obligated labour services performed for the VOC. In 1730, it was decided that the small vessel Cochin would be taken apart, "but only if this would not lead to excessive costs in coolie wages".[30] The report on the Trinconomale construction works of September 1788 makes a clear distinction between "obligated" and "non-obligated" coolie labourers, referring to "the voluntary heads [who] have worked at the main canal". In the November report, it is noted that in total "this month daily 1108 big and 186 small and 50 voluntary" coolies were employed. The 50 voluntary coolies "finished the canal at the entrance up in the fort". The employment of large numbers of coolies, including small numbers of "voluntary" coolies, continued into the year 1789.[31] "Voluntary" in this context, however, mainly indicated non-corvée labour, and did not necessarily imply "free" or

26 Generale Missiven, vol. 7, 309.

27 Generale Missiven, vol. 6, 447.

28 SLNA 1/2758, 23. Original: 'Chialiasse Coelij'.

29 SLNA 1/2758, 23.

30 Generale Missiven, vol. 9, 177.

31 SLNA 1/3164.

casual labour relations. VOC administrator Jacob Burnand, for example, pointed out in the late 18th century that constraints in mobilizing corvée labourers would force the Company "to rely [more] on slave labour for coolie work" (Schrikker 2006: 112).

COOLIE WORK AND COOLIE LABOUR RELATIONS

So how do we make sense of the world of early modern coolie labour? For this, it is important to take into account labour relations, social status, meaning, and the actual work involved. One of the most striking features, perhaps, is the large variation in the labour relations themselves. A taxonomy of labour relations might help to illustrate this point. In recent studies of labour, it has been argued that labour relations were not marked by clear-cut, free versus forced, and market versus non-market dichotomies, but instead were positioned on a gradual scale between free and unfree, and between non-market-oriented and commodified. Exploring the new perspectives on the history of work opened by these insights, Jan Lucassen has argued that "market economies did not emerge only once, but several times in history in different parts of the world, and in many cases also disappeared again" (2013: 21). In accordance with this, "wage labour on a large scale, slave labour and selfemployed labour emerged several times in history, and also often declined again" (ibid.).

In the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations, these have been subdivided into reciprocal, tributary, independent, slave-, and wage-labour relations.[32] Coolie labour has been associated especially with "free" wage labour, either in the form of casual wage labour (as referred to by Boomgaard) or in the form of contract labour (although indentured, as in the 19th century). A closer look at coolie labour relations in the early modern Southeast and South Asia, however, seems to indicate that coolies were found in various different labour relations. Free persons referred to as coolies were performing (casual) wage labour side by side with slaves performing wage labour for the market referred to as coolie labour. At the same time, coolie work could also be obligated corvée (or tributary) labour. Coolies, therefore, could be more-or-less free workers (free coolies in Batavia, voluntary coolies in Ceylon) as well as coerced workers (corvée coolies in Ceylon, slaves working as coolies in Batavia or in Ceylon). This positioned workers, who were referred to as coolies, very differently in

32 Available online via https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourrelations.

terms of degrees of freedom and coercion – and in terms of whether their situation was forged through mainly economic or political relations.

Types of labour relations referred to as coolie

Economic relation	Casual wage labour	Contract "indentured" labour Slave (hired) wage labour
Political relation		Obligated labour services
	"Free"	"Bonded"

The VOC itself used the term *coolie* in its administration and reports to indicate different labour relations (casual wage labour; corvée labour) in Southeast Asia. In South Asia, in this case in Ceylon, the VOC also used the term to indicate specific social groups. Here, the term *coolie* could refer to groups categorized as coolies who were obligated to perform *oeliam*-services, but also refer to the coolie work performed by ('voluntary') wage-labourers and slaves. The workers involved could also identify themselves as coolies, for example, in court cases. In the case of Ceylon, it is not clear whether such references primarily referred to community memberships, corvée obligations, or occupations. In the case of Malacca, the reference to their status of 'coolies' by workers who identified themselves as 'free Moors' seems to have referred to their occupation. This is more in line with the evidence for Batavia, where free inhabitants, slaves, and deserters referred to their activities as doing 'coolie' work, 'seeking coolie [work]' or bringing 'coolie money [to their masters]'.

