

## Making Land Leaseable: Woeste Gronden and the Genealogy of Colonial Agrarian Governance in Priangan (1830-1870)

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### Abstract

Studies of colonial agrarian history often place the *Agrarische Wet* 1870 as the starting point for land liberalization in the Dutch East Indies. This article argues that key infrastructures for privatized access to land were assembled earlier through the leasing of *woeste gronden* (uncultivated 'waste' lands), with focus on Priangan. Using critical historical methods, the study operationalizes Foucault's analytics by reading colonial archives as instruments of knowledge production: *Koloniaal Verslag* tables and *Staatsblad* regulations are analyzed as techniques of calculation and legibility (governmentality), while the language and evidentiary rules that defined which land could be leased are examined as a 'regime of truth'. Sources include *Koloniaal Verslag* reports and statistical appendices (mid-1850s-1880), *Staatsblad* 1856 No. 64 and related regulations, lease contracts and dispute correspondence, and the 1857 Priangan residency map. The study finds: (1) a marked growth of leased parcels and rental revenues before 1870, indicating the conversion of land into fiscal assets; (2) *woeste gronden* was operationalized through exclusions of cultivated and desa lands, allowing customary tenure to be treated as administratively 'unproven'; (3) implementation relied on hybrid state-capital-local-elite arrangements to secure labour and boundaries; and (4) maps and contracts stabilized claims through survey, boundary-making, and documentary inscription. The article reframes 1870 as a legal consolidation of earlier classificatory and leasing practices, and cautions that 'empty land' labels can enable agrarian dispossession when documentary legibility overrides lived tenure relations. symbiosis.

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## Introduction

Agrarian liberalization in the nineteenth-century Netherlands Indies is often read as a transition from the forced cultivation system to an open economy. Yet this shift also involved an earlier transformation in the colonial state's ways of seeing and administering land: before 1870, officials increasingly defined and sorted agrarian space through legal categories practices, regulations, annual reports, registers, and maps, that rendered land measurable, comparable, and thus governable (Scott, 1998; Stoler, 2009). The *Koloniaal Verslag*, for example, did not merely 'report' on land, its narrative sections and statistical appendices standardized land use categories (including *woeste gronden*) and coupled them with figures on leased plots and rental revenues, translating heterogeneous landscapes into fiscal-administrative objects (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1854, 1864). In this context, land functioned not only as a source of production but also as a field of power that brought the colonial state, local elites, and the interests of European plantation capital into contact (Arfaton et al., 2025; Syarifudin et al., 2023).

One of the foundations of colonial agrarian policy was the principle of *domeinverklaring*, which in practice positioned land as government property, so that its use had to be known and approved by the state (Rafly & Halim, 2023). This principle operated alongside the legacy of earlier obligations and land taxes, as well as the colonial need to open new lands that were considered 'not yet cultivated'. On the other hand, Indigenous communities understood land through customary law (*hukum adat* or *adatrecht*), in which rights emerged through clearing and working land and were tied to communal authority and collective norms (Alting, 2011; Anon, 1896; Boemi, 1925). The tension between the colonial state's claims and local agrarian practices formed the basis of land-tenure conflicts in many regions, including Priangan.

In the historiography of colonial agrarian change, unequal village structures and the erosion of peasants' control over land have been widely discussed. Breman (1986), for instance, shows how colonial village social structures developed unevenly, marked by large numbers of landless peasants and the dominance of local elites and plantation companies, and how the plantation system deepened poverty through tax pressure, low wages, and food vulnerability. Ahmadin (2007) also traces the continuity of unequal land control patterns from the VOC period to the late colonial era, including the impact of policies that treated land as state property. Other studies emphasize that after the Agrarian Law (*Agrarische Wet*) of 1870, the long-term lease system (*erfpacht*) created greater space for private capital and intensified the subordination of Indigenous agrarian rights (Aprilia et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2024; Zulyanti et al., 2025). Studies that focus specifically on the Agrarian Law likewise assess *erfpacht* as part of economic liberalization that did not automatically align with Indigenous interests, but rather benefited Dutch capitalists (Masyrullahushomad & Sudrajat, 2020).

Nevertheless, three interrelated gaps remain underexplored. First, a chronological gap: scholarship tends to treat 1870 as the key turning point, leaving the pre-1870 decades underexamined as a formative phase in which leasing rationalities and evidentiary standards were already being assembled. Second, an empirical gap: while studies of colonial land policy draw on Java-wide narratives, the specific trajectory of Priangan, where plantation expansion intersected with distinctive local social structures, remains less systematically reconstructed. Third, a conceptual gap: the category of *woeste gronden* (waste or uncultivated land) is often mentioned descriptively, but rarely analyzed as a technology of power that produced available land by narrowing which forms of land use and tenure count as legitimate (Foucault, 1978; Scott, 1998).

In colonial administration, *woeste gronden* was not simply an observation that land was unused. The label appeared as an administrative-fiscal category in colonial reports and regulations, where it was linked to procedures for leasing plots, documenting boundaries, and recording rental taxes. In the *Koloniaal Verslag*, for instance, leased parcels and state revenues were enumerated under the heading *woeste gronden*, indicating how classificatory term could authorize specific property

claims while placing customary uses outside the field of recognized rights. (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1854, 1863). Such early documentary uses suggest that the central issue is not only who leased land, but how land was made leaseable through colonial classifications that rendered indigenous tenure relations illegible or secondary.

