

Chapter V The Changing Intermediary Role of Indonesian Concubines between the Local and European Communities at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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Introduction

Indonesia, being located at the maritime crossroads between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, played a significant role in international trade from early centuries. Its port cities became the highly cosmopolitan urban areas accommodating foreign visitors from both East and West, for the purpose of trade or waiting for favorable winds to continue their journeys. The rulers of these port cities would often recommend to visitors that they take local women as wives and concubines, in order to establish ties of affiliation with them [Andaya 1998:11–16; Hamilton 1930:28, 96, 115; Dampier 1723:5–6], and as expected, these indigenous wives and concubines played an important role as mediators between those visitors and local society. The Dutch colonial rulers also condoned this custom. During both the Dutch East India Company era and the Dutch colonial government era, the European communities of major towns, like Batavia, Surabaya, and Semarang, were made up of far more men than women, mainly because up to the beginning of the twentieth century, most male European travelers to the Dutch East Indies were not accompanied by their spouses. Instead, many would take local concubines and female slaves before the slavery system was abolished in 1860 [Taylor 1983:114–58; Haan 1922:456, 539–40].

An Indonesian concubine was usually introduced to a European newcomer by the local chief or his predecessor and acted as both a housekeeper and common law wife for her master. Although she was not allowed to attend formal parties or engage in conversation with European guests due to the fact that she was not legally married, she was a key person in managing her master's household, supervising the domestic staff, and teaching him the local language and customs. When a child was born within such relationship, the woman became the mother. Those Indonesian concubines were usually called *nyai*, originally a respectful term of address to elder women among the Javanese [ENI 3:36, s.v. “Njahi (Njai)”].

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, those *nyai* kept by Europeans had not attracted much public attention from the local people. Local people occasional-

ly noticed a *nyai* in public, shopping at the local market. They were probably surprised to see an Indonesian woman dressed in white salon decorated with lace and wearing expensive rings and bracelets, but no one, except the local chiefs, knew about the kind of life she led in her master's home.

The rise of new ideas about the role of women and prostitution in Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth century induced the Dutch colonial authorities to change their attitude about Indonesian concubines residing in the households of colonists. From the end of the 1870s on, the anti-prostitution movement in the Netherlands and its call for improved sexual morality turned its attention to "white slavery" within the European community in the colonies [Abalahin 2003:220–82; Ming 1983]. These activists, who did not have the custom of keeping concubines in their society, perceived the Indonesian custom to be immoral and degrading, and thus urged the Dutch colonial authorities to prohibit the practice among Europeans under their jurisdiction. This movement also influenced early Indonesian nationalists in the 1910s to take an anti-prostitution stand as one of its countermeasures in dealing with Dutch colonialism. These Indonesian nationalists strongly condemned the keeping of concubines among the European and Chinese in the East Indies [*Onderzoek* 1914:25–27; Ratu-Langie 1913:21].

Such social trends also influenced the scientific study of Indonesian concubines during the colonial era. Studies so far have generally dealt with *nyai* as victims of European colonial rule and sexual exploitation [Ming 1983:92–93; Hesselink 1992:216–19]. Furthermore, recent research on gender in the East Indies has clarified that colonialism brought a strong racial and national differentiation into relationships between men-women [Stoler 2002; Abalahin 2003:400, 471–75]. As these studies suggest, "mixed marriages" (including *nyai*) between Indonesians and foreigners became important issues among Indonesian nationalists in the 1910s and 1920s.

Despite all this uproar, the practice of becoming the *nyai* of a European by no means disappeared from the colonial scene of twentieth century Indonesia. To the contrary, it seems that not even the number of cases of Indonesian-European cohabitation decreased, in the midst of increased European immigration to Indonesia [Marle 1951–52:491–95; *Pemberita Betawi* 1912a; *Poetri-Mardika* 1917]. There is also the point that these indigenous girls unlike those during the later part of the nineteenth century may have other option than to become *nyai* because of the development of economic activities in the East Indies at that time. Were those Indonesian concubines really "victims" of European sexual exploitation? How did they take the criticism leveled at them by Indonesian nationalists? Why did Indonesian girls continue to become *nyai* in the midst of the nationalist condemnation? In order to answer these questions, the author will examine the changing image of *nyai* among Indonesians during the end of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century.

Nyai became one of the most popular topics in local newspapers, novels, and theater drama during the early stages of the twentieth century, as symbols of the trans-class, marginal medium through which these journalists, authors and playwrights attempted to describe colonial society as a whole [Ibnu Wahyudi 2003; Fane 1997]. Those publications and drama went a long way in helping the Indonesian public to create its image of *nyai*, which conjured up a life full of changes and adventure, regardless of happy or sad endings that may have resulted. The Indonesian case offers us a very interesting example of the urban hybrid culture that cut across the boundaries of ethnicity and religion and a custom that survived after the development of Indonesian nationalism.¹

1. *Nyai* in the East Indies during the Late Nineteenth Century

Colonial towns in Indonesia were no different than any other urban area of Southeast Asia in terms of their high degree of cosmopolitanism. Not only Europeans and indigenous peoples but also Chinese, Arabs, Indians, Armenians, etc. all contributed in important ways to the economy and the social milieu [Berg 1886:105–9; Abeyasekere 1987:57–71; Lohanda 1996:1–104]. The number of European and Chinese newcomers to East Indies increased as the Dutch colonial government expanded its rule not only over Java but also over the other islands from the later part of the nineteenth century. The number of the European in the East Indies grew from 43,876 in 1860 to 91,142 in 1900 [Department van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel 1935:18], while the Chinese population increased from 221,438 in 1860 to 537,316 in 1900 [Department van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel 1935:48].

Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, most European immigrants came to Indonesia without their spouses. For example, in 1880 men outnumbered women 40,684 to 19,585, in 1890, 47,733 to 25,895, and in 1900, 55,713 to 35,429 [Department van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel 1933:31–32]. Under such conditions, most well-off European and Chinese men kept Indonesian concubines. Even among the European colonial troops stationed in the East Indies, about a quarter of them lived with concubines in their barracks. It has been estimated that about a half of the European men in Indonesia were keeping concubines by the end of the nineteenth century [Marle 1951–52:486].