The meaning of the term coolie was not entirely open, but was ambiguous in some aspects, such as the meaning attached to the term, and the social groups and labour relations involved (free workers, slaves, corvée workers). And although the term did not exclusively refer to work – but in many instances did indeed refer to social status or (obligations ingrained in specific) labour relations – the common element seems to have been, time and again, the work involved. In accordance with the ambiguous character of the term, the (second) very open definition of coolie work was that of unskilled and physical labour, performed in port work, transport, agriculture, construction, etc.

TRANSFORMATIONS

So how did these early modern coolie labour relations transform into the 19th century imperial world evolving around the labour of indentured 'coolie' contract migrants? In the remainder of this chapter, two developments will be taken up that may have impacted the development of coolie labour within the Dutch imperial sphere before the well-known developments around the coolie trade within the British imperial sphere: first, the development of regulation of 'coolie work' in the early 19th century; and second, developments related to the work of migrant (contract) labourers on Java.

Despite the character of coolie labour as casual wage labour in and around Batavia, the 18th century had already witnessed some developments towards an increasing regulation of coolie labour markets (1743), and – perhaps more importantly – also towards an increasing control over workers through mediated recruitment. Some of the Chinese port workers hired by the VOC in the second half of the 18th century, for example, seem to have been recruited in a more mediated way. After the VOC decided to hire Chinese workers for the loading and unloading of the ships in Batavia in 1765, it was mentioned that "some fifty heads had already offered themselves", the rest were to be recruited via "the captain of this nation, Lim Tjipko". He was also charged with the monthly payment of the wages.[33]

In other cases, it is not even clear whether coolies were performing wage labour or whether other arrangements were involved. In 1716, for example, it was mentioned that the princes of Cheribon and other rulers "send 410 coolies in order to dredge the river of Batavia". It is difficult to say anything about the labour relations between the coolies and the local rulers (they may have been performing slave, wage or local corvee duties). For the VOC, however, the work of coolies seems to have been a gift from the local rulers to the Company. In that sense, the labour of these coolies was a sort of tribute and the reference coolie indicated especially the type of (unskilled) work involved.[34]

Early 19th century, regulations were implemented to arrange "the payment of coolies and horses employed by private travellers" on the land roads of Java.[35] In 1810, under the rule of governor-general Daendels, regulations were implemented for the provisioning of rice "to coolies working on the main road

33 Van der Chijs, J. A. *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek*, Batavia Landsdrukkerij (Batavia 1891), vol. 8, 53.

34 Generale Missiven, vol. 7, 257.

35 Van der Chijs, Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek (1896), vol. 15, 824.

over the Megamendoeng". It was "decided to provide the three hundred heads, who were employed on the construction of the road over the Mechamedong, as well as the two hundred heads, who work on the roads in other districts under authority of that landdrost, with forty pounds rice per person each month".[36] In Batavia, Chinese and inland coolies were mentioned to be working in the various warehouses, the artillery warehouse, the equipage wharf, and on the ships anchored in the harbour. They were paid in monthly wages. In 1809 and 1810, their wages were raised to the rather high amount of 15 and 16 rijksdaalders respectively.[37]

This may have meant that these coolies worked not on a daily basis, but for longer periods. The Chinese coolies working in the warehouse for medicines, on the other hand, seem to have received daily bonuses of 12 stuivers.[38] On the "private" lands in the environment of Batavia, workers referred to as "coolies" often still received "daily wages" in the early 19th century.[39] The coolies recruited from Bantam and employed on the fortifications in the Meeuwenbaai earned three stuivers "to be paid for every day's work". They seem to have been recruited, however, for two weeks' work. "In order to prevent damage to the production in the rice fields or any other agricultural sector, every 14 days 200 workers would be replaced with 200 other workers from Bantam".[40]

