

## **WOMEN IN THE SHADOW OF COLONIALISM: THE EXISTENCE OF NYAI IN THE PRIANGAN RESIDENCY 1870-1900**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to examine the dynamics of *nyai* life in the Priangan Residency during the Dutch colonial period between 1870 and 1900. The practice of concubinage involving native women and European men reflected gender inequality, economic pressure, and patriarchal colonial power. The term *nyai* is often associated with issues of morality and social stigma, but in reality they played an important role as a liaison between native and colonial society. This article also explores the legal regulations regarding mixed marriages and the fate of children from concubinage who often experienced social and legal discrimination. This phenomenon illustrates the dilemma of colonial authorities in regulating public morality amidst economic interests and power. This research uses a historical method that includes the stages of heuristics (collecting sources), source criticism (external and internal), interpretation (interpretation of historical meaning), and historiography (writing history). The sources used come from colonial archives, newspapers, *Staatsblad*, and documentation from institutions such as KITLV and Delpher. Through this approach, the article presents a critical analysis of the role and position of *nyai* in the socio-economic structure of the colonial Dutch East Indies.

Keywords: Dutch east indies; Nyai; Concubinage; Priangan.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The role of women in Indonesian history has experienced ups and downs, especially since the Western colonial era. As the spice trade flourished in Europe, many Europeans came to the archipelago to gain access to spice-producing regions. Even before the arrival of the Portuguese and the founding of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), trade in Asia was already taking place. After Batavia became the VOC's administrative center, many Dutch workers, including Chinese, were employed there. As Batavia expanded rapidly, the VOC prohibited natives from residing in the city, necessitating a greater labor force (Simbolon, 2006).

The term "*nyai*" describes native women, sometimes also Chinese or Japanese women, who live with men in Europe without a legal relationship in the eyes of religion and the state (Van den Berg, 2010) but did not have a marital status. Although there was no official position, a *nyai* was usually a housewife in a European man's house. During the European colonial period, concubinage was common in Asian and African countries. This phenomenon did not only occur in the British, Portuguese, French and Spanish colonies, but also in the Dutch East Indies colony. This was caused by the colonial army, which at that time still lacked women. As a result, they looked for replacement wives in the colonies (Subarkah, 2011). The role of indigenous women at that time was usually to take care of the house. They had no knowledge of education, rights or their position as independent women and as humans in general. European (Eurasian) women and indigenous women have differences in social status and position, causing differences between the two (Hellwig, 2007). In addition, the *nyai* were also often referred to as *maubel* or *transaksistuk* (inventory) (Baay, 2010). Meanwhile, the term *nyai* has several meanings, both developed by the Dutch and indigenous people (Bakhtin, 1997).

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After the VOC went bankrupt, the indigenous economy was run by the Dutch East Indies colonial government, which implemented an economic system that benefited the mother country. The colonial government capitalized on this opportunity by implementing a forced cultivation system, requiring indigenous people to cultivate specific crops that were marketable on the international market. In the Priangan region, residents were required to cultivate crops such as coffee, tea, pepper, and tobacco. The harvest was then purchased by the Dutch government. Private companies granted investment permits in the Dutch East Indies created jobs for local residents. They provided jobs for local people as plantation laborers, and the private companies would pay them in cash. The need for money to meet daily needs made this work not only for men, but also for indigenous women and children (Burger, 1962).

Urgent economic needs forced indigenous women to ignore the calling that demeaned them. One reason for the practice of concubinage was the patriarchy that grew in Dutch East Indies society (Thornham, 2010). The *nyai* ignored the devastating impact of concubinage, driven by the economic needs that led to concubinage during the colonial era. Furthermore, Priangan society, steeped in patriarchal culture, required women to obey the men in their families. Whatever was ordered of women had to be carried out without objection. To meet these economic needs, most families appointed their daughters or sisters as *nyai*, Europeans with high positions. This practice was also considered to raise the family's value within society, although it drew criticism for being inconsistent with their religion (Bakhtin, 1997). This practice was not limited to colonial centers like Batavia, but also reached key areas like the Priangan Residency, an agrarian region that became the center of the colonial economy since the implementation of the *Preangerstelsel*.

