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Boven Digoel: Projecting a New Society*

Yamamoto Nobuto**

In the aftermath of the Communist revolts in West Java and West Sumatra in 1926 and 1927, Boven Digoel was constructed as an internment camp for political prisoners. It was designed to be a place where Communists were taken from their home communities and transplanted in a foreign environment to be "re-educated" by the authorities under close surveillance. Outwardly, however, the Dutch colonial regime also used Digoel as a cautionary tale to the Indonesian populace by projecting a terrifying image of the exile colony and its feral environment. They achieved this aim by relying primarily on newspaper coverage. Such representations of Digoel came to inhabit the popular imagination during the colonial period. This article examines two prominent Malay-language newspapers, *Sin Jit Po* (Soerabaja) and *Pewarta Deli* (Medan), and their comparatively frequent reports on Digoel. Ultimately, the Digoel coverage gives insights into an important aspect of the Dutch colonial order in the Netherlands Indies, which was censorship.

Keywords: Boven Digoel, Communist, censorship, newspaper coverage, popular imagination

On August 30, 1933, Soekarno, already a prominent Indonesian nationalist and leading organizer of the Indonesian Nationalist Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia), wrote a confidential letter from the Soekamiskin prison in West Java to the Dutch prosecutor general. Nearly a month earlier, on August 1, he had been apprehended in Batavia and been confined in the prison for the second time. His letter begins as follows:

> The purpose of this [letter] is to respectfully request that I be spared—and with that also my wife and child and my old mother and father—by releasing me from further judicial proceedings or internment. I address myself to you and the Government with the prayer to set me at liberty. I further promise to withdraw from all political activities and live as a quiet citizen to provide for my family by practicing as an architect and engineer, a practice I have very much neglected on account of my political activities. I shall never break my promise. As a guarantee to that may this letter

* This is a shortened and revised version of Chapter 6 in Yamamoto (2011).

** 山本信人, Department of Politics, Keio University, Mita 2-15-45, Minato, Tokyo 108-8345, Japan
e-mail: nobuto@keio.jp
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7856-4293

> serve its purpose: were I to commit breach of promise, do then publish these lines and immediately intern me or in one manner or another penalize me. A breach of promise can only harm me: the publication of this letter will surely spell my social death. (Hering 1979, 154)

Soekarno's letter betrays anxiety and despair. Despite his pledge to withdraw from political life if the colonial government opted against sending him to the internment camp in Boven Digoel, Soekarno's pusillanimous words, years later, surprised many Indonesians and historians (Hering 2002, 236–237). This contradiction challenged the image of the young and fiery nationalist activist that Soekarno had meticulously built since the mid-1920s. The 1933 arrest was Soekarno's second, yet this arrest was different from the first. Soekamiskin was not merely a place of temporary confinement; Soekarno awaited the final decision from the prosecutor general on potential further isolation from political action through exile outside Java. His fear of being banished to Boven Digoel, the remote internment camp in western New Guinea for political prisoners of the Dutch East Indies, drove him to beg for the prosecutor general's mercy. However, it seems the plea did not make a difference, and Soekarno was indeed exiled—but not to Boven Digoel. Interestingly, the designated place of his exile was the town of Ende on the island of Flores. The rationale was to keep him apart from the Communist prisoners sent to Boven Digoel, preventing him from potentially influencing them. The futility of Soekarno's plea, however, is not the focus here. Instead, it is notable that Soekarno was so terrified of being banished to Digoel that he was willing to relinquish his political aspirations, effectively compromising Indonesia's independence. For the purpose of this article, Soekarno's letter serves to illustrate how Indonesian nationalists imagined Boven Digoel.

In the 1930s Dutch East Indies, Boven Digoel had an "(in)famous" (*terkenal*) reputation (Oen 1931, 2). It was also known by another name, Tanah Merah (Red Land), initially due to the color of the soil and later gaining an association with political leftists, or "reds." Those exiled to Digoel were referred to as *orang buangan* (exiles, or literally "those who are thrown away"). Established after the Communist revolts in Java in December 1926, Digoel served as a colony for those subjected to mass internal exile. The colonial government took decisive actions to dismantle the Communist mass following, rounding up thirteen thousand suspects in connection with the revolts. More than five thousand were placed in temporary preventive detention, with four thousand five hundred receiving prison sentences after trial. Those deemed particularly dangerous, including key leaders of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia; PKI), faced severe penalties. In response to the revolts, the government outlawed the PKI and extensively employed its power of banishment. It ordered the deportation of 1,308 individuals—noncommunist political activists as well as family members who

desired to accompany their interned spouses and parents. They were sent to a location on the upper reaches of the Digoel River in New Guinea, hence the Dutch name Boven Digoel ("upper Digoel") (Mrázek 1994, 128), where escape was nearly impossible due to the thick jungle surrounding it.

Digoel served as a place where internees were meant to live apart from Indonesians. It was not exactly a penal colony or a concentration camp; rather, it was designed as a location for transplanting Communists from their home communities to be closely monitored and "re-educated" by the authorities. Unlike the conventional concept and image of an internment camp—typically associated with isolation and oppression—the Digoel project exhibited the typical attributes of colonial engineering. The fact that some internees were permitted to bring family members to Digoel suggests that the authorities aimed to provide the internees with some semblance of a normal life there. Contrary to the standard perception of internment camps as places of isolation and oppression, no one in Digoel experienced physical abuse or direct violence akin to the conditions in German concentration camps (Pluvier 1953, 42–43; Mrázek 2019).

