IN 1985 I CAME ACROSS a thirty-page handwritten letter dated 28 October 1876 by a certain Frans Carl Valck, who was then Assistant-Resident on Sumatra's East Coast. It was addressed to someone named Levyssohn, with whom the writer seemed to have had an ongoing correspondence (Valck thanks him for his advice in a previous letter). Levyssohn might have been a family friend (Valck sends greetings to his “sweetest wife”) and influential enough that he might pass on Valck’s troubling observations to the powers that be. Henry Levyssohn Norman, I learned later, was a former law school classmate of Valck’s in Leiden, recently promoted to the Raad van Indie, the advisory body to the Governor-General in Batavia.

On its own the letter was of unusual interest on several counts. It was catalogued in the personal documentation center of the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology library in Leiden with no accompanying private or official correspondence. Its author’s name appears in no colonial or contemporary histories of Sumatra’s East Coast. It was written eleven days after what subsequent accounts have referred to as one of the “most horrendous” multiple murders of Europeans in the plantation history of Deli, in which the wife and two young children of a planter named Johannes Luhmann were knifed and dismembered by workers formerly employed on Luhmann’s estate. What is remarkable in Valck’s letter is that it is not about the horror of these mutilations. Instead it indicts Luhmann and other Europeans for their brutalities; it names names, giving detailed testimony to the atrocities perpetrated by these people, whom Valck calls “so-called pioneers of civilization.”

In this essay I draw on the dense corpus of correspondence and official missives about the Luhmann family murder that circulated between 1876 and 1877 between Valck, military commanders, high officials in Batavia and in the Hague. But it is Valck’s narratives about the murder—three composed in late October and one in December 1876—that frame my argument. I take them as an entry point to explore the kinds of stories people told about violence, the sorts of cultural knowledge on which those stories were based, and the “storeyed” levels...
through which those accounts were written and should be read. These narratives trace a compressed time during which Valck’s genealogy of violence shifted as East Sumatra’s subject population exploited European confusions about what their expressions of violence meant. As importantly, Valck’s letters allow us to see beyond an omniscient colonial apparatus to one peopled by agents whose imaginations propelled their actions, a perspective in which fact with fantasy together constituted the realizing of violence and what were deemed appropriate measures to counter it.

Within a period of several months in 1876, Valck and other Dutch civil servants, military personnel, and European planters exchanged hundreds of reports expressing their own versions of what was causing arson, rampage, and murder on Sumatra’s East Coast. There are striking discrepancies in these accounts, despite their often common sources. Was the Luhmann murder an isolated incident or, as Valck contended, part of a patterned response by Asian workers to European abuse? Were ethnic Gayo woodcutters among the assailants; were they individual workers bent on revenge against Luhmann or guerrilla supporters assaulting a generic European in a continuation of the Acehnese resistance to Dutch rule? Should the consistency in these stories, a certain density of agreement among versions, serve to discount alternative versions? Or does such agreement merely indicate shared cultural assumptions that provided a common standard of reliability? Did Valck and other colonial agents really know what was going on?

With Valck’s impassioned and contrary letters in hand, I sought to find out how much his reconstructions were at odds with other official versions, how deeply they went against the grain. But reading Valck’s narrative alongside the others was more difficult than I had imagined. Genealogies of the murder varied as did the physical settings and psychological motivations that were assumed; some related the event to the Aceh war (hundreds of miles to the north), while others personalized its origins in a planter’s abusive character. The narratives displayed different rhetorical strategies, slipping between visual and verbal evidence and appealing to rumor to buttress one version or dismiss a counterclaim. Paradoxically, what they held in common—a loosely conceived colonial logic—only underscored what set them apart as individual planters and officials appropriated that logic differently to interpret what some had never seen but thought they knew. Reference to a common set of dichotomies ordered their plots: they distinguished between personal acts of revenge and collective political acts, between criminality and subversion, between the order of the plantations and the disorder of the hinterland, between “war” proper (as in Aceh) and labor “disturbances” (as in East Sumatra), between loyal subjects and enemies of the state. But their stories contested each other in their uneven adherence to (and suspicion of) the very dichotomies on which they drew. More pointedly, these dichotomies rarely seemed adequately to explain the forms of dissension they confronted on
the ground. These forms were both personal and political, cutting through the ethnic divisions and animosities on which Dutch authority rested.

The task then is clearly not to identify a “fixed” and singular social context and then to plot a constellation of biased and intentionally designed stories told to obscure it. Nor would I argue that we, unlike contemporary actors, are handicapped by not being privy to the “crucial facts.” Both these rejected premises assume a subtle metanarrative that would subsume the apparent incompatibilities of different texts and contexts in a coherent and unified frame—which I am convinced it would not. These conflicting texts may rather represent what Michael Taussig has called an “epistemic murk,” an “unstable interplay of truth and illusion” where narratives mediated fears of violence and fashioned colonial imaginations. I suggest that this murk may have dimensions that are part of, but not reducible to, the distinction between fiction and fact. These stories indicate a fractured social reality, one derived from fragmented knowledge as well as from competing hierarchies of credibility through which violence was read. Thus, for example, both Valck’s and the military commander’s contrary readings drew on a common colonial logic that was filtered through and limited by different local channels through which they could learn about what was transpiring on Deli’s estates.

But, as importantly, Valck’s knowledge was limited and shaped by different members of Sumatra’s indigenous and immigrant populations who played European fears and rumors of revenge back on their authors. In the highly fractious social and political environment that characterized Deli’s “pioneering” years, rumor occupied a charged cultural space for planters, military personnel, and civil servants. Workers, in turn, further disrupted European stories of native violence, interrupting official efforts to identify the sources of violence and its “real” perpetrators. More directly, European knowledge was shaped by Gayo, Javanese, Malay, and Chinese assailants who, in writing their own acts of violence in such ambiguous ways, assured that they could rarely be easily and neatly read. While subalterns are silenced in European accounts, the conflicting meanings of their seemingly straightforward deeds of theft and arson cut through the official texts, suggesting kinds of subversion that joined speaking about violence and realizing it in more disruptive ways than we might have imagined.

Valck and his agents filled the gaps in their knowledge with culturally reasonable conjectures, thereby making their stories both persuasive and relevant to a class-, gender-, and race-specific audience. Plantation unrest was easily subsumed by a cultural logic that explained “coolie outbursts” as “instinctual responses” of revenge or alternately as actions orchestrated by “outside agitators” on an otherwise passive population. Not least important to the credibility of these accounts were shared conceptions about the psychological vulnerability of whites in a tropical milieu, their susceptibility to cultural and moral contamination by those they
were there to rule. Thus, for example, the Director of the Civil Service criticizes the inept performance of Valck’s superior, S. Locker de Bruine, but forgives his transgressions because “in his association solely with native heads he has taken over some of their inertia.”

This essay deals at one level with the relationship between the rhetorical strategy we bring to such texts and the rhetorical strategies of our sources. How do we ethnographically read these stories and write a kind of history that retains the allusive, incomplete nature of colonial knowledge? How do we represent that incoherence rather than write over it with a neater story we wish to tell? How do the individual psyches of agents such as Valck interact with collective strategies of domination on the ground? Here I attempt not only to sort out the multiplicity of motives and intentions but to capture the gossamered climates of violence in which these stories are told. These stories are not incoherent because of rumor. Rumor is a key form of cultural knowledge that, in Deli, shaped what people thought they knew, blurring the boundaries between events “witnessed” and those envisioned, between performed brutality and the potentiality for it.

**Valck’s Reading**

**and Reading Valck**

When I was appointed Assistant Resident of Deli, I knew very well that I would not land in a “bed of roses”; but that I would find such an Augean stable as I did here, I could never have imagined.

In opening his letter to Levyssohn with the above observation, Valck prepares his reader for the Herculean task with which he is faced and the heroic stance he as an individual must assume to confront it. Valck’s letter is striking because it may be one of the earliest personal statements that directly charges Deli’s planters with severe maltreatment, outright murder, and mutilation of Asian workers. Stylistically, it is a highly self-conscious text, both tentative and bold, with carefully chosen examples and a cautious effort to avoid the sensational. It is a narrative of inversions: colonizers rather than the colonized are condemned for their violence; “delinquents” are not recalcitrant workers as for the planters, but Europeans instead. Standards of “barbarism” are turned on their head. In Valck’s hands, rumor represents reasonable conjecture, a legitimate (if still dubious) measure of the publicly denied and unspeakable “facts” of life and labor on Sumatra’s East Coast.

Explaining the serious shortage of labor on the estates he writes:

It would be a miracle indeed, if respectable Chinese coolies would be attracted to a place where coolies are beaten to death or at least so mistreated that the thrashings leave permanent scars, where manhunts are the order of the day. . . . Just recently I heard a rumor about a certain European who prided himself on having hung a Chinese, only having cut
him down after the coolie had turned entirely blue (people say that it was probably a bluff, but this sort of bluff is same as committing the act). The brave one who is thought to have done this was Heer Luhmann: I mentioned this sample of humanitarianism to a planter who answered me, “No, I heard this about someone else.” Who this other one is I don’t know, but I do know that such unheard-of things occur or at least have occurred. I won’t even mention the case of the cut-off ear kept in alcohol as a curiosity by a down-and-out tanner from Batavia. . . . but I mean inhumaneness that brings the greatest disgrace upon humankind.15

Valck charges the planters with barbaric brutalities toward their workers but more pointedly accuses them of participation in a conspiracy of silence, deceit, and terror in which their reports “contain some truth but more often are filled with unashamed lies.” His challenges are aimed at both subordinate European “no goods” and the “gentlemen” of the largest plantation companies with their “blood-stained hands.” Commenting on his investigation of the fatal beating of a Chinese coolie by the planter Nederveen Pieterse, he writes:

[The Pieterse affair] has taught us a noteworthy lesson. The gentlemen of the Deli Company and the most important planters have gone so low as to hold back witnesses and to assure they disappear. One of them admitted this to me personally, and another said, “All of us have been guilty of things such as those that occurred at Rudolphsburg [Pieterse’s estate].” All of these men have been accomplices in the offenses committed by Pieterse; by assisting him they have shown themselves to be a tightly grouped gang of Cartouche. It is anything but an enviable task to have to fight against them. If only you knew all that has happened here; if only you could hear what the planters themselves have to tell, even though that of course can never be proved; you would be deeply saddened. Heaven knows how many Chinese have been killed and tortured by the so-called pioneers of civilization! Be assured, my friend, that there are several among them who would not consider it a heinous wrong to do away with a government official who would dare to reveal their crimes! But I better leave it at this, for you might start to accuse me of exaggeration, and that I don’t want. “To go beyond the point is to miss it,” as the song so rightfully says. (Emphasis added)16

Valck’s personal and private account confirms much of what some historians have surmised from other sources: that a climate of violence and a complicity of silence marked colonial capitalism in one of the most lucrative and lauded plantation regions of the Netherlands Indies from its formative period through its later expansion.17 As Valck so aptly put it: “People make such a great to-do over the enormous development of this region, but [it] is as thin as cat-ice.”