Based on previous research, this study will discuss the life of *nyai* in the Priangan residency, the mixed marriage law, and the fate of children from concubinage. There are articles related to the life of *nyai* in Java, including the Priangan region, during the Dutch colonial period. One study examines the role of *nyai* in the acculturation of Javanese-Dutch culture between 1870 and 1942. This study explains the reality of *nyai*'s life as native women living with European men without formal marriage. *Nyai* often came from lower-class families who were sold or given away for economic or political gain, but some also came from the *priyayi* class (Muniroh et al., 2023).

Writings examining the lives of *nyai* in West Java between 1900 and 1942 also provide insights into their status as unofficial wives or concubines of local officials and Europeans. The practice of concubinage was one way for indigenous women to support their families, and *nyai* often found themselves in an ambiguous position, considered a disgrace by indigenous society (Karima, 2017).

There are not many studies that specifically and in-depth highlight the existence of *nyai* in the Priangan region by taking into account the economic, legal, social, and cultural dimensions. In fact, Priangan was a key region in the colonial economic system, especially through the *Preangerstelsel*, which made the exploitation of land and labor very intensive, including women's labor. This paper examines and describes the existence and role of *nyai* in the Priangan Residency society during the colonial period between 1870 and 1900. This article aims to explore how *nyai*, as native women who had relationships with European men, contributed to the social and economic dynamics in the Priangan region. In addition, this article provides a deeper understanding of the often complex social position of *nyai* in society, and how they played a role as a link between native and colonial communities. This article also provides an overview of how mixed marriages could occur. This paper seeks to challenge the negative stereotypes that have been attached to *nyai* and shows that their existence had an impact on Priangan society in the late 19th century.

## RESEARCH METHOD

According to Gottschalk (1975) historical research method is the process of critically researching and analyzing various records and relics from the past. According to Sjamsuddin (2007) The historical method is one way to understand and study historical events. In his book, Sjamsuddin also cites the definition from The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, which states that a method is a way of carrying out a procedure to complete a task, a

regular pattern of action or planning. This research uses a historical approach in examining the issues raised. The historical method is the process of tracing and assessing the truth of various records and relics of the past by critically analyzing evidence and data. The goal is to construct an accurate and reliable historical narrative.

The historical method has four main stages. The first is *heuristics*, which is the activity of searching for and collecting historical sources, both primary and secondary. Primary sources include official documents, newspapers, government archives, colonial reports, diaries from the past. Secondary sources include scientific studies, history books, articles, and previous research results. Second, criticism is divided into external criticism (assessing the authenticity and authenticity of the source) and internal criticism (assessing the content and credibility of the source). The third stage is interpretation, which is the process of understanding and interpreting the meaning of historical facts by paying attention to their context. The final stage is historiography, which is writing history based on the results of the analysis that has been carried out (Ismaun, 2005). In this paper, the author uses various sources, this research utilizes primary and secondary sources obtained from several institutions and historical documentation, such as Delpher, KITLV (*Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*), Staatsblad, history books, and archives of the West Java region.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Geography and Demographics of Priangan Before 1870

In 1808, the island of Java was taken over by the Dutch East Indies government. Daendels divided the island into nine prefectures. (Lubis, 2011). The Priangan Prefecture consists of four regencies: Cianjur, Bandung, Sumedang, and Parakanmuncang, known as the Prefecture of Preanger-Regentschappen. A prefecture was an administrative region used by the Dutch East Indies government, introduced by Daendels. The purpose of this system was to control the government in its colonies. Each prefecture was led by a prefect who was directly responsible to the governor-general. The formation of administrative divisions was for economic interests that often influenced other decisions. The success of coffee production and plantations could influence the existence of the regency. According to Van Rees (1869) When Thomas Stamford Raffles introduced the Residency, from then on it was also known as the resident who led the residency whose position was in the residency capital. On August 10, 1815, the island of Java was designated as 16 residencies including the Priangan Residency. Based on Besluit (government regulation) dated August 17, 1864 No. 18, in 1864 the capital of the Priangan Residency was moved to Bandung from previously in Cianjur (De Klein, 1931). At this time the Priangan Residency consisted of five districts, namely Cianjur, Bandung, Sumedang, Parakanmuncang, and Sukapura.

