



Research Article

Orang Rantai, Mbah Soero, and the Moral Politics of Labor in the Ombilin Coal Mines

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Abstract

This study offers an interpretive historical rereading of the Ombilin coal mines in Sawahlunto, treating them not only as sites of colonial extraction but also as spaces in which coercive labor, criminalization, collective memory, and moral leadership intersect. It focuses on the colonial classification of *orang rantai* (chained laborers), questioning the assumption that this label represented a neutral legal category and considering how colonial penal practices supported coercive labor within the mining system. Using a qualitative historical approach based on document analysis of scholarly literature, institutional heritage documents, and documented public narratives, the study examines how *orang rantai* and the remembered figure of Mbah Soero have been represented and interpreted in historical and heritage narratives. The findings suggest that colonial penal classifications may have obscured the broader political, social, and coercive contexts in which these laborers were incorporated into the mining economy, while the remembered figure of Mbah Soero can be interpreted as embodying an ethical form of leadership grounded in solidarity and responsibility within collective memory. Rather than reconstructing the lived experiences of historical actors, this study offers an interpretive historical perspective that reconsiders colonial labor history through the interconnected dimensions of coercion, memory, and moral leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

The expansion of colonial extractive industries in Southeast Asia was closely connected to systems of coercion, labor discipline, and state control. Under colonial rule, mining, plantation, and infrastructure projects were not merely economic enterprises but also political instruments through which colonial states organized territory, regulated populations, and secured resource accumulation. In the Netherlands East Indies, these processes were visible in the development of large-scale extractive industries that depended on different forms of unfree and semi-free labor. Colonial labor systems were therefore shaped by the interaction between economic rationality and coercive governance, with productivity sustained through legal regulation, surveillance, punishment, and bodily discipline (Furnivall, 1939; Breman, 1989; Foucault, 1977; Stoler, 1995).

The Ombilin coal mines in Sawahlunto, West Sumatra, represent one of the most important examples of colonial extractive development in Indonesia. Following the nineteenth-century identification of coal reserves by Willem Hendrik de Greve, Ombilin developed into an integrated mining complex comprising underground mines, railways, port facilities, and a company town. UNESCO later recognized the Ombilin Coal Mining Heritage of Sawahlunto as a World Heritage Site for demonstrating this integrated industrial system of coal extraction, processing, transportation, and shipment during the colonial period (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019). While this recognition highlights Ombilin's industrial and technological significance, it also invites closer attention to the labor regime that sustained the system. Among the most significant yet often overlooked components of this regime were the *orang rantai* (chained laborers), whose role is central to understanding the social history behind Ombilin's industrial heritage.

At the core of Ombilin's colonial labor regime was the system of *orang rantai*, or chained laborers. These laborers were recruited through the colonial penal system and sent to the mines as convict workers. The 2019 ICOMOS advisory evaluation notes that Ombilin used convicts from prisons in Java, Bali, Makassar, and other areas controlled by the Dutch colonial state; these workers were

known as *orang rantai* because they performed hard labor under conditions associated with confinement and punishment (International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS], 2019). In colonial records and dominant public narratives, *orang rantai* were often described as criminals. However, this classification should not be accepted as a neutral legal category. Postcolonial scholarship reminds us that colonial categories frequently functioned as instruments of domination, producing images of deviance, disorder, and criminality to legitimize control over colonized populations (Said, 1978; Stoler, 1995; Reid, 2015). Local historical accounts further emphasize that Ombilin's mining heritage occupies an important place in the historical formation of Sawahlunto as a colonial mining town and, later, as a heritage city (Zed, 2017).

From this perspective, the category of *orang rantai* warrants critical reinterpretation. Rather than viewing them simply as criminal laborers, this study understands their classification as part of a broader colonial technology of power. The penal system did not merely punish crime; it also supplied disciplined labor for colonial production and transformed marginalized or resistant subjects into exploitable workers. Studies of Ombilin show that labor relations in the mines were shaped by complex interactions among managers, workers, and the colonial state, making the mining system not only an economic institution but also a sociopolitical arena (Erman, 1999, 2005). Thus, the history of *orang rantai* cannot be separated from the wider dynamics of colonial governance, labor exploitation, and political repression.