In 1854, the Dutch authorities decided to re-categorize the colonial population of the East Indies into “Europeans,” “foreign Asians,” and “natives,” and ruled that

¹ The topic of this chapter is also relevant to my research project of “The Role of Slaves and Mixed Blood People in the Social Integration of Southeast Asian Port Cities,” supported by The JFE 21st Century Foundation. I am very grateful to the Foundation for assisting my research.

a child born between a European man and an Indonesian concubine would be granted European status if the father legally acknowledged it. If he refused, the child would be categorized as “native.” Under this statute, the larger number of children born out of such a relationship remained “natives,” due mainly to *nyai* not wanting their children to be acknowledged as Europeans out of fear that they would be separated in the course of their lives [Ming 1983:78–79], although acknowledged children became no smaller part of the European community during the nineteenth century. When a European cohabitant left the East Indies, it was customary to leave his household goods and a certain amount of money to his *nyai* and his children.² Some of these “abandoned” *nyai* would then become concubines of newly arrived Europeans, while others who successfully had accumulated savings during their cohabiting days began small trade business at the local market.

Under the Agrarian Law introduced in 1870, the compulsory system of cultivation in the East Indies generally came to an end, with the exception of coffee cultivation in Sumatra and Sulawesi. This act enabled plantation companies to come into direct contract with the indigenous people in order to open cultivation. This new entrepreneurial opportunity was one of the causes of the increase in the number of European immigrants to the region. The number of Indonesian concubines accordingly increased.

These *nyai* were generally from the lower echelons of Indonesian society. Those women had few or no other alternatives to earn a living for themselves and their family during the later part of the nineteenth century, when the custom involved being recommended for such a position by a village chief or elder. Despite the belief among Indonesian Muslims that to cohabit with non-Muslim European or Chinese was even more disgusting than to become *nyai* of an Indonesian man, those women who did serve Europeans or Chinese were often greeted with a much better life than if they chose to obey Islamic law. They were given the wherewithal to conduct the housekeeping for their masters and were put in charge of supervising the other household servants and employees.

It was at the end of the nineteenth century that the image of *nyai* held by Indonesian society began to change due to their frequent appearance in such media as newspapers, fiction, and the stage. There already had been Dutch writers in the Netherlands who took up the subject of cohabitation between Indonesian women and European men in the East Indies [Taylor 1983:145–48], more times than not condemning the practice as laxity in European morality, but also praising the devotion of *nyai* to her master. However, this body of literature, written in Dutch, did not attract much public attention within the indigenous society in the East Indies. It

² If per chance a master did not comply with this custom, his dereliction of duty would be picked up by local newspapers and made public in an attempt to ruin his career [*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* 1892; Nieuwenhuys 1959:27].

was only when local Malay language newspapers and novels mentioning the subject that the people began to have concern about *nyai* of Europeans. In 1854, freedom of the press was allowed in the East Indies by the Dutch authorities with a few exceptions, and from that time on until the end of the nineteenth century, newspapers published in Malay began appearing in the major towns of Batavia, Semarang, Surabaya, etc. The editors of these newspapers, who were mainly of Eurasian origin, were usually literate in both Dutch and Malay. Then, during the 1880s, Chinese also began publishing newspapers and in 1903 the first newspaper by the Indonesian editor appeared [Adam 1995:16–109].

One popular topic for this new indigenous print media was the local women who were cohabitating with European colonists [Watson 1971:420–23, 427–30; Tsuchiya 1991:473–75]. By introducing the character of the *nyai* in an article, story, or drama scene, the reporter, author, or playwright was better able to describe the complicated relations that existed between men and women in the European, Chinese, and indigenous communities, regardless of class differences. The situation involving *nyai* was portrayed highly unstable due to the fact that they were not legitimate spouses. They might be able to enjoy a relatively better life as long as their masters were in the East Indies. But upon either the latters' return to their home countries or the arrival of their legal wives in the East Indies, *nyai* were liable to lose everything, except for some household goods and a solatium. Readers enjoyed reading about *nyai* because these heroines provided the vehicles for intricate love stories within the overall colonial society milieu. Also, the instability of such figures like *nyai* was another popular topic within an urban society where social mobility was increasing and expanding more rapidly than ever before, owing to the development of economic activities in the East Indies.

Tjerita Njai Dasima (The story of Njai Dasima) by G. Francis [1896], *Tjerita Nji Paina* (The story of Nji Paina) by H. Kommer [1900], *Njai Isah* by F. Wiggers [1903] were perhaps three of the most popular *nyai* novels at the beginning of the twentieth century.³ These women were described as extremely beautiful beings swaying to and fro between the indigenous and European communities and often falling victim to provocation or deception on the part of some villains and other. One of the above novels ends sorrowfully, with Nyai Dasima being murdered by a group of local swindlers. Nyai Isah, who faithfully loved her master, eventually found her happiness by going to live in Europe with him in spite of her parents' strong opposition. Only Nyi Paina is able to ultimately find happiness in local soci-

³ In addition to these three stories, B. Fane [1997] refers to another early twentieth century popular *nyai* story, *Tjerita Njai Alimah* (The story of Njai Alimah) by Chinese author Oei Soei Tiong [1904]. In this story, Alimah becomes the *nyai* of a Dutchman, despite the fact that it had been arranged that she marry the son of the village chief. Shamed by Alimah's behavior, the chief endeavors to bring about the death of her father, but loses his son by divine retribution and finally goes mad.

ety, by successfully surviving an ordeal with a wicked Dutch master and later being married to a Javanese. All three characters may or may not have been based on actual cases, but all three authors, who were well-known local Eurasian journalists literate in Malay [Pramoedya 2003:30–31, 38–48; Watson 1971:419], take a non-fiction approach to the subject matter, giving their readers the impression that all of this is going on right under their noses, although the stories were probably reconstructed from bits and pieces of late nineteenth century life. In either case, the authors were well versed in both the Java/Malay oral traditions and modern colonial urban culture.

