

Whispers and Gazes: A Postscript to the Semarang Comfort Women Incident

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On August 15, 1945, the war between Japan and the Allied nations formally ended, but the tensions between defeated Japan and the victorious Allies, the incomplete realization of the longed-for Indonesian independence, and the lack of leadership created chaos in immediate postwar Indonesian society. People in camps expected to have instant liberty and return to their sweet homes. Unfortunately, the social situation outside of the camps' fences was rather dangerous due to Indonesians' passion for independence and the disorganized social order which was guarded by the disarmed Japanese military under Allied Forces' orders.

On September 8, nearly one month after the end of the war, RAPWI units finally parachuted into Jakarta as the first Allied representatives on Java, others soon arrived in Surabaya and other European population centers. These RAPWI officers were charged with oversight and investigation of the situation during and after World War II.¹ Their primary tasks concerned their fellow Europeans, and they immediately visited internment camps in Batavia. All the residents of the Tjideng, Kramat, and Adek camps, man or woman, young or old, looked starving and weak, a condition certainly made especially noticeable by the later wartime period with its limited rations, and the postwar period, with its even greater chaos in ration provision.

In this period, people in the camps enthusiastically informed the Allied military representatives about wartime problems. Fueled by their anger, envy, and hatred, complaints often focused on Japanese military behavior, especially camp guards who were the most visible "Japanese" for most Europeans and Eurasians.² Other targets included European and Eurasian "traitors" who used fellow Europeans for their own material gain or empowerment under the Japanese military regime, and those who became close to Japanese military personnel and thus apparently made their own life easier.³ Report-

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¹ RAPWI (Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees) units were sent by Mountbatten's South East Asia Command at the end of the war.

² According to Utsumi Aiko, quite few Koreans were posted as camp guards in Java. As a result of their position and visibility to the eyes of Europeans, the number of Koreans who were convicted in the BC class war tribunal in Batavia was high relative to the total number of Korean paramilitary troops (Utsumi 1982).

³ NSBers, members of the pro-Nazi political party Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland, were another target for investigation. In this paper, however, I would like to exclude this issue because there is no *direct* relationship to the primary issue being addressed here.

ing to Allied authorities probably increased the tensions which saturated each camp and the European and Eurasian community outside.

Kramat Camp was one of the camps with a high priority for interviewing, because of its location in central Jakarta. However, it was also the camp where former comfort women of Semarang case and their families were interned with other civilian women and children. In this paper, I will describe former “comfort women” and their families’ war-time lives after the scandalous Semarang Comfort Women Incident. I will also discuss how the camp atmosphere and emotions of internees changed through time through an analysis of the memories and testimonies in relation to colonial discourse.

16th Army’s Understandings of Semarang Comfort Stations as Incidents

In early March 1944, four comfort stations were publicly opened in Semarang, the third biggest city in Java, located on the north-central coast. These comfort stations were, however, closed less than two months after opening due to an order from the 16th Army government in Jakarta. It was unusual for comfort stations, except in locations facing intense combat, to be opened for such a short period, since comfort stations existed almost everywhere the Japanese military invaded or occupied. The comfort stations then sometimes ran even after battle situations became critical.⁴ These four comfort stations, all managed by Japanese civilians, were seen as “extraordinary” cases by the Japanese military authorities because of the way and/or places of recruitment of these 36 comfort women.⁵

In late February 1944, a group of Japanese military, civilians and Indonesian police visited 7 women’s internment camps in Central Java, including a couple of Ambarawa camps and the Lampersari camp.⁶ These Japanese asked European camp leaders to create a list of women who were between 18 and 28 years old, and ordered them to line up in the office.⁷ Some Japanese camp leaders or European commanders like those in Lampersari Camp refused to cooperate. However women in 4 camps, namely Ambarawa 4, Ambarawa 6, Moentilan, and Halmaheira followed the order under pressure from (or fear of) the camp commanders based on past experience with Japanese guards, like in Ambarawa 6, or

⁴ A naval military police officer, Nogi Harumichi, has written about his experience on Ambon. One chapter about comfort women described brothels being kept open even during air raids (Nogi 1975).