Existing studies of colonial labor have provided important insights into the structural character of coercion. Furnivall (1939) explains the colonial economy as a plural and hierarchical system organized to serve imperial interests, while Breman (1989) demonstrates how colonial labor control relied on coercive recruitment, social discipline, and unequal power relations. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power further helps explain how institutions regulate bodies through surveillance, spatial organization, and punishment (Foucault, 1977). More recent scholarship has also emphasized that colonial labor regimes in Island Southeast Asia were deeply embedded in broader political-economic structures that relied on coercive labor mobilization and unequal labor relations (Bosma, 2019). In the Indonesian context, studies by Erman (1999, 2005) demonstrate that the Ombilin coal mines operated through complex interactions among colonial administration, labor control, and local social relations, illustrating how coercive labor was embedded in the broader political economy of colonial mining. These perspectives are useful for understanding Ombilin as a site of colonial domination. However, they tend to emphasize structures of control rather than the micro-level practices through which laborers and local actors negotiated life within coercive systems.

This limitation is important because colonial labor regimes were never only systems of domination. Even under extreme constraint, workers and intermediary figures could still exercise forms of agency, solidarity, and ethical judgment. While structural approaches explain how colonial labor regimes were organized and sustained, they are less equipped to explain how coercive systems were experienced, interpreted, and morally negotiated by historical actors and later remembered by local communities. Examining these relational and ethical dimensions therefore requires a complementary perspective that extends beyond structural analysis. The concept of moral economy provides such a perspective by illuminating how ideas of responsibility, protection, and justice shaped social relations within and beyond coercive labor systems. In the case of Ombilin, the remembered figure of Mbah Soero offers an important entry point for examining these dimensions. In Sawahlunto's collective memory, Mbah Soero is associated with Lubang Tambang Mbah Soero and remembered as a figure connected to discipline, protection, and the lived experiences of mining labor. Recent scholarship on Sawahlunto's heritage politics shows that Lubang Tambang Mbah Soero has become a significant site for the construction of collective memory and local identity (Ediyen & Tambunan, 2025). Mbah Soero should therefore be approached not only as an individual historical figure but also as a symbolic figure through whom communities remember suffering, dignity, and moral responsibility.

To analyze this dimension, the study draws on the concept of moral economy. Thompson (1971) argues that economic life is shaped not only by market rationality but also by moral expectations regarding justice, obligation, and social responsibility. Scott (1976) similarly shows that subordinated communities often evaluate power and authority through ethical expectations related to protection, reciprocity, and survival. Applied to Ombilin, the concept of moral economy enables this study to

examine how ethical action and relational leadership could emerge within a coercive labor regime. Mbah Soero's remembered role can therefore be interpreted as a form of moral and relational leadership grounded not merely in formal authority but in solidarity, practical judgment, and responsibility toward vulnerable workers.

Based on this framework, this article argues that the Ombilin coal mines should be understood not only as a site of extraction and coercion but also as a contested arena in which power, agency, and moral action interacted. The study contributes to colonial labor studies by shifting attention from domination alone to the relationships among coercion, criminalization, collective memory, and moral leadership. This approach offers a more nuanced understanding of *orang rantai* as historical subjects positioned within colonial structures of punishment and exploitation, while also recognizing the possibility of agency and ethical negotiation within those structures.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions. First, how did the system of *orang rantai* function as a mechanism of labor control within the Ombilin mining complex? Second, in what ways can Mbah Soero be interpreted as a figure of moral and relational leadership within Sawahlunto's collective memory? Third, how do the dynamics of coercion, agency, and moral leadership contribute to a reinterpretation of colonial labor history in Indonesia? By answering these questions, this study seeks to show that colonial labor history is not only a history of domination but also a history of contested meanings, ethical practices, and human dignity under conditions of structural violence.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical approach based on document analysis to reinterpret *orang rantai* and the remembered figure of Mbah Soero through the lenses of coercive labor, collective memory, and moral leadership. Rather than providing a descriptive historical account, the study adopts an interpretive perspective to examine how labor, power, and moral meaning are constructed through historical representation and collective remembrance.

The unit of analysis is the relationship among colonial labor control, the classification of *orang rantai*, and the remembered figure of Mbah Soero within the Ombilin coal mining complex. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: first, the mechanisms through which coercive labor was organized and maintained; second, the ways in which *orang rantai* were categorized and represented as criminal laborers; and third, the emergence of moral and relational leadership in the memory of Mbah Soero. These dimensions correspond directly to the research questions formulated in the introduction.