The drama medium was another source of entertainment about *nyai* and the world around them. By the end of the nineteenth century, colonial towns in Indonesia were giving rise to a new style of the Malay-language musical genre, performed by the Komedi Stambul, starring Eurasian actors, produced by Chinese owners and appearing for the first time in 1891 at a theater in Surabaya's Chinatown [Cohen 2006:1–4]. It was a performance of *Arabian Nights* on a proscenium stage with wing-and-drop scenery offstage musical accompaniment. Within months of its founding, the Komedi Stambul was transformed into a touring company. Soon many imitators emerged. Itinerant professional troupes toured large and small cities in the East Indies, performing four or five hours tent shows of *Ali Baba*, *Snow White*, *Faust*, etc. in addition to stage plays based on popular stories being published in newspapers and novels. Francis' *Tjerita Njai Dasima* became one of the most popular adaptations of the latter to be performed by these itinerant troupes. By the end of the colonial era, this story was performed at least 127 times [Pramoedya 2003:47]. Advertisements of performances and review articles appeared in the news media. Although not everyone was interested in going to see this new type of musical drama, almost everyone had an opinion about it, as M. I. Cohen suggests [2006:2].

The vernacular press and theater helped local people to create their image about *nyai*, this new character on the colonial scene whose circumstances had not been well known to them previously. It seems that this image was characterized by a perception that the life of *nyai* may be highly unstable and risky, but was also full of adventure. The creation of such an image consequently induced indigenous girls to make up their mind about becoming *nyai* more easily than before. Moreover, compared with the Europeans in the East Indies until the end of the nineteenth century, European newcomers in the twentieth century were more temporary residents owing to the development of traffic systems. To be *nyai* began to be more a kind of business for local girls⁴ than during the previous centuries, when *nyai* had been treated common law wives. During the first three decades of the twentieth century,

⁴ See for instance, "Cerita Nyai Ratna" by Tirtoadhisuryo [Pramoedya 1985:366–428; Matsuo 1997:231–32].

the number of Europeans immigrating to the East Indies was on the increase in the light of bright economic opportunities, to the tune of about 94,518 (men: 56,527) in 1905; 168,114 (men: 93,420) in 1920; 240,162 (men: 127,481) in 1930 [Department van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel 1933:32]. Although more European women were coming to Indonesia than during the previous century, the number of young Indonesian women who were willing to cohabite with Europeans by no means decreased.

2. Dutch Colonial Policy regarding *Nyai*

Like the Indonesian public, the Dutch authorities also had not paid much attention to the practice of colonists keeping concubines, before the anti-prostitution and morality improvement movements began to raise their voices against the practice among the Europeans in the East Indies.

The Dutch government had been very careful about its treatment of its Eurasian communities in the East Indies, because 1) its members and locally born Europeans were not at all satisfied with the existing order that did not allow them to share the political freedoms, including freedom of speech, that Europeans from the home country were granted and 2) they were restricted from holding office in the upper rank of colonial bureaucracy [Blumberger 1939:14–16]. Eurasians were furthermore prohibited from acquiring land in the East Indies under the Agrarian Law of 1870 which allowed only “the native” to possess it. For these reasons and others, poor Eurasians often became involved in smuggling opium and liquor, as well as organizing illegal gambling and prostitution rings. Among them there was no small number of orphans who had been abandoned by fathers of European descent. In 1872 the Dutch government set up an investigation committee to look into the issue of impoverishment among Europeans in the East Indies [*ENI* 3:366–67, s.v. “Pauperisme”]. In order to improve the situation, the primary and middle education system was introduced for them. Meanwhile, the Dutch government had not paid much attention to either *nyai* or unacknowledged offspring from the practice, mainly because they were not recognized as “Europeans.”

From around 1870, Calvinist moralists in Britain and Switzerland launched a movement to abolish the state regulation of prostitution and the movement soon spread into the Netherlands in the end of the 1870s [Abalahin 2003:221–22]. The movement’s ultimate aim was to illegalize prostitution altogether. Dutch Christian moralists also strongly condemned Europeans who were cohabiting with concubines, out of wedlock, in the East Indies, after the Dutch literature dealing with the topic of *nyai* came to their attention. The anti-prostitution and morality improvement movements began to urge the Dutch government to ban on prostitution in the East Indies and to stop Europeans from keeping concubines.

These Christian moralists took particular issue with the practice among the European troops of keeping concubines in the barracks of the colonial army, mainly out of concern that a large number of young European soldiers were more likely than any other type of colonists to abandon their concubines and children upon completion of his tour duty in the East Indies. During the time between the 1880s and 1910s, there were about thirty or forty thousand troops stationed in the colonial army, of whom about ten thousand were Europeans [Department van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel 1930:31]. Of the latter about one-quarter were keeping *nyai* in their barracks [Verbaal 8/4/1913/71:11; Ming 1983:71], following the local custom of their Javanese and Ambonese counterparts.

Up until that time, the colonial authorities regarded this custom as convenient, because 1) it was not necessary to pay allowances to soldiers who were not legally married and 2) *nyai* helped single European soldiers to maintain a healthy lifestyle by minimizing the possibility of venereal disease. However, the circumstances facing *nyai* who lived in the barracks were much worse than those of *nyai* kept by European planters and colonial officials. A girl lived with a soldier in a single bedroom. She and her children were often forced to sleep under the bed, as evidenced by the term *anak kolong* (“under the bed child”). European Christian activists, who did not have the custom of concubinage, often regarded *nyai* as a form of “public girl” [Vereeniging 1898:14; *ENI* 3:514, s.v. “Prostitutie”].

At the end of the nineteenth century, poverty among the people of the East Indies began to be discussed seriously among the Dutch politicians as having been caused by the compulsory cultivation and the liberal economic policy. Some claimed that the Netherlands owed the people of the East Indies “a debt of honour” for all the wealth which had been drained from the region [Ricklefs 1981:143]. The Dutch government responded with policy changes at the turn of the twentieth century and introduced the Ethical Policy to the East Indies, claiming to promote Christianization, decentralization, and social welfare of the people. This policy encouraged the anti-prostitution and morality improvement movements at home to get more involved in colonial society. In 1904, the governor-general of van Heutz circulated a memo warning colonial officials to be more prudent about keeping *nyai* [*Java-Bode* 1904], while the colonial army was ordered to provide larger living space for the European soldiers who kept *nyai* in the barracks separate their rooms from those of single soldiers. The Dutch authorities also increased the allowance for coming European soldiers to make it possible for their wives to accompany them from Europe [Verbaal 8/4/1913/71 (Mailrapport 162/1913); Verbaal 29/7/1915/50 (Exh. 19/8/1915/23)].

