

Tamils Identity in Early Twentieth Century Medan

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Abstract. This article discusses the Tamils identity in Medan city in the early 20th century. Tamil identity was politicized in such a way during the colonial period. The colonial regime identified the Tamils as *Klings*, which was later changed to *Voor-Indiër*. Tamils were classified as Foreign Orientals under colonial law. Foreign Orientals is a racial category that determines political authority, social status, legal rights and obligations. Their relationship with other social groups is limited by segregation and discrimination regulations. However, Tamils can still form organizations aimed at strengthening primordial ties among themselves.

Keywords: Tamils, Identity, Medan.

1 Introduction

“I now saw only tall, almost black Tamils with thin legs, pariahs originally from India. Their clothing consisted of a tiny, vermilion rag which they pulled up between their legs so that only the necessary was covered” [1].

The quote above is an imaginative language of Ladislao Szekely in the novel entitled *Tropic Fever*. Even though it is a literary work, the two sentences above clearly describe the physical characteristics and dress style of the Tamils in Medan in the early 20th century. Realized or not, the clothes worn by Tamils are one of the many external markers used to distinguish them from others. Nordholt [2] says that the habit of the dress has become a tool in shaping and reproducing various groups of society, in the sense that the boundaries between these groups become so clear that they are difficult to cross. Thus, the clothes worn by the Tamils are an expression of their identity, and in turn, identify themselves as a separate social group in Medan.

The Tamils originates from South India. They migrated to the east coast of Sumatra in the late 19th century to work as contract labourers on tobacco plantations owned by private Western investors. When the contract period is over, they do not return to their original place. Many of them chose to stay and try their luck in Medan, the residency capital of East Sumatra [3]. During the colonial period, the identity of the Tamils in Medan was politicized in such away. Dutch colonial officials identified the Tamils as *Klings* or *Kelings* [4]. The colonial legal system classifies Tamils as Foreign Orientals, a racial category that distinguishes them from Europeans and natives [5]. This colonial-style racial status determines what laws apply to Tamils, the social strata they occupy, and their place of residence.

Tamils identity is a unique and complex issue. However, the writing of Indonesian history is very minimal with historical facts relating to the Tamils, especially regarding their identity.

Nevertheless, some exceptions should be pointed out, such as the works of Mani [3] and Sinar [6] on the Indians history in North Sumatra, and Harahap [7] on the everyday life history of Indians in Medan. The writings of the three scholars do not specifically discuss the construction of identity but serve as initial information to examine the identity formation of the Tamils in Medan during the colonial period.

This article discusses the Tamils identity in Medan city in the early 20th century. Identity in this study is defined as a social construction of similarities with a number of people and what distinguishes one person from another. Identity as a social construction is always changing, influenced by the conditions of the times, and most importantly that it is a choice [8].

2 Research Methods

This study uses historical research methods, which consist of four stages: (1) source collection, (2) source verification, (3) interpretation, and (4) historiography. The historical narrative of Tamils identity is constructed using a variety of sources. The primary sources used are archives and newspapers published during the Dutch colonial period. The secondary sources in the form of books and articles become knowledge in compiling the framework of this paper.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 From Plantation Coolie to Colonial City Society

The presence of the Tamils in East Sumatra has a long history. Archaeological research in Kota Cina, a village located north of Medan, shows that Tamil traders from South India settled there between the late 11th and mid-14th centuries [9]. The existence of the Tamils in East Sumatra became clear increasingly when Western businessmen's opened tobacco plantations in the area in the last four decades of the 19th century. The Malay kings in East Sumatra could only provide land, not labour. The local populations, Malay and Karo peoples, own lands for farming and are not interested in working as labourers on Western plantations [10]. The absence of labour supply in East Sumatra forced the planters to bring in contract labour from outside, first from China, then India and Java.

Contract workers from India are Tamils. The planters recruited Tamil workers from the Straits Settlements through *kangany* (labour brokers) [3]. Planters can not recruit Tamil workers directly from India because hindered by regulations prohibiting the deployment of workers to countries with no agreement with the British-Indian government [11]. A series of negotiations between the Netherlands Indies government and the British-Indian government conducted in 1876 and 1888 did not reach an agreement regarding the deployment of Tamil workers to East Sumatra. The Netherlands Indies government rejected the British-Indian government's request for the placement of British agents as protectors of Tamil workers in East Sumatra [12]. Even recruiting Tamil workers in the Straits Settlements is prohibited, but planters can still get them because emigration controls are lax there [13].