Legally, internees were not considered criminals. The Penal Code of 153 bis empowered the government to isolate any person deemed a threat to public order without the need for a trial or specific charges. Per Dutch instructions, Digoel internees, though confined, were expected to have the same duties and privileges as everyone else in the colony (Mrázek 2009, 301). Simultaneously, under the Penal Code of 153 bis, they could be subjected to indefinite confinement: "As in the case of the Jews, there was no time set for their release" (Mrázek 2009, 301). Consequently, Digoel symbolized indefinite isolation for Communists and served as a warning to other Indonesians.

Digoel undoubtedly stood as a symbol of political suppression in the Indies during the late 1920s and the 1930s, with the colonial government playing a significant role in constructing this potent yet intricate setup. To transform it into a symbol, the government permitted both Malay-language newspapers and Dutch-language publications to feature reports on Digoel from various angles. On the one hand, this approach created an impression of normalcy within the internment camp, albeit one fabricated and meticulously maintained under strict police supervision (Shiraishi 2021, 99–161). On the other hand, the mere existence of Digoel projected a terrifying image and conveyed a stern message to the Indonesian people. Through newspaper accounts, Indonesians gained insight into the repercussions of exile to Digoel, and the Dutch regime relied heavily on journalistic reporting to embed the Digoel project in the public consciousness, to serve as a deterrent against further political activism (Shiraishi 2021, 30). Soekarno's intense fear of being banished to Digoel, as reflected in his letter, underscores the effectiveness of this propaganda strategy.

To comprehend the evolution of the general public's perception of Digoel, it is crucial to scrutinize newspaper coverage of the camp. The colonial regime actively promoted Digoel to instill fear among Indonesians, relying significantly on newspaper reports. The content of articles on Digoel was meticulously controlled, generally falling into two categories: the first type involved reporting on life within the camp, while the second provided personal accounts of events transpiring there. Understanding the impact of these reports necessitates an examination of the authors and how, from whose perspective, Digoel was presented. All these aspects were shaped by a process of censorship, prompting questions such as: What kind of censorship was at play concerning Digoel? How did this specific censorship influence Indonesia's popular politics?

Censoring Digoel

Media reports played a crucial role in disseminating the image of Digoel among Indonesian intellectuals. News reports often covered the latest internments and releases from Digoel. Additionally, newspapers featured private letters to internees' families and relatives along with personal interviews.

Two types of newspapers carried reports on Digoel. The first were Dutch-language newspapers. While colonial officials had access to colonial (confidential) documents for information on Digoel and other internment camps, Indonesian intellectuals and leaders of the nationalist movement such as Soekarno relied on Dutch-language newspaper reports to stay informed about decisions made by the Dutch authorities. Some Dutch-language newspapers in the Indies served as semi-official mouthpieces of the colonial government, while others represented big planters and conservative parties that were often critical of government policies. These newspapers regularly covered Digoel and even had their own special correspondents for Digoel who traveled there to observe and write reports. This Dutch-centered discourse shaped the intellectual sphere in Indonesia. It represented a limited and regulated intellectual sphere because only a small number of Indonesian elites could attend Dutch Native School (Hollandsche Inlandsche School) and read Dutch newspapers. It was regulated because Dutch was the official language of communication for the Indies administration.

The second type of publications that reported on Digoel were Malay-language newspapers—and, to a lesser extent, popular Malay-language novels. Malay newspapers that regularly covered Digoel distinguished themselves in three ways: those that perceived Digoel mainly as a place for criminal elements rather than political prisoners; those that covered only factual aspects concerning Digoel; and those that carried personal accounts

of individuals who had experienced living or being interned in Digoel. Since most Malay-language newspapers were not allowed to send their journalists to Digoel, many had to rely on Dutch-language newspapers as the source of information on the camp and its development. Consequently, many Malay newspapers cited and translated articles from Dutch newspapers into Malay.

Interestingly, *Sin Jit Po*, the Chinese-Malay newspaper based in Soerabaja, East Java, began featuring Digoel early on, in December 1926. The first news regarding the Communist movement (or the "Communist rebellion," according to colonial authorities) in West Sumatra was reported in *Sin Jit Po* on December 3, 1926 under the title "Gerakan Kaoem Communist di Sumatra Barat: Keadaan di Djawa Hendak Ditjontoh" (The Communist movement in West Sumatra: Java's situation is to be imitated) (*Sin Jit Po* 1926a). It was followed by an article titled "Rahasia Communist di Soematera Barat Terboeka: Pemboenoehan di Kamang" (The Communist secret in West Sumatra exposed: the killing in Kamang) on December 24, 1926. *Sin Jit Po* also reported on the aftermath of the 1926–27 Communist rebellion with news of the trial process, announcements of Communist activists sentenced to exile, their departure from Java, and their arrival in the far-flung Digoel (*Sin Jit Po* 1926b).[1)]