⁵ There have been two major reasons suggested for the rush to recruit women and create new comfort stations in Semarang in 1944. One reason suggested was an epidemic of venereal disease among currently employed prostitutes; healthy women were necessary according to the military perspective. The second was that a new academy to train young officers would be soon established in the Semarang area and a number of youths were expected to arrive in the area (see Yoshimi 1995 and Yamamoto and Horton 1997).

⁶ This visitation seemingly took place on different days, but in all cases it happened between March 23 to March 25.

⁷ The ranges of the ages are slightly different in each interview document, as some informants said from 16 to 28, and some said 18–25. However, there was no authoritative document indicating the age of the youngest was 16 or 17, and more documents stated 18, so I employ age 18 as the starting age. For the same reasons, the oldest age is listed as 28 instead of 25 (“Interview 332b” [14 December 1945] and “ProcesVerbaal Politie [no. 3, 10 January 1946]).

simply without thinking about the reason for this curious request, such as in Ambarawa 4.⁸

A couple of days later, on February 26, the Japanese and Indonesian group came back to the camps with lists, summoned the women on the list, asked them to pack their belongings within one hour, and to get on the bus. Mothers and other women in each camp reacted and protested their daughters and the other young girls being taken away. In Halmaheira Camp, camp commanders, the mothers, and other women screamed, cried and chased after the bus all the way to the camp gate as if they already knew what was going to happen to their daughters. Facing this severe protest, uniformed Japanese shot their guns into the air to make them more submissive. In Ambarawa 4, the women asked the Japanese for the reason the girls were being taken away and received an answer that they were going to work outside of the camp, but they did not expect these women would “work” as prostitutes. As a result, there was no significant protest there.⁹ In Ambarawa 6, while some reports stated that the Dutch commandant protested, other reports noted that the camp commander calmed down the mothers and other women and mothers. She even convinced them that if they protested, the selected women would not be able to bring even one suitcase with them.¹⁰ In Moentillan camp, some women noticed something was wrong and something bad might happen to these young women, and 6 married women came forward and asked the Japanese to let them replace these selected 6 young girls. Both young and married women were taken, but 5 days later, 2 selected young girls were returned to Moentillan.¹¹

The women were taken to a large luxury colonial house on Kanarielaan in a suburb of the city of Semarang. Compared to the situation in the camps, this building provided a heavenly atmosphere with a soft mattress bed and a beautiful cabinet. The food provided was not comparable to the food in the camps. All reminded them at the time of wonderful colonial period which was just two years earlier. The fact that there was no apparent reason for this wonderful treatment, however, made them feel rather scared, and that something was not right. Their intuitive sense was unfortunately correct. One night after dinner, a small sheet of paper was passed to each of them which they were required to sign.¹² Basically they could not refuse and had to sign it, despite not knowing the content because it was written in Japanese. It was an agreement to become a prostitute, currently called comfort women.

The next night, each woman was put into an individual room to sleep, and a Japanese medical

⁸ The camp number for Ambarawa 4 is confusing as it was changed to Ambarawa 9, and thus it is dependent upon the time period. However in this paper, I use Ambarawa 4 due to the testimonies of one of the camp commanders showing detailed information about the name change (PN 3209 “Cover note”).

⁹ “Additional Report.” One testimony asserts that the “whole camp protested, but to no avail,” and that once the Japanese insisted and told them family could follow in a few days “nobody knew what to think of it all because in Soerabaja no-one had been troubled yet ... that was why the mothers did not distrust the Japanese.”

¹⁰ “Report on Taking Away Girls from Camp 6—Ambarawa end February 1943.” Furthermore, women responsible for encouraging camp residents to gather to [almost] protest were later berated by Dutch camp authorities for embarrassing them, and asked “what would you have done?” and “do you want to take over our jobs?”