Then in 1913 the Dutch authorities finally prohibited the keeping of concubines by European soldiers in their barracks, although non-European Muslim soldiers were allowed to have *nyai* as before [Verbaal 8/4/1913/71 (Exh. 6/5/1913/74)]. Furthermore, European soldiers who desired to keep *nyai* were strongly recom-

mended to do so in wedlock. In the same year, the Dutch government also prohibited prostitution in the East Indies, closing all the brothels which had operated under colonial regulation [*ENI* 3:513, s.v. “Prostitutie”; Abalihin 2003:265–66].

However, Europeans not directly affiliated with the colonial bureaucracy or the military continued as before to keep concubines. Rendez-vous points for European men moved to canteens, cafés, and hotels run by the locally born Europeans or Chinese who were willing to introduce indigenous girls to foreign newcomers. It became very difficult to tell fiancés from *nyai* and girl friends from prostitutes. Mixed marriages between Europeans and local girls were usually preceded by cohabitation out of wedlock. Also illegal brothels never disappeared even after 1913. Policemen were hesitant to interfere in the affairs, because they were required to seek warrants to intervene from the local authorities, the procedure of which was highly complicated [*ENI* 3:513, s.v. “Prostitutie”].

3. The Rise of the Indonesian Nationalism Movement

The Ethical Policy did help to expand school education for the indigenous people of the East Indies from the system instituted as a result of the enlargement of the colonial bureaucratic system to include local civil servants. The number of the primary schools for “natives” increased from 20 to 504 in 1893 and to 953 in 1910 [*ENI* 3:110, s.v. “Onderwijs”]. As for middle level training, a medical school of Dokter Jawa, was established in Batavia in 1851, and three schools for the son of local upper chiefs were opened in Java in 1878, and were reorganized in 1900 as academies for the purpose of training civil servants, called OSVIA (Opleidingscholen voor inlandsche ambtenaren, Training schools for native officials). The curriculum there was five years long, taught in Dutch and open to any Indonesian who had graduated from the European lower school. In 1901 the “Dokter Jawa” school was turned into STOVIA (School tot opleiding van inlandsche artsen, School for training native doctors). Also the course was in taught in Dutch. The European lower schools which were necessary prerequisites for admission to OSVIA and STOVIA had been open to Indonesians since 1891.

Through the development of school education, the requirements for offices of local chief such as upper chiefs, like *regent*, *bupati*, and *pati*, and the district chief of *wedana* were changed from heredity to merit, based on one’s ability and experience [Sutherland 1979:18]. Various colonial government posts were open to Indonesians. Also the development of the activities of plantation and mining companies in the East Indies offered employment not only to the European and Chinese immigrants but also to Indonesians.

Dutch colonial officials and Indonesian intellectuals also turned their attention to education for indigenous girls. In 1882 a missionary school for girls was estab-

lished in Tomohon in north Sulawesi, where Christians were the majority of the population. In 1901 Dewi Sartika, a granddaughter of a local chief, opened a school in Bandung for local girls with support of the *regent* and wives of local officials, and in 1904 Kartini, the daughter of *bupati*, opened a school for Javanese girls with support from Dutch colonial officials [*ENI* 2:279, s.v. “Kartini-Fonds”]. Both Dewi Sartika and Kartini had been educated in Dutch.

The Dutch promoters of the Ethical Policy encouraged those activities by local intellectuals. From 1902, the colonial government organized the committee in order to investigate poverty among the native people in Java and Madura and its causes. To improve the situation of indigenous women was one of the important parts of the project.⁵ This project received support from colonial officialdom of both Dutch and Indonesian, their families and local intellectuals. In other words, when the political organization went “native,” the education of the indigenous women became one of the most important themes. The Dutch colonial government welcomed such an awakening of “national” consciousness regarding self-improvement. In 1908, Budi Utomo (The Beautiful Endeavour) was organized by students of STOVIA for the purpose of the harmonious development of “the native,” aiming to improve access to Western education and to promote the study of Javanese culture [Nagazumi 1972:26–50; Ricklefs 1981:156–57]. This organization was also highly concerned with the development of education for indigenous girls. Tirtoadhisuryo, who was a member of this organization, in the same year published the first issue of *Putri Hindia* (in Malay) in an attempt to awaken indigenous women in the East Indies [Pramoedya 1985:102–33]. He stressed the importance of education of women by publishing examples of how girls and women were being educated in other countries.

The Dutch Ethical Policy, on the other hand, was not geared to either “foreign Asians” (Chinese and Arabs, etc.) or Eurasians. Although these people had played an important role as mediators between “the native” and European rulers, the colonial authorities imposed on the Chinese and Arab the passport and residence system. They were unable to travel without passport to other places in the East Indies and the residence system confined them to ghetto-like neighborhoods in many cities throughout the East Indies [Lohanda 2002:36–48]. Furthermore, the revenue-farms of opium, gamble, pawnshop, etc., the licenses of which had been issued to Chinese entrepreneurs, were gradually abolished between the later part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. With the raising of the legal status of the Japanese to that of “European” in 1899 as the result of negotiations between the Japanese and Dutch governments, the Chinese residents in the East Indies

⁵ One of the main reports by the project was later published as a book, *Onderzoek naar de mindere welvaart der inlandsce bevolking op Java en Madoera, IXb³, Verheffing van de inlandsche vrouw* [1914].

sought similar improvement in their political situation. They also expected the home country to help to improve their status. When the Chinese Revolution in 1911 successfully resulted in the establishment of the Republic of China in the next year, the Chinese people in Java became so excited that some of them claimed that the new republic would soon drive the Dutch away from Java and that the Chinese would be their rulers and masters [Wal 1967:97; Shiraishi 1990:37]. Local Chinese were also developing their economic activities into such fields as the manufactures of the batik textile and clove cigarettes (*kretek*) in which Javanese and Arab merchants had dominated [Mandal 2002:165].