Popular novels also played an important role in transmitting the image of Digoel. Within several years of its establishment, Digoel seemed to become a fashionable topic for popular novels (Chandra 2013). In 1931 the Chinese-Malay literary monthly *Boelan Poernama* published two different novel-length stories on Digoel. This Bandoeng-based journal had a circulation of ten thousand copies and was quite popular because its contributors included well-known contemporary writers. The number of subscribers reading *Boelan Poernama* suggests that its two stories on Digoel were likely circulated quite widely. The author of the first story, titled "Antara Idoep dan Mati, atawa Boeron dari Boven-Digoel" (Between life and death, or the fugitive from Boven Digoel), was an ex-Digoelist by the name of Wiranta. The second story, "Darah dan Air-Mata di Boven Digoel" (Blood and tears in Boven Digoel), was written by Oen Bo Tik (Oen 1931). Wiranta went on to publish another Digoel novel titled *Minggat dari Digoel* (Escape from Digoel), published by Awas in Soerakarta. Another popular literary journal, *Tjerita Roman*, based in Malang, also published novels on Digoel: Liem Khing Ho's *Merah* (Red) (1937), which references the Communist uprisings in 1926 and 1927; and Pouw Kioe An's *Api jang Tida Bisa Dibikin Padem* (The fire that cannot be extinguished) (1939). Kwee Tek Hoay published two novels related to Digoel: *Drama di Boven Digoel*

1) The trial of the uprising case was reported in the April 29, 1927 issue (*Sin Jit Po* 1927b; see also *Sin Jit Po* 1927d). On April 13, 1927, *Sin Jit Po* reported that the first batch of Communist exiles had reached Digoel (*Sin Jit Po* 1927a; see also *Sin Jit Po* 1927c).

(Drama in Boven Digoel), which was first serialized in the journal *Panorama* from December 15, 1929 to January 1, 1932 and then republished by Moestika in Bandoeng from 1938 to 1941; and *Penghidoepan Satoe Sri Panggoeng* (The life of a theater star) (1931), referencing the preceding Communist uprisings (Kwee 1938; Salmon 1981).[2)] In the 1930s and 1940s, Medan-based literary circles published several works of fiction featuring Digoel written by former internees. The short stories included Abd'oelxarim M.S.'s "Pandoe Anak Boeangan" (Pandoe, the internee), D'Nian S.B.'s "Ke Boven Digoel Dengan Kekasih" (To Boven Digoel with a lover), and D. E. Manu Turie's "Roestam Digoelist" (Roestam, the Digoelist) (Pramoedya 2001). The titles alone suggest the personal nature of the accounts, relating the hardship and trials experienced by Digoel prisoners; this was perhaps what most attracted readers' interest.

Since Digoel was an emerging and sensitive colonial project, during the first years of its existence the colonial regime needed to carefully establish the image it hoped to promote. Press coverage of Digoel was a key medium for this purpose, and while newspapers were allowed to carry articles on Digoel, these were carefully censored. Internees were allowed to send out letters, but they had to be written in Malay (rather than in Javanese or other regional languages) so they could be read by the censoring officers before being forwarded (*Sin Jit Po* 1927g). The few Indonesian correspondents from Malay-language newspapers who successfully gained permits to be stationed in Digoel had great difficulty reporting because "the censorship there was too tight" (*censuur disana terlampau . . . keras!*) (*Pewarta Deli* 1928e).

Censorship figures prominently in the story of Digoel in that it promoted and controlled the discourse related to the infamous camp. Censorship regulates who and what is included in or excluded from a particular discourse (Burt 1994). It gives legitimacy to a certain discourse by allowing it to circulate in society. This aspect of censorship works in a situation where power exerts itself by virtue of the sanctions it places over matters of the print and publishing industry. In the case of Digoel coverage, not only journalists but also internees contributed articles to newspapers. Internees were able to contribute articles only if they passed a pre-publication censorship review (*Pewarta Deli* 1929b). Pre-publication censorship was applied to all writings from Digoel, including personal correspondence. It differed from the post-publication censorship of journalistic publications, which was then the standard procedure in the Indies. Because of censorship's nature as a political tool of the government, it was important for the Indies regime to familiarize Indonesians with the Digoel project. Censorship was also a component of the

2) As late as 1950, Digoel continued to feature in popular novels—for instance, Njoo Cheong Seng's *Taufan Gila* (Mad storm) (1950).

Dutch defensive strategy to deter criticism from the Netherlands in the late 1920s, as highlighted by concerns raised by Dr. M. van Blankenstein, a prominent correspondent for *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*.[3)]

In sum, Digoel literature was allowed to be written and published by Indies Chinese and other writers to promote awareness of Digoel's existence and what life in the camp was like. The authorities regarded stories from Digoel as political lessons for readers, as they framed a new perception of the Indonesian nationalist movement—in this case, the "Communist radicals."

In general, political prisoners in Digoel were categorized into three: active collaborators, passive collaborators, and non-collaborators. Due to a shortage of labor, the internees were, ironically, forced to build and manage their own prison camps. By participating in the management and control of Digoel, they came to learn about Dutch colonial law and order and the necessity of self-policing. It was like a miniature colonial ward. In addition to Digoel literature, major Malay-language newspapers, both indigenous and Chinese, covered "news" on Digoel into the 1930s, and thus Boven Digoel or Tanah Merah became a familiar place for the Malay readership. The rationale was that since Digoel represented the proper colonial order and society, the more it was reported on and described, the more the general population would learn what an ideal colonial society was like.