Building on these gaps, this article asks: how did the practice of leasing *woeste gronden* in Priangan develop before Agrarian Law of 1870, and how did this practice become an institutional precondition for the emergence of the *erfpacht* regime after 1870? This question is elaborated into two analytical foci: (1) how the colonial state produced the category of *woeste gronden* through regulation, documentation, and fiscal reporting; and (2) how this category shaped peasants' position and agrarian power relations at the local level.

Methodologically, this study employs a critical historical approach that treats the colonial archive as a site of knowledge production rather than a neutral repository of facts (Stoler, 2009). Concretely, this is carried out through: (1) a genealogical reading of regulations and administrative procedures that defined and operationalized *woeste gronden*; (2) discursive analysis of archival narratives and correspondence to trace how 'empty land' was just justified and normalized; (3) extraction and interpretation of *Koloniaal Verslag's* statistical series to map shifts in leased area and rental revenues over time; and (4) cartographic and documentary analysis of maps and lease contracts to examine how boundaries and rights were materially inscribed (Foucault, 1978; Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

In doing so, the article offers contributions that go beyond adding 'pre-1870' chapter to an existing story. Empirically, it reconstructs the pre-1870 infrastructure of leasing in Priangan by bringing together serial fiscal statistics, regulatory texts, leased documents, and cartographic artifacts that are rarely read in combination. Historiographically, it proposes a mechanism, based periodization in which 1870 is read less as an abrupt beginning than as a legal consolidation of classificatory and documentary practices already operating through *woeste gronden*. Conceptually, it demonstrates how a land category functioned as a technology of power, through calculation, documentation, and spatial inscription, that normalized the colonial state's claim over agrarian space and reconfigured relations between state authorities, private capital, and local elites.

By placing *woeste gronden* at the center of analysis, this article seeks to enrich the historiography of colonial agrarian change, not only by explaining the impacts of the Agrarian Law of 1870, but also by uncovering earlier processes that shaped the conditions of possibility for the colonial land-lease regime. This historical reading also provides context for understanding the formation, and enduring afterlives, of land law that administrative categories in Indonesia to the present day.

### **Research Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant critical historical research design to examine the genealogy of land-leasing practices in Priangan and their relationship to the *woeste gronden* policy and the later *erfpacht* regime. The analytical time frame is anchored in 1830-1870: 1830 is treated as a contextual starting point because it marks the onset of intensified colonial agrarian administration and reporting in Java (including the expansion of documentary practices through which land became governable), while 1870 marks the codification of agrarian liberalization through the Agrarian Law. Importantly, the empirical visibility of *woeste gronden* leasing as a formal administrative category emerges most clearly in the early-mid 1850, culminating in regulatory codification (e.g., *Staatsblad* 1854/1856). Therefore, the study treats 1830-1853 primarily as a pre-formalization phase (to trace antecedent administrative rationalities and discourses), and 1854-1870 as the core phase in which leasing practices were formalized and operationalized. Where relevant for contextual comparison, the statistical series is extended beyond 1870 to capture immediate post-1870 reconfigurations in leasing mechanism.

The study follows Kuntowijoyo's stages of historical inquiry, topic selection, heuristic, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, combined with documentary and cartographic analysis to

reconstruct policy change and its institutional effects (Heller, 2023; Kuntowijoyo, 2003). Primary sources include: (1) the *Koloniaal Verslang* and *Staatsblad* from which references to leasing practices, land categories, and fiscal figures were identified; (2) regulatory and administrative texts that structured land status and leasing procedures; (3) lease contracts and related administrative files such as boundary descriptions, dispute correspondence, and documents concerning forest conversion and land use; and (4) cartographic materials, particularly W.F. Veersee's 1857 map of the Priangan Regency and other contemporaneous maps used to examine how the region was rendered legible to colonial administration (Aton et al., 2024). Secondary sources consist of scholarly works on colonial agrarian history, Priangan studies, Dutch East Indies land administration, and methodological literature; Foucauldian power/knowledge is used as an interpretive lens and operationalized through the analytical procedures described below.

Data collection was conducted through systematic archival and document study. Archival texts were inventoried using thematic keywords (e.g., *woeste gronden*, leasing/rent, forests, boundaries, unused land), and relevant excerpts were recorded in analytic memos with source metadata. While the research is qualitative in orientation, it incorporates descriptive quantification as an evidentiary support: quantitative information such as leased area, number of plots, and rental revenue was extracted to construct a time-profile of leasing expansion and fiscal intensification. These figures are treated not only as economic indicators but also as historical traces of colonial techniques of calculation, administrative practices that helped constitute land as a fiscal object, thus remaining consistent with a critical historical approach rather than shifting into econometric inference. Qualitative material, such as definitions, classificatory language, administrative procedures, and representations of indigenous land relations was compiled to trace how land categories were formulated and applied.