In response to this Chinese threat, the Javanese and Arab merchants established the Islamic Association (Sarekat Islam) in late 1911. Its original purposes were: (a) to promote commercial enterprises; (b) to aid members who had got into difficulties through no fault of their own; (c) to foster the spiritual and material interests of native people; and (d) to further the cause of Islam by combating misconceptions, spreading knowledge of its true precepts, etc., [Blumberger 1987:56–59; Shiraishi 1990:41–42]. Sarekat Islam soon spread over Java through the establishment of local branches. In September 1912, the association was granted corporation status from the colonial authorities and selected Cokroaminoto as its chairman. By the end of 1912, the association gained about a hundred thousand followers in Java, mainly due to the deep dissatisfaction felt by Muslims towards their Chinese rivals and social unrest caused by a volcanic eruption and the outbreak of epidemics [Fukami 1996:46–52; see also pp. 100–108 of this book]. By July of the following year, the association had three hundred thousand members with branches not only on Java but also other islands as well, through the successful exploitation of Muslim networks and publications.

The association's main supporters were merchants, traders, Islamic teachers, and native colonial officials. Some of the ardent followers were occasionally involved in the physical clashes with Chinese people in 1912–14 in such major cities as Surabaya, Batavia, Cirebon, Surakarta, Semarang, etc. [Lohanda 1996:194–214; Sartono 1973:142–85]. Along with the rapid increase in the number of members and expansion of its branches, they began to imagine that power of Sarekat Islam might exceed that of the Dutch so that they would no longer need to obey colonial duties. The term of *bumi putra* (the native), which referred to the indigenous people in the colonial hierarchy was frequently used in both the publications and meetings by the association. By the end of 1913, the number of newspapers being edited by indigenous journalists outnumbered those edited by Eurasian and Chinese counterparts, on the strength of the spread of the movement of the Sarekat Islam over Indonesia [Adam 1995:173–77]. Those newspapers frequently reported on the activities of the association, often referring to it as “Sarekat Bumi Putra” [Verbaal 29/7/1915/50 (Exh. 19/8/1915/23)], reflecting their hopes for the improvement of the status of *bumi putra*. Legal differences among the European,

the Chinese and the native were emphasized. The consciousness of “the native” came to be widely shared among the indigenous people.

4. Local Muslim Leaders vs *Nyai*

During the early stages of the development of the Sarekat Islam movement, the circumstances surrounding the keeping of concubines by non-Muslim residents of the East Indies became an important issue among its membership. Members of Sarekat Islam strongly condemned those Chinese and Europeans who kept Indonesian *nyai*. One part of Sarekat Islam’s objection to the practice was religious, since the Koran prohibits the cohabitation of Muslim with non-Muslim [Ratu-Langie 1913:21; Tjipto 1913]. At the meetings held at branches in Batavia and Bandung during 1913, they claimed that those who offered foreigners *nyai* from among their families should be refused membership [Verbaal 9/8/1913/B13; *Onderzoek* 1914:25–27]. In June of that year, the home of a Chinese of Surabaya who kept a *nyai*, was attacked by association members in an attempt to “rescue” the woman, resulting in the death of one household employee [*Bintang Soerabaja* 1913].

Such strong condemnation by Muslim leaders against *nyai* gave rise to counterarguments from non-Muslim nationalists. In 1912, while the Sarekat Islam movement was still in its developing stages, Eurasian and indigenous intellectuals established the Indische Partij (Indies Party) (1912–13), which aimed at the independence of the East Indies by the Indiërs (“East Indians”). They claimed that all the people who regarded the East Indies as their fatherland whether Dutch, Eurasian, Chinese, or “*bumi putra*” were qualified to become Indiërs [Veur 2006:207]. Although the Indische Partij endeavoured to cooperate as much as it could with Sarekat Islam in order to develop their movement, Cipto Mangunkusumo [1913], one of its main leaders, wrote an article regarding Sarekat Islam’s standing against prostitution, which questioned whether the Islamic religious principle alone was sufficient to solve the problems presented by the existence of *nyai* and “public girls.”

It is well known that the native woman, who is found in the non-native circumstance, has a peculiar position. The man does not take her as a servant, but even when she becomes the mother of several his children, she is still “native,” no matter what, and the man isolates her from the family.

Tjipto went on arguing that Sarekat Islam should also take non-Muslims into consideration and that the association should redirect its activities to making *nyai* equal members of their adopted families.

The topic over *nyai* became one of the hot issues in the local press. Muslim leaders also began to discuss the importance of educating indigenous women, lest

they fall victim to the customs of *nyai* or prostitution. In the November 20, 1912, issue of *Pemberita Betawi*, one of the most popular newspapers in Batavia, one young Muslim leader under the byline of “L. van Casino” stressed the importance of the introduction of women’s education in order that they might master reading, writing and arithmetic and decried the fact that many a local girl would likely become a *nyai* of some European out of her yearning for a better life, despite all the instability involved in such a decision, the possibility of desertion and transformation from *nyai* to “public girl” [*Pemberita Betawi* 1912a]. The author concluded that through education, indigenous women would be able to find gainful employment other than becoming *nyai*. *Pemberita Betawi*, which began publication in December 1884 under a Eurasian editor named J. Kieffer, had gained many readers among both Eurasians and Indonesians [Adam 1995:46, 175]. Consequently it offered a place to air controversies over *nyai* between Eurasians, Indonesian women, and Muslim leaders.

There is also an article contributed to *Pemberita Betawi* by a woman claiming to be a *nyai* herself, in order to refute the Muslim leader who claimed that education was the key for girls to avoid the fate of *nyai*. The contributor, who called herself “a Faithful *Nyai*” (*Satoe Njai Jang Setia*), stated that she did not become a *nyai* in order to seek a better life, as van Casino has assumed, but because her husband, an indigenous colonial official, was so unfaithful to her [*Pemberita Betawi* 1912b]. Although she loved him and believed that he was working diligently, he secretly ran up large gambling debts and then persistently asked her parents for the money to pay them off, resulting in her parents having to liquidate most of their rice paddy holdings. Feeling betrayed by her husband, she asked her husband for a divorce, but the husband would not give her one due to his position. She then left him, returned home, and later became the *nyai* of a European whose salary was much less than that of her husband. She bore her master’s children. She described that her man appreciated her for helping him through his days of penury, and concluded that indigenous men needed to reflect upon their mentality and morals before discussing how to educate girls.