The number of Tamil coolies on tobacco plantations increased from 459 in 1874 to 1,528 in 1884 [14]. This number continues to increase along with the development of the plantations. In 1901, the number of Tamil coolies had reached 4,140. However, their number

was not as large as the number of Chinese coolies who achieved 54,489 in 1901 [12]. Chinese coolies are the main choice in labour recruitment because of their skills and perseverance in growing tobacco. By the late 1900s, Chinese coolies were no longer a priority as planters turned to cheaper contract labour from Java, especially for rubber and oil palm plantations. The number of contract coolies from Java increase continued, while number of Chinese and Tamil coolies gradually declined. In 1920, the planters employed 209,459 Javanese coolies, 27,715 Chinese coolies and 2,010 Tamil coolies [15].

The planters employed Tamil coolies to constructing roads, trenches, and dykes, and as drivers of bullock carts [3]. In 1902, each Tamil coolie was earning less than six dollars a month after deducting the various fees and down-payments quoted by the planters [12,16]. Although the planters considered the Tamil coolies to be very economical, the wages they received were still not sufficient to meet their daily needs [7,17]. The Tamil coolies had to bear the heavy burden of living due to the poor working conditions on the plantations. *The Millions of Deli* pamphlet by Van den Brand, a Dutch lawyer, which is a dramatic revealed the lives of contract coolies in East Sumatra who suffer from poverty, exploitation, discrimination and harsh treatment from supervisors and planters [18]. The plantation area is an “open prison” for contract coolies. They are always under the watchful eye of the planters. If coolies run away, neglect their work or violate other rules written in the contract, they will be subject to penal sanctions in the form of imprisonment, fines or forced labour [19]. The historian Thee Kian-wie [15] states that the applications of the penal sanction came under fire from Dutch liberals in the early 1900s. However, significant changes only occurred in 1930, when the economic crisis that devastated the plantation sector had forced planters to fire large numbers of coolies and replace the contract system with “free workers” [20].

Although the Coolie Ordinance requires planters to return coolies to their places of origin at the end of the contract period, thousands of Tamils, Chinese and Javanese with the status of “ex-contracted coolies” prefer to stay in East Sumatra [10]. At the same time, Medan grew into the administrative and trading centres of East Sumatra. Medan's economic development in the early 20th century offered a variety of job opportunities. Many Tamils moved to Medan to try their luck [7].

The Tamils in Medan work as unskilled labourers for trading companies and shops, housemaids, drivers of bullock carts and small traders. Some of them are also dairy farmers on the outskirts of plantation concessions [7,21]. The movement of the Tamils out of the plantations was followed by the migration of newcomers from India to Medan. Most of the new arrivals were Sikhs and Sindhis from North India, and Chettiars from South India. They migrated to Medan to pursue economic benefits by opening various businesses [3]. Their arrival has enlarged the Indian population in Medan. Between 1920 and 1930, the number of Indians increased from about 2,100 to 3,067. The population census of 1930 showed that Indians represented only 4% of the total population of Medan [22,23].

3.2 Identity Politicization

Plantation reports were published in the late 19th century, identifying Tamil coolies as *Klings*, *Klingalese* or *Klingaleezen* [11,13]. Reports of Dutch colonial officials also use *Klings* terminology to designate Tamils [4,7]. This category of identity was adopted by European travellers in the early 20th century. In Couperus' travel reports [24], the term *Klings* is used to designate the largely of Medan's population who are Hindu.

Perret [25] argues that the term *Klings*, also spelt *Kelings*, seems to have been known since pre-colonial times. This term comes from Nusantara. The earliest evidence that records the term is an Old Javanese inscription from *Jaha* in 840 AD. The term is also found in

traditional Malay literature, such as *Hikayat Raja Pasai*. There are some interpretations of its meaning: (1) designates Indians in general, who trade or live in the archipelago, and their descendants; (2) designate people who come from or speak Tamil and Telugu; (3) designates a category which includes Hindu traders from the east coast of India.

Klings is often interpreted as a derivative of the name of the ancient kingdom of Kalinga on the east coast of India [3]. Sarkar [26] argues that the term Kalinga originally referred to people from the Kalinga area, then its meaning expanded gradually to designate Tamils, people from South India or Indians in general. The chronology of this development is not known in detail, but perhaps because this region is the main gateway for textile exports to Southeast Asia, and the term *Klings* is used in the archipelago to designate all people from South Asia [27,28].

But for Tamils, *Klings* is a derogatory term. The Tamil community in Medan asked the colonial government to change the terminology of *Klings*. The colonial government granted this request by changing the *Klings* terminology to *Voor-Indiër* in late 1927 [29].

The colonial legal system classified everyone from India as Foreign Orientals, including Chinese and Arabs. The Foreign Orientals is a racial category distinct from the categories of Europeans and natives. The racial and ethnic constructions written in colonial law have resulted in the category of the Foreign Orientals as a different political identity from Europeans and natives. The status of Foreign Orientals places Indians on the middle social strata and subject to differential laws from Europeans on the upper strata and natives on the lower strata. The Indians shared the same public law as natives and were tried in the same courts with regard to criminal procedure, but there are exceptions in civil cases that apply their customary law [5,30]. Tagliocozzo [31] argues that this legal bifurcation showed that in the eyes of the colonial state, the Foreign Orientals are both to be feared and controlled, and at the same time engaged for commercial profit.