Source criticism was conducted through external and internal critique: externally, the study verified provenance, authorship, dating, institutional origin, and the administrative or fiscal function of each document and map; internally, it assessed credibility by identifying colonial bias, justificatory language, and inconsistencies within and across sources, including cross-checking reported leased areas against fiscal statements and comparing contractual boundary descriptions with mapped representations. Interpretation then combined four analytical strategies aligned with the research problem: (1) descriptive analysis of historical statistics to identify trends in leased land area and state revenue prior to and around 1870; (2) textual and classificatory analysis of archival documents to examine how *woeste gronden* was defined, justified, and operationalized, including the handling of customary claims; (3) practice-oriented reconstruction of implementation by linking state institutions, private lessees, and local authorities as reflected in contracts, correspondence, and reports; and (4) cartographic and documentary analysis of maps and contracts to examine how measurement, boundary-making, and legal inscription stabilized administrative claims over land. Here 'legal inscription' is used operationally to refer to the performative process through which land becomes claimable and enforceable by being written into administrative form, through surveyed or narrated boundaries, named plots, contractual clauses, and their incorporation into state documentation, rather than as a vague policy consequence.

Throughout the interpretation stage, triangulation was applied by comparing evidence across reports, contracts, and maps to connect statistical patterns, administrative classifications, and implemented practices. In the historiography stage, the findings are synthesized into an analytical narrative demonstrating how the *woeste gronden* policy operated as a governing instrument in Priangan before 1870 and shaped institutional conditions for subsequent land-leasing regimes.

## Result

### Colonial Reports and the *Woeste Gronden* Category (1830-1870)

Colonial archival materials shows that, from the mid-1850's onward, the colonial government made land leasing legible through the *Koloniaal Verslag*, the annual report submitted to the States-General. The *Koloniaal Verslag* combined narrative exposition with recurring statistical 'states' (*staten*) that summarize leasing practiced in a standardized tabular format. In the subsection titled '*Landbouw op woeste gronden door het Gouvernement verhuurd*' for example, leasing is reported by residency (*gewest*) with relatively stable columns, including the number of parcels/leases, the leased extent measured in *bouws* (each *bouw* equals 500 square roeden), and the *huurschat* (rent) paid to the government (sometimes disaggregated into cash and in-kind payments). These recurring tables provide the empirical basis for the time series summarized in Table 1 (Anon, 1858; Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1856).

Within these reports, *woeste gronden* appears not merely as a descriptive term but as an administrative-legal rubric that specifies which lands were considered eligible for leasing and under what conditions (Issar, 2017; Monaghan, 2011). The 1856 report explicitly links leasing to Article 62 of the *Regeeringsreglement* (1854) and the implementing decree promulgated in *Staatsblad* 1856 No. 64, while also stating exclusions: lands already cultivated by indigenous cultivators and land belonging to villages as common pasture or village forests were not to be leased under this mechanism. In other words, the category was delineated through eligibility criteria and exclusions that drew a boundary between land treated as 'available' for government leasing and land recognized (at least formally) as under customary cultivation or village use. A prior to 1870, questions of land use and land availability were systematically recorded in *Koloniaal Verslag*, the annual report submitted by the colonial government to Dutch Parliament (*Staten-Generaal*). The report consist of a narrative section and a statistical appendix (*bijlage*). In these records, land discussed before 1870 was frequently organized under the category *woeste gronden* (waste land or abandoned lands), a term used by colonial government to designate spaces considered neglected or insufficiently aligned with colonial economic priorities for agricultural use and resource commodification.

Archival entries further suggest that leasing practices preceded the full consolidation of this arrangement, if 'consolidation' is understood as both formal codification through RR 1854 and *Staatsblad* 1856 No. 64 and the stabilization of recurring reporting rubric in the annual *Koloniaal Verslag*. Earlier reports already noted *ad hoc* leasing initiatives such as the lease of land in Belitung to Prince Hendrik in 1851 and agreements with European industrialists in Semarang, Pasuruan, and Banyumas in 1853 (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1852, 1854). After the mid-1850s, however, leasing becomes increasingly visible through standardized annual tables that normalize *woeste gronden* as a reportable administrative object.



Figure 1. Map by W.F. Versteeg (1857) showing the topography of Priangan. Note the small symbols in the Legend (upper right corner) indicating the original locations of tea plantations, indigo factories, and coffee warehouses, which were scattered throughout an area dominated by forests and mountains.

Source(s): Nationaal Archief, MIKO Collection

The statistical series summarized in Table 1 shows that the record leased extent under the *woeste gronden* rubric expanded across the Dutch East Indies through the 1860s and early-mid 1870s, followed by a contraction in the late 1870s. Priangan appears later in this particular reporting series: the *Koloniaal Verslag* records leased *woeste gronden* in Priangan beginning in 1863 (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1863). This 'later entry' should be read cautiously as the first appearance of Priangan within this reporting format; it may reflect either later expansion of leasing into Priangan or shifts in aggregation and reporting practices that made Priangan leases newly visible in the annual tables.

Table 1. Table of the area of *woeste gronden* in Priangan and the entire Dutch East Indies

Year	Priangan			Dutch East Indies			
	Area	Many plots	Total rental max	Area	Many plots	Total rental max	
1855	-	-	-	31.048	40	f 8.647	
1857	-	-	-	34.093	41	f 9.150,05	
1860	-	-	-	32.500	41	f 67.569,84	
1863	600	2	f 1.440	35.226	49	f 123.644,45	
1866	2.350	9	f 49.782	40.225	76	f 203.257,74	
1869	3.300	14	f 37.484	45.526	92	f 231.423,69	
1870	4.164	15	f 56.920	45.826	96	f 261.649,00	
1873	4.772	19	f 63.882	52.347	113	f 295.498,06	
1876	6.105	20	f 68.807	28.580	75	f 192.486,13	
1879	5.344	18	f 70.577	17.223	48	f 125.729,93	
1880	4.453	15	f 55.554	15.258	42	f 110.078,96	

Note: Area is reported in bows (1 bows: 500 square *roeden*) following the *Koloniaal Verslag* tables.

