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Robinah: A Dignified Women in the Dutch East Indies in Dutch Colonial Era

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Abstract

Dutch colonialism from 1860 to 1935 witnessed a prevalent phenomenon of indigenous women in the Dutch East Indies entering into concubinage arrangements with European men, often assuming the position of “nyai” (mistresses) due to various socioeconomic factors. This study explores whether this situation was universal among indigenous women by examining the case of Robinah, who achieved an esteemed status during this era. Utilizing feminist theory and historical research methodologies, the investigation analyzes primary and secondary sources related to the Regentschap Bondowoso region in East Java. The research reveals that Robinah, a woman of Madurese descent, became the legitimate wife of Dutch investor George Birnie, diverging from the typical concubinage model. Robinah's intellectual acumen and communicative prowess were crucial in expanding Birnie's tobacco plantation enterprise, facilitating labor acquisition and land management within the predominantly Madurese local community. This case exemplifies how certain relationships between Dutch men and indigenous women could transcend the conventional concubinage paradigm, resulting in more egalitarian partnerships and enhanced social standing for the indigenous women involved. The study contributes to the scholarly discourse on the intricate dynamics of cross-cultural relationships and female agency within colonial contexts. Navigating mixed marriages can be challenging due to family resistance and social pressures, which can hinder the couple's integration into each other's groups. Sociological research examining power dynamics and identity in these unions is crucial for understanding their impact on social change and harmony and overcoming these obstacles.

[Periode kolonialisme Belanda dari tahun 1860 hingga 1935 menyaksikan fenomena umum perempuan adat di Hindia Belanda masuk ke dalam pengaturan selir dengan laki-laki Eropa, sering mengambil posisi “nyai” (simpanan) karena berbagai faktor sosial ekonomi. Kajian ini mengeksplorasi apakah situasi ini universal di kalangan perempuan adat dengan meneliti kasus Robinah, yang mencapai status terhormat selama era ini. Memanfaatkan teori feminis dan metodologi penelitian sejarah, investigasi menganalisis sumber primer dan sekunder terkait wilayah Regentschap Bondowoso di Jawa Timur. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Robinah, seorang wanita keturunan Madura, menjadi istri sah investor Belanda George Birnie, menyimpang dari model gundik yang khas. Ketajaman intelektual dan kecakapan komunikatif Robinah memainkan peran penting dalam perluasan perusahaan perkebunan tembakau Birnie, memfasilitasi akuisisi tenaga kerja dan pengelolaan lahan dalam komunitas lokal yang didominasi Madura. Kasus tersebut mencontohkan bagaimana hubungan tertentu antara laki-laki Belanda dan perempuan adat dapat melampaui paradigma selir konvensional, menghasilkan kemitraan yang lebih egaliter dan peningkatan kedudukan sosial bagi perempuan

adat yang terlibat. Kajian ini berkontribusi pada wacana ilmiah tentang dinamika rumit hubungan lintas budaya dan agensi perempuan dalam konteks kolonial. Pembahasan terkait pernikahan campuran dapat menjadi tantangan karena resistensi keluarga dan tekanan sosial, yang dapat menghambat integrasi pasangan ke dalam kelompok satu sama lain. Penelitian sosiologis terhadap dinamika kekuasaan dan identitas dalam serikat pekerja ini sangat penting untuk memahami dampaknya terhadap perubahan dan harmoni sosial, serta dimaksudkan untuk mengatasi hambatan tersebut.]

Keywords: Robinah; concubinage; Dutch colonial era; indigenous women; respected status

Introduction

In any part of the world, primarily related to social problems and the fulfillment of lust that demean women has long occurred. Various ways are carried out by the rulers, nobles, or anyone who wants to vent their lust. Starting from depriving women of their chastity to be used as concubines^{1,2} by kings or caliphs, ³ making young enslaved women to their passions or employing women to serve as housemaids and at the same time being tricked into sexual intercourse, as happened in the Dutch East Indies during the Dutch Colonial era, with no clear status. Women have always been considered as weak creatures. Their essential position often does not appear in patriarch historical discourse.⁴ Gordon describes many deviations by young men from the elite class of the Abbasid dynasty from the middle of the 8th century AD to the middle

¹ Stacey E. Murrell, *A Concubine of Many Names*. Portraits of Medieval Europe, 800-1400 (Routledge, 2024).

² Moh. Ashif Fuadi, "Perspektif Islam dan Prostitusi: Kajian Historis Praktek Pelacuran dan Argumentasi Fiqh Sosial," *Al 'Adalah: Jurnal Syariah dan Hukum Islam* 7, no. 1, (Juni 2022), 88-110.

³ Mutiat Titilope Oladejo, "Tradition of Concubine Holding in Hausa Society (Nigeria), 1900-1930," *International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)* 9, no. 1 S/No 32 (January 2019): 118-129. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v9i1.12>.

⁴ Basrin Basrin Melamba, "Perempuan Dan Kekristenan Pada Masyarakat Tolaki Dan Moronene Di Sulawesi Tenggara, 1915-1946," *Citra Lekha* 5, no. 2 (2020): 87-97, <https://doi.org/10.14710/jscl.v5i2.31139>.

of the 10th century AD.⁵ The elite household of the Abbasid dynasty absorbed large numbers of enslaved young women. These women are provided by commercial services drawn from various areas bordering Arabia. These women were recruited to be domestic servants⁶ and at the same time, forced to serve their master's lust.