Post-publication censorship was introduced under the Ethical Policy in the 1910s; it was designed to "listen to" and "contain" local voices. It promoted a kind of "free press" atmosphere that became a driving engine of popular politics in the 1910s and 1920s (Shiraishi 1990). However, journalists and nationalists who wrote extreme and provocative articles were penalized with jail time when they violated the *persdelict* (press offense articles of the Penal Code) (Yamamoto 2019, 92–113). Essentially no newspapers were banned or shut down before 1931, after which the new administrative measure against newspapers, called *persbreidelordonnantie* (press curbing ordinance), was introduced (Yamamoto 2019, 176–204). It is to be noted that most reports on Digoel appeared during the transitional years from the Ethical Policy to a more suppressive policy of Dutch rule in the Indies. For the most part, the atmosphere was still rather lenient in the publishing world.

Reporting about Digoel also provided an occasion for newspapers to cite each other's

3) In September 1928, van Blankenstein published a series of reports in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* based on his journey to Boven Digoel. In these articles, he highlighted errors that had resulted in the unjust relocation of certain individuals to Boven Digoel. The colonial authorities in the Netherlands Indies acknowledged these mistakes and repatriated some individuals from Boven Digoel (Kwantes 1981, 165–167).

articles. For instance, *Pewarta Deli* carried an article titled "Boven Digoel: orang-orang jang 'djahat' memboeat 'onar': orang-orang jang 'baik' menjanjikan 'Wilhelmus'" (Boven Digoel: "bad" people cause "trouble": "good" people promise "Wilhelmus") in its October 12, 1928 edition (*Pewarta Deli* 1928e). The article opens with a telegram from Den Haag, which refers to articles written by the Dutch journalist van Blankenstein. He was an editor of *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, which was then a very influential newspaper based in Rotterdam, and had had several opportunities to visit various places in the Indies, including Digoel. For many political activists in Indonesia and the Netherlands, his articles were considered to be a "guidebook" (*penoendjoek djalan*) for information on Digoel. Meanwhile, the same *Pewarta Deli* article cited a report on Digoel by Dr. Broesma, another Dutch journalist, which had been published in *De Locomotief*, a Semarang-based Dutch newspaper, and had also been cited by the government news agency, Aneta.

Since Malay-language newspapers had difficulty sending their correspondents to Digoel, they needed to rely on Dutch or other European journalists' accounts. Dutch and European correspondents in general could get permission to visit and stay in Digoel much more easily than indigenous or Chinese ones. Some European journalists even went to Digoel several times. Yet, they generally toed the government line and disseminated official accounts on Digoel, and therefore their reports were considered safe. These Dutch and European journalists played a significant role in promoting the image of Digoel as a healthy and ordered political camp among the European audience. Since the Netherlands was a small nation, positive reportage on Digoel was a way to prevent criticism from neighboring European nations.[4] A culture of citation, in which various newspapers appeared to be reporting on a particular topic but were, in fact, only citing each other, was thus encouraged. This was another by-product of censorship.

Under the Ethical Policy, the vernacular press served as a symbol and means to educate Indonesians; in a different way, the reportage on Digoel was supposed to serve the same purpose—a symbol of the "free" press and a means to socialize a government project. One is tempted to ask: How did the authorities achieve these objectives? What exactly was being communicated in those Digoel articles?

4) The Dutch view about Malay-language periodicals in the Indies started to change in the middle of 1927. In a confidential letter dated September 22, 1927, Prosecutor General H.G.P. Duyfies wrote to Governor-General De Graeff, saying that after the Communist uprisings in West Sumatra and West Java, he acknowledged an urgent need to act against the extremist propaganda which was being carried out in some native and Malay-Chinese newspapers (Kwantes 1978, 669–676).

Reporting on Digoel

Functioning as an internment camp, Digoel required the creation of new infrastructure carved from the tropical landscape. The initial years at Digoel were dedicated primarily to land development and the formation of an internment community, with the labor force for these endeavors provided by the internees themselves. This posed a particular challenge for those among the internees who were intellectuals and unaccustomed to rigorous manual labor and land cultivation. Geographic challenges added to the difficulties. Digoel was situated in a malaria-infested, hot, and humid region, deemed uncultivable and sparsely populated. The internees found themselves close to the Papoean tribes, whose distinctive way of life had resulted in a stereotyped portrayal of them among Indonesian readers as "headhunters" and "cannibals" (*Pewarta Deli* 1928b). Three years after its establishment, in May 1930, Digoel's internee population peaked, with 1,308 individuals recorded as being interned.

The construction phase of the Digoel project captured the interest of the general public, transforming into a form of theater akin to a newspaper rendition of a reality show. The coverage encompassed narratives of internees departing from their home communities, their arrival in the unfamiliar setting of Digoel, the challenges of their mundane yet arduous daily life, and, frequently, their unexpected return home. The entire process was publicized and made accessible to a wider audience. The following accounts serve as illustrative examples.

Departure:
In the "City" section of the *Sin Jit Po* newspaper on May 14, 1927 (*Sin Jit Po* 1927c), readers encountered a detailed account of the departure of internees destined for Digoel from Soerabaja.

On the preceding day, despite the rain, the Tandjoeng Perak seaport was unusually crowded (*terlaloe rame jang loear biasa*) in the late afternoon. The *Rumphius* was scheduled to depart for Makassar at five o'clock. Around four o'clock, the internees arrived at the port in three buses, accompanied by government officials. As the prisoners disembarked, they exchanged salutes with some of the spectators (*penonton*). The internees were easily recognizable, given their status as prominent activists affiliated with the Soerabaja PKI and branded as troublemakers (*kaoem peroesoeh*) by the authorities.