Priangan has been known since the 17th century. The name Priangan is still used even though the area and its territorial capacity can change. The Priangan Residency in the 18th century had an area of approximately one-sixth of the island of Java (approximately 21,524 km<sup>2</sup>). The boundaries of the Priangan Residency were to the north by Batavia, to the east by the Cirebon and Banyumas Residency, to the south and southwest by the Indian Ocean and to the west by the Banten Residency. The natural boundaries of this region are to the north by the Salak-Gede and Burangrang-Tangkubanperahu mountains, to the east by the Citanduy River, to the west by Pelabuhanratu (*Wijnkoopsbaai*) and Ciletu (*Zandbaai*), to the southeast by the Pananjung Strait, and to the south and southeast by Cilauteureun (Lubis, 2011). The Priangan region is very fertile because it is a volcanic area formed by volcanoes with an altitude of 1800 to 3000 m above sea level.

At the beginning of the 19th century, specifically in 1815, the population of the Priangan Residency was very low, at 243,628 people, compared to its area of 10,002 square miles. On average, each square mile was inhabited by only 24.5 people. Since the 19th century, with improvements in economic, social, and political conditions in the Priangan region (Raffles, 2008). Population has increased relatively annually. In fact, for some years, Priangan's population growth was higher than the average population growth in Java (Boomgaard & Gooszen, 1991).

Table I

Population growth of the priangan residency and java in the 19th century

| Year      | Priangan | Jawa  |
|-----------|----------|-------|
| 1815-1820 | 1,06%    | 2,4%  |
| 1820-1831 | 13,31%   | 2,43% |
| 1831-1840 | 5,06%    | 1,8%  |
| 1840-1850 | 0,32%    | 1,1%  |
| 1850-1860 | 1,17%    | 2,8%  |
| 1860-1870 | 2,56%    | 3,3%  |
| 1870-1880 | 5,42%    | 2,0%  |
| 1880-1890 | 0,71%    | 1,6%  |
| 1890-1900 | 4,19%    | 2,4%  |

Source: In the journal *Priangan 19th Century: Historical and Demographic Review*, adapted from Boomgaard & Gooszen (1991).

According to AJV Priangan (1823) in 1823 it was reported that many residents migrated to Priangan, some of whom fled and avoided the actions of other rulers. The birth rate in Priangan in the 19th century increased due to the high birth rate compared to the death rate, especially in the mid-19th century. Owen (1987) A positive impact of the declining mortality rate was the improvement in the population's material standard of living thanks to the development of the agricultural and plantation sectors during the Preangerstelsel period . This increased prosperity resulted in better food consumption and improved health. Since the 19th century, government attention to public health has increased.

The government was very concerned about increasing the indigenous population in Priangan. The reason was to increase the number of coffee farmers, thus increasing coffee production. Furthermore, a large population of plantation owners and other means was crucial for generating revenue through taxes paid by the regent (Hardjasaputra, 2002). In 1852, immigration to Priangan increased, following the repeal of the Passenstelsel. The Priangan Resident even permitted Europeans not only to enter but also to reside in the district capital, Praiangan (Staatsblad 1853, No. 53).

### Control of Territory and Land Exploitation by the Colonial Government

Priangan was a region that was inseparable from the policies of the Dutch East Indies government. As a producer of coffee and other export crops such as sugar cane, indigo, cinchona, tea, and so on, Priangan's soil was very suitable for cultivation, so coffee was the main product of the Priangan plantations. Initially, coffee buying and selling used commercial transactions, the VOC purchased coffee through local leaders by providing a down payment, then the produce was sold to the down payment provider at a predetermined price (Burger, 1962). Coffee was considered a profitable commodity for the VOC, which adopted a policy of indirect government system with the native rulers who allowed to manage their areas traditionally. Local leaders managed coffee plantations on the orders of the VOC. The natives ordered their assistants to mobilize farmers and farmer families to cultivate coffee from the planting process to storage in the warehouse (Bremen, 2014).