Another thing that happened in Afghanistan is that women are the most vulnerable, whose rights are often ignored by men. They are insulted and mistreated when they are in public. Name-calling on women shows disrespect and humiliation and shows that they are excluded from involvement in their community. For example, the names *Zaifa* (Weak) and *Ajiza* (Disable) indicate that all women are weak and do not have the same interests as the rights of men. Although Islam has given more rights to women, their rights are ignored by the Afghan government; seven men do not recognize that women have the right to live, work, and study on an equal footing with men in society.⁷

In Roman territory, the opposite happened; many women contested to win the emperor's heart.^{8,9} One of them is Theodora, Emperor Justinian's wife, a former erotic dancer. In the 6th century AD, women tried to enter the world of the Roman elite by selling sexual attractiveness.¹⁰

⁵ Matthew Gordon, "Unhappy Offspring? Concubines and Their Sons in Early Abbasid Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no.1 (February 2017): 153–157. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743816001215>

⁶ Ali Raza Tahir and Muhammad Iqbal Shah, "Advances and Challenges: An Analytical Exploration of Women's Struggle for Rights," *Al-Nasr* 3, no. 2 (April-June 2024).

⁷ Sayeed Asif Sayeed Asif Akramy and Ahmad Khan Aiyaz, "Afghanistan Women's Sensitivity to the Negative Nicknames Addressed by Men in Public," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2134256>.

⁸ Emma Nymoen, "The Power of Concubines and Empresses," *BYU Asian Studies Journal* 7, Article 3. 1 (2022), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/asj/vol7/iss1/3>

⁹ Hannah Ferla, "From Concubine to Ruler: The Lives of Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager," *History in the Making* 14, no. Article 7 (2021), <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol14/iss1/7>.

¹⁰ Anise K Anise K Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World, Powerful Concubines and Influential Courtesans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

In the Dutch East Indies during the Dutch Colonial era, many Dutch Indies women were trapped in the world of concubines¹¹ or marriage. It is inseparable from social problems in the life that surrounds it. Poverty, looking for shortcuts to live a better life, sold by his family or husband, or forced by his master to serve his lust.¹² This condition occurred due to the large European population in the Dutch East Indies until 1870. They worked as government employees, colonial soldiers, plantation entrepreneurs, and several small entrepreneurs. The European population increased when the Suez Canal opened, and the development of fast steamers that did not depend on weather conditions replaced sailing ships.

The voyage from the Netherlands to the Dutch East Indies could be shortened by only six weeks.¹³ The development of the European population proliferated when, in 1870, the Dutch East Indies was opened to private entrepreneurs. Many Europeans and new working groups came to the Dutch East Indies. It caused the number of Europeans to increase. Their wives did not accompany their arrival, and most were single. It triggers the occurrence of concubines and disputes. On the other hand, people's social life is trapped in a patriarchal thought pattern¹⁴ which has an impact on the lasting relationship between concubines and disputes. The dominance of men is more significant, which allows women to have less space to be aware of themselves in a marginalized position.

The name *nyai* was given to indigenous women who were used as concubines for Europeans in the Dutch East Indies. The word *nyai* is a general term used to name a concubine. The word *Nyai* or *Nyi* is found in Balinese, Sundanese, and Javanese, meaning woman (young) and younger sister, and it is also used as a term for address. In Malay lands,

¹¹ Moh. Ashif Fuadi, "Perspektif Islam dan Prostitusi: Kajian Historis Praktek Pelacuran dan Argumentasi Fiqh Sosial," *Al 'Adalah: Jurnal Syariah dan Hukum Islam* 7, no.1 (Juni 2022): 88-110.

¹² Willem Willem Walraven, *Eendagsvliegen, Journalistieke Getuigenissen Uit Kranten En Tijdschriften* (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1971).

¹³ Reggie Reggie Baay, *Nyai Dan Pergundikan Di Hindia Belanda [Nyai and Concubine in Dutch-Indies]* (Depok: Komunitas Bambu, n.d.).

¹⁴ Basrin Melamba, "Perempuan Dan Kekristenan Pada Masyarakat Tolaki Dan Moronene Di Sulawesi Tenggara, 1915-1946," *Jurnal Sejarah Citra Lekha* 5, no. 2 (2020): 87-88, <https://doi.org/10.14710/jscl.v5i2.31139>.

the term concubine or munch is more commonly used.¹⁵ The above phenomenon causes many indigenous women to engage in illicit relationships with European men. Two questions arise: are indigenous women involved in concubines or marriages? Second, why was Robinah able to become a respectable indigenous woman in her era?

Methods

This study was historical research formulated with feminism theory. In the historical research method, the stages of research consist of determining the topic (object of research), heuristics (search for sources/collection of research data), source criticism (data verification), selection and categorization, data analysis, and historical writing (historiography).^{16 17 18} We used feminism theory to describe the figure of Robinah, who was able to become a dignified woman in that era who was shackled to the life of a concubine or marriage. Feminism is an ideology of liberation for women.¹⁹

The feminist movement seeks to advocate for women in voicing gender equality and justice, considering that women always experience discrimination due to community construction of men's and women's different roles.²⁰ One form of discrimination often experienced by women is that women are second-class human beings who have the same quality of reason as men,²¹ because women are irrational human

¹⁵ Tineke Hellwig, *Citra Kaum Perempuan di Hindia Belanda*, Trans.: Mien Joebhaar (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2007).

¹⁶ Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Tiara Wacana, 2003).

¹⁷ Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History. A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

¹⁸ Gilbert Joseph Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1957).

¹⁹ Wafda Vivid Wafda Vivid Izziyana, "Pendekatan Feminisme Dalam Studi Hukum Islam," *Istawa: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 2, no. 1 (2017): 139–58, <https://doi.org/10.24269/ijpi.v2i1.366>.

²⁰ Nuril Nuril Hidayati, "Teori Feminisme: Sejarah, Perkembangan Dan Relevansinya Dengan Kajian Keislaman Kontemporer," *Jurnal Harkat: Media Komunikasi Gender* 14, no. 1 (2019): 21–29, <https://doi.org/10.15408/harkat.v14i1.10403>.