Explanations of the silence permeating this climate of violence, however, are more problematic. Jan Breman contends that government officials systematically covered up what they knew about the Deli situation.18 I have argued somewhat differently that the planters saw themselves pitted against state authorities, secreting what they construed as their “private” affairs from public scrutiny in an effort to keep disciplinary measures in their own hands.19 Valck’s letter alludes to a more ominous scenario still: that planter violence could turn on government agents themselves. However, neither account captures what colonial agents knew
and how they knew it, what they talked about and to whom, which stories were discredited as rumor and suppressed, which rumors were inscribed as evidence and “fact.” Neither addresses a particular colonial reality in which violence was experienced as both ordinary and outrageous, silenced and ever present in the stories people listened to—what they chose to repeat, what they refused to say about what they knew. Nor did colonial bureaucrats and planters not speak the unspeakable. Valck’s letter to Levysohn and even his official reports refer to the rumors passed on by “reliable” sources, to “what planters themselves have to tell,” to the stories planters told to one another or selectively fashioned for Valck.

What was happening on Sumatra’s East Coast in 1876? Is there a baseline set of conditions to retrieve from the convergence of these stories about the Luhmann family murder and other assaults on European persons and property? What would be appropriate to establish as “context”—what Valck was cognizant of during his short sojourn in Deli’s plantation belt, what military officials reported following their reconnoiters in the villages and forests abutting the estates, or what Maj. H. Demmemi, the military commander for the region, feared in his fixation on the Aceh war?

Deli’s plantation belt had been “opened” for just over ten years on Sumatra’s eastern coastal plain when Valck took over as Assistant-Resident. While the Dutch Indies state in the colonial heartland of Java was firmly entrenched in the nine-

![Figure 1](image-url)
teenth century, on its periphery the state apparatus was minimally manned and for all intents and purposes absent from most of the daily workings of the emerging plantation economy. In the 1870s government agents such as Valck were assigned multiple administrative roles (over prisons, police, courts, and land lease contracts) and were largely dependent (for lodging, comradeship, and information) on the very planters they were charged to control. Valck's local inexperience and marginality from the planters' inner circle may partly account for his frequent appeal to the reliability of rumor about what he could not know.

The European planters, for their part, were confronted in the 1870s with a thinly populated region where Malay fishermen and farmers under local sultanates and shifting cultivators of ethnic Batak origin could neither be coerced nor cajoled to work for the estates. Recruitment, retention, and confinement of labor remained their most pressing problem through the early twentieth century. The earliest tobacco estates in the 1870s were worked by Chinese procured through "coolie brokers" in Penang, Singapore, and China. Recruitment from Java started more slowly, but with the opening of the rubber estates after the turn of the century it became the principal source of labor.

In 1876, recruitment practices were so problematic that British and Chinese authorities from both China and Penang threatened to prohibit shipments of workers to Deli's estates.20 That same year a major inquiry on the labor situation targeted a central issue: the conditions under which a worker could be compelled
to remain at her/his place of work. When Valck came into office the punishment for a worker's breach of contract was under continued debate, culminating in the landmark 1880 coolie ordinance, the first in a long series of government penal regulations for indentured “contract coolies” on the East Coast. Valck's predecessor, Hallewijn, had sided with the planters in arguing that Deli's estate industry was unique in the Indies, that its viability would be jeopardized if stricter punishments for recalcitrant workers were not enforced. But high officials in Batavia were unconvinced. Contrary to planter pressure, an 1876 ruling forbade the forced return of workers to those estates where they had breached their contracts. Valck not only supported the new ruling (thereby pitting himself openly against the major company heads) but interpreted it to read that trangressors were no longer legally bound to return to their estates at all, thereby releasing them from repaying the three-month advances by which they were initially recruited.

As subsequent government reports made clear, Valck's interpretation was seen as far too “generous.” That workers could not be forced back to their estates was never meant to suggest that they should not be brought back to their estates by other means. According to Valck's severest critic, G. S. H. Henny, the Director of the Civil Service, Valck had actually encouraged vagabondage in the region by allowing excoolies to choose twelve days in prison in lieu of either repaying their advances or working through the duration of their contracts. But Valck's misinterpretation does not really explain why Deli was overrun with clandestine forest encampments and who was in them. What was the relationship between the estate enclaves and the rural hinterland? Or is it anachronistic to speak of such a clear distinction at all? Why was there such a large roaming population of unemployed men?

Valck was caught in the line of fire; the planter constituency was bent on mobilizing labor in increasing numbers but controlling its mobility through ever more coercive and state-endorsed measures. On the other side was a growing population of migrant workers whose ties to the estates were minimal and whose refusal to submit to penal sanctions remained strong. More importantly, those sharp political divisions between ethnic groups described for the late-colonial Indies—Batak pitted against Javanese, Gayo against Malay, Chinese against Javanese—were more fluid in late-nineteenth-century Deli than most histories lead us to imagine. When military agents “discovered” jungle encampments on the plantation peripheries, they found that these refuges were not limited to ex-Chinese coolies in one place and Gayo resistance fighters in another but consisted of hundreds of Gayos, Malays, Chinese, and Javanese hiding out together in makeshift shelters. This “vagabond” population refused to work for the estates but instead lived off them, carrying out night raids in search of food, weapons, clothing, and cash. “Vagabondage” thus characterized a Sumatran underclass whose members either were rejected from the estates or maintained only equivocal ties to them.
The Deli “labor problem” is, however, only one context for these stories. In 1876, the Acehnese resistance to Dutch rule, in which Islamic religious leaders took an important part, was still going strong three years after it had begun. Southern Aceh abutted the Langkat district in the northern plantation belt where Luhmann’s plantation lay, and an increasing number of men from Aceh had moved down to these estates to seek work as more trading activities were cut off by Dutch blockades. Among these were many Gayo, a highland tribal group that, despite its long subjection to Acehnese influence, had remained neutral in the war. By the mid 1870s, however, as Dutch troops moved closer to their homelands, more Gayo faced the choice of submission to Acehnese authority, of surrender to Dutch rule, or of flight into the forests from both. Whether the Gayos who worked for Luhmann were partisans of the war or pacifist refugees is unclear. Valck and his contemporaries appear to have had only the vaguest notions of where these Gayos came from and with whom they were allied. In official missives, the terms Gayo and Acehnese are distinguished in some accounts and used interchangeably in others. How did Valck and his fellow reporters know how to tell a Gayo thief in the night from an Acehnese dissident? As we shall see, these terms often served to mark not ethnic identity but those whose actions were to be classified as “common criminal” or “insurgent rebel.”

Valck’s Audience

In his letter to Levyssohn, Valck is angry, anguished, frustrated, and despairing. But he is also curiously ambivalent about how much he wants the “facts” about European atrocities communicated and to whom. Aware that his observations and actions will leave him open to serious criticism and opposition, he seems more concerned that he will not be believed. Valck may have been convinced that his story was suspect because it so boldly contradicted at least one version of the dominant official script: that Deli was flourishing and profits were secure because both planters and coolies were “in hand.” As he wrote Levyssohn:

If you think I paint a darker picture of the situation, that I exaggerate, I repeat that the situation is as bad as it can be and this is the result of a policy of leniency pursued for years toward the planters... Believe me Levyssohn! I don’t see the situation blacker than it is.

And again:

Don’t think that I write in a moment of agitation. I am totally calm but utterly indignant. Everyday I see more muck that needs to be cleaned up.

For a student of the colonial Indies, Valck’s letter echoes another compelling account, that of Eduard Douwes Dekker, who, under the pseudonym Multatuli, published Max Havelaar two decades earlier, among the boldest and most famous attacks on Dutch colonial policy. Both men were Assistant-Residents. Both con-
demned European corruption and policy based on their experience in their posts. Both were destined for short Indies careers. Douwes Dekker resigned as Assistant-Resident three months after he was appointed, while Valck was transferred out of Deli in less than a year.

Despite these similarities, the contrasts are more telling: Max Havelaar was, in D. H. Lawrence’s words, a successful “tract-novel” considered a “Dutch classic” outside of Holland, with major impact on public opinion and government reform.26 Douwes Dekker attacked the corrupt collusion between Dutch officials and native rulers who together abused privilege and abetted the impoverishment of the rural Javanese. Valck’s accusations, on the other hand, targeted the “cold-blooded” barbarism of Europeans themselves. Douwes Dekker resigned and remained indignant; Valck was indignant and was then dismissed. Valck’s charges against European conduct never received a public airing, nor were they really designed for it. His accusations were so thoroughly expunged from the official record that even his limited readership (his superior officer and advisors to the Governor-General) refused to pass on his observations or even to repeat his words. Valck was erased from colonial historiography, while Dekker became a posthumously widely known and revered antihero. Valck was intent on telling his (in)credible story but seemed to want the “real situation” made accessible only to selective ears. Unlike Douwes Dekker, whose denunciation of Dutch rule was written for and received an immediate popular response, Valck was more circumspect on the issue of public consumption: “It is hoped that such facts as I mention do not become public because our name might then be mentioned in the same breath with that of the Spanish in America [emphasis added].” In his ambivalent but continued identification with Dutch authority, Valck desired only “his excellence the Governor-General and Van Rees [chair of the Indies Council] to know the real situation here.” He criticizes his predecessor Hallewijn for complicity in the planters’ silence, as well as “government people in Batavia [who] have painted the situation entirely the color of roses, however incorrectly.” Convinced that he will be opposed for his actions by planters and government agents alike, he places faith in the Governor-General, who he believes will not share in this condemnation:

What happened to Valck and his letter? He was not destined for long in the civil service. Less than a year after his appointment as Assistant-Resident, he was transferred (in February 1877) to Ambarawa on Java while an extensive investigation of his “serious misconduct” in Deli continued after he had gone. The fol-
lowing year he was honorably dismissed from the civil service and placed on the retired list at the relatively young age of forty-three. At the same time, his supe-
or Locker de Bruine, reprimanded for allocating too much responsibility to Valck and blaming the latter for his own mistakes, emerged from the inquiry with his character intact. What was wrong with Valck? Was he merely a bungling bureaucrat, as some investigators later suggested, or the right person in the wrong place at the wrong time? Were the increased disturbances during his tenure of his own making, as the head of the civil service later argued, or the result of a situation inherited from his successor, as Levyssohn was to assert on Valck's behalf? Or was it, as Valck in his own defense continually claimed, “the result of a longstanding government policy of leniency toward the planters”?

What did Levyssohn do with Valck's letter? None of the communications dealing with Valck's reprimand suggests that his concerns were passed on to the Governor-General, nor that Levyssohn alerted his fellow council members to Valck's warning about European excesses and crimes. Instead, Levyssohn drew on Valck's personal letter extensively but selectively to defend his friend. When the Director of the Civil Service advised Valck's immediate dismissal, Levyssohn refused to endorse it. Rather, he appended a separate defense of Valck's conduct, outlining the “mitigating circumstances.” He argued that Valck's loyalties were never in question; that he was unfairly overburdened, had inherited a neglected administrative situation, had received no guidance from his immediate superior, and that “his shortcomings” had to be “seen in light of a course of events that apparently made his mood oversensitive” (an “agitation” that, we already noted, Valck denied). On 13 August 1877, the Governor-General accorded Valck “a second chance,” on an argument borrowed word for word from Levyssohn's addendum. Neither Levyssohn nor the Governor-General refer to what Valck deemed inhumane about the conduct of Deli's Europeans.

Anatomy of a Murder:
Narratives of Revenge
and Logics of Blame

On the night of 17 October 1876, several members of the Luhmann family were murdered. Valck immediately telegraphed the Secretary General in Java about the event, stating only the following:

Offenders 4 Gayos though mostly kampong people. Appears to be private retaliation in the affair, Malayan kicked by Luhmann. Also issue about clearing forest. As for political motive, there seems to be none.