In 1730 the VOC received 100% of the profits from the compulsory coffee surrender known as Preangerstelsel (Bremen, 2014). Coffee was profitable for the VOC and the rulers of Bumi Putera, but the farmers did not make much profit. According to The lives of the Priangan people have been influenced by coffee plants Zakaria (2008), which can be grown in yards, fields, and even on

mountain slopes, thus avoiding the disruption of the staple crop, rice. Coffee is considered profitable in the Priangan region compared to other export crops such as sugar cane, although coffee prices fluctuate (Amarina et al., 2021). This is because the Priangan region has been exploited by the colonial government for almost two centuries through coffee plantations. The Priangan Residency requires a lot of land and labor, so coffee production is the highest compared to other residencies on the island of Java (Bremen, 2014).

The *Preangerstelsel* system, implemented in the 18th century, impacted farmers, regents, and the general public. The regents became the right-hand men of the VOC, thus gaining greater profits. However, over time, the regents profited from the *Preangerstelsel* system, such as the regents of Cianjur, Sumedang, Bandung, Sukapura, and Limbangan, who received approximately £128,757.83 from coffee production (Zakaria, 2008). The regents had the authority to direct the people to work hard but received little wages. The Priangan community was greatly influenced by coffee cultivation, especially in economic and social terms. The emergence of the *Preangerstelsel* system is an example of labor exploitation. However, in its implementation, the *Preangerstelsel* system also created injustice in the relationship between the regents and the indigenous people. The regents were granted special privileges by the colonial government and used them to enrich themselves, while the indigenous people suffered from oppression and exploitation by the regents (Lubis, 1999).

### **The Presence of *Nyai* in Plantations and Military Barracks**

Plantations established by the colonial government and private companies brought many new European workers to the Dutch East Indies. Priangan, still steeped in tradition, was exploited by private companies to attract a large workforce at low wages. As a result, not only indigenous men worked, but indigenous women also took part to help support their families (Baay, 2010). One common practice for women at the time was concubinage, where indigenous women lived in the same house as European men. This relationship was usually temporary, lasting only as long as the European man resided in the area (Baay, 2010).

Native women who became *nyai* generally came from low-income backgrounds, initially working as servants in European homes or as laborers on plantations. If a European man was interested, they would be asked to become *nyai*. This practice of concubinage was often carried out secretly and was not officially recorded by the Dutch government. Many European men engaged in informal relationships and easily changed partners. A *Nyai* who was not legally married did not have the privileges of a legal wife. Her duties were limited to taking care of the house and serving the European man. Often, *Nyai* were victims of emotional abuse and were treated harshly. Many newspapers of the time reported on the mistreatment they experienced. However, because Europeans held a much higher social standing than natives, the *Nyai* did not dare report or complain about such treatment. As in the newspaper (GoGwilt, 2007).

In addition to plantations, the practice of concubinage also occurred in the military, where a *Nyai* lived with a soldier in a military barracks or barracks. In colonial military barracks, concubines were referred to as *moentji*. With official permission for such relationships, many men were attracted to join the KNIL (National Army) army. The KNIL was the only armed force that officially allowed its soldiers to live with women without marriage within the barracks (Baay, 2010). However, for military members who practiced concubinage, there were several requirements that had to be met before a *Nyai* could live with them in the barracks. Native women who wanted to become *Nyai* had to submit an official certificate of good conduct to the military commander as a requirement for permission to live in the barracks. Once permission was granted, it would be recorded specifically along with the name, residence, and name of the military member who appointed her as *nyai*. A distinctive feature of *Nyai* in military barracks was that they had to comply with applicable military regulations (GoGwilt, 2007).

A *Nyai* whose marital status was legally recognized would have the same rights as a legitimate wife. They were treated equally when interacting with Europeans. Due to their close ties with Europeans, *Nyai*'s appearance was often influenced by European styles. However, this style

was combined with indigenous Priangan traditions, from clothing to accessories (Taylor, 2009). With her status recognized by the Dutch government, a Nyai was required to learn Dutch for daily communication. Her husband often invited her to various events that were only open to Europeans. For example, they were allowed to participate in art performances and dine together at the Societeit Concordia building, a venue with complete facilities such as a performance space and restaurant. This building was often used by Dutch residents, especially gardeners or Preangerplanters, to hold parties in the afternoon or evening as a way to relax and unwind (Darmarasti, 2002).