¹¹ “ProcesVerbaal van Getuigenverhoor, 18 Febr. 1948”; “ProcesVerbaal van Getuigenverhoor, 24 Febr. 1948”; “ProcesVerbaal van Getuigenverhoor, 25 Febr. 1948.”

¹² Testimonies by O’Herne, Proces Verbaal (No. 3, 10 January 1946); “Interview 322b” (14 December 1945).

doctor (who committed suicide after the war) visited each woman and gave each woman a medical exam. Some women were raped by him, according to postwar interviews. In the night, one woman became psychotic and was sent back to the Camp Ambarawa 6 where she came from. One girl was found to be under age. She was still 15 years old and was sent back to Ambarawa 6 as well. Another girl was found to be a Japanese–Dutch mixed blood, and she was sent back to the camp where she came from. Jean O’Herne, who has testified many times and even written about her own experience in the 1990s, cut off her hair and climbed up a tree to try to prove her insanity. The women who replaced young women as “volunteers” told other the young women that they expected this to happen much earlier.

On March 1, the women were separated and sent to four comfort stations, Seiunso, Futabaso (Paralelweg 2, opposite to Hotel de Brussel), Hinomaru (former Hotel Splendid), and the Shoko Club (on Oei Tiangweg). Consequently, all four were officially open from that day. Except for the Shoko Club, these comfort stations were open to both military personnel and Japanese civilians. Here, of course, “Japanese” included Koreans and Taiwanese who were part of the Japanese colonial empire. “Customers” could reserve either the evening or all night. The price was fixed; 3 guilders for civilians and 1.5 guilders for military personnel, with 30% of the tariff going to the woman. These women used the money to buy food,¹³ as well as to book time for themselves without customers and decrease their work load.¹⁴

The existence of the comfort stations was never a secret but due to unusual process of establishment, these comfort stations were some of the most well-known places among residents of mid-Java. Eurasians, whether they were inside the camps or outside of the camps, men or women, young or old, Japanese proper or naturalized Japanese, and even civilians and soldiers knew something was wrong.

Aline, the elder sister of Jean O’Hearne, was one of the people who heard about the comfort stations, but she also received a letter from Jean. Unlike Jean and her two younger sisters, Aline was registered as being of French descent. Although France was an enemy country, due to the existence of the Vichy French government, the French were not seen as an enemy of Japan. Aline could live outside of the camps and worked as a nurse in the Semarang clinic of a Chek doctor, Dr. Zikel, where Japanese civilians were also coming as a patients or as a friend of the doctor. Aline asked Zikel what she could do to help her sister. Dr. Zikel introduced his Japanese friend, Aoyagi. Aoyagi knew that he could not take Jean away from the brothel but he could book himself nights in order to help her avoid receiving any guests.¹⁵ However, he needed money to buy the time for her. Dr. Zikel and Aoyagi provided cash for this effort. Aline also asked her friend in Semarang to help. As a long term resident in Semarang, she knew trustful Japanese and introduced a Japanese civilian friend who worked in N.I.S., who might be able to help Jean. He also could not get her dismissed her from the brothel but he could do the same thing that Aoyagi had done. The Japanese person, Aline and her friend all worked hard to

¹³ E. van der Ploeg, “ProcesVerbaal OM 10212/N” (16 October 1946).

¹⁴ Information from a girl from Ambarawa 4, “ProcesVerbaal,” 13 Febr. 1946.