Valck's brief report five days later to the East Coast Resident, then still posted in Bengkalis far to the south, again stressed Luhmann's actions: “It appeared that by his own confession Mr. Luhmann had once kicked a Malay and was told the
next day that this could have serious consequences for him.” Here, too, Valck notes that the attackers were mostly “from the neighboring villages and that there were only four Gayos and a few Bataks among them.” In all, Valck arrested thirty suspects “who were in possession of bloody weapons and clothing. Many of them were recognized by the daughter of Mr. Luhmann and a few by [his brother-in-law] Mr. Revening.”

With these synoptic statements Valck conveys several points: 1) that Luhmann was responsible for what happened to him; 2) that more Malays were involved in the attack, although Gayos were among the assailants; and 3) that the assault was an act of “private revenge” and not “political,” thereby signaling to his superiors that it was neither instigated by Acehnese supporters nor part of a collective assault on Europeans.

His telegram already disrupts two clearly demarcated categories of colonial logic on the East Coast in 1876. To say that an assault was a private matter was, in planter parlance, to discount its import. For example, the 1925 Deli Plantation Company memorial volume, summarizing assaults fifty years earlier, notes that “people were constantly uncertain as to whether an assault should be considered as ‘hostile’ or indeed only as ‘rapacious’ and ‘cutthroat,’ though in fact people lost goods and lives in both cases.” But Valck was unwilling to dismiss the violence of personal revenge so lightly. He saw a patterning to it and, in his subsequent report, told a story that describes a climate of violence and retaliation, extending beyond the specificities of the Luhmann family murder alone.

Valck’s account of the murder, written a week later, takes on a different cast. Here he provides a careful description of the attack, with the first blow inflicted by “a Gayo, thick-set, dark and with a mustache who was employed at the estate as a woodcutter”; he also gives detailed attention to the specific mutilations of each of the Luhmann family members. I provide his narrative here not to turn violence into voyeurism but because his description and tone contrast so sharply with his own commentary upon it:

Mr. Browne [Mrs. Luhmann’s brother] walked around the house and found his sister lying on the ground. She was slashed in her neck, head, chest, stomach, and both legs. Having gathered some men he brought her home with them. It was a terrible sight. In the rather wide passage that formed some sort of indoor veranda lay the body of the eldest child, Johny, about nine years of age. With one cut the head had been severed off the body. Next to him lay the corpse of little Marthe, about five years of age. The right arm had been severed almost completely from the body by a slash that had opened the chest. All kinds of objects and clothes were also spread on the floor, and in both front rooms of the house. In the one Mr. and Mrs. Luhmann use as a bedroom a wooden chest in which the money was kept had been cut open and the money, approximately 800 dollars, was gone. The fifteen-month-old youngest child who slept there was left unharmed. The room next to it had also been ransacked, but the other backroom, where Mr. Browne lived, remained untouched, although a watch was on the table. This gentleman, after helping to bring his sister inside, went to get Mr. Revening, who was lying on the front indoor veranda and
whose wounds he bound up as well as possible. There were no less than fourteen of them, with one above both brows, one over the chest, and one over the stomach seeming the most serious. The right hand was severed at the wrist. This gentleman was a complete blood-bath. Later, little Clara said that the criminals put her in a crate and hit her several times on her neck with the flat side of a weapon and threatened to kill her if she did not tell them immediately where the money was kept. As soon as she told them the criminals forced the strongbox open and she ran away.

This gruesomely vivid description (taken from Luhmann's brother-in-law's observations) juxtaposes with what follows:

One peculiarity was that a couple of little Manila dogs, which usually began barking at the slightest sound, had remained completely silent; and another thing, without anyone noticing, all around the Chinese barracks there had been traps set to injure the feet of those who went outside when they heard the noise.

Why is this interjection here? Is Valck implying that the assault was carefully planned but that the bulk of the coolie population was uninvolved? Or do these “peculiarities” invoke the mystical powers of the Asian assailants? Was this a carefully arranged theft or an ad hominem attack on Luhmann? Valck continues:

According to Mr. Luhmann and Mr. Browne, the attackers only injured the former in order to scare him and his family off so they would leave the house to allow [the assailants] free play in ransacking the house, which seems to me rather unlikely. According to them, Mr. Revening had been injured so terribly because he defended himself, while Mrs. Luhmann and Johny were killed because they knew many of the attackers, and they [the assailants] feared that later they would point them out as the offenders. (Emphasis added)

Valck rejects this analysis outright and offers a more damning hypothesis, which he also alludes to in correspondence with Levysohn:

However, the question then arises why little Marthe, who was only five years old, was killed and her three-year-old sister, who, as later became evident, knew almost all of the criminals, had been spared? I feel that once blood had flowed, the tiger nature [tigernatuur], characteristic of the Malay, came out and blood thirst [bloeddorst] should be seen as the cause of the crime, which, by the way, was committed in a state of excitement, so it is easier to excuse than the horrors [gruwelen] that are said to be done in cold blood by so-called civilized Europeans on their plantations to the helpless Chinese coolies, horrors that cannot be unknown to the Malay because they were committed over such a long period of time.

Valck’s account here is both ambiguous and contradictory. He constructs a scenario of premeditated action and sensible revenge but explains the “cause” of the crime and its viciousness by appeal to the atavistic “tiger nature” of uncivilized Malays. But it is unclear why the “bloodthirsty” Malays are bent on revenge when it is the Chinese coolies who have been victimized by the planters but here are “helpless” and barred from leaving their houses with “traps” set by the assailants. Racial psychologizing shapes his argument; hot-blooded native rage contrasts
with cold-blooded and calculated murder by Europeans. The excesses of native violence are explicable within a logic that expects natives to express short bursts of passion, contrasting the sustained long-range reasoning on which European violence rests. But Valck deploys this racist logic to turn the prevailing explanation of violence on its head. He argues that the killing “in cold blood” done by Europeans was “the horror” (gruwel) that preceded all other violence and allowed for it.

Valck’s grisly report on the murders was not an end in itself. His graphic narrative directly prepares the reader for his claim that Luhmann and his brother-in-law’s interpretations are incorrect. The assault could not be reduced to a bungled theft because “a watch on the table was untouched.” The assault must have been directed at Luhmann because such excessive violence could only be reactive to the planters’ violence itself—or, put more pointedly, as Valck did, “cruelty breeds cruelty.” In the margin of the text, the Minister of the Colonies in the Hague, to whom the report was addressed, inserted: “What is meant by this? This has to be clarified.”

Anticipating the query, Valck sets out to clarify the situation. Abruptly curtailing the discussion of Luhmann, he shifts to a diarylike chronicle of his own activities on the day in question, providing another context for the story he is intent to tell:

The 17th, the day of the attack on the Soengei Diski estate, I had left for Padang Boelan, in order to go to Soengei Sipoet the following morning to investigate the matter of retired captain of the artillery in the Indies Army, Mr. Nederveen Pieterse, who, among other things, was accused of flogging several Chinese to death, beating others with a rottan whip, and using a copy press to find out the truth when his estate had been burglarized.

Copy presses were a preferred weapon of torture. By cranking the two metal surfaces of the press together, the victim’s fingers were initially crushed and eventually broken. From Valck’s letter to Levysohn we already know that this was the same Pieterse whose harsh treatment of workers had been covered up by Deli’s European elite—and the same individual to whom the Indies army had awarded a distinguished military medal six years earlier. It is also the same Pieterse whose presence as a juror member in the European court had made Valck feel, as he wrote Levysohn, that he could not convene a session without it being a “slap in the face of the court’s dignity.” There is no official correspondence that defends Pieterse or that ventures to describe his crimes. Only Valck’s letter specifies Pieterse’s actions: if not seen as a substantiation of his larger story, the reference to this poorly regarded planter would seem inappropriate if not gratuitous. Pieterse’s behavior was condemned as exceptional by some officials, but it was Valck who was later admonished for having “lost perspective . . . [having] judged all planters alike and considered all equally as cruel as Mr. Nederveen Pieterse.”
Pieterse's placement here underscores Valck's central theme that “cruelty breeds cruelty.” It also resituates the context of the assault, contrasting the military reports that emphasized the Gayos' role in the attack. While working on the Pieterse case, Valck reports that he received two communications, a telegram from the director of the powerful Deli Company about the Luhmann assault and a letter from Maj. Demmeni citing Gayos as the perpetrators. He says that he immediately left for the Soengei Diski estate but was prevented from getting any further than the neighboring Kloempang estate because roads were flooded and bridges were down. He presents this as a fortunate mishap that gave him the opportunity to learn from “Count van Benthem Tecklenburg Rheda several facts that later appeared to be of importance in tracking down the criminals.”

Valck's reference to the planter's titled and full family name may have served to give these “facts” additional authority. But it is the reliability of his own judgment he seeks to affirm, justifying his prudent decision not to go directly to the scene of the crime but to stay at Van Benthem's for an extra day. The reader is left in suspense, since Valck does not say what he learned. Instead, he describes his arrival at Soengei Diski the following morning where, armed with these “facts,” he confronts Luhmann. Interrupting his account with Luhmann's narrative, Valck enhances his own credibility by showing the implausibility of Luhmann's explanation:

In connection with what I had already been told at Kloempang, I asked Mr. Luhmann what could have been the reason for the attack on his plantation and for the murders of his family. He answered that there could not have been any reason because he and his subordinates always treated his Chinese, Battaks, Gayo, and Malays with the utmost humanity [de meeste menschlievendheid]. The previous day he had even given some of them money on the occasion of the end of the Mohammedan fast. Then I said to him that so far all the planters whose plantations had been attacked had given me the same assurance, except for Mr. Droop who admitted having insulted a Gayo headman; that there were rumors [geruchten], however, about things that had happened on each of those plantations that in the eyes of uncivilized people would motivate retaliation; that I had to rely on those statements [verklaringen] and had to take measures accordingly; that those measures might have been wrong because of false information, and that the misery that struck them might have been prevented if the other planters would have told the truth; that I also heard something about him, Mr. Luhmann, that could have caused the attack at his estate, because people had told me that he had kicked a Malay or hit him with a slipper, a fact that I had heard from a reliable person, who in turn could point out the people that had told him.

Rumors here are transformed into actionable evidence by a slight of hand. Valck underscores his argument by quoting his own words in conversation with Luhmann. He recounts how he reprimands Luhmann for withholding information, and with him all the planters. He blames them for forcing him to take these rumors as quotable statements because the “facts” they report are clearly lies. And,
while directing his accusations at Europeans, he invokes the “uncivilized” instincts motivating native retaliation—affirming the very cultural distinctions and racial principles that girded Dutch (and his own) authority.