²¹ Juniar Alisa, Ela Laela and Rita Nurjanah, "Gender Stereotypes from A Management Perspective: A Literature Review," *Journal of Feminism and Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (2024): 1-18, <https://jurnal.unej.ac.id/index.php/FGS/index>.

beings; they prioritize the emotional side.²² Feminism is a women's movement that rejects everything marginalized, subordinated, and demeaned by the dominant culture in politics, economy, and social life.²³ This study examined the role of Dutch East Indies women in the Dutch colonial era, 1860-1935, in Regentschap Bondowoso, East Java, Indonesia.

This study was based on two groups of data sources, namely primary and secondary data.²⁴ Primary data were obtained from contemporary Dutch Colonial manuscripts, and genealogical line tracing was conducted by geni.com and related to the descendants of George Birnie (a Dutch investor who leased land in Regentschap Bondowoso). The primary sources used include: "Bijdragen tot de Kennis van de Residentie Madoera, Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch Indie" written by J. Hageman, and *Naamlooze Vennootschap Landbouw Maatschappij Oud Djember 1859-1909* written by C. Vermeer. The secondary data were collected from various sites and included published works, research results, and government reports on the problem being studied.

The collected data collected data were referred to as raw data. Other unrelated data may have been recorded outside the scope of research when collecting the data. For this reason, data selection was needed. In the historical method, this stage is called verification or source criticism to determine the validity of the sources so that authentic and credible sources can be found.

The categorized data were the raw material for data analysis, carried out in two stages: preliminary and final. In the historical method, this stage is called interpretation or source interpretation and consists of two activities: analysis and synthesis. The final stage in this study was reconstructing it as a scientific article. We paid attention to the chronological and diachronic aspects of this descriptive and analytical scientific writing.

²² Imam Syafe'i, "Subordinasi Perempuan Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Rumah Tangga," *Analisis: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 15, no. 1 (2015): 143–66, <https://doi.org/10.24042/ajsk.v15i1.716>.

²³ Nyoman Kutha Ratna, *Penelitian Sastra* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2007).

²⁴ A.B. Beni Ahmad Saebani, *Metode Penelitian* (Bandung: Pustaka Setia, 2008); Ema Pratama Agustiningih, Singgih Tri Sulistiyono, and Dhanang Respati Puguh, "Islamic and Dutch Schools in Jambi during Colonial Era," *IHiS: Indonesian Historical Studies* 5, no. 1 (2021): 59–72, <https://doi.org/10.14710/ihis.v5i1.10006>.

Results

Tracing Robinah's Identity

Social phenomena related to concubines or marriage in the Dutch East Indies occurred when VOC officials arrived in the Dutch East Indies in 1600.²⁵ When waiting for a suitable European wife, European men usually satisfy themselves with young indigenous concubines or *nyai*. According to the prevailing custom, the concubine could be ordered to leave at any time by those who wanted her to, although the relationship has produced children. The most terrible fate of concubines occurred in Deli tobacco plantations in East Sumatra, Indonesia. As described by Van den Brand, punishment is often applied after the woman is injured by smearing the body parts with crushed Spanish red chilies.²⁶ The most prioritized area is the pubic area, and the woman is tied naked in front of the house or under the administrator's house. The master is binding because the woman prefers a lover from the same tribe.

Indigenous women are trapped in concubines as a result of the conditions that surround their lives, ranging from poverty, looking for shortcuts to a better life, being sold by their families or husbands, or being forced by their masters to serve their lusts.²⁷ In 1870, well-established European men employed several domestic servants, both male and female, in their homes. They usually worked to become *bongos* for male servants and female maids, who prepared meals, washed clothes, cleaned the house, and slept with their masters. In colonial society, social boundaries were firmly established between the colonial group as rulers and the colonized group (Inlanders).²⁸

The phenomenon of concubinage or marriage, which was difficult to separate from the lives of Indigenous women in the 1860s era, still leaves the lives of women who are lucky and not trapped in the

²⁵ Reggie Baay, *Nyai dan Pergundikan Di Hindia Belanda [Nyai and Concubine in Dutch-Indies]* Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2010).

²⁶ Jan Jan Breman, *Koelies, Planters En Koloniale Politiek. Het Arbeidsregime Op De Grootlandbouwondernemingen Aan Sumatra's Oostkust in Het Begin van De Twintigste Eeuw* (Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij, 1992).

²⁷ Willem Walraven, *Eendagsvliegen, Journalistieke Getuigenissen Uit Kranten En Tijdschriften*. (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1971).

²⁸ Singgih Tri Singgih Tri Sulistiyono, "Nasionalisme, Negara-Bangsa, Dan Integrasi Nasional Indonesia: Masih Perlukah?," *Citra Lekha* 3, no. 1 (2018): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.14710/jocl.v3i1.17912>.

life of concubines or marriages. We applied feminism theory to place women in a position that deserves to be respected and appreciated by men. This lucky woman is named Robinah. Robinah (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* in 1933) was born on 18 August 1844 in Gambangan District Mahesan Regentschap Bondowoso. Robinah is the daughter of Mr. Grimin and Mrs. Sayah. Robinah's parents are Madurese, the largest ethnic group in the Regentschap Bondowoso area. There needs to be detailed information about the factual background of Robinah's family life. Robinah's face is less beautiful than that of European, Javanese, or Sundanese women. JS Brandts Buys, the Dutch and non-permanent correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, wrote in a series of articles on Madura Island that:

Madurese women need to be more graceful and authoritative. The bone structure is too rough for that [and] his countenance is too thick. The little girls are far away finer but soon become rough as they grow up.²⁹

Another opinion of Hageman is that one can immediately recognize Madurese women among hundreds of Javanese and Sundanese women.³⁰ The only positive thing about Madurese women is that they have excellent and plump breasts. These beautiful breasts become a consideration because they do not wear a *kemben* (a piece of cloth worn to flatten the breasts). Madurese women are considered to have a strange habit of carrying anything (bottles, teacups, baskets of food, and merchandise) with their heads held high, something that Javanese women would never do. Thus, her breasts become nice and plump because the muscles are pulled up, indirectly tightening her breasts. Most likely, one of the attractive sides of a Madurese girl named Robinah is her beautiful and plump breasts.