Source: adapted from *Koloniaal Verslag* 1856, 1858, 1861, 1864, 1867, 1870, 1874, 1877, 1880, 1881.

The series shows that Priangan's recorded leased area grows from its first entry in 1863 and reached mid-1870s high point (1876), after which *woeste gronden* figures decline (1879-1880). Crucially, the post-1870 contraction should not be attributed only to a post hoc assumption about

investor preference. The archival record points to an institutional reconfiguration of legal forms and reporting categories after the Agrarian Law of 1870. By 1880, the *Koloniaal Verslag* explicitly provides overviews of agricultural enterprises operating on lands granted by the government ‘in *erfpacht* or in *huur*’ as *woeste gronden*, including a note that some parcels were those ‘whose rent was replaced by *erfpacht*’. The report also discusses ‘replacement of rental by *erfpacht* and notes an administrative shift whereby, since 1877, the government no longer offered parcels proactively, granting *erfpacht* primarily upon entrepreneurs’ applications. These statements suggest that the declining figures for *woeste gronden* under the older rental rubric may reflect conversion and reclassification within the colonial legal-administrative apparatus, alongside other factors such as local constraints and changing investment conditions (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1880)

In a governmentality perspective, the *Koloniaal Verslag* series is not simply an economic trend line but a fiscal technology of rule: by routinely enumerating leased parcels, measured extent, and *huurschat*, the colonial state translated land into auditable units of revenue and presented leasing as ordinary administrative success. In this way, statistics did not merely record privatization, they helped normalize and justify it as a rational form of governance. The same logic then appears at the field level, where lease decisions required land to be specified, measured, and mapped before issuance, showing that numbers and measurement were prerequisites for making land governable and leaseable.

### **Maps and Contracts as Evidence of Administrative Claim-Making**

The 1857 map of Priangan Residency (*Kaart van Residentie Preanger Regentschappen*), compiled by W.F. Versteeg, is presented as a residency-scale administrative overview rather than a cadastral map. Its title block and legend prioritized topography and administrative/commodity, relevant makers, such as symbols for plantation-related facilities (e.g., *theetablisement*, *indigofabriek*, *koffijpakhuis*) and major place names, indicating that map was designed to render Priangan legible for governance and economic administration. At this scale and cartographic purpose, the map does not provide fine-grained village boundaries or community land categories, therefore, the analysis treats such omissions as consistent with map genre and representational limits, and examines their exclusionary implications only through triangulation with lease contracts and administrative correspondence (Anderson, 2006).

Written instruments likewise carried decisive authority in conflict settings. In correspondence from 1874 concerning a *woeste gronden* dispute in the Waliran and Kandangan plantations, the entrepreneur B.R.G. Bouricius protested that once ‘wasteland’ was contracted, the government should pervert competitors from emerging (Rouricius, 1874). In the same dispute context, the population appears in administrative language not as landholders but as *voorhanden werkkrachten* (available labour), indicating how territorial claims and labour supply were documented within the same administrative field. Together, these materials show that leasing functioned not only as an economic arrangement but also as a claim-making practice stabilized through documentary and cartographic techniques.

## **Discussion**

### **Language Politics and the ‘Regime of Truth’: *Woeste Gronden* as a Technology of Classification**

The findings in the results section show that *woeste gronden* did not operate merely as a descriptive term for ‘wasteland’, but as an administrative-legal category embedded in regulatory language. The administrative use of the term is explicit in the *Koloniaal Verslag* itself, where leasing was reported under the recurring rubric “*Landbouw op woeste gronden door het Gouvernement verhuurd*”. Under this heading, the report specifies operational rules for leasing, most notably that lands already “*door de inlanders zijn ontgonnen*” or “*tot de dorpen of dessa’s behooren*” were excluded, thereby showing that *woeste gronden* functioned as an evidentiary-administrative classification rather than a neutral description of ‘waste’ land (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal,

1856). In this sense, *woeste gronden* names not an ecological condition but a governable category produced through proof, exclusion, and standardized reporting, which is precisely how a colonial 'truth' about land was made administratively durable. This logic is further operationalized in *Indische Staatsblad* 1856 No. 64, which authorizes leases of land deemed "*ter beschikking van het Gouvernement*" and excludes land "*door inlanders ontgonnen*" or belonging to village territory, Article 4 requires prior investigation and demonstration that such exclusions do not apply before issuance (Issar, 2015; Monaghan, 2011; *Staatsblad* No. 64, 1854).