In self-defense Luhmann recounts the following:

that a certain Djamal from the Kloempang village who was labor crew leader of seven Battaks [sic] came to him on September 11th to talk about the job of cutting some wood. Djamal had already received an advance to hire woodcutters. When he came to talk about the matter there were more people with him in addition to the Battaks. They too wanted a similar contract. Luhmann was willing to pay 30 dollars per square, but Djamal wanted 35 dollars, although the wood was small and easy to handle. Mr. Luhmann refused to pay the extra sum but finally gave in; then they refused to work at all. Having paid the advance Mr. Luhmann got mad and said: “You think you can fool me? If you refuse to work I'll send you to jail.” Then one of the Malays laughed at Mr. Luhmann, who then kicked him, but as he states, without hitting him [sic]. By a Malay version . . . the Malay was kicked down the stairs. Mad, the man ran off, and Djamal said to Mr. Luhmann: “Kenapa toean bikiin begiote ini boekan toean poenja orang, kalau dia bikiin salah saja jang boleh poekoiel” [Why did you do that, sir, he is not your man, if he did something wrong it's me that should hit him]. The next day Djamal returned to say that the man had complained to Mr. van Benthem under whose protection he put himself, and that Mr. Luhmann should expect trouble [soesah].

At one level, Luhmann's actions seem motivated by a similar impulse to that of George Orwell's district officer in his story “Shooting an Elephant”: both feared to look the fool and responded with brutality to defend their own tenuous standing and that of their European compatriots. In Orwell's story that fear prompted the pointless shooting of an elephant; in Luhmann's case, his family were the victims of his violent deeds. However, it is difficult to tell where Valck's story begins and Luhmann's ends. Valck never grants Luhmann a first-person voice but tells his story for him, referring throughout to “Mr. Luhmann” and “this gentleman.” In contrast Djamal, the Malay foreman, speaks in his own—albeit carefully excerpted—words. This is one of the few Malay language entries in Valck's narrative (or for that matter in any other of the reports).37

Why does Luhmann report Djamal's words in Malay, and why does Valck choose to repeat them? Perhaps because this bracketed Malay testimony underwrites and authenticates their separate claims: 1) according to Luhmann, that physical beatings of coolies were accepted and carried out by Asian overseers, thereby justifying his own nonexceptional behavior; and 2) according to Valck, that Luhmann transgressed a basic prescription for labor control: namely, that estate managers should neither reprimand nor directly give orders to native workers—the moral being that if they did so they would surely pay.

Valck's narrative continues with his day of inquiry, taking up first van Benthem's story and then returning to Luhmann's account:

Later Mr. van Benthem told me that indeed some Malays did come complaining that Mr. Luhmann had kicked one of them and that he advised them to go to Laboean to the district
officer and that he could be sure that if that gentleman was wrong he would be punished, even if he [the Malay] would not be aware of it. A few days later, he [van Benthem] met one of the complainers and inquired whether the abused person had gone to Laboean, and was told that he first wanted to complain to the village head of Hamperan Perak. Among those who attacked the Luhmann plantation were only four Gayos. Those men were employed with him since August 22, and there was no fault to be found with their behavior, except that they worked slowly. Together with twelve Bataks and three Malays they belonged to the crew controlled by the foremen Deli and Saman, both from Kloempang.

Finally Mr. Luhmann told me that a certain Datoe Gembang, head of the nearby village of Sala Moeda, might have had a share in the attack on his plantation.

Van Benthem’s advice seems at the least naive and even ludicrous within the prevailing judicial system in the plantation belt. How feasible could it have been for a laborer to leave work and travel at least two days round trip to complain to a Dutch officer about a “kick”? Or perhaps this exchange suggests that a “kick,” common fare for immigrant estate workers with nowhere to vent their grievances, was not common for those Malays with sustained ties in the surrounding villages and with more tenuous affiliations to the estates.

The names of the foremen Saman and Deli do not surface again for another month. Luhmann’s story refocuses the causes of the murder around the disgruntled Datoe Gembang, to whom Luhmann twice refused to extend a cash loan for harvesting tobacco, planted at his own expense. By Luhmann’s account, after Datoe Gembang made unsuccessful efforts to sell his tobacco at several other estates, he disappeared to Langkat for some time, and within a few days of his return the attack took place. Whether Valck is quoting Luhmann is again difficult to tell. The only indication that he might be is a temporal shift as the narrative returns to the day of his inquiry and his own story:

In the late afternoon [of 18 October 1876], the Radja Moeda of Deli arrived with a few Chinese policemen from the sultan. Datoe Gembang was sent for immediately and came, with seven followers armed with swords. He declared that he knew nothing of the affair (as he told Maj. Demmeni the previous day) and very much regretted that it happened. He had nothing whatsoever to say in answer to our interrogations. While we were still questioning him, one of my men noticed a small bloodstain on the sword scabbard of one of Datoe Gembang’s followers and took it from him. After close inspection all the weapons or clothes of Datoe Gembang’s seven followers appeared to have traces of blood, and they were thus arrested.

Having a clue it was easier to track down other persons, especially after the arrival of Deli’s sheriff Lucas and a few policemen. From Kloempang he brought a certain Djamal, whom he strongly suspected of having taken part in the attack. All those who had been employed by Mr. Luhmann and who lived nearby were arrested, and on most of them traces of blood were found on their weapons and clothing. It was curious that nobody seemed to have bothered to cover up the traces of the murder. (Emphasis added)

This “curiosity” could be read as the punchline in Valck’s story. No one covered up the murder because they did not want to; they intended for some people to
know (other workers, other villagers, other planters?) who did it and why. Or it could be read to frame another plot. They did not cover up the crime because they had no need to; the assailants were so strong in number and so firmly backed by a broader antiplanter sentiment that they had no fear of recrimination. Valck reads their bloodstained weapons one way; other district officers, military personnel, and some planters were to read it another.

We began reading Valck's account convinced that his story captured some underlying truth, that Luhmann deserved what he got, that revenge not "political" motivation was at issue, and that Luhmann was hiding the "facts." But as Valck's narrative develops, the introduction of new actors makes the casting of blame more difficult. What connects the Chinese coolies working on the estate (who are said to play no part in this assault), Datoe Gembang from Sala [Sialang] Moeda village, those alleged assailants from Kloempang, and the four Gayos? Were there nineteen assailants from Kloempang, as van Benthem's informant counted, only seven from Sialang Moeda, or more than thirty, the number that Valck arrested? How did so many men of such diverse origin, domicile, and estate engagement come together and under whom, and then dare not to hide their crime?

Valck ends his report with the "well-founded remark" of a Malay with whom he spoke,

that it could not have been the assailants intention to rob, because in that case it would have been much easier for them to attack and overpower one of the convoys transporting money for the estates and traveling under small escort than to first do hard labor for some time and only then attack the estate. Therefore, I still feel that revenge [wraak] was the cause of every one of the committed crimes.

Several categories begin to collide. Unlike the planters' view, Valck's schema makes robbery retribution for justified grievance, and his effort to flesh out the context of retaliation structures both the chronology and logic of his argument. Still, his adherence to the official understanding of "political"—actions of direct threat to government authority—remains largely intact. However, his belief in a collective threat to European security, based on patterned revenge, falls somewhere between the personal and political, anticipating his failed challenge to those categories themselves.

The Genealogy of the Murder:
Patterns of Protest

Valck's interpretation of the Luhmann family murder was in keeping with his more general contention that planters were attributing estate assaults to external Aceh influence to deflect attention from the internal tensions in their own affairs. He first articulated this position a month earlier in September, when
other government, military, and estate personnel were blaming a series of attacks on the Droop, Peyer, and Baay estates on Gayo gangs in league with Aceh resistance fighters.

On 6 September 1876 Valck reported that Droop, administrator of the van Sluijs estate on the Babalan River, was assaulted by Gayos, and much of the estate property was destroyed. Droop had recently hired a certain Panglima Laoet who, with his twenty-seven men, had come to him looking for work. Droop engaged them and paid an advance to build a road. Several days later another fourteen Gayos led by a certain Radjah Petambiang were also engaged under similar terms.

“The trouble began” when Panglima Laoet asked for a personal loan of several dollars. Hearing about this, Radjah Petambiang demanded that Droop give the same to every Gayo. Droop explained that it was a personal loan and refused. Then Droop went back in his house, and when Radja Petambiang attempted to follow Droop turned around, calling him a “radja mawas” (monkey prince). Valck suggests that the insult was not taken lightly. Droop was warned by an Acehnese living on the estate to beware of the Gayos and not to go out unarmed because Petambiang was intent on murdering him. The following day Petambiang returned to tell Droop the work had been completed and demanded his pay. Droop did not agree but “decided to consider the work finished” as long as they returned his tools. Droop was again warned that the Gayos were out to attack his estate and murder him that night. Droop only prepared his weapons and, not trusting his subordinates with his four guns, kept the weapons in the house:

The Gayos appeared that night and began cutting through the plaited roofing when Droop fired his pistol at them four times. Several Gayo were wounded and he was cut by a saber across the hand. When the assailants withdrew to get a torch to set the house on fire, Droop escaped. According to Droop the Gayos attacked him while calling “Labilloellah,” the common Muslim war cry, and it was clear from this that they were in contact with the Acehnese and had come with the intent of murdering him, a European. This last part seemed strange to me right away, because if this was their intent it certainly would not have been necessary to first work for many days in a row; they could have just killed him. (Emphasis added)

This final sentence offers the same reasoning expressed in the “well-founded remark” by the Malay informant, quoted by Valck in the Luhmann murder. In both cases, Valck uses it to confirm the sound reasoning of his own claims. But the question remains, Why did these Gayos call out a “Muslim war cry”? Was this play on the planters’ fears of an Acehnese assault drawn from the cultural tool kit in which protest was expressed, or was something else transpiring in Deli that Valck’s fixation on the planters’ abuses could not allow? Perhaps Valck thought that to entertain the possibility that a more diffuse impulse against Dutch rule was underfoot would weaken his case that the planters, and not the assailants, were responsible for endangering Dutch authority.

In the meantime Locker de Bruine, without Valck’s report in hand, sent the following brief communiqué to the Governor-General:
From private information, but from a very reliable source, I was informed that on one of
the Langkat plantations disturbances took place during which a European administrator
was wounded and some damage was done to personal property. According to my infor-
man, the offenders were some of the Gayos working on the estates who, because of inju-
dicious action by the administrator, took bitter revenge on him and who afterward
disappeared to their own land without creating further disturbances. It seems to me,
therefore, that this fact has no political significance whatsoever. . . . I have not yet received a
report from the Assistant-Resident of Deli [Valck].

De Bruine pretends to a knowledge that barely masks his unfamiliarity with the
circumstances of the assault. He blames Valck for not filing a report sooner,
although Valck’s preliminary report is actually written four days before de
Bruine’s. Valck’s second lengthy report on the Droop assault a month later—only
five days before he reports the Luhmann story, and four days before he writes
Levysohn—makes his case against the planters again. He categorically dismisses
the report by the military commander, Vogel, who both “suspects instigation from
Acehnese quarters” and who argues that the assaults on the Baay estate included
“four Atjehnese [who] took employ with the purpose of sedition.” Vogel notes
that he has heard from “various quarters” that Heer Peyer badly treated his
workers, whereas Heer Baay did not, providing further “proof” that political
instigation and not revenge was the common denominator that explained the
events.

Demmeni’s report makes a similar if somewhat more equivocal case. Writing to his commander-in-chief on 28 October—eleven days after the
Luhmann murder—Demmeni states that he will only present “the facts and
rumors because there are such discrepant interpretations of the events.”