Van Casino then wrote an article in order to rebut “a Faithful *Nyai*,” arguing that there was no reason for a Muslim woman to choose cohabitation with a non-Muslim, since Islam prohibits it, while at the same time empathizing with her predicament [*Pemberita Betawi* 1912c]. He argued that she should have advised her legal husband not to deviate from Islamic teaching and such wise council is the reason why educating women was so important. “A Faithful *Nyai*” then responded to van Casino, saying that all she had been taught was that a wife must obey her husband in every aspect, thus preventing her from scolding him for deviating from Islamic teaching [*Pemberita Betawi* 1912d]. She argued that her husband should have acted in accordance with Islamic morality on his own accord, concluding that most Dutch men were more faithful to their *nyai* than indigenous men to their

wives.

This exchange of opinions elicited responses from other Indonesian women. A Palembang woman wrote to *Pemberita Betawi* that her Muslim husband had defrauded her and her sisters of the property that her father left them after his death [*Pemberita Betawi* 1913a]. She also refuted van Casino's premises, claiming that Muslim leaders should first point to the low moral standards of native Muslims as the reason for native girls becoming the concubines of foreigners. Another woman also stated in *Pemberita Betawi* that among not only old generations but also younger, indigenous men tended to be arrogant towards their wives and that they never thought how a husband should behave towards his wife [*Pemberita Betawi* 1913b]. She concluded that under such circumstances it was no doubt that local girls often choose to become *nyai*. The articles contributed by "a Faithful *Nyai*" were also introduced in the March 13, 1913, issue of *Koloniaal Weekblad* (Colonial weekly), which was published in the Netherlands as the organ of the East-West Association, an organization that had been founded at the end of the nineteenth century to inform the Dutch public about what was happening in the East and West Indies. The editor inserted the articles in a column entitled "What natives are saying," and concluded that the Dutch should not think of a *nyai* as a drudge [*Koloniaal Weekblad* 1913].

The main reason why these articles by "a Faithful *Nyai*," which probably were the result of a joint effort between the woman and the Eurasian editors at *Pemberita Betawi* in keeping with the journalistic custom at that time, attracted so much attention in both the East Indies and the Netherlands is because here was a *nyai* bearing witness from her own experience as to why local girls became concubines; namely, the deterioration of local Muslim morality, not any debauchery on the part of Europeans. Such a conclusion was no doubt the work of Eurasian journalists, who were well aware of public opinion current within both the indigenous and European communities at the time and knew how to make them newsworthy by arousing people's concerns about Indonesian marital life and concubinage with foreigners.

5. The Indonesian Nationalism Movement and Controversies over the Issue of Women

The rise of the Sarekat Islam movement stimulated Indonesians to take over the major role in the publication of newspapers in the East Indies from Eurasians and Chinese, and as a result, debate over politics, modernization and progress flourished in their publications. As Sarekat Islam expanded, other political organizations, such as Indische Partij and Indische Sociaal Democratische Vereeniging (Indies Social-Democratic Association, ISDV) which was established in 1914 by Dutch socialists aiming at developing socialism in the East Indies, tried to gain access to the Sarekat

Islam by having their members join it. In 1916 Cokroaminoto, the chairman of Sarekat Islam, organized the Nationaal Congres, modeled after the National Congress formed by nationalists in India, in order to discuss social and political problems among the association's body of members and appeal them to the colonial government [Verbaal 1/9/1917/32 (Mailrapport 2411/1917)].

The establishment of the Soviets after the 1917 Russian Revolution excited the socialist members of the Sarekat Islam, whose hold over the Semarang branch was strengthening socialist influence within the association. In sympathy with these socialist members, Cokroaminoto began a campaign in 1918 against "sinful capitalism," which resulted in Arab merchants who had supported the founding of Sarekat Islam retreating from the political scene [Blumberger 1987:65–68; Mobini-Kesheh 1999:46]. Late in 1917 ISDV had gathered about 3,000 soldiers and sailors into soviets, mainly in Surabaya. The colonial government crushed these movements in 1918 and 1919, and banished the main Dutch leaders of ISDV from the East Indies. The leadership of ISDV shifted to the hands of Indonesian leaders, and consequently, in 1920 they changed the name of their organization into the Malay name of Perserikatan Kommunist di India (Communist Party in the East Indies) [McVey 1965:46].

As the influence of socialists grew within Sarekat Islam, they began to vie with Pan-Islamic and reformist members for leadership of the association from 1919 on. Against these socialists, Pan-Islamists adopted a rule that made it impossible for a Sarekat Islam member to join another party in 1921. Members of Perserikatan Kommunist di India were driven out of the headquarters of Sarekat Islam (Central Sarekat Islam), but the battle went on in each branch of the association. Then the headquarters of Sarekat Islam began to withdraw from any significant political action, and Perserikatan Kommunist di India became the majority party in the political movement. In 1924 Perserikatan Kommunist di India renamed itself Partai Komunis Indonesia (Indonesian Communist Party), and claimed to struggle for Indonesian national liberation from Dutch colonial rule [McVey 1965:166–93; Blumberger 1987:110–23]. Such a radical political agenda alienated not only Arabs but also most of Chinese and Eurasians as well.

As the gap widened between Indonesian nationalism and European and Chinese concerns over colonialism, the mixed marriage between Indonesians and non-Indonesians became a very newsworthy issue in the local press. Mixed marriages between Indonesians and foreigners were not at all rare. For instance, Cipto Mangunkusumo, a Javanese leader of the Indische Partij, had a European wife, and their marriage, which had been consummated perhaps around the turn of the twentieth century, had not attracted much public attention. However, in 1919 two local newspapers, *Oetoesan Hindia* (edited by Sarekat Islam Chairman Cokroaminoto) and *Darmo Kondo* (affiliated to Budi Utomo) took up the mixed marriage of Dr. Rajiman, one of the Indonesian nationalist leaders, who took part in the founding

of Budi Utomo, to a European woman, debating the question of whether or not the marriage was really based upon true love [*Oetoesan Hindia* 1919; *Darmo-Kondo* 1919]. *Oetoesan Hindia* went so far to question whether Javanese people were really capable of falling in love with foreigners.