A Priangan micro-case shows how this classificatory logic worked operationally. Resident Christian van den Moore's 1865 report records that 'two parcels of *woeste gronden*' were issued in lease at rental of *f* 5 per *bouw*, including the Tjialak plot (174 *bouws* leased to W.A. Holle and another plot (173 *bouws*) leased to F.G. Baus in the Plaboehanratoe district (*regentschap* Tjiandjoer). The same report notes a queue of large applications (including multiple requests of 500 *bouws*) and shows that the administrative response hinged in measurement and mapping, applicants were granted preliminary permission 'to measure and map' the requested grounds and were required to specify precisely which lands and where they were located (van der Moore, 1865).

Here, 'illegibility' is observable as an administrative condition: what triggered decisions was not the documentation of local forest uses, but whether plots could be specified, measured, mapped, and cleared through state-defined eligibility criteria. This prioritization becomes even clearer in later processing, when applications were escalated of existing state coffee gardens, an evaluation framed as a conflict of state assets and release permissions, rather than a forum for customary claims. In this was, conversion was 'systematic' insofar as it followed repeatable administrative steps, classifications, pricing, measurement/mapping, and hierarchical authorization, through which land became practically leaseable.

In a Foucauldian framework, this category can be read as part of a regime of truth that renders particular definitions objective, scientific, and neutral, while in fact functioning politically to reorganize access, ownership, and legitimacy (Foucault, 1978, 1995; G. Martin & Waring, 2018). This is why the *Staatsblad* and *Koloniaal Verslag* should not be treated merely as a passive repository of data, it is also a site where classifications are produced and standardized, making the colony 'legible' and therefore governable (Gray, 2023; Hughes, 2025; Stoler, 2009). In other words the data and truth produced by the report do not stand outside power; they are effects of power/knowledge mechanisms working through statistics, categorization, and bureaucratic narrative (Foucault, 1995; Stoler, 2009).

At this point, it is important to stress that the clash between Western agrarian law and customary land rights in the Dutch East Indies, especially in Priangan, cannot be reduced to a balanced coexistence of legal pluralism. It is more accurately understood as an asymmetric operation of power/knowledge: the asymmetry lay not simply in the existence of different normative system, but in the evidentiary burden imposed by regulation, only land that could not be demonstrated as "cultivated by natives" or belonging to village territory was eligible for lease (*Staatsblad* No. 64, 1854).

In practice, this meant that documentary verification and administrative recognition determined the threshold of legitimacy. Only one form of truth about ownership was recognized as valid, namely, that which could be demonstrated through written documents, measurable boundaries, and intensified cultivation (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Hirsch & Hall, 2001).

In Priangan, this documentary hierarchy is visible in the Waliran-Kandangan dispute correspondence, where contractual claims were treated as carrying an implicit expectation of state protection, while residents appear administratively as *voorhanden werkkrachten* (available labour) rather than as landholding subjects (Rouricius, 1874). Meanwhile, customary system, which grounded land rights in practices of opening land, cultivating it, and social standards, and were therefore easily displaced from the category of legitimate ownership (Anon, 1881; Juwono, 2023; Labibah et al., 2024; van der Linden, 1970). The colonial construction of land without proof then linked up with the

*domeinverklaring*, turning the absence of documents into absence of rights. Here, *woeste gronden* becomes a sematic bridge, it transforms land that does not fit colonial categories into land without claims, allowing appropriation to appear as a reasonable administrative act (Hall et al., 2020; Peluso, 1992; Scott, 1985).

A useful way to conceptualize this linguistic operation is through the tension between *bezit* (possession/use) and *eigendom* (ownership/title) in colonial legal discourse, rather than presuming a uniform terminological shift across all Priangan documents, this distinction highlights how evidentiary standards privileged written proof and measurable boundaries aligned with a logic of productivity (Hirsch & Hall, 2001; Juwono, 2023; van der Linden, 1970). While the Priangan documents examined here do not always explicitly employ the terminology *bezit* versus *eigendom*, the regulatory structure of *Staatsblad* 1856, requiring demonstrable proof of cultivation or village incorporation before exclusion from lease, suggests a narrowing of valid ownership toward documentable and administratively verifiable forms (*Staatsblad* No. 64, 1854).

This narrowing did not occur naturally, but through systematic efforts visible in legislation and colonial officials' correspondence, recognized proof that for the apparatus of the state (Anon, 1855; Fahmi, 2020). Thus, when spaces such as reserve forests or sacred forest (*leuweung tutupan* or *leuweung larangan*) were deemed empty or uncultivated what was actually taking place was the delegitimation of forms of management that did not register as permanent agricultural intensification (Bremen, 2014; Fairuzahira et al., 2020; Kristiyanto, 2018). In the logic of *woeste gronden*, the value of space was determined by its economic legibility to the colonial order, not by the socio-spiritual functions and ecological cycles of communities (Altair et al., 2024; Peluso, 1992).

This pattern appears clearly in Priangan where the *ngahuma* (shifting cultivation) system structurally conflicted with colonial needs for fixed boundaries, fixed plots, and easily calculable intensification (Putra et al., 2018; Rigg, 1862). A contemporaneous legal discussion on claims to uncultivated grounds in Java noted an evidentiary doctrine in which customary claims were often treated as extending only within a radius of three *paal* from the village ( $\approx 4$  km) (Anon, 1869). In the Priangan context, where *ngahuma* depended on mobility and rotational use, such spatial doctrines could function as administrative tools that rendered customary practice 'beyond the limit' more vulnerable to reclassification as *woeste gronden*. In this way, *woeste gronden* can be read as a language that produces order, it regulates what may be called property, how rights are recognized, and who can speak legitimately about land (Foucault, 1978, 1995; Scott, 1985).