In both Demmeni’s and Valck’s accounts there is a curious and unremarked
omission. Both fail to note that the planters’ fear are not fueled by the assaults per
se but by the numerous “friendly natives” who repeatedly warn them of possible
dangers. Demmeni reports that the planter J. Cramer is “warned twice that he
should not leave his estate because of the danger outside”; the planter August is
“advised by a Batak not to go out at night without a bayonet”; and Droop “is
warned by an Acehnese living on the estate to beware of the Gayos.” Demmeni
attributes these fears to “exaggeration in all this news” and calls a meeting with
local Malay authorities, who tell him pointedly that the villages of Salah Moeda
and Kloempang “are not to be trusted.” But in answer to his question as to who
was leading the “unruliness,” they answer, “No one from Deli, the influence comes
from outside.” These elaborations of fear are multilocal, but who is playing off
whose violence and fears of it is unaddressed. Demmeni questions whether the
assaults should be seen as part of a larger conspiratorial effort or as perpetrated
by “common thieves as occurs elsewhere.” Nevertheless, based on rumors of pos-
sible insurgence, he requests 128 reinforcements for the 90 armed soldiers
already stationed in Deli to protect the planters.

Valck still resists casting the assaults as expressions of subversion. Instead he
argues for more obvious and plausible parallels to draw between them:
I feel I should mention the connection I notice between the events at the Droop, Peyer, and Baay plantations. As I informed Your Honour in my letter of September 6, no. 520, Mr. Droop had insulted the head of the Gayos who worked for him. . . . His plantation was ransacked; the empty strongbox was removed from the house by the Gayos; and he was attacked and injured while the house was set afire. . . . As far as I am informed at this moment, the Gayos employed at the Perseverance estate were dissatisfied with the wages Mr. Peyer had given them, and they were all allegedly beaten by Mr. Buck. Those Gayos as well as those working for Mr. Droop, not knowing where to claim justice, probably took the law into their own hands and took revenge by killing Mr. Buck. . . . Mr. Sijthoff allegedly had beaten the Gayos too. They also took revenge on him. It is curious that they did not attack the estates of [. . .] and Shaw situated on the road in front of the Baay estate, nor the Ayer Ham estate or that of Mr. Menzies in whose vicinity they remained for about a day. They also dwelled for days near the plantations of the gentlemen O'Flaherty, de Munnick, and Hirschman without doing them any harm. Their attacks occurred so unexpectedly that if they had intended to attack, no one would have been safe.46

Valck represents the Gayos as avengers, not thieves. Specific Europeans are targeted for assault, while others are informed in advance that they will go unharmed:

Mr. Thompson [of the Ayer Ham estate] later told me repeatedly that a native [inlander], not belonging on his estate, had told him that same day that he had nothing to fear since nobody had anything against him.

Again Valck underlines that the attacks were strategically directed and planned. He does not comment on the perhaps more unsettling implication that many more inlanders (natives) knew in advance about the assaults than those who participated in them.

Exasperated with the invocation of Aceh influence, Valck states his conclusion in no uncertain terms:

I feel that no one with a trace of common sense, after being informed of the above, will believe that Atjeh influence is behind those attacks and that everyone must agree that they have resulted from personal feuds. Only the interested parties at the attacked plantations feel differently, unpleasant as it must be to find the blame put back on themselves or their subordinates. The truth of the matter will become evident later.

Here, Valck’s reference to “personal feuds” serves not to placate fears of unrest but to warn of the jeopardies to Deli’s European community at large:

After all the above, it need not be said that when it comes to retaliation no one is safe, even if one were surrounded by a complete battalion. . . . We only agreed to leave a detachment with planters in the Langkat lowlands who were most afraid. This was merely done to calm the feelings of these gentlemen.

No government, no matter how well organized, no police force, no matter how diligent, no troops, no matter how numerous are capable of securing the planters from attacks like those which have taken place. Fairness and justice toward their subordinates will always be the best weapons against them.

The Luhmann family murder stood out from other similar attacks because the victims were “innocents,” a woman and children, but this is not Valck’s primary
concern. He is focused on Luhmann's guilt and therefore invokes the exigencies of a situation that go beyond what he learned from the "facts" of that case alone.\textsuperscript{47} From accounts of the assaults that preceded it and those that followed, we can see that stories about the murder of whites were shaped by one of two plots. We have noted that attacks were considered "personal" or "political," "criminal" or "subversive," with these conceived as mutually exclusive categories. Based on these prior distinctions, the assaults were classified either as retaliations against an individual who happened to be European or expressions of an orchestrated assault on generic Europeans tout court. These narratives, however, allow for another scenario, the possibility not only that the personal was highly political but that outrage at planter abuses—be they physical, financial, moral, or psychological—were shared by different members of Deli's subject population who met the affronts of the estate economy and its violence by undermining its order in various ways.

This is not to suggest that a metanarrative reducing these events to "resistance" captures the complexities of this violence but to understand that the categories available to most colonial officials constrained what they could envision as a possible plot. By bracketing these dichotomies, we can explore the possibility that rumor, arson, murder, and theft made up a range of responses, subverting the assumptions on which planter autonomy and authority were based. This is not to argue that they always did so, nor that this was their "real" intent. Nor is this a circuitous way of constructing a coherent, unified alternative story. On the contrary, I think it allows the multiple interfaces of plantation culture to reemerge as I think they were more likely lived; not in a dualistically divided world of plantation versus hinterland, personal versus political acts, criminal versus revolutionary intent, but in a varied set of arrangements and negotiations. Individual Gayos, Javanese, Malays, and Batak were alternately attracted and repelled by the plantations' demands for labor, land, and services. Drawn by this sphere of power (and possible empowerment), they enlisted in the plantation economy by varied means and exited with variable degrees of success.

Significantly, these assaults ill fit the European caricature of plantation violence carried out by suppliant, dog-headed coolies who, in response to what they considered verbal or physical abuse, would vent their impotence by going amok.\textsuperscript{48} On the contrary, in each case European planters were pitted against hard-nosed Batak, Malay, and Gayo negotiators who were assured what their proper payment should be and self-confident enough to make reasonable demands and even to press extravagant claims. As we have seen, Gayo and Batak woodcutters not only defended their due on agreed-upon piecework but redefined what their due was in mid process, when the work was already in progress. Deli planters in the late 1870s confronted a population with disparate investments in the colonial economy, but those disparities did not divide clearly along ethnic lines.

European estate personnel never seemed sure whether the assaults were by Gayos employed by them or by Gayos with no connections to the estates. While
many of the Malay aristocracy buttressed and profited from the estate industry’s expansion, there were many others of local or foreign origin who continued to contest the services they sold and the terms of those arrangements. They directed their violence at Europeans but also at those Javanese, Malays, and Bataks who succumbed to and supported the economic and political inequities of Dutch rule. Even before the Luhmann murder, a Javanese informant told Demmeni that “the Gayos plan to kill the Europeans as well as the Javanese in league with them.” But Ga, his Gayo informant from Kampong Gala, confirmed the very opposite: namely, that the Gayo “had nothing against the Europeans, they were good; the Gayos only wanted to return to their own lands with money in hand.”

Rumors of Rampage, Forest Fortresses, and Robber Gangs

The Luhmann family murder was not over with the burial of its victims or with Valck’s report. Over the next few weeks, official correspondence about the continuing number of assaults in Langkat invoked the name of Luhmann and his suspected assailants at every turn. But by mid November (only a few weeks later), the name of Datoe Gembang and those of the other thirty suspects initially arrested were no longer central to these stories. More military patrols coupled with increased recruitment of native spies in the villages surrounding the estates turned up new kinds of evidence and thus a new causal construction of the events. Native spies informed Maj. Demmeni that they had found armed fortifications (benting) in the forest, occupied and led by a certain Panglima Selan, “a Gayo, feared by the local Bataks.” Resident Locker de Bruine’s 25 November letter to the Governor-General cites a “captured” coolie found in one of the forest hideouts who confirmed that Panglima Selan had made raids on the Baay and Peyer plantations, on Luhmann’s estate, and on many others.

Valck’s 11 November report on the discovery of the benting is troubled and bewildered. Forest hideouts do not fit his plot. He doubts that the bentings exist, and goes with a military convoy to see Panglima Selan’s encampment for himself. He learns that two letters have been discovered there, addressed in German to Luhmann. When he questions the local Malay heads about the encampments he finds that they knew for at least six months about the existence of Panglima’s activities but continued to report rust (peace) in their districts nevertheless.

Valck’s confidence in his own analysis is shaken. He wonders whether the Malay chiefs are powerless to control the Gayos or, as he thinks more likely, that the chiefs were in complicity with them. When a Dutch military envoy is sent to destroy the fortifications, he reports that villagers professed great relief to be rid of Panglima and his gang, but Valck no longer knows what to believe. Spies
reporting to Valck confirm the existence of two encampments that seem to have been there for as long as a year, occupied not only by Gayos (of which there were about fifty to sixty in one) but by an equal number of “runaway Chinese coolies” (weggeloopen Chinesche koelies) as well as Bataks and Malays, of which “there were four, under the foreman named Deli from Kloempang, who had played a major role in the Luhmann assault.” Valck advises that the Malay leaders be replaced, to make room for a different organization, the sooner the better. If not, protection of the Europeans is out of the question. The investigation pointed to Panglima Selan as the main leader, if not the leader of those who attacked the plantations belonging to Peyer, Baay, and Luhmann. Those events were caused by rapacity mixed with rancor because of the insults suffered. As I have always maintained, there were no politics involved. Gang leaders like Panglima Selan will always easily find followers in the Langkat area. Malcontents are quite plentiful here as long as there are planters who mistreat their coolies. There will always be enough deserters who are willing, if only out of desperation, to join a gang leader. To secure peace in this district, it must be made sure that the coolies are not being maltreated by their masters. (Emphasis added)

The Resident’s report to the Governor-General, based in large on Valck’s report, tells a different story by omitting some parts and underscoring others. He argues that the villagers’ refusal to report Panglima Selan’s presence was due to their fear of retribution, as was the Malay heads’ similar silence. According to a Javanese informant, an important Gayo had been killed by the police in the earlier assault on the Peyer estate, and his followers were set on avenging his death, first by attacking those villagers who had assisted the police and second by mounting a full-scale rampage against the European planters “in general.” He notes that “people say” as many as five hundred Gayos were planning a mass assault on the estates for the beginning of December.

Locker de Bruine’s report of ten days later is increasingly troubled by rumors, by the “agitated atmosphere in Deli, caused and fed by exaggerated representations of the situation given by some inhabitants.” However, assured in a meeting with planters who “mentioned not one word about their concern for the safety and security of their estates,” he concludes that “the recent rumors about the region’s dangerous political situation should not be taken seriously.” Locker de Bruine makes no reference to maltreatment of workers or to complicity on the part of the Malay heads. But if his story of random theft and native rapacity was so convincing to his audience, and if he actually believed it, there is the question as to why he took the subsequent measures he did.

First, he rejects Valck’s advice to dismiss the native district heads but seeks ways to enlist their further support in eliminating both the robber bands and vagabondage. He recommends that the increased number of government officials in Langkat be charged with “the task [of] drilling our ideas of rule into the chiefs’ heads by means of gentle persuasion.” Second, he rejects the planters’ proposal to establish a permanent military garrison in Deli, fearing that the local rulers
will “feel dismissed of their responsibility for maintaining peace and order and will side with the Gayos” against the Dutch. Third, he requests authorization to send coolies back to their masters (contra the Procuer-General’s edict) to curtail the presence of excoolies roaming away from the estates. And finally, in the interests of “peace and order,” he requests that the planters issue a curfew for workers, keep “reliable” guards in the coolie barracks throughout the night, and enforce a pass system allowing only those with letters of permission to enter the plantation belt.