At the same time, the pressure of colonial competition and the possibility of war may have started to impact labour relations. In 1810, for example, authorities considered the possibility of a military invasion at Batavia by European colonial competitors, developed a plan for blocking the river and arranging the (obligated) delivery of "for this work required 3,000 heads out of the inhabitants of the private lands". For every district it was decided how many of these "coolies" should be delivered by the private landowners to the authorities. They were to be supervised "by a mandadoor on every fifty men" and would "receive the ordinary daily wages of coolies".[41]

Measures were also taken to ensure the "provisioning of coolies, needed for the works at the Merakbaai" in order to continue the construction works during "the present monsoon with the best possible power". It was decided that the numbers of workers should be brought to 1,500, "excluding the government-

36 Van der Chijs, Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek (1897), vol. 16, 419-420.

37 Van der Chijs, Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek, vol. 15, 884; vol. 16, 45.

38 Van der Chijs, Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek, vol. 16, 77.

39 Van der Chijs, Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek, vol. 16, 484-485.

40 Van der Chijs, Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek, vol. 15, 369.

41 Van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek*, vol. 16, 484-485.

slaves, convicts and sailors", for which the district heads "of Bantam, Cheribon and Samarang were demanded to each furnish 500 men". This time the period of work was longer. The men were "to be delivered within fourteen days and would be returned three months after their arrival in the Merakbaai in order to be replaced".[42]

These practices seem to have continued into the 19th century. In 1830, for example, it was reported that "a concession was granted to a Chinese captain in order to set up a tin mine at Biliton". The contract (effective from July 1, 1827) with the Chinese captain stated that he was responsible to recruit his own labourers. It was explicitly stated, however, that the Chinese captain did not obtain any "right or authority over the native population of Biliton" (who were obligated to perform corvée labour by this time), although the captain "nevertheless had the freedom to obtain the voluntary services of the inhabitants for the burning of coal, coolie work, etc, for a reasonable payment".[43] In this period, coolie work seems still to have referred to unskilled labour payed per day or at piece rate. The Chinese operator of the tin mines, however, was not primarily dependent on the local labour force. He recruited some 300 (later up to 500) Chinese workers. Although they were not explicitly referred to as coolies, they were probably migrant contract workers.

The work of these hirelings seems to have come close to that of another interesting category of workers which should be considered in this context, namely that of the Javanese *bujang*. In the late 18th and early 19th century, these *bujang* performed work very similar to that of coolies, but were concentrated mainly in the sugar industry. As De Zwart points out, *bujang* "were temporary or seasonal workers, which represents the main difference from the coolies" (De Zwart 2015: 201). Boomgaard describes the *bujang* "as a temporary migrant", "contracted for a period of half a year or one year" to work as "free wage-labourer[s] on the sugar estates of the environs of Batavia" (Boomgaard 1990: 45). Such labour contracts were not new for Asian workers; thousands of Indian, Malayan, Javanese, Chinese and other sailors and soldiers had worked for the VOC on contracts with durations of one to three years during the 17th and 18th century (cf. van Rossum 2016). Around 1800, some 4,000 bujang were employed in the sugar mills of Batavia. On the rise from 1750 onwards, this represented, according to Boomgaard "a new phase in the development of labour relations. Whereas the coolie had cut his ties with the village society perma-

42 Van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek*, vol. 16, 178-179.

43 NA, Koloniaal Archief, 2.10.01, 3077.

nently, the *bujang* seems to have done so only temporarily. He probably intended to go back to his village and get married" (ibid.).