Here lies the relevance of the argument that law does not function as a neutral protector, but can become an asset of exclusion. Labels such as abandoned land, ownerless land, or unproductive land point not merely to empirical conditions, but to colonial normative judgements about what forms of land use count as power (Andrew, 2025). This mismatch is visible in Priangan's series (Table 1): between 1876 and 1879 the leased extent declined (from 6,105 to 5,344) while total rental tax increased (from f.68,807 to f.5,344) while total rental tax increased (from f.68.807 to f.70,577). Likewise, between 1866 and 1869 the leased extent increased (2,350 to 3,300) while rental tax decreased (f.49,782 to f.37,484), readers should not hastily conclude economic progress, but should instead see how the classificatory regime succeeded in converting space into fiscal assets without acknowledging customary claims (Benda & Keebet, 2011; Logemann & Haar, 1928). It must be emphasized, those figures are traces of the success of colonial definitions, not neutral mirrors of empty land suddenly becoming productive (Otemperi et al., 2025; Syahputra & Israhadi, 2025).

Political contestation in parliament shows how this regime of truth was negotiated among rulling factions, yet never truly restored customary law to the center. The debate between conservatives seeking to preserve state monopoly (through the *cultuurstelsel*) and liberals promoting economic liberalization was not a debate about agrarian justice, but about the most efficient method of extracting the colony (Bhambra, 2021; Ince, 2024; Pinheiro, 2021). Even when Indigenous land ownership was

discussed, it was often treated as non-urgent, by contrast, opening land to industrialists gained breakthroughs through rental regulation (Anon, 1855; Staten-general: Eerste Kamer, 1867). In this context, narratives of freedom of enterprise, progress, and civilization functioned as technologies of legitimation that concealed the exclusionary relations being constructed (Haller, 2019; Siregar, 2023). Thus, *woeste gronden* does not stand alone, it intertwines with humanitarian and modernization language that also cloaked the *cultuurstelsel*, even though both produced uneven distributions of benefit and marginalized local farmers (Smith et al., 2019; Van Bavel, 2008).

Read through this lens, the findings showing concessionary and leasing practices before 1870 (e.g., Belitung and agreements in Java) become more than chronology, they indicate that regime shift did not wait for the major law to appear. The state buildt the conditions of possibility for liberalization through reporting, categories, and contracts, devices that made acts of dispossession appear as normal administration (Foucault, 1995; Gray, 2023; Hughes, 2025; Tweede Kamer der Staten-General, 1852, 1854). In other words, the Agrarian Law of 1870 was not a starting point, but a consolidation of power/knowledge system that had already been operating through *woeste gronden* (Juwono, 2023; Otemperi et al., 2025; Syahputra & Israhadi, 2025).

### **Between Rent and Coercion: State-Capital, Local Elites, and the Discipline of Labor**

One of the main theoretical contributions of these findings is to show that pre-1870 agrarian liberalization did not proceed as a pure transition toward capitalism based on free contracts. What emerges instead is a cross-cutting of power, even where leases were framed as contracts, private enterprises depended on colonial administrative enforcement and local intermediary structures to extract labour and secure control over land (Breman, 1986, 2014; Handayani, 2018; Scott, 1972). The dependence is suggested empirically by Priangan dispute correspondence in which entrepreneurs expected governmental intervention to secure contracted land, while labour availability was documented within the same administrative field (Hermansoemantri, 1979; Lubis, 1998; Rouricius, 1874). Priangan offers a sharp case because its social structure gave strong positions to *ménak* elites and Indigenous officials, while *somah* were embedded in intense relations of obedience (Hermansoemantri, 1979; Lubis, 1998). In Foucauldian terms, this can be read as a capillary network of power, power works through already established social nodes, not only through military force or formal law (Foucault, 1978; Vollenhoven, 1918; Wahid, 2018).

Because documentary rights required translation into enforceable authority on the ground, especially for labour mobilization and the policing of boundaries, industrialists needed intermediaries trusted by local communities (Salam et al., 2024; Sutherland, 1979). A simultaneously exploitative yet seemingly mutually beneficial symbiosis emerged between private capital and local elites, economic incentives, political pressure, and traditional authority were used to mobilized labor and open land. The term *mengawoela-stelsel* marks how labor and obedience were tied to social structures that produced willingness to work not through equal contracts, but through modified social obligations (Vollenhoven, 1918; Wahid, 2018). In everyday language, people referred to colonial offiials with the honorific *kangjeng*, reflecting an internalization of hierarchy that made colonial power appear natural and ordinary (Kartadinata, 1921). This underscores that the freedom of contract celebrated in archives could coexist with dependence on local feudalism, instrumentalized for colonial ends (Karima et al., 2023).

Breman concepts of colonial feudalism helps explain this contradiction, traditional patron-client relations were manipulated to serve colonial capital accumulation (Breman, 1986; Scott, 1985). In practice, *voorschot* debt, village apparatus, and government intervention ensured the continued availability of labour (Anon, 1860). This shows that labor discipline did not primarily arise from a free labor market, but from the deformation of feudal obligations into a commodity-production

machine. In this way, *woeste gronden* refers not only to land, but also to a social reorganization that binds peasant bodies to the rhythms of plantation production (Murray Li, 2017).