The study draws on three categories of sources: scholarly literature; institutional heritage documents, including UNESCO publications and official heritage materials; and documented public narratives. Scholarly literature provides the principal historical basis for analyzing the colonial labor system, while heritage documents and public narratives are used to examine how *orang rantai* and the remembered figure of Mbah Soero have been interpreted and commemorated in contemporary society. These sources were analyzed according to their distinct evidentiary roles. Historical claims were grounded primarily in scholarly historical studies, whereas heritage documents and public narratives were interpreted as evidence of collective memory and heritage interpretation. Source quality was assessed in terms of credibility, relevance, and analytical value, with findings triangulated across the different source types. Accordingly, conclusions regarding the reinterpretation of *orang rantai* and the remembered significance of Mbah Soero should be understood as interpretive historical readings rather than direct reconstructions based on primary archival evidence.

Table 1. Research Data

Source Type	Examples	Function in Analysis
Scholarly literature	Books, journal articles, theses, and dissertations on colonial labor, penal labor, Ombilin, and postcolonial interpretation	To build the historical, theoretical, and conceptual foundation of the study
Institutional and archival documents	UNESCO documents, official heritage records, historical reports, and institutional descriptions of Ombilin	To examine formal narratives of heritage, labor, and colonial mining development
Documented public narratives	Media reports, tourism narratives, local heritage descriptions, and public accounts of Mbah Soero and orang rantai	To interpret collective memory, symbolic meaning, and public representation
Historical studies on Ombilin	Works discussing Ombilin, Sawahlunto, mining labor, and colonial social relations	To contextualize labor relations, extraction, and the socio-political history of the mining complex

Source: Developed by the authors.

Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis. Sources were selected according to three criteria: credibility, relevance, and analytical value. Credibility refers to the reliability and authority of a source, particularly whether it was produced by academic, institutional, or historically recognized actors. Relevance refers to the source's direct connection to themes of coercive labor, penal classification, mining history, leadership, and collective memory. Analytical value refers to the extent to which a source contributes to answering the research questions and developing the study's theoretical argument. Using these criteria, the study prioritized sources that could provide both historical information and interpretive insight.

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis combined with theory-driven interpretation. First, the collected documents were read repeatedly to identify recurring themes related to coercion, labor discipline, criminalization, resistance, bodily suffering, solidarity, leadership, and collective memory. Second, these themes were coded and grouped into broader analytical categories. Third, the categories were interpreted through three conceptual lenses: colonial political economy, postcolonial critique, and moral economy. Colonial political economy was used to analyze the structural organization of labor control and extraction. Postcolonial critique was used to examine the production of colonial categories such as "criminal" and "convict laborer." Moral economy was used to interpret ethical expectations, solidarity, and relational leadership associated with Mbah Soero.

Table 2. Analytical Framework

Analytical Focus	Key Issue	Conceptual Lens	Expected Interpretation
Orang rantai	Coercive labor and penal classification	Colonial political economy	Labor control as part of colonial extraction and production
Criminalization	Representation of workers as criminals or convict laborers	Postcolonial critique	Criminality as a colonial technology of power and domination
Mbah Soero	Memory, protection, discipline, and leadership	Moral economy	Moral leadership as an ethical relation within coercive structures
Sawahlunto's collective memory	Heritage narratives and public remembrance	Collective memory and postcolonial interpretation	Reinterpretation of colonial labor history through memory, dignity, and moral responsibility

Source: Developed by the authors.

To ensure analytical rigor, this study applies source triangulation by comparing information from scholarly literature, institutional documents, and public narratives. Triangulation is important because each source type has distinct limitations. Colonial and institutional records may emphasize administrative order, technical achievement, and heritage recognition, while public narratives may emphasize suffering, identity, memory, and moral meaning. By comparing these sources, the study seeks to identify consistent patterns while also recognizing tensions and contradictions among historical representations.

The methodological process of this study can be summarized as follows.