Among the spectators were family members, friends, relatives, and sympathizers of the Communist movement. Suddenly, a man broke through the crowd, shouting, "Long live Communists!" (*hidoeplah communist!*). The police promptly apprehended him, and shortly after, the prisoners boarded the ship. The group comprised 41 indigenous

persons, six ethnic Chinese, along with 11 accompanying women and children. On the *Rumphius*, ten soldiers led by a Dutch sergeant closely monitored the prisoners. Once all internees were on board, the crowd dispersed, reminiscent of the end of a show. Excitement and anxiety lingered in the internees' minds; they were uncertain whether—or when—they would reunite with family, friends, or comrades.

The Internees:

Occasionally, newspapers reported the names of internees based on court decisions. In the June 13, 1927 edition of *Sin Jit Po*, a typical article detailed new Digoel internees, listing nine individuals sentenced to internment along with summaries of their careers as activists. Below are a few examples (*Sin Jit Po* 1927d):

> I. Makki alias I. Mangki, 38 years old, a small-scale merchant, the chairperson of the Market Union (Passarbond) from the People's Association (SR) and PKI-related Workers Union of Ships and Sea; he was last located in Makassar.
>
> Noeroet gelar Soetan Radja Endah, 37 years old, a former surveyor of the Topography Service, member of SR, secretary of the Market Union (Passarbond) and Peasant Union (Sarekat Kaoem Tani), last located in Makassar.
>
> Pio, 22 years old, a former writing staff at Volkslectuur (Balai Poestaka), a drafter of the Workers Union of Automobile and Electronics (Sarekat Boeroe Bengkel dan Electrisch), a commissioner of SR and PKI, last located in Makassar.
>
> Ishak, 28 years of age, a former student journalist and agent of the Singer Corporation, a member of SR, secretary of the Peasant Union, Drivers Union, and Market Vendors, and propagandist of the PKI, last stationed in Makassar.
>
> Mohamad Sjahmin gelar Pandji Nagara, 26 years old, former journalist in the Department of Internal Affairs and in the resident office in Telok Betong, but later lost his job, and chairperson and propagandist of the PKI in Menggala, last located in Batavia.

All individuals listed as internees in the *Sin Jit Po* compilation were aged between 21 and 38, were actively associated with PKI-affiliated groups or labor unions, and included former government employees. Notably, the roster underscores that the majority of those banished to Digoel were PKI activists. Ironically, many of the individuals listed

were actively engaged in Makassar, where no Communist revolt occurred in 1926 or 1927, as was witnessed in West Java and West Sumatra. Nevertheless, authorities apprehended well-known PKI activists based on their professional backgrounds and history of activism. This underscores the perceived threat posed by the organization in the eyes of the Dutch East Indies government, leading to the corresponding harsh treatment of its members. Given the limited newspaper reports on non-Communist internees, readers were likely to assume that those sent to Digoel were primarily Communist activists, solidifying the notion of Tanah Merah as the designated place for "the reds" (*kaoem merah*).

Arrival:

Pewarta Deli, in its edition dated April 19, 1928, presented an account of the arrival of internees. This information was gleaned from interviews with the wives of Soerodjojo and Mohamad Ashari, who had recently returned from Digoel. The article documented their return to Semarang following the demise of their husbands, who succumbed to high fever and elephantiasis in Digoel (*Pewarta Deli* 1928b). The interviews took place in Semarang on March 26, 1928.

According to the information gathered from the two sources, the journey from Soerabaja to Makassar took two days by ship; this was followed by three days from Makassar to Ambon, and an additional six days from Ambon to Digoel. Upon arrival, newly admitted internees were typically accommodated in temporary housing referred to as the internees' camp (*interneering kamp*). During this initial period, they were encouraged to establish social connections and collaborate in the construction of their cottages.

Residents received a daily stipend of ƒ0.72, with ƒ0.32 allocated for food, leaving an additional ƒ0.40 for other necessities (*Sin Jit Po* 1927e). However, within a year the stipend allocation system changed. Another source noted that the government allocated ƒ6.30 per internee every two weeks, along with a daily stipend of ƒ0.30. The allowance was not disbursed in cash but in the form of rice and other essential provisions. This marked the commencement of the internees' new life in Digoel (*Pewarta Deli* 1928b).

Daily Life:

Once internees were acclimated to life in Digoel, their daily routines unfolded relatively smoothly. According to a letter from one of the initial groups of internees, published in *Bendera Islam* and cited by *Sin Jit Po* on August 1, 1927 (*Sin Jit Po* 1927e), the camp was organized into six living quarters, denoted as Kampoeng A, B, C, D, E, and F, with Kampoeng A serving as the central hub for all living quarters.

The food rations provided to the internees typically included rice, meat jerky, green peas, dried salted fish, brown sugar, shallots, salt, and similar staples. These daily

necessities were supplied through a government cooperative and other shops, forming part of their remuneration. Additionally, internees had the option to obtain goods from government shops using coupons. Due to the presence of ethnic Chinese among the internees, a Dutch correspondent suggested the possibility of internees establishing their own shops in the future (*Sin Jit Po* 1927a).

By mid-1928, four shops had been established and were operated by individuals not interned. Alongside the government-run cooperative, there were two shops managed by Chinese individuals from Malang (East Java) and one by an Indonesian from Makassar. These shops sourced their goods primarily from Ambon (*Pewarta Deli* 1929a).