These *bujang* have often been emphasized as 'free' wage labourers (cf. Boomgaard 1990; De Zwart 2015; Van Zanden 2007). As migrant workers, however, the question of recruitment and control of *bujang* must have been of immediate interest. References in administrative sources seem to indicate that this was indeed the case. In June 1788, for example, it was stated that, "in order to counter the abuses, which have increased, it is necessary to make sure the Javanese *bujang* needed for the sugar mills, as before, are from now on recruited in the mountains by the Javanese mandoors of the mentioned sugar mills". There had been complaints that the old practice, in which *bujang* workers were recruited, brought to the mills, and escorted back by the servants of the sugar mills, had fallen in disuse in the period of the governance of Van Riemsdyk [in the period 1775-1777]. Javanese *bujang* were now being escorted by the servants of Javanese rulers, leading to a situation in which "recruiters and *bujang* were dependent on the servants of the Javanese rulers for their return". Furthermore,

> "these servants [of the rulers] had also claimed them at the moment of their arrival in the mountains, which had been sufficient cause for the owners of the sugar mills to address the mentioned servants in order to be able to recruit Javanese workers, and from this a form of selling of *bujang* to the owners of the sugar mills had been born."[44]

Towards the end of the 18th century, the VOC gained such a position as to be able to demand corvée labour from local rural communities in Java. As the pressure to supply sufficient labour increased after 1800, it has been pointed out by Boomgaard that "it became more and more usual to ask Javanese and Dutch officials in Priangan, Krawang, and Cirebon to send labourers to the sugar-mills. Of course, this form of labour recruitment can no longer be regarded as hiring free labour. Although in a disguised form, we are confronted here with corvée labour" (Boomgaard 1990: 46). This seems very similar to the practice by local rulers of delivering coolies to the VOC, as we encountered earlier. Here we see important crossovers between systems of wage labour, contracted work, corvée and other forms of coercion in relation to coolie types of work.

44 Van der Chijs, *Nederlandsch-Indisch Plakaatboek* (1893), vol. 11, 21-22.

CONCLUSION

What does this say about the standard narrative? It does not aim to falsify or contradict the standard British imperial narrative, but the evidence laid out in this chapter does seem to problematize its implicit linearity. The term *coolie* was not a static concept – it was used differently between regions, and – more importantly – it changed over time. The concept of coolie labour clearly has multiple sources, stemming from the complex relations forged by early modern global interactions. The changing coolie labour relations were inherently linked to extending and changing colonial and capitalist projects of exploitation. The longer histories of coolie labour, however, seem to provide reason to question what we might call the '1830s founding myth' of (British-Indian) indentured contract labour and the coolie-trade (cf. Lindner, this volume). It indicates the importance of looking for developments connecting the dynamics of the employment of European and Asian (indentured) contract labour in the 18th century with its development and expansion in the 19th century.

One of the crucial points here – more than simply taking the innovation of the indentured contract coolie migration as the reason for its 'success' and 'spread' – is that different alternatives for mobilizing and controlling labour, such as slave-, contract-, and corvée labour, had already been available to imperial authorities and employers for some centuries. They had been employed by the VOC side by side during the 18th century. The gradual, slow abolition of slavery in the 19th century stimulated the employment of corvée and contract labour. These were alternatives that had also been available and in use previously. In the Dutch case, it seems that the importance of slave labour was already slowly diminishing towards the end of the 18th century, leading to the growth of corvée, contract- and casual wage labour (cf. Breman 2010; Boomgaard 1990). At the beginning of the 19th century, the Dutch colonial authorities would increasingly focus their attempts at mobilizing labour on expanding the corvée labour system. With the implementation of the Cultivation System in 1830, (indentured) contract work – and wage labour in general – seems to have become less important in the first half of the 19th century. The employment of contract labour in the Dutch East Indian colonial sphere, in this period, moved in the opposite direction to that elsewhere. This turned out to be only temporary, as the introduction of coolie ordinances would lead to an expansion of the system of (indentured) migrant contract workers in the second half of the 19th century.

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