At the next stage, labor contracts and rental contracts became key devices for making that binding appear legitimate and civilized. This is where the language of free contract operates most clearly, Article 10 of *Staatsblad* 1856 states that “The tenant shall procure the necessary workers by voluntary agreement (*Staatsblad* No. 64, 1854). The emphasis on *vrijwillige overeenkomst* (voluntary agreement) frames labour relations as consensual, even though their operation depended on structural inequalities and administrative enforcement (Anon, 1858). as a result, once land was secured by industrialist, residents became tenants on their own land and even had to pay rent in the form of labor or levies (Nuralia et al., 2025). This reading strengthens the argument that pre-1870 agrarian transformation was not merely a change in land law, but a reconfiguration of power that combined state, capital, and local elites to restructure to resources (Domínguez & Luoma, 2020; Minoia, 2020).

Within the archival corpus examine here, large-scale agrarian rebellions in Priangan are not prominent, this absence should not be read as total compliance. Scott reminds us archival traces of administrative anxiety, such as the reduction residents to *voorhanden werkkrachten* (available labour) in Priangan dispute correspondence, suggest that labour compliance and availability remained a practical a practical problem to be managed rather than a settled condition (Scott, 1985). Under tight domination, resistance often mutates into subtle and hidden forms, that are not necessarily recorded in official document (Rahman, 2025; Scott, 1985; Vinthagen, 2017). The silence of the archive may therefore be an effect of how the archive works, it records what matters for administration, not peasants’ experiences as subject dispossessed of rights. Where peasant bodes were monitored and movement restricted, resistance might take the form of slow work, small acts of defiance, avoidance, or sabotage, things not easily captures by officials (Tripathi & Dwivedi, 2023; Wright, 2023).

Key indicators of resistance can instead be detected through rulers anxieties sedimented in regulations, bans on negligence, sanctions for laziness, and restrictions on worker mobility. If rulers were confident of total compliance, such tight disciplinary devices would be unnecessary. Thus, colonial discourse about native laziness should be reinterpreted not as a cultural trait, but as a political strategy by peasants responding to exploitation (Alatas, 1989; Tripathi & Dwivedi, 2023). In Priangan, *ngahuma* with its pauses, mobility, and cycles of land recovery, was easily misread by the state as empty or unproductive land (Breman, 2014; Putra et al., 2018; Stützer, 1787). Yet this practice demonstrates an ecological and social revolutionary incompatible with commercial plantations’ demand for quick harvests and strict labor rhythms.

Breman even cites the view that violence was considered necessary because, according to some colonial officials, no indigenous person would work without coercion (Breman, 2010; F. de Haan, 1912). Such statements show that the hegemony of *woeste gronden* was not total, it had to be continuously produced through a mixture of contracts, local elite authority, and threats of sanction. Thus, *woeste gronden* as a technology of power does not stop at the appropriation of space, it continues in the disciplining of bodies and time, turning labour into an economic variable for colonial accumulation (Murray Li, 2017; Nuralia et al., 2025).

The statistical finding of a surge in rental tax can also be understood in this context, intensified exploitation per plot is only about land productivity, but about the capacity of state apparatus and capital to extract more labor from communities whose access is increasingly constrained (Domínguez & Luoma, 2020). When tax revenue rises disproportionately relative area, this aligns with the suspicion that lands claimed as *woeste gronden* high-value land, and that rent mechanisms were not neutral but dispossession devices facilitating surplus transfer (Benda & Keebet, 2011; Logemann & Haar, 1928). In this way, statistics are not mere numbers, but evidence of how state-capital turned space and labor into fiscal assets and commodities.

### **The Materiality of Power: Maps, Archives, and the Legibility of Priangan**

If administrative language is the foundation of the regime of truth, then maps and contract documents are its materiality. Methodologically, the 1857 Pirangan map should be read as a topographic-thematic sheet from the *Algemeene Atlas van Nederlandsch-Indië* (scale 1:250,000) within the *Nationaal Archief's* MIKO Collection. As an atlas-level product designed for residency-scale administrative overview, it prioritized terrain and commodity-relevant landmarks rather than cadastral detail such as village boundaries or customary tenure. The Priangan map by W.F. Versteeg (1857) shows an early phase of the technologization of space, small points such as *theetablissement*, *indigofabriek*, and *koffijpakhuis* appear as nodes of power that organize commodity circulation without needing to physically occupy the whole territory (Erlenbusch-Anderson, 2020; Suijker, 2023).

In colonial logic, these nodes were sufficient to mark circuits of production and distribution, while vast areas between them were framed as empty and thus ready to be filled by capital. At the residency scale and administrative purposes of Versteeg's map, large areas are rendered primarily as topography, this apparent 'visual emptiness' must therefore be interpreted in relation to scale, map purposes, and nineteenth-century cartographic conventions rather than treated as direct proof of deliberate erasure (Anderson, 2006). Read together with *woeste gronden* reporting rubric and lease documentation, however, such selective visibility could still function as a discursive asset by making wide tracts appear administratively 'available' for productive conversion.