Residents cultivated corn, long beans, radishes, Chinese cabbage, and other vegetables, though the soil conditions proved to be a challenge. Simultaneously, the living quarters began to take shape, with each quarter accommodating fewer than one hundred residents. Residents were granted the authority to elect their representative or "village head" (*kepala desa*) (*Sin Jit Po* 1927a).

Health:

Digoel residents faced significant health challenges, a matter underscored in an interview with an editor from *Algemeen Indisch Dagblad*, a Dutch newspaper based in Bandoeng. This interview, published in *Sin Jit Po* on August 17, 1927 (*Sin Jit Po* 1927f), highlighted health as a crucial concern for the Dutch authorities overseeing the Digoel project. The issue was frequently reported in both Malay-language and Dutch newspapers.

The prevalence of malaria in Digoel was a notable concern, attributed in part to a section of the internment camp being situated in a swampy area, a conducive environment for mosquitoes. By August 1927, efforts had been made to address health concerns, including the construction of a hospital for residents. Additionally, residents were provided with a daily regimen of quinine as a preventative measure against malaria. If a resident had a spouse, the government supplied two mosquito nets, and those with children could obtain necessary medicine from the polyclinic.

Over time, Digoel gradually began to offer a semblance of ordinary life for its residents. According to the aforementioned editor, some residents were reported to hold an optimistic outlook (*orang-orang jang tinggal di Boven Digoel ada harepan baek*) and even expressed satisfaction with their living conditions (*orang merasa seneng tinggal di Boven Digoel*).

Education:

In its editorial dated April 17, 1928, *Pewarta Deli* underscored the significance of education in the "town of Digoel" (Kota Digoel). Given that many internees were intellectuals,

education was a priority. Digoel featured two types of schools: the Dutch Native School (Hollandsch Inlandsche School), established by the government, and the Native School (Inlandsche School), which received support from the internees themselves (*Pewarta Deli* 1928a).

On September 5, 1928, *Pewarta Deli*'s "special correspondent" ("Speciaal Corr.") disclosed the names of teachers serving in Digoel schools. The Dutch-language school had Hermawan from Mandailing (Tapanoeli, Sumatra), Mhd. Said from Soerabaja (East Java), and Mrs. Niti Soemanteri from Soekaboemi (West Java). The Dutch school commission included Soeprodjo from Bandoeng (West Java) and Said Ali from Padang (West Sumatra), who were no longer considered internees (*Pewarta Deli* 1928c).

In 1928 two additional schools were established. The English School (Sekolah Inggeris), designed for both children and adults, was taught by J. Berani from Tapanoeli (Sumatra). The Islamic School (Sekolah Agama Islam) was founded by the Digoel Islam Association (Vereeniging Islam Digoel) and focused on Islam and Arabic. Its instructors included Dt. Batoeah, Mardjoeki, and Raoef from Padang (West Sumatra), Hadji Achmad Chatib from Banten (West Java), and Haroenalrasjid and Dasoeki from Soerakarta (Central Java) (*Pewarta Deli* 1928c). The teachers were generally Digoel internees (*Digoelisten*) and former PKI activists. Both the English and Islamic schools were self-supporting in terms of teachers and finance.

Returnees:

Typically, news coverage concerning individuals released from Digoel and returning to their hometowns was concise, straightforward, and less significant than coverage of those initially interned. The reports generally included only the names of the released individuals and their places of origin. They lacked details about the circumstances leading to their release, simply stating that the listed individuals were returning home as the authorities no longer deemed them a threat and expressed confidence in their adherence to the law (*Sin Tit Po* 1930).

Early release was typically granted to individuals found to have no involvement in politics. Instances of administrative "errors" came to light during annual discussions by the People's Council (Volksraad) on issues related to Digoel. In the late 1929 and early 1930 sessions, the council deliberated on the repatriation of innocent internees to their hometowns. It was revealed that some individuals interned in Digoel had no affiliation with the PKI or engagement with any other form of political activism. Instead, their presence in the internment camp was a result of distorted investigations conducted by local indigenous administrators (Binnenlandsche Bestuur) exploiting the opportunity to settle personal scores.

Subsequent investigations brought to light that certain innocent individuals had been exiled to Digoel due to their refusal to conform to the deference expected by local indigenous bureaucrats in accordance with feudal Javanese customs. These noncompliant individuals were unjustly labeled as Communists by officials. In response to these findings, the government mandated administrators implicated in the misuse of power to submit new reports on internees for whom there was evidence of innocence. After a year of monitoring in Digoel, thirty internees were granted permission to return home (*boleh dikembalikan ke negerinya*) as individuals wrongly banished, now recognized as free from any wrongdoing (*Pewarta Deli* 1930a).

Apolitical Digoel

In April 1928, an article in *Pewarta Deli* characterized Digoel as the most "developed" place in Indonesia (*paling ontwikkeld di Indonesia kita ini*). However, this assertion held more validity in the educational and political realms than in economic and material terms. Therefore, a more apt description of the Digoel community might be "most enlightened." The majority of internees were well educated and intelligent (*orang pandai*), demonstrating proficiency in reading and writing with an independent mindset (*kemerdekaan*) (*Pewarta Deli* 1928a). Reading constituted their primary pastime, and they were granted the liberty to request any books they desired. Additionally, they had access to both Malay-language and Dutch newspapers, provided they did not hold extreme viewpoints (*Pewarta Deli* 1928b). *Soeara Oemoem*, the nationalist newspaper based in Soerabaja and led by Dr. Soetomo, was particularly popular among the internees (*Pewarta Deli* 1938).