Some of these measures could be construed as reasonable strategies to deal with “vagabonds” and “robber bands” if this is what they were. But the overall plan suggests that Locker de Bruine took the rumors of popular revolt more seriously than his report admits. Each one of the measures would effectively constrain and contain the movement of estate workers; intercept the lines of communication between Gayos, Malays, and estate resident workers; and impose more stringent disciplinary measures. No inquiry was made to investigate the reasons for the “unrest” as viewed by the workers themselves. Like the first coolie ordinance three years later, Locker de Bruine’s strategy was to keep workers bound to their contracts but, as importantly, to keep them isolated and out of trouble.

In a somewhat modified version, this account becomes Deli’s official history, in the form of W. H. M. Schadee’s classic narrative, published in 1919. Parts of it are derived verbatim and without quotation from the official Colonial Annual Report of 1877 (Koloniaal Verslag). It describes the surge of unrest as follows:

In September [1876] there were assaults on the Tandem estate belonging to Mr. Peyer and van Gulich in which a European supervisor was killed and several coolies were less seriously injured. The thieves [roovers] took all the available money with them. The same thing happened a day later on the Kwala Begoemit estate of Mr. Baud. In October the Soengei Diski estate was attacked, but this time not by Gayos alone but also by Bataks and Malays from the neighboring village of Sialang Moeda. The wife of the planter, Mr. J. Luhmann, and his two children were murdered, while he and another housemember were seriously wounded. The latter died from the wound a month later. Here too they were plundered.

Measures were immediately taken to protect the estates. Thanks to the police, several perpetrators of these assaults were apprehended. Four Bataks and two Malays were sentenced to death; six others to forced labor; the village head of Sialang Moeda was exiled for three months. The principal culprit, Radjal [sic], died in prison. It appeared later that the three assaults mentioned above had occurred under the direction of a certain Panglima Selan, a Gayo very much feared by the Batak population, who had often made these districts unsafe and who now had gathered together a number of his compatriots after they had been dismissed from the Ajer Tawar estate. In November our military took without struggle a fortification they had erected at Si Oempih-Oempih. Selan seems to have fled but many of the goods stolen from Soengi Diski were found in his quarters.

Schadee’s story reduces the Luhmann family assailants to a gang of itinerant thieves. Valck’s concern about Luhmann’s behavior and the more general uncer-
tainties about the relationship between vagabondage and assaults are nowhere to be found. Like many colonial histories, Schadee’s narrative celebrates the restoration of order, with the culprits identified and troubles overcome.

Anthony Reid has suggested that the aid provided by northern Sumatra’s inland tribes “for Atjeh had nothing to do with the beginnings of an ‘Indonesian consciousness,’ but was simply an expression of their distrust of the foreign invaders.” Reid’s conclusion holds for some of these groups, but it does not seem to capture the nature of Gayo activities. Their assaults on the estates expressed more than “distrust of the foreign invaders”—they were directed at planters and their property, and at specific members among them. The Gayo encampments were not confined to Aceh exiles but were peopled with Malays, Javanese, and Chinese excoollies as well. While some workers may have been taken by force, as Locker de Bruine claimed, a larger number seem to have lived in these encampments by choice and for relatively long periods of time. During those stays they seem to have raided the estates for food when they could not get enough in the villages or could not gather enough in the forest.

More discrediting still to Locker de Bruine’s story of pure plunder and rapacity by Gayo roving gangs—and thus to the version of it adopted by Schadee—was that the attacks were not random. Valck argued that they systematically occurred on estates where workers had experienced serious maltreatment, while neighboring planters in ‘shooting distance’ of the estate attacked went unharmed. Valck’s point was that there were more than enough angry and discontented estate workers for such types as Panglima Selan to enlist. Whether Panglima Selan was merely a clever thief who dovetailed his plundering with the desires of a coolie population eager for retaliation is difficult to assess. But the sheer number of independent motivations for the recurrent assaults suggests that they could not have reduced to theft alone.

Nor would the rumors have made much sense. In November, Maj. Demmeni reported rumors of Gayos and Bataks preparing for a rampage to wipe out Europeans en masse. But no one knew if they were eighty “Gayos” laying in wait or eight hundred “Atjehnese” gathering in the Batak highlands only four hours from the densest concentration of Deli estates. Other reports cited five hundred men in Gayoland making feasts in preparation for successive assaults on the Langkat estates. Within less than a week the rumors were denied. With obvious pride, Demmeni reported that he had probably located its “source” in Laboehan Deli itself. The rumors were alleged by Demmeni to have been spread by family members of the Malays from Kloempang and Sialang Moeda implicated in the Luhmann murder; Demmeni represented the rumors as an effort to impede the investigation and to “win time.” Or, he suggests more tentatively, the rumors might be true, with a full-scale assault on Langkat being planned. In this scenario, rumors of Gayos in the southern plantation heartland of the Deli district were merely a “distracting strategy.” In either case, “de paniek” was reigning in Deli,
and Demmeni's officers were deluged with planters' requests for protection, although they deemed it "unnecessary." Demmeni's daily reports between 11 and 24 November waver: he maintains that "roofzucht" (rapacity) motivated the assaults on Peyer and Luhmann, but he then quotes a "very believable source" who informs him that a full-scale rebellion is planned to take place in Deli two months hence.

During the same week that Resident Locker de Bruine concluded that the exaggerated representation of disorder on the East Coast was unjustified, Demmeni filed the following report:

After the disturbing news concerning Deli of the 16th [November], the following news [bericht] was circulating among the planters:

—the plantation Grob en Nahr was entirely plundered
—a fortification was erected by Malays in Sialang Moeda [the village from which some of Luhmann's assailants came]
—Atjehnese and Gayos were gathered at Laboean Deli
—the estate of Thompson was plundered and he was murdered
—Malays, Javanese, and Bataks in the next two months may come together and revolt [oproer] and would murder all Europeans along the way from Soengal to Laboean Deli
—Deli's Assistant-Resident was murdered on his trip to Si Ompey Ompey.

Assistant-Resident Valck was, we know, not murdered in Si Ompey Ompey, where the Gayo encampment was located. In fact, he complained that he was so exhausted from the trip that he never even participated in the ambush. And a full-scale carnage of the Europeans never occurred. Maj. Demmeni was convinced that Panglima Selan was a common thief and in no way related to the Acehnese troops who might be preparing an attack in Langkat. But then he was no longer sure, nor were Locker de Bruine and Valck.

**On Storytelling and the Hierarchies of Colonial Credibility**

What have we learned from these accounts? What questions arise from a close reading of these narratives that might otherwise not have been asked? Native assaults on European plantation personnel and property continue to be debated throughout the colonial period in similar terms: the dichotomies of "personal" versus "political" and "criminals" versus "insurgents" remained right through the national revolution of 1945. But in 1876 and 1877 the terror of a European slaughter was never realized in Deli nor, as far as any sources indicate, was it ever really tried.

Was Valck merely a bungling bureaucrat or an antihero who never happened? How ordinary were such challenges; how common were the Dekkers and Valcks who dared to criticize their European compatriots in the Indies and then
were forced to make rapid and unfettered departures? Dekker died in exile; Valck’s name disappears from the state archives in 1880 without a trace, while Luhmann’s name shows up in the Indies business gazetteer decades later as owner and operator of a good-sized rubber estate.

The evidence of Valck’s bureaucratic carelessness is strong. When his successor E. von Faber takes over as Assistant-Resident he reports prison ledgers in such disarray that he can neither find records of the number of people in the prison nor dossiers detailing the length of their sentences nor even their crimes. Valck’s predecessor, Hallewijn, may never have kept a register, but neither did Valck take it upon himself to start one. Faber reported that among the few dossiers he found was one for a prisoner who had been interned for over eleven months for a four-month sentence. Leyssohn’s defense of Valck on this point, however, bore much weight. Valck was charged with fulfilling so many jobs that it was virtually impossible, even for an efficient civil servant, to handle management of the court, prisons, concessions, and administration all at one time. If we consider the sheer quantity of reports that Valck filed in a matter of days (remembering that his letter to Leyssohn alone was thirty handwritten pages), it is difficult to imagine how he had time to travel to the estates attacked, conduct multiple interviews, and complete his reports based on them.

The more serious charge against Valck by the Director of the Civil Service, however, was that he “totally misjudged his relationship to the Resident, either keeping him completely in the dark about the most important matters that occurred in his district or notifying him too late.” But here too the case is not cut and dry. Valck’s assessments of what was happening on the East Coast were clearly at odds with what the Resident thought fitting to report to the Governor-General. Locker de Bruine’s reputation rested on his ability to keep his residency in “rust en orde” (peace and order)—assaults caused by personal feuds or outside Acehnese agitation were disturbances that fit into the categories already defined. Valck’s contention was more threatening: that the violence was patterned and that state complicity and leniency toward the planters was its cause. Valck may not have “misjudged” his relationship to the Resident at all. On the contrary, he may have understood how deeply they were at loggerheads, and how much evidence he had to muster to back his unpopular claims.

There is some indication that Valck’s family and personal history may have both prompted and discredited the kind of colonial story he chose to tell. His father was a high civil servant whose career as Resident of Djogjakarta ended with his dismissal in 1837, almost the same way as his son’s forty years later. At nineteen Valck enrolled in the prestigious Leiden law school and was appointed to the civil service in 1861. While his career was without luster, Valck’s personal life was marked with an intensity of violence, incongruous with the social violence and corruption he so condemned. In 1866 he became a controleur (district head) second class. Two years later he was reprimanded for challenging an Indies army
captain to a duel when they were forbidden by law. And in 1870 he “accidentally” and fatally shot his newly wed second wife when on holiday in Germany.\(^68\) When his classmate Levyssohn was already Director of the Colonial Civil Service, Valck was still only in a middling colonial post as *controleur* first class.\(^69\)

There are no references to Valck’s personal life and earlier career in evaluations of his conduct, though both may well have been taken into account.\(^70\) Rather he is charged with bad bookkeeping, backlogged cases, delayed reports, and inept management, but most seriously with indiscriminate and persistent harassment of the planters. He is condemned for carrying out his administrative and juridical duties in ways that consistently favored the coolies; “for ill-advisedly taking the Chinese coolies, the scum of Singapore and Penang, under his protection” instead of supporting the disciplinary actions of Europeans;\(^71\) for neglecting to curry favor with local rulers whose cooperation and collaboration (in both annexing and policing the plantation belt) were seen as critical to the industry and the security of the region; for interpreting the new ruling on breach of contract in a way that released those workers of the obligation to return to the plantations from which they fled. In this regard, the Director of the Civil Service charged Valck not only with a “misreading” of the Procurer-General’s edict but with single-handedly abetting both increased vagrancy among excoolies and a proliferation of roving bands of vagrant workers living off plunder of the estates.

Valck’s absence from the corpus of Deli histories contrasts sharply with the profusion of official and classified correspondence about him, by him, and about the alternate states of calm and hysteria that seemed to reign while he was there. I have taken this disjuncture to question the sorts of stories which *could* be told about violence and its causes, to explore both the political landscape of plantation culture and how we presume to know about it. I have suggested that we suspend what we usually take to be accepted hierarchies of credibility—“rumors” (*gerucht*) as opposed to news (*bericht*), hearsay as opposed to visually confirmed “facts.” These narratives attest to ways of knowing that confounded such distinctions. Rumor, more than firsthand observation, shaped people’s fears and armed responses. But these fears in turn provided the milieu in which stories captured people’s imaginations, shaping which versions spread across thousands of kilometers of estate complex through the border villages, to return transformed back to the estates. If gossip is based on rules of conduct, rumors must have plausible plots (even if an exaggerated relationship to what people believe is true about the world).\(^72\) Rumors in Deli were cumulatively and creatively multivocal, the medium through which the unspeakable was spoken, with no one party on hand to blame.