On the other hand, Robinah also lives in a village, allowing many women to have relationships with those who both need work. The life of a woman named Robinah is similar to that of other women in Gambangan village. The majority of people's economic lives depend on tobacco plantations. Tobacco plantations require many workers, both

²⁹ Buys JS Brandts, "Madoera," *Djawa* 6 (1926): 369–74. *Djawa* 6 (1926): 369–74.

³⁰ JCZ Hageman, "Bijdragen Tot de Kennis van de Residentie Madoera," *Tijdschrift Voor Nederlandsch Indie* 20, no. 1 (1858): 321–52.

men, women, and children. They start with preparing seeds, planting in paddy fields, treating pests and diseases, sorting tobacco leaves that have been harvested, drying tobacco leaves in the tobacco warehouse, and others. A Dutch investor named George Birnie is looking for female workers to work sorting the tobacco leaves that have been harvested. Usually, George Birnie went into the villages to look for female workers. Interestingly, Robinah was neither a concubine nor a *Nyai* in George Birnie's life but was married to George Birnie until death.

Other women did not feel the good fortune that sided with Robinah in her times. The majority of them are trapped in the life of concubines or mistresses by European men who employ them as housemaids, as well as as a means of satisfying their master's lust. For instance, Saila was born to a low-income family in West Java in 1884. Poverty had forced Saila to work at a young age to help her family's economy. Saila becomes a housemaid and a mistress or *Nyai* for her master, Eduard. From Eduard, he finally had several children. However, her fate was tragic because Eduard, who worked as a prison warden, was killed by one of the inmates.³¹ Another story of Roebiam, who comes from a small village in a region on Java Island; because of his poverty, he signed up to become a contract laborer on a tobacco plantation in Sumatra. Roebiam became a concubine, or *Nyai* from Haarlem, who worked as an assistant at the tobacco plantation where Roebiam worked. Based on the results of the concubine relationship, Roebiam has two children. The two children were eventually brought by Haarlem back to the Netherlands while Roebiam remained a contract laborer. There are still many indigenous women with their status as concubines or *nyai* who need clarity of marital status.

George Birnie falls into Robinah

George Birnie (See Figure 1) owned the great company of NV Landbouw Maatschappij Oud Djember, which was engaged in the plantation sector.³² George Birnie was born on 28 April 1831 in Deventer, Overijssel, Netherlands. George Birnie's father was named Johan Willem Birnie. His mother was Maria Louiza van Schuppen.

³¹ Reggie Baay, *Nyai Dan Pergundikan Di Hindia Belanda [Nyai and Concubine in Dutch-Indies]*. (Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2010).

³² Latifatul Izzah and Suharto, *Maraknya Investor Eropa Menanamkan Investasinya di Jember Pada Era Kolonial* (Jember: Bhinneka Pustaka, 2021).

George Birnie's siblings were Aleida Birnie; Anne Philippine Caroline Birnie; Pieter Birnie. About Birnie's personal life, he was a religious person, a simple and hardworking man. George Birnie came to the Dutch East Indies because he was accepted as a civil servant in the Dutch Colonial government as a *controller* and still did not have a wife. Being a *controleur* allowed him to contact the governor and the residents. He built good relations, making him familiar with many people. This ability made his business grow up. The house where he lives in Jember was far from the luxury of a President Director of a great company, NV Landbouw Maatschappij Oud Djember. The house was made of bricks, but it was straightforward, with the roof made of *well* (a roof made of leaves), just like ordinary people's houses. Even though the employee's house was like a clerk, he had a luxurious house. Below is a photo of George Birnie with his grandchildren, son-in-law, and son (See Figure 2), as well as a photo of George Birnie's residence in Jember (See Figure 3).



Figure 1. George Birnie in 1900
Source: KITLV collection photos, number: #15325



Figure 2. Hans Birnie (George Birnie's grandson) son of Willem Birnie jr; George Birnie; Adèle Birnie-Kauschmann and her husband Frans Birnie (son of George Birnie) 1900

Source: KITLV collection photos, number: #28707



Figure 3. George Birnie and Gerard David Birnie's house in Jember before 1888.

Source: The book commemorates the 50th anniversary of the establishment of "Naamlooze Vennootschap Landbouw Maatschappij Oud Djember 1859-1909" which was officially published by the Director of Naamlooze Vennootschap Landbouw Maatschappij Oud Djember, Dr. C. Vermeer (Deventer, September 1909).

In everyday life, Birnie also felt the thrill of romance. The vibration of his love was not tied to a European girl but to an ethnic Madurese girl from Gambangan Village, Mahesan Regentschap Bondowoso District named Robinah (See Figure 4). It is unknown exactly when Birnie married Robinah, but their love should be appreciated. There is no news from the records found during the study that Birnie had an affair or remarried another woman, especially a European woman. It was evident from Birnie's love for Robinah, which was shown by bringing Robinah back and forth from Jember to Deventer, the Netherlands, where Birnie and his parents live (See Figure 5). Birnie proudly showed his parents and family at Deventer Holland. It proved that he put Robinah as a native woman who deserve to be proud.³³ This condition made Robinah feel comfortable. Robinah's clothes in Deventer were the same as those of Dutch women. Her love for Robinah came to her death, as did her love for her husband, George Birnie. It was evident that Robinah accompanied him to live in Deventer until Birnie died. George Birnie died on 20 May 1904 in Deventer, Overijssel, Netherlands. Robinah died on 29 September 1912 in Deventer, Overijssel, Netherlands.