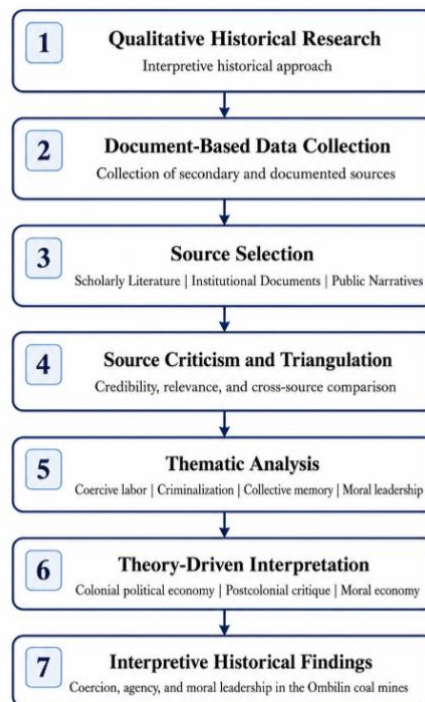


Figure 1. Flowchart

Source: Developed by the authors.

The study also employs reflexive interpretation, treating historical sources not as neutral descriptions of the past but as texts shaped by power relations, institutional interests, and memory politics. This approach is particularly important in analyzing *orang rantai* because the colonial label of "criminal" may reproduce the colonial state's perspective rather than the lived experiences or political positions of the laborers themselves. Similarly, Mbah Soero is interpreted not only as an individual historical actor but also as part of Sawahlunto's collective memory and heritage narrative.

Because this study relies on secondary and documented sources, it does not claim to reconstruct the full range of lived experiences of *orang rantai* or to provide a complete biography of Mbah Soero. Instead, it offers an interpretive historical analysis of how coercive labor, criminalization, collective memory, and moral leadership are represented, remembered, and theoretically understood. This limitation also opens possibilities for future research based on oral history, archival fieldwork, and ethnographic engagement with local communities in Sawahlunto.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Colonial Extraction and the System of Chained Labor

The Ombilin coal mining complex in Sawahlunto illustrates how colonial extraction was built on the institutionalization of coercive labor. Following the discovery of coal reserves by Willem Hendrik de Greve in the nineteenth century, Sawahlunto was transformed from a relatively peripheral area into a strategic mining town connected to broader colonial infrastructure. The development of Ombilin extended beyond underground coal extraction to include railway networks, storage facilities, ports, and administrative settlements designed to support the circulation of coal within the colonial economy (Erman, 1999, 2005; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019). This transformation shows that mining was not merely a technical or economic project but also a political process of territorial reorganization and labor control. In the post-mining period, Sawahlunto's colonial mining infrastructure has been reinterpreted as part of a heritage and tourism landscape, showing how former extractive spaces have been transformed into sites of memory, education, and cultural preservation (Erman, 2020).

Within this system, the use of *orang rantai* became central to the operation of the colonial mining economy. These chained laborers were recruited through the penal system and deployed as convict workers in the mines. Their presence demonstrates how colonial states connected punishment with production. Penal labor supplied the workforce required for dangerous and physically demanding mining activities while also providing the colonial government with a mechanism to discipline and remove unwanted subjects from society. In this sense, *orang rantai* were not simply laborers; they were subjects positioned at the intersection of criminal law, colonial governance, and extractive capitalism.

Historical studies indicate that convict labor constituted a central component of the early Ombilin mining workforce. When mining operations commenced in 1893, approximately 300 convicts were employed; the number rose to around 1,250 by the end of the same year and exceeded 2,400 by 1898 as coal production expanded. Many of these laborers were transferred from prisons elsewhere in the Dutch East Indies, particularly Java, to meet the labor demands of the colonial mining enterprise. They were employed not only in underground mining but also in railway construction and other supporting infrastructure (Erman, [1999](#), [2005](#); van Rossum, [2018](#)).

The coercive character of this labor regime was embedded in the organization of work itself. Coercion operated not only through visible violence, such as chains, guards, and punishment, but also through the regulation of space, time, and bodily movement. Workers were placed in confined underground spaces, subjected to strict supervision, and required to follow the rhythms of industrial production. This reflects what Foucault ([1977](#)) describes as disciplinary power, through which institutions produce obedience by organizing bodies in space and time. In Ombilin, discipline was not external to the mining system; it was one of the conditions that made production possible.

These findings challenge interpretations that separate economic rationality from colonial violence. In the Ombilin case, extraction and coercion were mutually constitutive. The coal-mining system depended on labor control, and labor control depended on the legal and administrative power of the colonial state. Coercive labor should therefore not be understood as an accidental or exceptional feature of the mining economy; rather, it formed part of the institutional logic of colonial extraction. This confirms broader arguments in colonial labor studies that unfree labor was not a marginal phenomenon but a central mechanism in the development of colonial capitalism (Furnivall, [1939](#); Breman, [1989](#)).