Ironically, this never stopped Dutch and other colonial officials from trying to assign blame.\(^73\) In Deli in 1876, rumors bore the cultural weight of social and political tensions, not the coziness of shared assumptions and shared knowledge.\(^74\) When Deli’s officials attempted to squash what they called “disquieting or disrup-
Rumors resonated not only in the confines of local plantation culture but in official correspondence that passed from Deli to Batavia, from Batavia to the Hague, and back again to the Deli estates. Rumors, directly and indirectly, placed army units on plantations, curfews in workers’ barracks, watchguards at estate crossroads, stricter labor contracts to be enforced, and concerns over “peace and order” to translate into military reconnoiters and judicial action. This is not to
suggest that rumor permeated the official discourse undigested and unchal-
 lenged. On the contrary, official reports self-consciously engaged the doubts of a
 readership that might suspect that these statements were based on hearsay alone.
 Thus Levyssohn prefaces his defense of Valck with an approval of the Director
 of the Civil Service’s statement (repeated in the Governor-General’s subsequent
decision), that “we are not dealing here with loose allegations but with carefully
 specified facts.” How often were central authorities dealing with “loose” local talk
 and how often did they know it? Or was this a rhetorical strategy confirming the
 report’s reliability? Rumor was not so much a source of what happened; it regis-
tered what people believed could have happened in the past and could happen
 in the future. Rumor was a wild card that planters, sultans, coolies, and govern-
 ment agents played carefully in gauging one another’s fears and perceptions of
danger.75

Ferreting out these competing rumors and competing agendas challenges the
 notion that colonial capitalism was a marriage of common interests between plan-
tation entrepreneurs and the state, or that the state itself could coordinate its
effort from top to bottom. Understanding the colonial logic in which they oper-

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**FIGURE 4.** Chinese plantation workers sorting tobacco leaves on a Deli estate. Note the Chinese foreman in the rear, dressed in a sarong, and European managers (one poised with a “walking stick”) on an elevated platform, c. 1880–90.
ated bears directly on how we represent that past—and resist the impulse to smooth over and “fill in” its incoherencies. We are not only piecing together fragmented stories but working from a cultural landscape in which our “best sources” were dependent on a range of visual and verbal evidence that tapped different kinds of knowledge. These stories suggest another picture of a colonial state in expansion than one of omniscience by tracing the tenuous filaments of information on which its knowledge was based; the Governor-General wrote his decision in Levyssohn’s words, whose own opinion was based on a personal letter from his friend Valck, whose outrage derived in part from what was rumored about Gayo rebels and planter abuses on Sumatra’s East Coast. Rumor was a highly ambiguous discursive field: it controlled some people, terrorized others; it was damning and enabling, shoring up colonial rule and subverting it at the same time.

These stories further suggest how limited colonial authorities may have been in putting their policies into practice, how vulnerable and nonhegemonic that authority was. The efforts to maintain controlled mobility and sharp ethnic divides between their captive workers and other subjects only had marginal success. The clandestine settlements of Gayos, Javanese, Bataks, Chinese, and Malays suggest that large numbers of people subverted the enclave model for which Deli’s estates were later so well known. The discursive reduction of these people to “vengeful natives,” “Aceh rebels,” or “robber gangs” placed violence back where it “belonged,” displacing it from Europeans. No wonder that Valck’s stories were impossible to hear—they repeatedly repositioned violence in the hearts and minds of Europeans themselves.

**Reflections on Storytelling and the Historic Turn in Anthropology**

These are not the luxuriant pardon tales of *Fiction in the Archives* from which Natalie Zemon Davis so deftly drew out the cultural nuances of sixteenth-century France. They are relatively dry, formulaic documents—administrative epistles, resolutions, and internal reports—of colonial bureaucrats eager to be read in a favorable light by their superiors, careful to deflect attention from their own inadequacies while affirming their loyalties to continued rule. Unlike the pardon tales, these stories categorically deny the voices of those they feared. Thus, the Luhmann family’s Gayo assailants could only be spoken for, by “trustworthy natives” whose allegiance to Dutch authority was thought to be secure. It is not the Gayos themselves that are privileged in these accounts but a representation of them seen as geographically and cognitively caught between the wars of Aceh and the muggings of Deli, economically attracted to the estates but independent of them, politically labile and vaguely dangerous. Treating these docu-
ments as stories is not to reduce them to fictions made up out of whole cloth and therefore false. They were fashioned cultural accounts with political effects that precluded some conclusions and encouraged others. I have tried to explore what made these stories credible, relevant, and reasonable to their authors and audience and how specific scenarios challenged or conformed to certain culturally and politically plausible plots.

The ordering of these stories and the reworking of their contexts raise some basic questions about how we ethnographically read colonial texts and how deeply we excavate the layers of our sources. The “historic turn” in anthropology has been marked by a new contextualizing impulse, one challenging the naturalized ideologies underwriting colonial representations of authority by pinning their inventions and authenticities to specific time and place. At the same time, we often invoke these texts ironically, assured of the imperial, racist, and sexist logics in which their authors operated. We are able to read them as collective representations because we expect a comfortable fit between a dominant discourse and colonial agents. We presume to know the intimate relations of power on which those representations are based. However, I think the Luhmann murder narratives suggest a more problematic correspondence between colonial rhetoric and its agents on the ground. Colonial lexicons were unevenly appropriated, sometimes constraining what agents of empire thought, elsewhere delimiting the political idioms in which they talked, indicating not what they thought but only what they said.

While anthropologists now produce exemplary readings of ethnography as text, we can do still more nuanced readings of the “storeyed” narratives in historic texts for what they reveal about colonial epistemologies. When I first read and wrote about this murder six years ago, I had assumed that a discourse of “personal revenge” rather than “political threat” typified a moment in the 1870s and sought to contrast it to the murder of a Deli planter’s wife in 1929, an event that was politicized as a “communist threat” by planters and Dutch authorities in the colonies and abroad. While I hold to some features of that reading, now I am less willing to accept that the inconsistent versions can be “explained” by the clear and conflicting agendas of planters and the state. While aware that these acts of violence were polysemic, I had not considered the extent to which that polyphony complicated the ways in which violence could be read. Refocusing on these shifting plots, I see a far more fragmented social reality, a grappling with limited knowledge, a more complex hierarchy of credibility than in the neater story I chose to tell.

What privileges this rhetorical strategy over any other? Certainly not the particular focus on Valck. A centering on Luhmann or Panglima Selan’s forest compatriots would alter the set, change the key characters, demand attention to subplots that here remain ancillary to what we think we need to know. Nor do I take this to be a Rashomon tale, a multistranded set of equally plausible claims. I
have tried to negotiate a different kind of coherence, not one that elevates this
text to master narrative, nor one in which only subaltern voices have truths to
tell. Rather I have sought to recoup the inconsistencies of these narratives, to
explore how subaltern inflections entered these stories retold in disquieted Euro-
pean voices, tangled by multiple meanings that could not be easily read.

Notes

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Tom Laqueur, Liisa Malkki, and Sherry Ortner for their artful efforts to make me
clarify the nature of the incoherencies in these accounts of colonial Deli without
undoing the incoherencies themselves. I also thank Maria Speller for transcribing and
translating many of the original documents under a University of Wisconsin research
grant and Barrett Watten for editorial assistance.

1. An Assistant-Resident was a relatively high-ranking post in the Dutch Indies colonial
administration that entailed jurisdiction over a number of subdistricts in a residency.
In this case, the residency of the East Coast of Sumatra comprised nearly 10,000
square kilometers.

Frans Carl Valck’s letter was originally filed in the Verbeek Collection, given to
the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology (KITLV), Leiden, in the 1920s.
Verbeek was a geologist, prominent for his investigation of the eruption of Krakatoa
in 1883. In the early 1980s, an archivist came across Valck’s letter; finding that Verbeek
had no experience or contacts in Deli, nor that there was any reference to Verbeek by
Valck, it was refiled separately (in file H1122). No other correspondence with, or ref-
ference to, Valck has been found (Gerrit Genap, personal communication). In this
article, I refer to this letter as KITLV, H1122/Valck, where it is now lodged.

2. Stamboeken Indische ambtenaren, part M-330, p. 523; Album studiosorum lugdunum
batavorum (Leiden, 1925), fols. 1362–63. For these references and most of the docu-
ments I cite in this paper, I owe special thanks to M. G. H. A. de Graff, archivist of the
second section of the Algemeen Rijksarchief, who gave me immeasurable assistance
in tracking down Valck’s personal and professional trajectory and the correspondence
on the Luhmann family murders.

All the materials for this paper, excluding Valck’s letter to Levyssohn, are from
the Algemeen Rijksarchief, Second Division, in the Hague. The mailrapport numbers
refer to the bundle of documents (letters, telegrams) that were sent by the Governor-
General of the Indies to the Netherlands Ministry of Colonies. Since several commu-
nications were collected and sent in one dispatch, the same mailrapport number may
refer to several reports and letters.

3. Although Valck is never referred to by name, the disruptive situation in Deli in 1876
in which he found himself overburdened and without sufficient police reinforcements
is referenced by R. Broersma, Oostkust van Sumatra (Batavia, 1919); and W. Schadee,
Geschiedenis van Sumatra’s Oostkust, 2 vols. (Batavia, 1918–1919), among others. He is
the highest government official in Deli (the Resident’s seat was still located in Beng-
kalis, a week's travel to the south), so that all references to inept government and backlogged judicial cases are a direct reference to him. That Valck is not named would not be so surprising (Assistant-Residents being directly responsible to their Residents in most regions) if it were not for the fact that the Resident of Deli was so far away and it was Valck who was charged with presiding over the European court, handling land concessions and setting the tone of relations with the planters. It would also not be so surprising if there had not been such concern in Batavia and the colonial ministry in the Hague over what Valck bungled, misinterpreted, and did not do.


6. As with any archive there is a "selectivity bias" here; cases that came to the attention of the Governor-General and Ministry of Colonies were those deemed of some special "political" attention. Attached to them are lower-level reports by district officers, recommendations and evaluations by local colonial agents on which these higher decisions are based. I am interested in this "cribbing process" by which certain cultural readings of events become part of the "evidential" packet.

7. See Lloyd Kramer's particularly lucid discussion of Dominick LaCapra's rejection of "coherence" as the task of the historian in "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination," in Lynn Hunt, ed., The New Cultural History (Berkeley, 1989), 97–128.


9. On the relationship between rumor and colonial insurgence, see Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (Delhi, 1983), esp. 220–77; and Shadid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma," in Selected Subaltern Studies (New York, 1988), 288–350. Both subtly address the place of rumor as both vehicle of political mobilization and as a critical element in a peasant "folklore of fear." I focus more on how subaltern rumors intersect with European narratives to subvert the latter's explanations of violence and to realize a climate of fear.