³³ Hongli Lv. "A Comparison Study of Concubine Yu and Cleopatra," *Scientific research An Academic Publisher* 9, no.3 (March 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1108563>.

Figure 4. Robinah (left), George Birnie's wife at George Birnie's house in Deventer Netherlands year 1900

Source: KITLV collection photos, number: #28707



Figure 5. Robinah (left), George Birnie's wife, George Birnie (four from left) at George Birnie's house in Deventer Netherlands 1900

Source: KITLV collection photos, number: #28707

Dignified Indo-European Descendants

Robinah was one of the lucky indigenous women in the Dutch Colonial era. George Birnie put Robinah not as a mistress or a *Nyai* but as an honorable woman to accompany Birnie's life. It was evidenced by the birth of Birnie's nine sons, which resulted from his marriage to Robinah. His sons became dignified Indo-European descendants because Birnie recognized and legalized his descendants by adding Birnie's name after the names of all his descendants. As an illustration to strengthen that George Birnie recognized his descendants when the media exposed the names of his children, "Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad," 12 August 1933, No. 211.

The marriage between George Birnie and Robinah Birnie was blessed with nine children, including (Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad in 1933):³⁴

- a) David Birnie was born in Jember on 21 October 1862 and died on 21 October 1931 in Haarlem, Noord-Holland, Netherlands;
- b) Carolina Birnie was born in Jember on 24 February 1864 and died on 5 November 1933 in The Hague, The Hague, South Holland, Netherlands;
- c) Maria Louise Vermeer Birnie was born on 6 January 1866;
- d) Willem Birnie was born in Jember on 19 January 1868;
- e) George Louis Johan Birnie was born on 31 May 1869 and died on 15 June 1942 in Voorst, Gelderland, Netherlands;
- f) Frans Johan Carel Birnie was estimated to have been born in Jember on 21 November 1870;
- g) Otto Birnie was born in Jember on 9 March 1878;
- h) Rabina Aleida Birnie, was born on 26 June 1879 in Velp, Gelderland, Netherlands;
- i) The ninth son is unknown.

The first son, David Birnie (See Figure 6), was born in Jember on 21 October 1862. His wife named Hillegonda van Delden (See Figure 7). David Birnie had two sons, including Pieter Albert Birnie and one man (unknown). Finally, David Birnie continued the business of his father, George Birnie, with M. Sanders (son-in-law of Gerard David Birnie, George Birnie's cousin). Under the leadership of David Birnie and M. Sanders, NV Landbouw Maatschappij Oud Djember further spread its coverage to Regentschap Bondowoso, Oost Java, Midden Java, and Sumatra. David Birnie died on 21 October 1931 in Haarlem, Noord-Holland, Netherlands. The following was the figure of his wife, Hillegonda van Delden.

³⁴ *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 12 August 1933, No. 211.



Figure 6. David Birnie, the first son of George Birnie with Robinah in 1880

Source: KITLV collection photos, number: #15322



Figure 7. David Birnie with his wife Hillegonda van Delden year 1886

Source: KITLV collection photos, number: #15323

The second son was a daughter named Carolina Birnie (See Figure 8), born in Jember on 24 February 1864. Her husband was Hendrik Johannes Haverman. Carolina Birnie (Carolina Haverman and Birnie were the names after marriage, with the addition of Haverman) had two sons, George Philip Haverman and Rabina Haverman. Carolina died on 5 November 1933 in The Hague, South Holland, Netherlands. Carolina and her husband were not involved in her father's plantation business.



Figure 8. Carolina Birnie

Source: Latifatul Izzah and Suharto, *Maraknya Investor Eropa Menanamkan Investasinya di Jember Pada Era Kolonial* (Jember: Bhinneka Pustaka, 2021).

The third son was also a daughter named Maria Louisa Birnie or Maria Louisa Vermeer-Birnie (with the addition of her husband's name, Vermeer), born on 6 January 1866. Her husband's name was Christian Vermeer. Christian Vermeer was the person George Birnie trusted to be the Director of Naamlooze Vennootschap Landbouw Maatschappij Oud Djember. Maria Louisa Vermeer Birnie had one child named Alida Christina Rabina Vermeer. It was not known when Maria Louisa Vermeer-Birnie died.

The fourth son, Willem Birnie, was born in Jember on 19 January 1868. His wife was Aleida Birnie Folkertsma. Aleida Birnie Folkertsma was the daughter of Gerard David Birnie (George Birnie's cousin) and Djemilah Birnie. Willem Birnie was also missing from his father's board. George Birnie had no children from his marriage. It was not known when Willem Birnie died.

The fifth son, Georg Louis Johan Birnie (See Figure 9), was born on 31 May 1869, and his place of birth is unknown. His wife's name is Louise Berkhout. Georg Louis Johan Birnie did not join his father's company, George Birnie. He had no children from his marriage.

Georg Louis Johan Birnie died on 15 June 1942 in Voorst, Gelderland, Netherlands.



Figure 9. Left: Louis Birnie (son of George Birnie), right: Frans Birnie (son of George Birnie) 1920. Wreath laying over the grave of George Birnie (founder) at the fiftieth anniversary of the Naamlooze Vennootschap Landbouw Maatschappij Oud Djember company

Source: KITLV collection photo, number: #32988

The sixth son was Frans Johan Carel Birnie, estimated to be born in Jember on 21 November 1870. Like Willem Birnie, he was not in the management of the company owned by his father, George Birnie. His wife's name was Franzisca Julia Adelheid Kauschmann. It was unknown how many sons he had nor when he died. His wife, Franzisca Julia Adelheid Kauschmann, died on 13 January 1928, buried in Bondowoso (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 14 January 1928).³⁵ The seventh son, Otto Birnie, was born in Jember on 9 March 1878. Otto Birnie did not join his father, George Birnie's company, and it was unknown when he died. The eighth son was a daughter named Rabina Aleida Birnie, born on 26 June 1879 in Velp, Gelderland, Netherlands. The husband's name was Jan Vleming, and he had two sons, NN Vleming and NN Vleming. Rabina and her husband also did not help her father, George

³⁵ *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 14 January 1928.