¹⁵ “Een Sukkelachtig Japanner,” *Het Parool* (January 29, 1972).

gather money for Jean. Although these five people tried to support and protect Jean, providing the booking fee for every night was not possible. Eventually Aoyagi and the other Japanese ceased visiting Jean, and she also had to receive guests. The N.I.S. employee decided to visit Bandung to inform higher military authorities about the situation in the brothels.¹⁶

Jean O'Herne's situation, with support from outside the brothel from her sister, however, was very remarkably good, at least compared to the situation of other women in the brothels. According to her post-war testimonies, she even could refuse the 30% from the brothel managers. The majority of women, however, reluctantly took guests during the evening and nights unless a medical doctor recommended them to rest. Elly van der Ploeg has testified that she used the 30% pay for booking herself or to purchase food and medicines. Some women had regular guests and suggested other women to follow that strategy in order to survive easier. A couple of "volunteer" women reportedly selected their guests and sent drunk men or men that seemed likely to have venereal disease to young girls in order to make their own life in the comfort station easier.¹⁷ This of course made other women's lives worse. Thus, even from this time, not all women in the comfort stations were sympathetic to each other, but rather there was sometimes hostility and tension, and this discordance would be clearer at the time when Allied officers started to interview with them in the post-war period.

Near the end of April, without any notice, the four comfort stations were closed.¹⁸ Japanese military officials came to ask women to pack their belongings. Soon, they were relocated to a newly established camp, Kota Paris Camp, which was opened on May 9, 1944. It was situated in an unusually cool area within the tropical climate of Indonesia, outside of Jakarta in the city of Bogor where the Dutch Governor General's mansion was located. Until their arrival in the Kota Paris Camp, most of these former comfort women were worried about where they were being sent. Their concern disappeared when they were reunited with their mothers and sisters. Without telling, their family understood what these 36 women had to go through and most of them were accepted warmly by their family members. The camp was occupied by more than 200 women and children categorized as "citizens of Japanese enemy," however unlike most camps in Indonesia, these internees were not from the local region but were former prostitutes and their families from Central Java. Although there were women from other comfort stations and probably former lovers of Japanese, this unusual camp was basically created for and dedicated to women who were utilized in the four famous Semarang Comfort stations and their families immediately after the Japanese 16th Army administration found out about the problematic establish-

¹⁶ "Proces-Verbaal OM/4050/R" (27 Maart 1946).

¹⁷ This is largely an issue of perspective. No woman would choose to take drunk or diseased men, and so if refused by one woman, they would naturally go to the others; "sent" or not sent, the result would be the same.

¹⁸ There have been various reasons provided in public discourse about the reasons that these comfort stations were closed, such as that one of comfort women's fiancées was a Japanese officer and that he reported to Tokyo about the illegal process of recruitment, Jean O'Herne's Japanese guest went to Bandung to ask for assistance, or that mothers of comfort women from Ambarawa 6 told an officer who just been appointed in Central Java about the process of the recruitment and concerning their daughters conditions.

ment of the comfort stations in Semarang.

The agitation of Japanese military officials with respect to the Semarang case also appeared in Jean O'Herne's post-war interviews: "shortly before this [closing brothels] order was given, there appeared two Japanese in our brothel, dressed in civilian clothes, who asked us whether we had been compelled to prostitution or not and whether we wanted to stay there or return to our camps A similar visit by Japanese was repeated various times afterwards, even when we had already been transferred to Kota Paris. Moreover we were once visited by Japanese who spoke English, who gave us the opportunity to make a report of our experiences. We had to give full particulars and he added that we were free to tell the truth even if this constituted a charge against the Japanese."¹⁹