Embodied Suffering and the Production of Risk

The conditions associated with *orang rantai* also reveal how risk and suffering were structurally produced within the colonial labor regime. Mining work in Ombilin exposed laborers to dangerous underground conditions, physical exhaustion, limited mobility, and the constant possibility of injury or death. The workers' chained status intensified this vulnerability because it reduced their capacity to avoid danger, negotiate working conditions, or refuse hazardous tasks. Thus, suffering resulted not only from difficult labor but also from a system that deliberately restricted workers' autonomy.

The colonial mining regime transferred the costs of production onto workers' bodies. The demand for coal required continuous labor, while the dangers of underground extraction were borne primarily by *orang rantai*. In this sense, the body became the site at which colonial power and economic accumulation converged. Workers' bodies were disciplined, exhausted, and exposed to danger to secure productivity. This supports the view that colonial labor systems operated not only through wages or contracts but also through bodily control and the normalization of vulnerability (Foucault, [1977](#); Stoler, [1995](#)).

These theoretical perspectives are supported by historical evidence from Ombilin. Erman ([2005](#)) documents that many *orang rantai* worked under constant supervision while restrained by chains and were subjected to corporal punishment, poor nutrition, and limited medical care. Such conditions illustrate how bodily discipline operated not only as punishment but also as a mechanism for sustaining colonial production.

Risk in Ombilin was therefore not merely an occupational hazard. It was a political and economic condition produced by the colonial organization of labor. By placing convict laborers in the

most dangerous forms of work, the colonial state made certain bodies more expendable than others. The classification of *orang rantai* as criminal laborers contributed to this process by reducing public sympathy and normalizing harsh treatment. Once workers were labeled as criminals, their suffering could more easily be justified as punishment rather than recognized as exploitation.

This point is important because it shifts the analysis of suffering from individual tragedy to structural violence. The hardship experienced by *orang rantai* was not simply a consequence of mining technology or geological risk. It was produced through the combination of penal classification, labor discipline, and colonial economic priorities. The mining system made danger productive by incorporating it into the organization of labor. The suffering of *orang rantai* must therefore be understood as part of the broader political economy of colonial extraction.

Criminalization as a Colonial Technology of Power

One of the central issues in understanding the history of *orang rantai* is the colonial classification of these laborers as criminals. Colonial records often presented convict laborers as offenders who had been legally punished and assigned to hard labor. However, this classification must be treated critically. Postcolonial scholarship has shown that colonial regimes frequently produced categories of deviance to legitimize domination and regulate colonized populations (Said, 1978; Stoler, 1995). In this context, "criminality" was not always a neutral legal category but could also function as a political instrument.

The category of *orang rantai* should therefore be understood as a product of colonial power. By labeling certain individuals as criminals, the colonial state could remove them from their communities, discipline them through forced labor, and incorporate them into the mining economy. This process transformed punishment into production. The penal system did not merely administer punishment; it also supplied labor for colonial industry. As a result, the boundaries among law, punishment, and economic exploitation became blurred.

Historical scholarship and heritage research indicate that the convict population was heterogeneous and that some figures later remembered as *orang rantai* were associated in public memory with anti-colonial resistance. Ediyen and Tambunan (2025), for example, show that local heritage narratives portray Mbah Soero as having opposed Dutch taxation, while family memories collected in Sawahlunto describe ancestors who resisted colonial authorities or experienced dispossession. Because these claims derive partly from collective memory, they should not be treated as direct archival proof of each prisoner's legal status. They do, however, demonstrate how the category of "criminal" has been contested and reinterpreted in postcolonial memory (Ediyen & Tambunan, 2025).

Criminalization thus operated as a colonial technology of power. It produced a class of laborers who were both exploitable and socially delegitimized. Once categorized as criminals, *orang rantai* could be subjected to harsh conditions with limited moral or political accountability. Contemporary public narratives continue to associate the *orang rantai* system with the cruelty of Dutch colonial rule in Sawahlunto, especially in relation to forced labor, bodily suffering, and underground mining work (Antara News, 2018). This process also shaped historical memory. If colonial categories are accepted uncritically, *orang rantai* remain remembered as offenders rather than as historical subjects caught within structures of repression, displacement, and forced labor. Historical studies document the use of convict labor and penal classification in Ombilin. The broader interpretation advanced here is that these legal categories also functioned politically by legitimizing coercive labor and shaping subsequent historical memory. Reinterpreting them is therefore not only an academic task but also an ethical act of historical recovery.