Birnie's plantation company. It was unknown when he died. George Birnie and Robinah Birnie's ninth son was unknown.

Previous descriptions show that the descendants of the marriage between George Birnie and Robinah are of dignified Indo-European descent. The children of George Birnie and Robinah's marriage hold honorable positions in the company owned by their father (George Birnie), and some live in the Netherlands with respectable positions. This condition is inversely proportional to Indo-European children due to concubinage or marriage. They are often separated from their mother because their father does not want their mother. Indo-European children were poorly received in white, brown, or yellow society. Indo-Europeans unite harmful elements of the two worlds present within them. "They just inherited the ugliness of Europeans, which only gave them a talent for bad traits. They are highly impressionable, especially through bribery."³⁶ Westerman's minor proposition is evidence that European and indigenous families do not desire the presence of Indo-European descendants.

Robinahs Role in George Birnie's Business

In 1859, George Birnie decided to quit his job as a *controller*. He joined his colleagues C. Sandenberg-Matthiesen and AD van Gennep to open a tobacco company near the location of the Sukowono tobacco company. There was an interesting story about George Birnie's decision to apply for a pension to the Dutch colonial government from his job as a *controleur*. Starting from a resident report to George Birnie quoted by R. Broersma that:

"One day, a resident was at the government coffee plantation in Birnie's control district and complained to the supervisor that the garden had been damaged by black monkeys, who had crammed under a shady tree and destroyed it."³⁷

³⁶ Willem Willem Westerman, *De Tabakscultuur Op Sumatra's Oostkust* (Amsterdam: University of Michigan Library, 1901). (Amsterdam: University of Michigan Library, 1901).

³⁷ Roelof Roelof Broersma, *Besoeki Een Gewest in Opkomst* (Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema's Boekhandel, 1912).

George Birnie, superintendent in the District of Jember, did not like this statement and considered it untrue. In his daily report on his civil servant work, he explained that "since his visit, no more monkeys have been seen in the government gardens." The government did not believe George Birnie's report and transferred him to Lampong District, where he was given a higher salary. However, he felt that the country was alienating him. Finally, he decided to quit his job as a *controller*. George Birnie was already attached to the Jember area. Hence, he decided to return and settle in Jember, despite knowing that the geographical conditions of the Jember area are still primarily swamps and many are covered with forests. However, George Birnie's feeling said differently that the climatic conditions of Jember were very suitable for growing tobacco. In his observation, the uniqueness of this area was in July, August, and September, when rain and the air were humid and suitable for planting tobacco.

Birnie learned from his predecessor company, Sukowono Tobacco Company, that there was no need to apply for a land lease to the government; they just stayed. After settling and domiciled in Jember, he partnered with C. Sandenberg-Matthiesen and AD van Gennep, who founded a tobacco company. Its establishment was completed, the capital collected was small, there was no labor, and transportation was difficult. The first attempt by George Birnie was to select fields and dry fields and work with residents to plant tobacco seeds.³⁸ Birnie worked with the residents in the Sukowono sub-district (a part of the Sukokerto District) to plant his tobacco seeds. In its development, Birnie slowly worked with the residents to drain the swamps, clear the forest, and prepare the acquired land for planting.

It requires a guide who can communicate with most of the Madurese population. Indeed, it took work for him to communicate with the residents due to the different language used. Robinah's role was decisive for the development of George Birnie's company. Robinah's communication with the indigenous people to find employment was the key to the success of Birnie's company. The availability of labor is one of the factors supporting the sustainability of large plantations. Likewise, with the rental of land owned by residents and the purchase of resident land, Robinah's significant role was decisive. Robinah's

³⁸ Roelof Broersma. (Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema's Boekhandel, 1912).

competence in communicating with Madurese and Javanese benefited Birnie's business.

The method used by George Birnie to get land owned by residents was by asking residents to plant tobacco seeds for him. Robinah later replaced mediation with the residents as his wife. George Birnie gave tobacco seeds to be planted on people's land. When the planting was complete, three months demanded constant care and attention from George Birnie. From July to October, George Birnie and the locals who planted tobacco had to inspect the plants so that caterpillars or other things did not damage them. After the harvest, it must be paid to George Birnie at an agreed price. The price was never less than *f (gulden)* 20 per thousand trees that managed to grow. From the approximately 13,000 trees planted by per-bow, about pf were successful, so residents get much income for four months growing tobacco. Tobacco cultivation only took four months to harvest, making the residents comfortable. Eight months remain, and their land could be replanted by planting rice. Residents never asked for the rent of the land because George Birnie paid the tobacco yields. They said that these were large and had never been obtained before. It indicated that the population favored this kind of cooperation model.³⁹

After harvesting tobacco, the following process was drying the tobacco leaves in a drying warehouse, which required much energy. The method used by George Birnie was to go to nearby villages to look for female workers. There is an interesting story about George Birnie entering the villages looking for female workers. Many women are afraid and run into his house. The fear of these women was very discouraging, and George Birnie was worried. Luckily, a significantly older woman informed that the women feared George Birnie's long beard. Receiving this information, George Birnie finally went home, shaved his beard, and returned to the village the next day with a less scary face. It turned out that the village women were willing to accept George Birnie's arrival to work in George Birnie's tobacco drying warehouse. Robinah quickly did this work. Robinah communicated with residents to find workers, both men, women, and children. Robinah's ease of communication with residents impacted George Birnie's business. George Birnie's company, Landbouwmaatschappij

³⁹ Roelof Broersma. (Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema's Boekhandel, 1912).