Figure 1: Societeit Concordia in Batavia  
Source: KILTV

When a *nyai* reached 30, she was considered elderly and was usually given a "letter of release." This letter signified the end of the concubinage relationship between the Nyai and her partner. Upon receiving the letter, the *nyai* had to leave the barracks and forfeit all her previous rights and privileges. A "letter of release" was not only given due to age, but could also be due to the soldier's transfer, leave, or return to the Netherlands. The prevalence of venereal diseases in the military at that time, and the fate of children born of these concubinage relationships, many of whom were abandoned by their parents, and in some cases, the children were taken to the Netherlands. This problem had become a serious problem for the government at that time (Baay, 2010).

One of the famous *nyai* in Priangan is *nyai* Itih. Nyai Itih was a woman from Central Cigugur, Cimahi, who lived during the Dutch colonial period and became one of the concubines whose story is quite famous. She was born in 1898 and died in 1969. In 1919, Itih was chosen by a Dutch man named William Walraven, a KNIL (*Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger*) soldier. Itih's life as a *nyai* was different from most other *nyai* during the colonial period who usually experienced tragic fates and unfair treatment. She received full attention from Walraven, who did not care about the social stigma among the Dutch who had a concubine. Itih and her children were taken to the Netherlands, a rare thing at that time because *nyai* were generally not officially recognized and were often left without child custody. Walraven provided protection and recognition to *nyai* at that time.

### Mixed Marriage Regulations

The mixed marriage law during the Dutch East Indies era was known as the *Regeling op de Gemengde Huwelijken* (GHR). This regulation was created to address legal issues arising from marriages between different people in the Dutch East Indies, such as marriages between Europeans, Chinese, and indigenous people who had different customary laws and religions. This regulation aimed to provide legal certainty in mixed marriages that previously caused uncertainty regarding which law applied. Governor General van der Wijek and the Minister of Colonies, as well as the *Raad van State*, the slightly modified GHR plan was well received with the issuance of the Royal Decree on December 29, 1896, Number 23 Staatsblad 1898/158 (Gautama, 1996). The GHR also

applied to international mixed marriages, namely marriages between Europeans and indigenous people. According to Article 12 of the 1892 Staatsblad number 268, native people were considered foreigners, even though they were not actually foreigners at all. This happened because in international agreements with other countries, native people were treated as *Dutch citizens or Nederlandsch Onderdaan* (Staatsblad 1898 No. 158).

At that time, the rules regarding personnel statutes stipulated in Article 16 AB (*Algemene Bepalingen van Wetgeving*) were still based on the domicile principle, that is, the law applicable to a person was determined by their place of residence. For foreigners living in Indonesia, Indonesian law applied, not the law of their country of origin. This domicile principle was only replaced by the citizenship principle in 1915. Furthermore, in 1898 the only citizenship law in effect was the *Wet op het Nederlandschap en het Ingezetenschap*, which only recognized Dutch citizens as Dutch citizens. Under this law, indigenous people and people of East Asian descent born in Indonesia were still considered foreigners (Prawirohamidjojo, 1988).

According to Article 1 of the GHR, a mixed marriage is a marriage between two individuals who are subject to different laws in Indonesia. So, for example, if an Arab and a British citizen marry abroad and are not Indonesian residents, their marriage is still considered a mixed marriage under the GHR. If two Indonesian citizens living abroad marry, but in Indonesia they are subject to different laws, for example due to differences in religion or customs, then their marriage also falls under this regulation. The same applies to marriages between Indonesian citizens and foreigners. However, if one or both parties were previously subject to all or part of the rules in the *Burgerlijk Wetboek* (BW) or the Civil Code, then the rules of the *Burgerlijk Wetboek* (BW) will apply in that marriage (Bengngu & Widiatedja, 2024).

