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The Punishment Pole

Blood on the Pole

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Prologue

This book is grounded in harsh reality and the unwavering resistance of victims during the colonial era in the former Dutch East Indies. It brings to life the stories of indigenous peoples who, despite corporal punishment, exploitation, and humiliation, managed to preserve their dignity and resisted colonial rule in various ways.

Corporal punishment and colonial hierarchy
One of the most harrowing aspects of the colonial system was the use of corporal punishment against the indigenous population. These penalties were often brutal, degrading, and merciless, imposed even on the slightest suspicion of disobedience or insufficient submission. They created an atmosphere of fear and constant surveillance.

Within this system, the so-called Tandil and Mandòr played a central role. They acted as intermediaries between the colonial

administration and the labour force. For every worker they recruited, they received a commission, and they often served as foremen or supervisors. Their authority was made visible through appearance and conduct: exaggerated uniforms, a staff as a symbol of power, and a harsh, commanding tone that left little room for dissent.

After the Second World War, in the 1950s, many of these former intermediaries moved to the Netherlands. Within the colonial system they had occupied a limited yet visible position of authority; once in the mother country, they were often placed in modest administrative roles which, despite their humble nature, still carried a certain degree of authority—such as in supervisory or clerical functions.

Thus, the colonial hierarchy did not disappear; it merely changed form. In a new context it continued to exist, though more subtly—no longer as an overt structure of colonial rule, but

as something woven into the fabric of society itself.

Complicity and moral ambiguity
During and after the Japanese occupation and the Indonesian struggle for independence, some indigenous collaborators remained loyal to the colonial administration. For them, this often-meant protection, status, or economic advantage, yet this choice placed them in deep moral tension with their own communities.

Within the wider population, they were regarded as traitors who had handed their own people over to a system of oppression. Their involvement ranged from acting as informants to active participation in repression and violence. This history reveals how colonial structures were not only imposed from the outside but could also be sustained from within—often driven by survival, fear, or opportunism.

Economic exploitation and dependency
Many foremen did not limit themselves to

supervision but also developed systems of economic exploitation. From their position between labourers and colonial employers, they were able to create a closed circle of dependency from which they themselves profited financially.

Workers were forced to purchase goods such as food and clothing at inflated prices, often through trade controlled by the foremen themselves. These costs were deducted from wages, leaving workers structurally indebted and with little possibility of escaping their position.

This debt system kept them trapped in a structure that, in practice, left virtually no room for social or economic mobility. In some cases, this dependency was further reinforced by gambling and opium use, increasing workers' vulnerability even more.

Historical significance

This history reveals how colonial power was not only exercised through external domination but

also maintained through internal hierarchies and complicity. The intermediaries involved often occupied a position between two worlds: not fully part of the colonial elite yet also alienated from their own communities.

Their role remains historically charged and morally complex. They are not clear-cut figures of good or evil, but rather products of a system in which power, survival, and exploitation were deeply intertwined.

The victims of the colonial system

Initially, Chinese coolies—a term derived from Sanskrit meaning **"porter"** or **"low-paid laborer"**—formed the largest share of the workforce on colonial plantations and infrastructure projects in the Dutch East Indies. Their role was particularly prominent in the early phase of colonial economic development. However, during the nineteenth century, this composition began to shift.

For economic reasons and due to social tensions, colonial authorities increasingly turned to the recruitment of Javanese laborers. The choice of Javanese workers was not accidental: they were considered more compliant and easier to recruit through the cultivation system and its associated forced contracts. Moreover, they often arrived in family groups, leading to a profound shift in the labor model. Women and even young children were subsequently employed on plantations as well, with severe consequences for their well-being and development.

The group of contract labourers grew into a diverse and vibrant whole, a convergence of peoples brought together from afar. Among the rows of workers, Javanese labored alongside Bataks, Balinese, and Sundanese; Malays and Boyans from the Malay Peninsula shared the harsh existence with Klings—Tamil-speaking labourers from India—and with Banjarese, Sumatran workers, and others who had left their homelands behind. Each carried something of

their origin: a language that sounded different, rituals that recalled a distant past, and stories whispering of a life once lived elsewhere.

Yet beneath this diversity lay a shared reality, less visible but deeply felt. It was an existence defined by labour, by boundaries that could not be crossed, and by constant dependence on a system that left little room for personal will. Freedom was not a given, but something that could only be touched in thought.

Within this brought-together world, invisible lines gradually emerged—boundaries that were not drawn on maps, yet profoundly shaped everyday life. Groups were set against one another, differences were amplified, and mistrust was quietly cultivated. What at first glance appeared to be a community was, from within, carefully kept divided.

This was no coincidence. Colonial power understood that a divided population is easier to control than a unified one. By subtly—and at

times openly—introducing divisions, solidarity was undermined and resistance was broken before it could even take shape. In this way, each individual remained in their assigned place, trapped within a system that exerted pressure not only from above, but also reinforced itself from within.

The shift in labour structure was not merely an economic strategy of the coloniser; it also had profound social and cultural consequences for the communities it affected. It created a system in which entire families were trapped in a cycle of poverty, debt, and dependency, all under the banner of colonial progress.

Among the indigenous female workers brought increasingly to the plantations were a striking number of young girls, often only between 10 and 14 years old. Their youth offered no protection against the harsh realities of the colonial labour system. Initially, they were assigned so-called **"light"** work: sorting and

bundling tobacco leaves, weeding plantation fields, and other tasks requiring precision and endurance.

Yet this did not remain limited to light labour. As the demand for cheap labour grew, these girls were also assigned physically more demanding tasks. They were made to dredge gravel from rivers, break stones for the construction of roads and railways, and in some cases even carry and empty heavy latrine barrels for Chinese and European workers—a degrading task accompanied by stench, disease, and social stigma.

This practice reflects the harsh conditions in which young female labourers found themselves within the colonial context. The utilitarian mindset of the colonial administration—where workers were viewed primarily as labour capital—left little room for moral consideration or protection of vulnerable groups. Women and children alike were, regardless of age, absorbed