10. See James Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance (New Haven, 1990), for a careful analysis of how subalterns use the "official transcript" while maintaining hidden ones for themselves. Here, I am more concerned with the multiplicity of official scripts, and with the ways in which subalterns tap the fears, inconsistencies, and fantasies of European hidden scripts by playing them back to colonial agents for their own political projects.


12. Director of the Civil Service to the Governor-General, 18 June 1877, mailrapport 6281 (urgent, secret).


14. KITLV, H1122/Valck. 15. Ibid. 16. Ibid.

17. See Jan Breman, Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia (Delhi, 1989); and Ann Stoler, Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870–1979 (New Haven, 1985). Breman has established that at least one-fourth of the coolie population (then still primarily Chinese) must have been killed or...
died on Deli’s estates at the turn of the century. By Valck’s account twenty-five years earlier, workers died in derelict and overcrowded prisons, barracks, and hospitals, where the sick were often dismissed and left on the roadsides to die of disease and hunger or to scavenge in the forests on their own. Valck gives no figures, but after five months in Deli he is outraged at “heaven knows how many Chinese are murdered” (KITLV, H1122/Valck).

Contrary to some of Breman’s critics who have charged him with overplaying the role of white planters (as opposed to Asian overseers) in Deli’s violence (see Vincent Houben, “History and Morality: East Sumatran Incidents as Described by Jan Breman,” Itinerario 12, no. 2 [1988]: 97–100), Valck’s letter more than corroborates Breman’s interpretation; virtually all of the cases of maltreatment referred to between 1876 and 1877 directly implicate European planters and their European subordinates.

18. Breman, Taming the Coolie Beast.
20. See Schadee, Geschiedenis; and Roelof Broersma, Oostkust van Sumatra, 2 vols. (Batavia, 1919–1922), 85.
22. That these encampments are absent from the public colonial record and contemporary rereadings of it may reflect a historiography that has followed the colonial administrative map demarcating Aceh from Deli rather than the political experience of those who lived between these regions. Accepting this map made certain kinds of relations logically inconsistent and inadmissible. Valck wrestled with these conceptual boundaries as he sought to piece together the events leading up to, and subsequent to, the Luhmann murders.
24. See Reid, Contest for North Sumatra, 153.
25. KITLV, H1122/Valck.
27. The discussion of Valck’s qualifications and the decision concerning his misconduct, transfer, and dismissal appear in the decision of the Governor-General of 13 August 1877, no. 2. The report of 18 June 1877 (mailrapport 6281) mentioned in this decision is located at the Arsip nasional in Jakarta. Levysohn’s addendum to the advice of the Director of the Colonial Civil Service was classified with the Governor-General’s decision; Vice President of the Raad (Advisory Council) O. Van Rees to the Indies Advisory Council, 13 July 1877, agenda 407/77 (secret).
28. Director of the Civil Service to the Governor-General, 18 June 1877, mailrapport 6281, on “the capability of Resident Locker de Bruine and the other civil servants on the East Coast.” Locker de Bruine is dismissed for his ineptitude in keeping tabs on Valck, that is for his actions not his beliefs.
29. O. van Rees and Levysohn Norman to the Director of the Civil Service, 13 August 1877, agenda 404/77 (secret).
30. The issue was not totally ignored elsewhere. In an article in the most widely read Dutch language newspaper in the Indies, the Javabode of 18 November 1876, on the
violence in Deli and the planters' part in it, an anonymous journalist writes: “People have indeed contended that the Europeans in Deli were on a very low level of moral development, but who could ever have thought that they could have sunk so low.”


32. Frans Carl Valck to Resident Locker de Bruine in Bengkalis, 29 October 1876, *mailrapport* 920.

33. I thank Val Daniel for drawing my attention to these distinctions.

34. In 1877 George Samuel Nederveen Pieterse, then 44 years old, was already “notorious” in the Hague (Communiqué, 24 May 1877). This appellation was strangely at odds with his previous military career, for which he was awarded the Willem Orde in 1870 for distinguished service in the Ceram expedition of 1865–66 (*mailrapport* 920/1876).

35. Report of Director of the Civil Service Henny to the Governor-General, 18 June 1876, *mailrapport* 6281 (secret).

36. His concerns are well founded; a year later he is criticized precisely for that delay.

37. One of the only other Malay-language quotes appears in the Director of Civil Service's report on Locker de Bruine, where he explains the latter's lack of initiative by his too frequent association with native heads who are always saying, “Nanti, saja maoe pikir lebih dhoeloe” (Later, I want to think about it for a while first). Presumably, like Djamal's quote, such an utterance reflected some essential features of native mentalité.

38. *Datoe* is the term used for a Malay village head.

39. John Bowen has suggested to me that the “Petambiang” cited in this report may have been the Raja Petiam[b]ang, one of the Gayo kejurun (domain lord), which would “fit” with what Valck reports; see Bowen, *Sumatran Politics and Poetics*, 62.

40. Resident Locker de Bruine to the Governor-General, 10 September 1876, *mailrapport* 741.

41. Expedition commander Vogel in Langkat to Chief of Staff Willink Ketjan and General Chief of Staff of the Seventh Division Pfeiffer, 21 September 1876, *mailrapport* 844.

42. Ibid.

43. Maj. Demmeni to the Commander of the Army and the Chief of the Department of War, 28 October 1876, *mailrapport* 916 (secret).

44. Ibid. 45. Ibid.

46. Valck to Locker de Bruine, 24 October 1876, *mailrapport* 864.

47. It is striking in these narratives that the gender and familial dimensions of the murder go virtually unmarked, nor is any allusion to sexual assault ever made. For other contexts in which the gendering of colonial violence was politically charged see Stoler, “Perceptions of Protest”; and “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia,” in *Gender at the Crossroads: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, ed. Micaela di Leonardo (Berkeley, 1991), 51–101.

48. These tales of “coolie rows” pervade the planters' representations of protest as well as that of the government's labor inspectorate well into the 1920s. See Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation*, esp. chap. 3.

49. Demmeni to the Chief of Staff and the General Chief of Staff, 8 October 1876, *mailrapport*.

50. Journal extract from Demmmeni, 6–19 October 1876, *mailrapport* 880.

51. Locker de Bruine to the Governor-General, 25 November 1876, *mailrapport* 964.

52. Valck to Locker de Bruine, 2 December 1876, *mailrapport* 53.

53. Locker de Bruine to the Governor-General, 25 November 1876, *mailrapport* 964.

54. Locker de Bruine to the Governor-General, 5 December 1876, *mailrapport* 973.
55. Locker de Bruine to the Governor-General, 30 December 1876, mailrapport 53.
56. Locker de Bruine to the Governor-General, 27 February 1877, mailrapport 170.
57. Locker de Bruine to the Governor-General, 8 January 1877, mailrapport 70.
59. Reid, Contest for North Sumatra, 153.
60. Demmeni to the Chief of Staff, 15 November 1876, mailrapport 1005.
61. Ibid.
62. Extracts from Demmeni’s journal, 11–24 November 1876, mailrapport 1005.
63. Ibid.
64. Telegram from Demmeni to the General Chief of Staff, 11 November 1876, mailrapport 929 (secret).
66. Luhmann remained in Deli for another twenty-five years and maintained his tobacco estate at Soengai Diski until the 1890s. In 1903 his name first appears in the Indies business directory as the owner and administration of the Soengei Bloetoe rubber estate that he ran at least through 1918; Handboek voor cultuur en handelsondernemingen in Nederlands-Indie (1892–93; Amsterdam, 1918); Nieuw adresboek van Geheel Nederlands-Indie (Batavia, 1903).
67. When I had first read Levyssohn’s plea for Valck, I had taken their law school ties to be sufficient justification for Levyssohn’s loyalty to him. However, returning to the archives this past year, I found a denser if still confused genealogy of power and alliance than was first apparent. Valck’s father arrived in the Indies in 1806 at 8 years of age with his father, also a civil servant in the Indies administration. At 24 Valck senior was appointed secretary to the Resident in Batavia, and from the 1823 to 1842 he held successive prestigious posts as Resident in different parts of Java (Krawang, Pasuruan, Kedoe) and finally in Jogjakarta where Frans Carl was born. While Resident in Jogjakarta he was commissioned by Governor-General De Eerens to take over the Surabaya residency, where the Resident and Assistant-Resident had recently been dismissed on the recommendation of a commission charged with investigating their conduct. Valck senior, by his own report, was outraged by the fashion in which the dismissals had occurred. He argued to the Governor-General that their removal was engineered and proceeded to reinvestigate the commission itself. He was quickly withdrawn, suspended from the civil service for three months, banished without salary, and “only the memory of his good services” kept him from being dishonorably dismissed. Upon returning to Holland on a two-year sick leave the following year, he filed a complaint against the Governor-General directly to the Minister of Colonies in the Hague, thereby bypassing the local Indies chain of authority altogether.

Whether the Valck family name was still marked when Frans Carl arrived in the civil service thirty years later would be difficult to establish, but it is plausible that the younger Valck, whose father died (from ill health and perhaps ill name?) when he was only seven years old, was raised in an environment where Multatuli’s sense of outrage at government corruption (published when he was in law school) resonated with his mother’s and family’s own. But since the voices of women are so categorically denied in these accounts, we know nothing more of Valck’s mother than her name and can only speculate as to the sorts of Indies stories she might have told her son.
68. The only reference I have found to this incident is in the Stamboeken Indische amb-
tenaren, part deel O, fol. 153.
69. Ibid., part M-330, p. 523; Album studiosorum lugdunum batavorum, fols. 1362–63.
70. The cold reception Valck received for accusations against Deli’s planters may have
more to do with his own past entanglements than those of his father. Valck had already
been involved in an administrative scandal in north Bali just four years prior to the
Luhmann murder. Then a lowly district officer, he had sided against the current Res-
ident and Assistant-Resident, who had allegedly discovered a wide range of abuses
perpetrated by the local Balinese regent. An investigation in 1873 concluded that the
regent had been set up by the Dutch Resident and Assistant-Resident, who were them-
selves guilty of corruption. Although both were dismissed and Valck was promoted to
Assistant-Resident, the report was denounced by many Europeans in Batavia. Accord-
ing to the Dutch sociologist Henk Schulte-Nordholt, Valck’s correspondence
from 1873 already suggests that he feared the gossip among certain factions in “white
Batavia” about his promotion. Whether he was sent to Deli as a routine transfer is
unclear, since the inspector of the Bali report that Valck supported was the father-
in-law of the same Levyssohn Norman who was to defend him five years later; see
149–60.
I thank Henk Schulte-Nordholt for pointing out this Bali connection to me when
I first presented this paper in Amsterdam. Valck’s double-edged persona, as honor-
able whistle blower but self-promoter, may have made the Bali affair too confused to
be usefully invoked for his prosecution or defense. In any case, no mention is made
of his Bali years in the files I read.
71. Director of the Civil Service to the Governor-General, 18 June 1877, mailrapport 6281,
(secret).
72. See John Haviland, Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge in Zinacantan (Chicago, 1977),
where he argues that participation in gossip entails a knowledge of cultural rules and
therefore a cultural competence.
73. See Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency, 251–74.
74. I owe this contrast between the “coziness” of gossip and the tension of rumor to dis-
cussions with Val Daniel.
75. On the contrasting definitions of danger by planters and state officials in Deli between
the 1870s and 1930s, see Stoler, “Perceptions of Protest.”
76. See ibid., 642.