The colonial-style social system has limited the interaction of Tamils with other social groups. The settlement system (*wijkenstelsel*) which has been in effect since 1866 requires Foreign Orientals to live in predetermined places. In Medan, the Tamils had to live in Kampong Kling and were separated from the natives, Europeans and Chinese [32]. Even more oppressive than the settlement system was the pass system (*passenstelsel*) which had been in place since 1816 [33]. This system requires Tamils to apply for a pass from the local authorities if they wish to travel outside the region. These regulations severely restricted the mobility of the Tamils. The pass and settlement systems were abolished in 1917 and 1918, respectively. After the settlement system was abolished, most of the Tamils in Medan still tended to live together in Kampong Kling [34]. In 1927, they asked the city government to change the name of Kampong Kling to Kampong Madras [35]. The request seems to have been granted because the name Kampong Madras was already used in the De Sumatra Post reporting in early 1928 [36].

The segregative politics adopted by the colonial regime had shaped the Indians into a political community governed by their administrator. The colonial government appointed a lieutenant to the Indian community in Medan. Indian lieutenants are tasked with collecting taxes, handling population administration, maintaining order, taking oaths and interpreter in court. The famous Indian lieutenant was Mohamad Ali, a Muslim Tamil. He was an Indian lieutenant in Medan for forty years (1884-1924). However, the Chettiars and Hindu-Tamils judged that Lieutenant Mohamad Ali did not represent them because of different religions. In 1920, the Chettiars and Hindu-Tamils asked the colonial government for a lieutenant from among themselves. In 1924, Mohamad Ali was dismissed from his post for involvement in tax evasion. In his stead, the colonial government appointed two lieutenants for the Indian

community in Medan. Gulan Mohamad Japi Sahib was appointed Tamils and Chettiars lieutenant, while Ranjit Singh was appointed Sikhs and Sindhis lieutenant. This decision does not appear to be in line with the wishes of the Chettiars and Hindu-Tamils [7].

3.3 Social and Cultural Organizations

Religious differences among Indians were expressed through the formation of religious organizations. In 1913, the Hindu community founded the *Deli Hindu Sabha*. The formation of this organization was motivated by the conversion of some Tamils (*Adi-Dravida* caste) to Catholicism in 1912. The purpose of the *Deli Hindu Sabha* is to strengthen the unity of Hindus, as well as to promote social and cultural life. However, the organization went into a vacuum in 1918. The organization was reactivated in 1923 [3]. When led by D. Kumarasamy Pillay from 1931 to 1941, the *Deli Hindu Sabha* reformed some Hindu traditions, such as removing the ban on widows from marrying, encouraging inter-caste marriages, simplifying marriage and death ceremonies. Cultural development is carried out by holding musical and drama performances. Particular attention is paid to the issue of education as many Tamils are illiterate. By 1937, the *Deli Hindu Sabha* had opened four Tamil and English language schools in Medan. This organization waives fees for students from underprivileged families [21].

The Tamil Muslim community formed the *Indian Muslim Association* in 1941. Its chairman was Abdoel Gafoer Barkata, a trader in Medan. This organization aims to improve spiritual and social life. Meanwhile, Buddhist Tamils founded the *Hadie Dravidan Sabah (Adi-Dravida Sabai)* organization in 1926. This institution was formed to provide training related to households, such as cooking, parenting and driver training [7]. Mani [3] argued that Buddhism was used as a reactionary movement against Hindus who treated the Adi-Dravidians outside the social and cultural life of the Tamil community, such as denying kinship and placing them in the lowest strata of the Tamil community. The movement was assisted by a monk named *Ayothi Das Pandithar* who came from India.

4 Conclusion

Tamils from South India migrated to the east coast from the late 19th century to work as contract coolies on plantations. When their contracts ended, many of them moved to Medan to try their luck. Dutch colonial officials identified the Tamils as *Klings*. But for Tamils, *Klings* is a pejorative term. The terminology was changed to *Voor-Indiër*. Colonial law classed Tamils as Foreign Orientals, a racial category distinct from Europeans and natives. Foreign Orientals status places Indians in the middle social strata which are subject to different laws from Europeans in the upper strata and natives in the lower strata. The segregation and discrimination politics that were the main features of Dutch colonialism had separated and limited the relations of the Tamils from other social groups. The Tamil community formed organizations based on religious ties. Organizations not only aim to improve spiritual life, but also promote social and cultural life.

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