Oud-Djember, was the largest company with the most significant land lease rights compared to companies owned by other investors (See Table 1).

Table 1. Names of plantation companies leasing land in the district of Jember year 1879-1883

No	Plantation Company Name	District	Area of Rights Erfpacht (bouw)	Year of Rent
1	Landbouwmaatschappij Oud-Djember	Jember	1374	1879
2	Landbouwmaatschappij Oud-Djember	Rambipuji	6433	1881
3	Landbouwmaatschappij Oud-Djember	Mayang	5603	1881
4	Internationale Crediet en Handelsvereniging Rotterdam	Tanggul	827	1881
5	Cultuurmij. Djelboek	Tanggul	1493	1881
6	Landbouwmaatschappij Besoeki	Rambipuji	888	1882
7	Landbouwmaatschappij Besoeki	Jember	706	1883

Source: Departement van Binnenlandsch Bestuur, Lijst van: Particuliere ondernemingen in nederlandsch-indie op gronden door het gouvernement afgestaan in huur (voor landbouwdoeleinden) en erfpacht 1914 (Batavia: Landsdrukkerij 1915).

Discussion

The discussion section of the input text focuses on the following key points. The prevalence of concubinage and *Nyai* relationships in the Dutch East Indies during the colonial era was significant due to various socioeconomic factors. These relationships were common between Dutch men and indigenous women, often resulting in mixed-race

children. However, the case of Robinah and George Birnie presents a unique deviation from this typical narrative. Robinah's status as a lawful wife to Dutch investor George Birnie set her apart from the more common concubine relationships. This legal marriage elevated Robinah and her descendants' social standing compared to children born from typical concubine arrangements. Robinah played a crucial role in Birnie's business success, particularly in the tobacco plantation industry. Her linguistic skills and local knowledge facilitated communication with indigenous workers and aided in land acquisition, contributing significantly to the plantation's growth. The economic opportunities in Regentschap Bondowoso may have influenced the dynamics of such relationships in that region, potentially reducing the prevalence of concubinage. Additionally, Birnie's background as a former colonial official likely influenced his approach to local interactions and his decision to marry Robinah legally.

Economic factors frequently serve a crucial function in enabling cross-cultural unions, particularly regarding marriages between Indonesians and Dutch individuals. These unions facilitate economic advancement and cultural exchange, allowing individuals to integrate diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and access global markets. Families engaged in such marriages may attain enhanced financial stability through dual-income households and the potential for resource sharing, thereby improving their quality of life. Furthermore, recent scholarship acknowledges that disparities in language and education can influence these unions. Research on motivations for language acquisition indicates that the practical advantages of multilingualism, especially in economically beneficial collaborations, play a significant role in managing cross-cultural interactions.⁴⁰ Economic motivations extend beyond financial considerations to encompass aspirations for social mobility and access to broader networks, highlighting the complex relationship between culture and economy in these unions.

This case highlights how some relationships between Dutch men and indigenous women could deviate from the typical concubinage model, resulting in more equitable partnerships and elevated social status for the indigenous women involved. The Dutch East Indies

⁴⁰ Patricia A. Duff, "Commentary: Motivation for Learning Languages Other Than English in an English-Dominant World," *The Modern Language Journal* 101, no. 3 (September 2017): 597–607, <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12416>.

colonial era saw widespread concubinage between Dutch men and indigenous women. However, Robinah and George Birnie's case was unique. Their legal marriage elevated Robinah and her descendants' social status compared to typical concubine relationships. Robinah's linguistic skills and local knowledge were crucial to Birnie's tobacco plantation success, aiding communication and land acquisition. The economic opportunities in Regentschap Bondowoso and Birnie's background as a former colonial official may have influenced this atypical relationship. This case demonstrates how some Dutch-indigenous partnerships deviated from the concubinage model, resulting in more equitable unions and higher social standing for the indigenous partner.

The unique case of Robinah, an indigenous Madurese woman who became the lawful wife of George Birnie, a Dutch investor, rather than a concubine. The dignified status achieved by Robinah and her Indo-European descendants contrasts with the often marginalized position of children born from concubinage. Robinah's significant role in George Birnie's business success, particularly in facilitating communication with local workers and land acquisition. The impact of Robinah's competence in communicating with Madurese and Javanese people on the growth of Birnie's tobacco plantation company. The economic opportunities provided by the tobacco industry in Regentschap Bondowoso may have contributed to fewer women being trapped in concubinage. George Birnie's background as a former colonial official is essential in his approach to local interactions and his eventual marriage to Robinah. The discussion highlights how Robinah's case diverged from the standard narrative of indigenous women in the Dutch colonial era, emphasizing her elevated status and the positive outcomes for her descendants.

Cultural settings significantly impact how people act in society and interact. It is especially true in mixed marriages like those between Dutch and Indonesians. Indonesian culture is mainly shaped by its many customs, which stress unity, family ties, and communal values. These values guide how people interact with each other and act in social situations. Dutch society, on the other hand, leans toward individualism. They often value independence and personal freedom, which can be seen in how they make decisions and deal with others. This difference in cultural frameworks creates chances and problems in weddings between people from different cultures. When people from different

cultures join, it can take effort to figure out how to handle family duties and demands. Additionally, looking at people's charitable actions in these situations shows complex connections, where gender and family structure significantly affect how much people give.⁴¹ These cultural details are essential to understanding how mixed marriages between Indonesians and Dutch people work. They also show how culture and social institutions are connected.⁴²

The intricate dynamics of Indonesian-Dutch relations are deeply interwoven with the historical colonial frameworks and economic interactions, revealing profound sociocultural currents beneath the surface. In its pursuit of supremacy within the Indonesian archipelago, the Netherlands instituted political and economic structures that would fundamentally influence the trajectories of both societies for generations to come. The Dutch colonial system established rigid hierarchical frameworks, favoring European cultural standards while systematically eroding local governance and customs. Their identification of Wehali illustrates it as a ritual center where traditional authority was maintained under colonial oversight.⁴³ This disparity in power relations cultivated a distinctive amalgamation of cultural interactions, primarily through intermarriages, which arose as a reaction to the economic practices dictated by complex frameworks of social organization and exchange.⁴⁴ Thus, these marriages may be perceived not solely as individual unions but as critical social phenomena, embodying broader transformations in identity and relationships influenced by a colonial legacy.