Administratively, Digoel demonstrated a form of "development" from the perspective of colonial management. It served as an exemplary instance of colonial self-governance, wherein the Digoelists endeavored to lead ordinary lives under decidedly abnormal circumstances. This abnormality was evident through the absence of political activities, as reported in newspaper articles and other documents pertaining to the internees' lives. The peculiarity of these circumstances becomes particularly apparent when one considers that many Digoelists were former activists deeply committed to politics, unions, and the labor movement. This abnormal condition had, in essence, become the new normal in Digoel.

The endeavor to establish a sense of normalcy significantly influenced the governance of Digoel. In practice, authorities employed two governance methods. The first involved organizing residents into categories to manage their attitudes and thought processes. The Dutch journalist Broersma, in reports dated October 12, 1928 and cited by

Aneta (*Pewarta Deli* 1928e), emphasized the need to segregate "good seeds" from "bad" ones (*perloe diadaken soeatoe perpisahan antara bibit jang baik dan bibit jang djahat*). "Bad" internees were those causing disturbances, while "good" internees included those who participated in activities such as singing "Wilhelmus," the unofficial Dutch national anthem, on August 31 and expressed remorse for their past "mistakes." This categorization mirrored the government's own practice of classifying residents based on behavior. In November 1928, the government announced in the People's Council that Digoel internees would be classified into three categories: the recalcitrants (*de onverzoenlijken*), those who complied half-heartedly (*de halfslachtingen*), and those with good intentions (*de welwillenden*) (Shiraishi 2021, 36). These categories were later recognized in the Malay language as *kaoem kiri* (leftist group), *kaoem tengah-tengah* (middle group), and *kaoem kanan* (rightist group), respectively (*Sin Jit Po* 1929). Internees in the last category were eligible for repatriation contingent on demonstrating good behavior while in Digoel.

This categorization significantly impacted the education of the internees' children. Children of *werkwillingen*, those who were willing to cooperate with governance, were permitted to attend the standard school, in this case, the Dutch Native School, which received government subsidies.[5] This school, with two government-hired teachers and eighty pupils, carried out instruction in Dutch. In contrast, the colonial authorities did not establish a school for the children of "recalcitrants," those unwilling to cooperate with the authorities. Instead, these residents established their own schools with government permission and operated under government supervision.

Another method of governance involved the establishment of robust administrative units. Maintaining order and harmony at Digoel necessitated active cooperation from the internees themselves. The ideal form of government was one that was self-sustaining. While some individuals were identified as "revolutionaries" (*revolutionair*), those who refused to cooperate with the authorities, a significant number of former Communists underwent a change of allegiance, assuming roles as pseudo-government officials (*Pewarta Deli* 1930b). In Kampoeng A, for example, the internees Gondhojoewono served as the "village representative," Ngadiran as an officer (*rechercheur*), and Soedibjo as a spy (*spion*). They collaborated closely with the Dutch controller of Digoel, Monsou, and were frequently invited to his house for social events. They even submitted a petition to the governor-general urging that Controller Monsou not be transferred when his term

5) *De werkwillingen* were those who performed paid services for the administration—such as police officers, teachers, nurses, and all salaried workers. *De zogenaamde naturalisten* were those who refused to perform labor for the government, whether on principle or due to considerations related to opportunity (Soetan Sjahrir 1960, 52–53).

ended (*Pewarta Deli* 1930c).

On September 29, 1928, authorities introduced a neighborhood watch system called "the guardian of order and peace" (*Rust en orde bewaarder*, or "R.O.B."). The guards, dressed in yellow jackets with neckties and "R.O.B." badges, had a multifaceted role. First, they ensured compliance with the ban on gatherings where politics and governmental regulations were discussed. Second, they engaged in propaganda dissemination to foster greater cooperation with the government. Last, they informed residents about the conditions for repatriation, emphasizing adherence to rules and petitioning for the governor-general's pardon.

Individuals who refused to cooperate were branded as unrepentant and steadfast in their adherence to Communist ideals. The most radical among them were segregated in South Digoel, where living conditions were considerably worse than in the "developed" North Digoel. These internees were frequently characterized as "bad people" (*orang djahat*) and deemed ignorant (*bodoh*), drawing comparisons to the indigenous Papoean tribes, insinuating their deservingness of relocation. The authorities faced embarrassment as the number of "bad people" increased over time, reaching nearly a hundred according to government statistics. The management of this undesirable and unexpected trend became a sensitive issue for the authorities and their collaborators.

The presence of "bad people" and their associates posed significant challenges for the internees who had become collaborators with the government. During a meeting with the assistant resident from Ambon, Gondhojoewono, the representative of Kampoeng A, raised a concern related to the dependents of the internees. Specifically, the issue involved the practice of repatriating female residents to their hometowns. Gondhojoewono highlighted that some female residents arrived in Digoel with the status of being associated with a Communist and subsequently developed an interest in and acquired knowledge about Communism. As a result, he opposed the idea of allowing them to return home (or leave at their discretion), fearing that they would disseminate Communist ideas in their hometowns. In demonstrating his reformed stance on Communism, Gondhojoewono showcased his concern for containing the influence of Communism not only within Digoel but also beyond its confines.