Marriage between European men and indigenous women, or vice versa, was initially considered taboo, primarily due to the social status differences between the two. One important requirement was that any mixed marriages must obtain permission from the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, demonstrating the strict control the colonial government placed on inter-racial relationships. Initially, these mixed marriages occurred largely due to the limited number of European women arriving in the Dutch East Indies due to the long sea voyages and the high cost of sending European women. Many European men, including soldiers and businessmen, chose to have relationships with indigenous women, either officially or informally, or as concubines. One important stipulation was that women who married men of a different race would inherit their husband's citizenship, which had certain legal and social consequences (Akbar et al., 2024).

The culture resulting from mixed marriages later developed into Indic culture, a blend of European and Indonesian cultures that was quite strong among Indo-European communities. However, even though mixed marriages began to be socially and legally accepted, discrimination persisted, particularly regarding differences in social status, inheritance laws, and racial identity. Indigenous women who married European men often faced loss of property rights and social stigma. Furthermore, children of mixed marriages, called Eurasians or Indos, often experienced identity confusion because they were torn between two different worlds, although they usually had better access to education than ordinary indigenous people (Soekiman, 2000).

### **The Fate of Children from Concubin**

The practice of concubinage during the Dutch East Indies had significant social impacts, particularly within military barracks. Relationships between European men and indigenous women were often fleeting sexual encounters rather than legitimate unions. As a result, many mixed-race children, also known as Indo-European children, were born. These children were not well-received by society. They were placed in a difficult position because society viewed the relationship between their parents negatively. Rejection came not only from indigenous communities but also from the European community themselves, who settled in the Dutch East Indies. Europeans at the time viewed mixed-race children as having poor character, and even education was deemed incapable of changing their nature or morals. Some believed that mixed-race children inherited the negative traits of both races, and this often led to them being considered a problem in society. This negative



view led many mixed-race children to feel alienated and unaccepted by their surroundings. They grew up amidst rejection, a result of the prevailing social system and racial views of the time (Baay, 2010).

Moentji and her children could be transferred to another assignment or return to Europe with the soldier who fathered them. However, this didn't always happen; only a small number of fortunate ones had the opportunity. Moentji and her children could be handed over to fellow soldiers, who moved without any certainty about their future. Furthermore, soldiers could take their children elsewhere, while Moentji was forced to become another soldier's concubine or return to her hometown without her children. The most heartbreaking thing was that soldiers simply abandoned Moentji and her children without giving them anything, leaving them to live in poverty (Weijl & Boogaardt, 1917).

Children of concubinage were called "*anak kolong*" (under-bed children) because they slept under beds in military barracks, or *tangsi* (barracks), reflecting their lowly and marginalized status within the military barracks. They came from various ethnicities, including Javanese, Chinese, African, and Indo-European, but still faced social discrimination. Many lived in poverty, were neglected, and even became homeless after being disowned or cared for by their fathers. Some followed in their fathers' footsteps and became soldiers, while others settled in the civilian community of the Dutch East Indies or were taken to the Netherlands (Baay, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of concubinage in the Priangan Residency was part of a complex colonial reality characterized by inequality and injustice. Indigenous women, known as nyai, were victims of a social, economic, and legal system that was unfair to them. Many of them were forced into relationships with European men out of wedlock due to the demands of life. *Nyai* faced societal stigma, the loss of women's rights, and a lack of adequate legal protection.

Although often overlooked by society, the role of nyai was actually quite crucial in bridging the indigenous and colonial worlds, both in domestic life and social interactions. Some nyai even gained official recognition and access to a better social life, as experienced by *Nyai Itih*. However, a fate like Itih's was the exception. Most nyai lived in uncertainty and could be abandoned at any time without legal certainty, while children born of concubinage often grew up in social conditions that marginalized them, even to the point of being labeled "children under the roof".

This article demonstrates that the practice of concubinage was not merely a moral or cultural issue, but was also closely linked to colonial economic policies such as the Preangerstelsel system, which demanded extensive exploitation of land and labor. The nyai were not merely symbols of women's subordination but also representations of the structural injustices imposed by the colonial system. Through a critical historical approach, this paper seeks to highlight the existence of the *nyai* as historical subjects inseparable from the social and political dynamics of the Dutch East Indies, while also opening up space for a reinterpretation of their role in Indonesian colonial history.

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