Radical members of Sarekat Islam (including socialists) were inclined to see colonialism and “sinful capitalism” in mixed marriages between Indonesian girls and European men. When a Javanese princess of the Pakualam royal family in Jogjakarta was married to a European in 1922, *Oetoesan Hindia* argued that European spouses often made use of mixed marriages with Indonesian girls in order to facilitate land deals with the native population [*Oetoesan Hindia* 1922]. Also *Sinar Hindia* (edited by Semaun, a leader of the socialist movement in Semarang) and *Perempoean Bergerak* (one of the radical newspapers edited by Indonesian women) occasionally claimed that “sinful capitalism” drove Indonesian girls to marry European men in the form of *nyai*, and the latter paper in 1919 further argued that capitalism resulted in well educated Indonesian men frequently marrying European girls to sing the Dutch national anthem [*Perempoean Bergerak* 1919].

Meanwhile the development of school education and the nationalist movement induced people to discuss the importance of “free love.” The rise of the socialist movement stimulated Indonesian nationalists to discuss the issue of women’s liberation. The development of school education had produced many Indonesian female intellectuals by the end of the 1910s. One of them contributed an article in 1919 to *Sinar Hindia*, arguing that socialism preached “freedom” (*kemerdekaan*) for women and chastised men who attempt to hinder them from “progress” (*kemadjuaan*). The article also harangued against the custom of polygamy among the Javanese, arguing that free marriage based upon “true love” (*tjinta lahir batin*) was so important that women should refuse to marry and remain workers, if they suspected that their suitors planned to deal with them like “play-dolls” [*Sinar Hindia* 1919].

Marriages for love conducted against the will of the women’s parents or *adat* (customary law) drew much attention from liberal and radical newspapers. When a Minangkabau girl was married to her colleague of a Javanese in 1920 in contradiction to *adat*,⁶ Sutan Maharaja, the editor of *Oetoesan Melajoe*, who was a representative of the party of progressive *adat* leaders, critically referred to her selection of a Javanese spouse as the result of the women’s liberation movement, questioning the ability of such young women to find out proper spouses without family assistance [*Oetoesan Melajoe* 1920]. Meanwhile, other liberal newspapers, such as *Jong Sumatra* and *Hindia Sepakat*, praised this marriage and attacked the custom

⁶ According to the custom of Minangkabau society, marriage is not an individual affair of the two persons involved. Various maternal uncles, fathers, mothers, and other relatives participated in the process of choosing a proper marriage partner [Katō 1982:57].

that did not allow women the freedom to select their own spouses [*Jong Sumatra* 1920; *Overzicht* 1920, no. 51:40–41]. There was even a pro-*adat* Minangkabau man who sympathized with such Minangkabau girls who were unable to marry non-Minangkabau men, since Minangkabau men were allowed to marry non-Minangkabau women [*Tjaja Soematra* 1920]. Also the main reasons why the above-mentioned mixed marriage between the princess of Pakualam and a Dutch man drew much attention from Indonesian readers not only included the issue of mixed marriage but also the fact that it was an affair of free love against the will of her parents [*Neratja* 1922; *Medan Moeslimin* 1922].

Free love inevitably gave birth to not only free marriages but also many other types of man-woman relationship. Sutan Maharaja in the above *Oetoesan Melajoe* mentioned in addition to the marriage of the Minangkabau girl the two other cases of “free love”: 1) nieces of one of his party’s leaders becoming *nyai* of Dutch men, and 2) a Chinese girl ran away from her school with a Eurasian boy in spite of the fact that her parents had already arranged her spouse. Although such love affairs might have existed before the twentieth century, local newspapers in the 1910s and 1920s actively picked up those stories in order to discuss on the subject. Moreover, local newspapers began to publish the marriage advertisements place not only by boys, but also by girls. The advertisement placed by girls generally requested several months of association in order to approve a marriage [*Overzicht* 1920, no. 52:12].

Man-woman relationships appeared more and more frequently in the press. As the differences among the Indonesian, European, and Chinese groups became more and more distinct, Indonesian concubines became more and more interesting for journalists who liked to describe love, nationalism, and colonial society in the modern era all in one breath. Such journalists, whether Indonesian, Chinese, or Eurasian, continued to write and publish pieces, whether fiction or not, that featured Indonesian *nyai* in active roles. Those *nyai*, unlike those portrayed in the novels that came out around the turn of the century, were no longer passive beings, but were now actively protesting against the tradition of arranged marriage and were searching for “true love.”

Tirtoadhisuryo’s novel of *Tjerita Njai Ratna* (The story of Njai Ratna), which was published in *Medan Prijaji* in 1909, was one of the earlier works dealing with such a type of *nyai* [Pramoedya 1985:366–428; Matsuo 1997:229–36]. Here, the heroine, Ratna, who accumulated money by being *nyai* of Dutchmen falls in love with a young Indonesian man, Sambodo. Becoming *nyai* for Ratna had been merely a means to earn money, for she did not love her cohabitants at all. Sambodo who loves Ratna, is unable to understand her mentality and subsequently leaves her. However, when Ratna visits Sambodo after several years of separation, both realize the importance in loving each other. Tirtoadhisurojo describes Ratna as a calculating woman but at the same time as human being searching for true love.

In the 1910s and 1920s when more and more European and Chinese women came to Indonesia, local *nyai* needed to reconsider their role. In one of the popular *nyai* novels, *Peniti-Dasi Barlian* (The diamond tiepin), by a Chinese author of Tan Tjing Kang [1922], a *nyai* herself takes it upon to advise her Chinese master to marry a Chinese girl. Following her suggestion he does marry the Chinese girl and the couple lives together with the *nyai* happily ever after [Salmon 1981:38]. This novel connotes that the non-mixed marriage which nationalists recommend, could possibly co-exist with having a *nyai*. However, when gender balance is not even, women often played an active role among men where the latter outnumbered them. In another popular *nyai* novel, *Kota Medan Penoe Dengan Impian* (Medan, city of dreams) [1918] written also by a Chinese author, a beautiful Indonesian girl named Ros Mina living in north Sumatra, where plantation companies were flourishing, enjoys loving her mates, while she became *nyai* of a rich Chinese master [Kuo 1928]. She ultimately falls into prostitution after being deceived by an Indian money lender, but she feels no guilty about her station in life and continues her occupation. The author without much moral implication describes the *nyai* who enjoys entering into others liaisons. This *nyai* story is one of the typical examples that attracted new private readers with themes of illicit sexual relationships, love, and lust [Fane 1997: 48]. The novel was reprinted again and again.⁷