Navigating the complexities of cultural identity within mixed Indonesian-Dutch families presents significant challenges that require careful consideration. Individuals in such families often struggle with

⁴¹ Pamala Wiepking and René Bekkers, "Who Gives? A Literature Review of Predictors of Charitable Giving. Part Two: Gender, Family Composition and Income," *Voluntary Sector Review* 3, no. 2 (July 4, 2012): 217–45, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204080512X649379>.

⁴² Alberto Alesina and Paola Giuliano, "Culture and Institutions," *Journal of Economic Literature* 53, no. 4 (December 1, 2015): 898–944, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.53.4.898>.

⁴³ Tom Therik, *Wehali: The Female Land: Traditions of a Timorese Ritual Centre*, 2nd ed. (ANU Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.22459/WFL.2022>.

⁴⁴ Karl Hutterer, *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Prehistory, History, and Ethnography* (U Of M Center For Southeast Asian Study, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.19412>.

divergent cultural norms and values, leading to identity conflicts and cultural fragmentation. This ambivalence is exacerbated by societal perceptions that may reduce their multifaceted identities to oversimplified stereotypes or homogenized narratives. As indicated by the discussions on super-diversity, migration changes social configurations, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of identity that transcends rigid categorizations.⁴⁵ Moreover, the interplay between culture and institutions can further complicate belonging; cultural legacies influence institutional dynamics, shaping family interactions and societal acceptance.⁴⁶ Thus, for children in mixed families, the quest for belonging is not only a personal journey but also a reflection of broader social realities that continually shape their lived experiences and identity formation.

The legacy of the colonial past substantially influences modern societal institutions, especially with mixed marriages between Indonesians and the Dutch. Colonial encounters generated enduring power dynamics and social hierarchies that continue to affect relationships in contemporary society. Historical stratifications have shaped familial connections and cultural exchanges, resulting in a complex environment where mixed marriages vary widely among groups. This marriage's amalgamation of Eastern and Western ideals frequently signifies continuous debates of identity, belonging, and position within a post-colonial context.

Analyzing these relationships elucidates how colonial legacies influence individual agency and collective identity, thereby uncovering the insights presented by Sujay Rao Mandavilli and identifying significant yet frequently neglected impacts on society systems.⁴⁷ Moreover, as highlighted by the accessibility of essential resources via open access platforms, academic discourse persists in elucidating these interconnected histories, prompting a reassessment of dominant social narratives concerning mixed marriages in Indonesia and the Netherlands.

⁴⁵ Steven Vertovec, *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203503577>.

⁴⁶ Alesina and Giuliano, "Culture and Institutions."

⁴⁷ Pamala Wiepking and René Bekkers, "Who Gives? A Literature Review of Predictors of Charitable Giving. Part Two: Gender, Family Composition and Income," *Voluntary Sector Review* 3, no. 2 (July 4, 2012): 217–45, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204080512X649379>.

Couples from different countries or cultures getting married, like those from Indonesia and the Netherlands, not only join together as a couple, but they also challenge traditional social norms. Diverse ideas, customs, and values often come together in these marriages, leading to rich cultural exchanges and possible conflicts. Understanding and tolerance between people of different ethnic groups can grow through mixed weddings. These marriages break down walls that keep stereotypes or social divisions alive. However, navigating these relationships can be challenging, with problems like family resistance and social pressures that can make it harder for the couple to fit in with each other's groups. Understanding how mixed marriages affect social change and harmony is essential for overcoming these problems. It can be done through sociological research examining how power and identity work in these unions.

Social class often dramatically impacts how a marriage works because it shapes people's beliefs, choices, and behaviors within a union. When people from different social groups meet, they may have to negotiate difficult issues related to cultural practices, money management, and family roles. For instance, when Indonesians and Dutch people marry, their different socioeconomic statuses could lead to power differences or disagreements about making decisions and raising children. According to research, when there is more social variety in these situations, there are often new ways of identifying and socially categorizing people, making standard marriage norms more challenging to follow. Weddings are places where cultural and economic differences meet, which can be good and bad because of inequality. If these issues are not dealt with, they could worsen social divides and make it harder to build truly fair partnerships. It shows how important it is to consider how social class affects mixed marriages.

Conclusion

The poverty that hit the Indigenous people in the Dutch East Indies during the Dutch Colonial era had an impact on the rise of Indigenous women to support the economy of their families. The only way that these women can do this is to become contract laborers or housemaids in well-established European families. Although men can do these jobs, the conditions surrounding low-income families allow women to work in the same field as men. There are many reasons why indigenous women also work and want to be made concubines or Nyai

by their masters, namely poverty, to gain a better life, being sold by their families or husbands, or being forced by their masters to serve their lusts.

However, not all indigenous women were trapped in the lives of concubines or women in their era. An indigenous woman named Robinah became an honorable woman in her time. The number of jobs offered in the Regentschap Bondowoso, especially tobacco plantations, impacted the prosperity of the people at the time. This condition allows women not to be trapped in a life of concubine or marriage; moreover, investors (George Birnie) who initially worked as a civil servant in the Dutch colonial government as a controller accustomed to dealing with residents in his working area. Birnie's habit of visiting the villages to find workers for his tobacco plantations allowed him to be interested in choosing the woman he preferred.

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