This discussion contributes to the broader argument of the study by showing that coercive labor was sustained not only through physical force but also through symbolic and legal classification. Power operated by naming, categorizing, and morally positioning laborers. The category of "criminal" made coercion appear legitimate. The history of *orang rantai* therefore reveals how colonial domination operated through both material violence and representational power.

Mbah Soero, Collective Memory, and Moral Leadership

Within this coercive labor regime, the figure of Mbah Soero occupies an important place in Sawahlunto's collective memory. Mbah Soero is remembered in relation to Lubang Tambang Mbah Soero, a former mining tunnel that has become one of the most significant heritage sites in Sawahlunto. Public and educational narratives also describe Lubang Tambang Mbah Soero as an important historical and learning site through which visitors and students encounter the memory of Sawahlunto's colonial mining past (Antara News, [2011](#); Azizah & Budiwirman, [2025](#)). Rather than reconstructing Mbah Soero as a fully documented historical figure, this study examines the meanings attached to him in contemporary collective memory and heritage narratives. His remembered role allows the history of Ombilin to be understood not only through domination but also through ethical relations formed under conditions of constraint.

For this study, the significance of Mbah Soero lies not in establishing the details of his historical actions but in understanding how he has been remembered as an ethical counterpoint to the impersonal logic of colonial extraction. The mining system was organized around productivity, discipline, and control. Collective memory, however, associates Mbah Soero with a different moral logic: concern for workers, practical judgment, and responsibility toward those placed in danger. This interpretation does not imply that he stood outside the colonial system. As a figure connected to the organization of mining labor, he was likely positioned within its hierarchy of authority. Yet his remembered significance suggests that leadership within coercive systems could be interpreted not only as command but also as mediation.

This is where the concept of moral economy becomes useful. Thompson ([1971](#)) argues that economic relations are shaped by moral expectations concerning justice, obligation, and acceptable conduct. Scott ([1976](#)) similarly shows that subordinated communities often evaluate authority according to whether it provides protection and respects basic expectations of survival. In the case of Ombilin, Mbah Soero's remembered leadership can be interpreted through this lens. His significance rests not solely on formal authority but on the moral expectation that leadership should protect, guide, and recognize the humanity of workers.

Within contemporary collective memory, Mbah Soero is remembered as embodying a form of moral and relational leadership. Moral leadership refers to leadership grounded in ethical responsibility, while relational leadership emphasizes the quality of relationships between leaders and those they guide. In a coercive labor regime, this form of leadership becomes especially meaningful because it introduces ethical considerations into a system structured by violence and exploitation. It does not abolish coercion, but it can reshape how power is experienced at the micro level.

However, this interpretation must be approached carefully. The available sources on Mbah Soero are shaped by public memory, heritage narratives, and tourism representation. This study therefore does not claim to reconstruct his full historical biography. Instead, it analyzes how his figure is remembered and why that memory matters. The memory of Mbah Soero functions as a moral counter-narrative to colonial dehumanization. While the colonial system reduced *orang rantai* to disciplined laboring bodies, the memory of Mbah Soero reintroduces ethical themes of care, responsibility, and solidarity into the history of Ombilin.

This interpretation also shows that collective memory is not merely a passive reflection of the past. It is an active process through which communities make meaning from historical suffering. By remembering Mbah Soero as a protective and morally responsible figure, Sawahlunto's heritage narrative offers an alternative way of understanding colonial labor history. It does not erase violence but places that violence alongside dignity, agency, and ethical action.

Coercion, Agency, and Moral Leadership as a Relational Dynamic

The findings suggest that coercion, agency, and moral leadership should not be understood as separate phenomena. In the Ombilin mining system, these three dimensions operated relationally. Coercion created the structural conditions of labor control: it organized workers' bodies, restricted

movement, imposed discipline, and legitimized exploitation through penal classification. Agency emerged within these constraints, not necessarily through open rebellion but through survival, adaptation, solidarity, and the reinterpretation of meaning. Moral leadership mediated the relationship between coercion and agency by introducing ethical judgment into everyday practices of authority and labor.