However, the assistant resident responded somewhat indifferently, stating that government policy permitted female residents who had chosen to accompany their husband or father to leave at their own discretion, on the sole condition that they would not be allowed to return to Digoel. This response from the assistant resident suggests that at this juncture the Dutch East Indies government may have been less apprehensive about the proliferation of Communism in Java. Communism, once a major threat to colonial rule, seemed to have transformed into a relatively insignificant issue confined to the

remote setting of Digoel.

Individuals who aligned with the government were referred to as "rightists" (*orang "kanan"*) by their fellow Digoelists. In an interview with the reporter "F.A." published in *Pewarta Deli* on July 21, 1930, Hasanoesi, an internee (*seorang geinterneerde*) then hospitalized outside Digoel due to a severe illness, compiled a list of collaborators. Some of these collaborators were previously prominent activists and leaders of PKI-related organizations, frequently mentioned in newspapers and political gatherings and thus widely recognizable. Hasanoesi's list included 14 collaborators:

1. Gondhojoewono from Semarang (the representative of Kampoeng A)
2. Soeprodjo from Bandoeng
3. Soekindar from Semarang
4. H.S.S. Parpatieh from Padang
5. Prapto from Semarang
6. Ngadiran (the officer) from Malang
7. Abdoel Karim from Langsa
8. Soendag from Ternate
9. Moeh. Sanoesi from Bandoeng
10. Mardjohan from Semarang
11. Mochtar Balok from Padang
12. Niti Soemantri from Bandoeng
13. Ngilman from Bantam
14. Soediono (the spy) from Soerabaja

In addition to revealing these names, Hasanoesi advised Communist activists to select their leaders judiciously so as to avoid ending up with false leaders who might betray their comrades. According to Hasanoesi, the 14 former Communists were now primarily seeking their own comfort, and their change of allegiance had contributed to the success of the government project in Digoel (*Pewarta Deli* 1930d).

Conclusion

This article delves into the political dimensions of the Digoel project, specifically examining the concealed messages that were disseminated by the colonial regime through news coverage of the camp and aimed at depoliticizing political activism. The disclosure of the lives of internees in Digoel did not necessarily instill fear among Indonesians,

though political activists might have interpreted a different narrative. Many readers expressed eagerness to follow accounts related to Digoel. The colonial authorities had specific motives in utilizing the news media to promote the Digoel project. Readers of Malay-language newspapers became acquainted with the perceived normalcy in Digoel, as the routine daily lives of internees—individuals ostensibly banished from public view—were extensively reported on, including intimate details. This coverage allowed readers to closely monitor the expansion and development of Digoel, possibly even more attentively than the developments unfolding in their immediate communities. The internment camp emerged as a prominent topic for consumers of print media.

The evolution of Digoel as a significant colonial undertaking was remarkable. There was a rapid increase in the number of internees in the initial three years after the camp's establishment, reaching 1,308 individuals in May 1930 (Kwantes 1981, 463). However, thereafter the numbers underwent a substantial decline. In January 1931 the resident count was 1,178, a number that dropped further to 793 by January 1932 and 553 by January 1933. By January 1934, the population had dwindled to a mere 440 residents, less than one-third of the peak population recorded (Kwantes 1982, 468–469).

In 1928 Dr. Soetomo, the prominent nationalist leader who established the political party Union of the Indonesian Nations (Persatoean Bangsa Indonesia) in 1930, projected that an increasing influx of individuals to Digoel would strengthen the Communist movement ("*Semakin banjak orang jang dikirim ke Digoel, pergerakan semakin tambah-tambah koeat*") (*Pewarta Deli* 1928d). Contrary to this expectation, the Communist movement lost momentum over time. As a result, newspapers also appeared to lose interest in covering Digoel. For instance, *Sin Jit Po* covered Digoel 21 times in 1927 but only twice in 1930. Nevertheless, the diminishing number of internees and news reports did not diminish the overall impact of the Digoel project. In the initial years, reports in mass publications regarding the internment camp were crucial in contributing to the project's success. The intensive reporting on Digoel by newspapers between 1927 and 1930 played a pivotal role in shaping the image and discourse surrounding this artificial community.

The political purpose of journalistic portrayals of the Digoel project was to instruct the general public. While reports on Digoel served as a deterrent for potential agitators, they also presented the camp as an exemplary model of a well-governed and self-sufficient community that the broader Dutch East Indies colony could emulate. Furthermore, Digoel was conceived as an inescapable destination for political offenders. The ideal colonial project operated based on principles of stringent surveillance, betrayal, and mutual scrutiny.

In Digoel, as well as in the rest of colonial Indonesia in the 1930s (Yamamoto 2019;

Shiraishi 2021), no mobilization politics were permitted to emerge. This message was clearly comprehended by activists and general readers alike. Even Soekarno himself grasped the message, which prompted him to take the risk of writing a letter seeking clemency from the prosecutor general, jeopardizing his reputation. He understood that political actions carried consequences, and that as long as he adhered to colonial law and order and behaved as a *goed* (good; *baek* in Indonesian) citizen, he would not be deemed a threat. Soekarno attempted to protect himself from being sent to Digoel by pledging to withdraw from political life. As the fear of indefinite exile in Digoel reshaped Soekarno's political intentions, the Digoel project effectively compromised his idealism and activism.

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