The uniqueness of the camp also appeared in the amount of rations, medical care, and strict morality of the guards toward internees. All of them then received protections such as greater rations of food and medicine compared to other civilian camps in Java, regular medical check-ups, as well as extremely morally strict military guards, as if the 16th Army were trying to compensate for the illegitimate recruitment of women by middle-ranking officers and soldiers in Central Java. The camp guards, for instance, had a rule prohibiting any camp guard from taking any internees out of the camp. However, there was no written statement of the consequences for violating this rule. Marginally important, but interesting documents related to military lives such as *senjō nisshi* [battlefield daily journal] include small pieces of information related to this problem, such as a notation about military ethics such that "XX took a woman last night and did not return until morning." Even the Dutch commander of the camp Ambarawa 4/9 complained that a couple of ladies were very famous as camp flowers and invited Japanese and Korean guards to date, often going outside the fence.²⁰ In the case of Kota Paris Camp, however, the enforcement of military ethics was extremely strict. One day, a camp guard engaged in sexual violence towards a woman in the camp. He was not only stopped but later was executed in front of the internees in the camp, as if the leader of the military guard tried to enforce strict rules, as well as to make internees feel protected from any sexually unethical behavior.

Whether or not the camp situation helped these women and their families to overcome their tragic past, the isolated and protected situation was soon ended with the worsening of Japan's war situation. Despite the lack of combat in the most populous areas of western Indonesia, the war certainly influenced the governing of Indonesia. Because of the decreasing the number of Japanese soldiers and in order to more efficiently control enemy citizens, the camps in Java were increasingly centralized. In November 1944, Kota Paris Camp was closed. Consequently, these internees were moved to Camp Kramat III which nearly 3500 women and children had already occupied. Even in this large camp, the Semarang victims and their families were continuously separated from other internees, and moreover

¹⁹ "Proces Verbaal Politie" (No. 3, 10 January 1946).

²⁰ "Statement OM/596/N."

continuously received special care from the Japanese military. In this context, it was important that the Semarang comfort women's case was well known among the Dutch and Indo community in Indonesia. It was so famous that even people in camps far away from Central Java knew about the incident. In the initial period, they received deep sympathy from the other internees. These internees could apparently understand and accept the different treatment and better conditions of these former comfort women and their families.

The already poor condition of camps deteriorated rapidly after May 1945, around the time Germany surrendered and Japan's inevitable eventual loss became too hard to hide. Internees from other camps were relocated to new areas and to the centrally located camps like Tjideng and Kramat where the former comfort women and their families were located. As the camps became larger, the population density became extremely high, rations of food and medicine became smaller and smaller, and the tension and anxiety of internees became higher than ever.²¹ In this condition, the sympathetic atmosphere of Kramat gradually changed. Within the same camp territory, the dissimilarity on former comfort women and their family compounds were obvious. They could receive quinine from time to time, but other women and families simply suffered from Malaria, and in the worst cases lost their lives. The food ration shortage caused starvation as well.

Life-threatening conditions were on one side, and availability of sufficient rations was on the other side of a fence within Kramat Camp. Facing losing friends and families to death, in addition to struggling to survive from day to day, their limitation of the both physical and emotional energy led to envy and anger toward these former comfort women. Even the envious feelings and feeling of "unfair treatment" generated suspicions, and consequently consensus about women and Japanese servicemen's relationships inside the fence of the Kramat Camp. Within the camp, occasionally these former comfort women were verbally and loudly condemned from the other side of the camp. In times of hardship, people often help each other and emerge with the strong solidarity among by themselves. Sadly, in the case of Kramat Camp, instead of creating solidarity to help each other for survival, due to the obvious different condition of two sides of the "fences", hatred and bitter feelings toward the former comfort women seemed to have built up the emotional energy within one side of the fence. Of course, there were a variety of reactions; postwar testimonies show that some did not care or even still sympathized with these former comfort women and their families.

The suspicion, stigmas, and hatred atmosphere also appeared in the former comfort women's compound. However these were not shown toward the other side of fence but within their own side of

²¹ Report on Kramat Camp (3 October 1945). Kramat camp was divided into two sides by barbed wire; one side was occupied by women and family related to the Semarang prostitution incident, and continually received high food and medicine rations as well as good medical treatment.

the fence. In this case, the complex feelings toward former volunteer comfort women who substituted themselves for other young women at the time of their recruitment; feelings which had been germinated from the time of their experiences in the Semarang comfort stations. These women were disgracefully called “volunteers,” “hoers” [whores], and “prostitutes” by the women who were forced to be in the same brothels. Additionally, it seems that some former comfort women and their families accused these women of being the cause of their receiving nasty gazes from the other side of the camp. No matter what the initial motivations were to become comfort women, some of these women without doubt saved other women who were almost taken to the comfort stations. In the end, rumors, cold eyes, distrust, and accusation abounded in Kramat camp.