The development of print capitalism not only helped to give rise to Indonesian nationalism, but also helped people to create highly diversified images of man-woman relationships. The developing Indonesian nationalism did not bring the cohabitation between Indonesian concubines and Dutch men to an end, either. Despite the above claim by *Oetoesan Hindia* questioning whether the Javanese were really able to fall in love with foreigners, the number of “mixed marriages” continued to increase. According to Marle, about 25 percent of the marriages conducted by European men in the East Indies in 1925 involved Indonesian women [Marle 1951–52:322–27; Department van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel 1933:66].⁸ Although this rate slightly declined in subsequent years, generally speaking, during the 1930’s about twenty percent of European male marriages involved Indonesian women, a figure that still represents an increase over the 15 percent figure for 1905. Mixed marriage between European men and Indonesian women was usually pre-

⁷ Salmon [1981:37] refers to this novel as being published in c. 1922, while Marcus and Hamiyati [2003:263] mentions that the novel was published in 1928. These two were perhaps the reprints of the original one.

⁸ The census of 1930 reports mixed marriages over the past decade between Europeans and non-Europeans (including Chinese residents of the East Indies) in terms of the percent of total marriages involving Europeans; 1920: 20.97%, 1921: 19.27%, 1922: 23.88%, 1923: 26.55%, 1924: 29.71%, 1925: 29.44%, 1926: 28.68%, 1927: 28.89%, 1928: 24.90%, 1929: 22.33%, 1930: 22.76% [Department van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel 1933:66]. Of these, marriages between Europeans and Chinese usually comprised 2–4 percent.

ceded by a concubine relationship. It was often the case that legal marriage would be resorted after a child was born during cohabitation. Marle [1951–52:322] estimated that during the 1920s and 1930s roughly about the half of the children between European men and Indonesian women were born in wedlock. What this suggests is that the other half of those children borne by Indonesian mothers out of wedlock were still acknowledged by their fathers. It is also highly probable that the number of the Indonesian cohabitants with the Europeans increased or at least did not decrease compared with the days of the end of the nineteenth century.⁹

The cafés, canteens, and hotels run by Eurasians, Chinese, and Japanese played an important role as rendez-vous points. Those local girls who wished to be *nyai* of foreigners or to marry them, would frequent these places in order to meet newcomers and serve them as housekeepers. *Kota Medan Penoe Dengan Impian* describes Mina often making use of hotels run by Japanese and Chinese. These establishments were occasionally referred to as “brothels” by moralists and nationalists. Nevertheless, the colonial authorities were generally hesitant to interfere with their affairs, since it was difficult to obtain sufficient evidence that illegal activity was occurring there, except in cases where girls were kidnapped or deceived [Abalahin 2003:271]. The prohibition of concubinage for Dutch colonial officials and army personnel, together with the ban of legal brothels by the colonial authorities induced those rendez-vous places to flourish more than before. While the Indonesian nationalism movement of the Indonesian Communist Party (1924–27) and that of the Indonesian National Party (1927–31) under the leadership of Sukarno continued to grow and spread among the Indonesian, the urban hybrid circumstances which cut across boundaries of race and creed not only survived, but actually may have been thriving.

Concluding Remarks

The research to date on concubines and gender in Indonesia during the colonial period has suggested that both colonial rule and the rise of nationalist movements caused a transformation in the relationships between men and women in the East Indies, by emphasizing difference between Indonesians and foreigners. The Dutch moral crusaders from the latter part of the nineteenth century on and the nationalist movements themselves from the 1910s on claimed that the practice of foreign

⁹ Marle [1951–52:500] roughly estimates the internal increase in the European population (i.e., excluding new arrivals) during the period 1881–1940 in the East Indies as follows: by equalization: 16,500; by mixed marriage: 16,000; by birth from the mixed marriage: 29,000; by acknowledgement: 48,000; by birth from non-mixed marriage: 210,000. It seems that the number of the unmarried Indonesian cohabitants was at least the same as the number of mixed marriage women, if not more.

men keeping Indonesian concubines (*nyai*) gave rise to one more group of victims produced by colonial rule. The Sarekat Islam movement strongly advocated the elimination of *nyai* belonging to Europeans and Chinese through the introduction of women's education and Islamic reform. Perhaps it was pressure applied by these movements that influenced more and more Europeans who were cohabiting with indigenous women to move into a state of wedlock, since from about 1920 it appears that nearly half of these cohabitants decided to marry after the conception or birth of a child.

In any case, we are certain of the fact that Indonesian *nyai* by no means retreated from the colonial scene, despite the heavy political and ideological pressure applied to do just that. We have also discovered that from the turn of the twentieth century Indonesian girls were choosing to become concubines of Europeans from among a number of job opportunities opened to them within the developing the East Indian economy. While it can not be denied that there were many women being forced into concubinage due to either poverty or compulsory association by foreign employers, as the existing literature suggests [Ming 1983:73–74; Lucas 1986:86–87], what I am arguing is that newspapers, novels, and theater drama helped local girls, including those women above, to create more diversified images about gender relations to cope with concubinage. Urban hybrid culture continued to embrace the custom of the cohabitation between local girls and foreigner visitors.

The locally born Eurasians and Chinese continued to play an important role in the social integration of colonial cities in the region, some becoming active in newspaper editing and publishing, novel writing, and creating new forms of theater drama. *Nyai*, who were the mothers of these mixed blood people became important characters in their publications and theater pieces. The Indonesian nationalism itself arose from such hybrid urban circumstances, aided by the same mass media in those cities, and spread among the indigenous people [Anderson 1983:109–12]. In the media's plays and publications, *nyai* appeared not only as conventional passive victims of colonialism, but also as active heroines struggling for happiness in the modern era. Although the existing literature is inclined to argue that Dutch colonialism and Indonesian nationalism drastically transformed the hybrid urban milieu of the East Indies, the Indonesian case suggests that such a set of cultural circumstances by adapting themselves to such changes continued to flourish right up until the end of the colonial era.

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