This relational perspective helps avoid two reductive interpretations. The first views colonial laborers merely as passive victims of domination. Such a view recognizes suffering but risks erasing the capacity of historical actors to interpret, respond to, and negotiate their conditions. The second romanticizes agency by assuming that it always appears as direct resistance. In coercive labor regimes, agency may take quieter and more embedded forms, appearing in practices of mutual support, moral evaluation, memory-making, and the preservation of dignity under oppressive conditions.

The case of *orang rantai* demonstrates this complexity. Their lives were shaped by extreme constraint, but their historical meaning cannot be reduced to criminality or victimhood. They were positioned within a system that criminalized, disciplined, and exploited them. At the same time, contemporary reinterpretations of *orang rantai* challenge colonial categories and open the possibility of understanding them as subjects of suffering, resistance, and historical injustice. This reinterpretation itself constitutes a form of agency in memory because it contests the meanings imposed by colonial power.

Similarly, the figure of Mbah Soero demonstrates how leadership can be reinterpreted within coercive systems. Heritage narratives portray him as a symbolic figure whose remembered leadership reflects values of solidarity, responsibility, and ethical care within an oppressive labor regime. Even within a violent structure, relationships of trust, protection, and ethical responsibility could become meaningful. This does not deny the brutality of the colonial mining system. Rather, it shows that power was never total or uncontested; it was continuously mediated through everyday relations, moral expectations, and collective memory.

Theoretically, this discussion contributes to colonial labor studies by integrating structural and micro-level analysis. Structural analysis explains how colonial extraction depended on coercion, criminalization, and labor discipline, while micro-level analysis reveals how agency, ethical judgment, and memory operated within those structures. By combining these levels, this study argues that colonial labor history should be understood as a field of domination and negotiation, violence and meaning, exploitation and moral action.

In this sense, Ombilin is not only a story of coal, chains, and colonial industry. It is also a story of how people lived and suffered under coercive conditions and how those experiences have subsequently been remembered and morally interpreted. The history of *orang rantai* and the memory of Mbah Soero show that even within systems designed to control bodies and suppress autonomy, dignity and ethical action could still emerge. This is the central reinterpretation offered by the study: colonial labor regimes were not merely machines of domination but contested moral worlds in which power was continuously negotiated from within.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the history of *orang rantai* in the Ombilin coal mines cannot be understood solely through colonial legal classifications but must also be interpreted through the interconnected dimensions of coercive labor, collective memory, and moral leadership. By reinterpreting the *orang rantai* system, the findings demonstrate that colonial labor regimes were sustained not only through physical control and legal classification but also through the political construction of criminality, which enabled exploitation while suppressing dissent. In this context, coercion functioned as a productive force embedded within the organization of labor rather than as an external instrument of repression.

The study further suggests that agency persisted in embedded and relational forms, challenging the assumption that workers within coercive systems were entirely passive subjects. The remembered figure of Mbah Soero illustrates how moral leadership can be interpreted within conditions of extreme constraint, as a mediating ethical framework grounded in judgment, solidarity, and shared

responsibility. This interpretation suggests that even within highly controlled environments, alternative moral logics can coexist with dominant structures and shape how those structures are remembered and understood.

Theoretically, this study contributes to colonial labor studies by advancing an integrated perspective in which coercion, agency, and leadership are understood as interdependent dimensions of a dynamic system. This perspective shifts the analysis of power from a static model of domination toward a relational and processual understanding in which power is continuously enacted, negotiated, and transformed at the micro level.

Beyond its historical contribution, the findings may inform broader discussions of labor governance in constrained environments by highlighting the importance of relational leadership and ethical decision-making in mitigating the effects of structural inequality. At the same time, the study is limited by its reliance on secondary and documented sources, which may not fully capture the lived experiences of historical actors. Future research should therefore incorporate oral history and archival fieldwork to deepen the empirical analysis and further examine the micro-dynamics of labor, leadership, and resistance.

Ultimately, the history of Ombilin reveals that systems designed for control and extraction do not entirely eliminate human agency. Instead, they create conditions in which dignity, solidarity, and moral action can continue to emerge, challenging and reshaping the boundaries of power from within.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

The authors have given approval for the publication of this manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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