On September 8, the first RAPWI units landed in Jakarta. Their primary concern was to understand the situations of camps and their fellow European population. In late September, Dutch POWs returned to work as well and eventually collected the information on camps during the war. Kramat was one of them and officially the camp commander submitted the report on accommodation, treatment, food situation, corvée, medical attention, and transportation. The report vividly described the former comfort women and their families different condition as “..... in a camp of approximately 3400 persons; approximately 100 were isolated and accommodated fairly comfortably under family conditions; approximately 250 persons, women who worked for the Japanese at bars and other establishments, were subject to strict isolation and were even afforded separate medical attention by a specially appointed Doctor”²²

In October 1945, the Dutch Administration had already started to be concerned with gathering information for trials of war criminals and collaborators. Some of the interviews with former comfort women showed that the focus of the interview was already “investigations on war criminals and collaborators.” Moreover, quite a few young women started to date with young Allied soldiers, and were engaged to them within weeks. This also happened amongst former comfort women as well. In this drastically changing situation for the former comfort women, military officers’ interviews came to be used both for investigations of war criminals and collaborators for judicial purposes and background checks for the marriages of military personnel. Interestingly, the most well-known former Dutch comfort woman, Jean O’Herne, did not mention any help from outside of the comfort stations, no Aline, no Zikel, no Aoyagi, no friends of Aline those who helped her went through the problematic period. The majority of compelled comfort women at least mentioned or even denigrated the volunteer women in their statements. Some volunteers were even mentioned by name with indications that they had good relationships with Japanese. In this period, knowing Japanese people, and especially obtaining their help, could be a point of suspicion of collaboration with Japanese. Marginalized former comfort

²² Report on Kramat Camp (3 October 1945).

women seem to have been especially careful not to remember good treatment during the war but rather to remember deteriorated conditions or problems from Japanese or people who were related to Japan or even people outside of the camps.

Conclusion

In the course of the last twenty years of post colonial studies, scholars have searched for a way to overcome the simplistic dichotomous structure of colonial discourse, i.e. west and east, we and other/they, white and others, or colonizers and colonized. In the discourse of colonialism in the post-colonial period, West, White, and Colonizers have been allocated into the arena of domination. The case of the Semarang incident was however initially anticipated to provide one concrete subversive case of the colonial discourse amongst scholars. It was neither a case of white domination nor victimizer but rather whites as victims of Oriental domination. Though through the last twenty years of discourse on comfort women, the reputations of limited witness' testimonies with excerpts or interpretation of the archival documents on the Semarang incident has encouraged a different set of dichotomous understandings of simple colonial or military-governed social situations; namely of Japan as dominator or victimizers and non-Japanese as subordinate and victimized. Despite changing the main roles in the colonial theater, the cognitive structure of colonialism in post-colonial studies has been conserved and strengthened, as a result actors who did not fit the discourse could be neglected and consequently forgotten. In this celebrating colonial discourse, the comfort women have to be presented as the total victim in order to lay comfortably, and people who supported and helped comfort women or young women were either forgotten or reluctantly discussed with abundant pejorative calls.

During the period of toward the end of WWII and post WWII period, socially marginalized "forced comfort women" also had to participate in identifying another marginal group who were labeled as "volunteers." Thus these women were not only repressed but repressed other women. Through the sensational political discourse in the last twenty years, the memories of comfort women in the Semarang incident also have encouraged and emphasized images of these innocent young women as total victims while disgracing other women and displacing them from the history of comfort women.

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