Equally important is what is not drawn. Community-manage areas, sacred forests, village boundaries, and reserve spaces within the *ngahuma* cycle are not represented on this residency-scale map, rather than treating this absence as proof in itself, it is read as part of how state cartography prioritized administrative and commodity-relevant features when producing territorial legibility (Anderson, 2006; Scott, 1998). The Priangan map is therefore not simply a geographic artifact, but a power technology that reshapes the possibilities of claims.

Contract documents especially *huurcontracten*, reinforce the effects of mapping through the glorification of written evidence. In Western systems, contracts are not merely administrative records, but authoritative umbrellas that define reality and bind action to specific legal forms (Fahmi, 2020). Foucault reminds us that modern power works through recorded knowledge, whoever controls the archive controls the definition of truth (Foucault, 1978). Thus, when contracts become primary instruments of exclusion, they turn spatial claims into something valid because it is printed on paper, while silencing claims living in social memory or natural boundaries. In Priangan, the reverence for written documents allowed dispossession to appear as an administrative dispute among Europeans rather than the erasure of community rights (Fahmi, 2020).

Correspondence on the Waliran–Kandangan dispute (1874) illustrates entrepreneurs' belief that contracts carried a monopolizing force over surrounding areas, competitors should be prevented because contracts were treated as containing an implicit government guarantee (Rouricius, 1874). Such statements show how contracts were treated almost as sacred objects, not just agreements, but sources of spatial power projecting claims beyond plot boundaries (Filatova-Bilous, 2025; Mik, 2017). In this context, written documents are not administrative accessories, but instruments that create reality, they produce exclusive space for capital with state backing.

Equally important is how Indigenous residents appear in such archives. In correspondence they are reduced to *voorhanden wekkrachten* (available labor power), not subjects who own or manage customary space. This ontological reduction marks the apex of symbolic violence, the population is understood as an economic variable to be contested, not as a community with historical ties to land (Murray Li, 2014). Thus, *woeste gronden* is not only a land category, but a category that produces a kind of subject, from customary owner/manager to available labor. This aligns with the biopolitical logic that views populations as resources that can be counted, managed, and mobilized for colonial profit (Foucault, 1978; Stoler, 2009).

If we return to the findings on fluctuating statistics, it becomes clear that these fluctuations are not merely economic phenomena, but symptoms of shifting legal and administrative mechanisms that regulate land legibility. When after 1870 there was a shift toward *erfpacht*, this suggests that capital investment preferred the most stable legal form, while the state refined governance so that previously invisible spaces became measurable and legally accountable (Lucas, 1992; Syahputra & Israhadi, 2025). In this sense, the post-1879 decline is not a failure of privatization, but a transition from pre-legal *woeste gronden* mechanisms to more established, structured legality. Thus, 1870 is a transitional phase rather than a beginning, it normalized, recalibrated, and institutionalized a dispossession logic already in motion (Otemperi et al., 2025).

The contribution of this discussion to colonial agrarian historiography, then, is to sharpen a revised periodization, land liberalization did not begin with the Agrarian Law of 1870, but had already been practiced through the classificatory device of *woeste gronden* since the mid-nineteenth century, complete with statistics, contracts, and political justification (Juwono, 2023; Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1852, 1854). This reading also enriches our understanding of state–capital relations, the state did not merely open the way legally, but actively produced categories and administrative truths that made dispossession appear neutral (Gray, 2023; Hughes, 2025; Poorghorban, 2023). In other words, colonial power was not only repression, but management managing space and populations through knowledge apparatuses that made domination feel normal (G. P. Martin & Waring, 2018).

In terms of policy relevance, this historical reading emphasizes that administrative categories such as empty land, idle, or ownerless always risk becoming technologies of exclusion if standards of proof are narrowed to formal documents and production intensification (Hall et al., 2011). The lesson from *woeste gronden* is that official truth can erase customary claims by making them unreadable rather than by openly rejecting them (Peluso, 1995; Scott, 1998). Therefore, land governance reform should incorporate meaningful recognition of customary tenure, participatory mapping, and caution toward state categories that appear technical yet carry dispossessive implications (Altair et al., 2024).

Ultimately, *woeste gronden* reveals how agrarian colonialism worked through a combination of language, numbers, maps, and documents, not merely through direct violence. It transformed living space into commodities, turned communities into available labor, and made dispossession appear as lawful administrative action. By centering attention on how archives and statistics operate, this study shows that pre-1870 dispossession was already systematic, the state did not wait for major laws to act, but first built a regime of truth that made such actions acceptable as order. This also underscores that correcting historical periodization is not merely a debate about dates, but a way to see how colonial power technologies worked through seemingly banal forms, report categories, statistical tables, map symbols, and contract clauses, yet with profound consequences for agrarian access and injustice.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the *woeste gronden* (abandoned or waste land) policy in the Netherlands East Indies, particularly in Priangan, prior to the Agrarian Law of 1870 was not a neutral instrument of land administration. Rather, it functioned as a colonial technology of power that converted customary territories into governable and alienable capital territories through concrete leasing procedures and evidentiary tests. *Staatsblad* 1856 No. 64 authorized the Governor-General to issue land ‘for agriculture’ in lease only where the land was considered *ter beschikking van het Gouvernement* and could be shown to be neither *door inlanders ontgonnen* nor part of *dessa* territory (e.g., common pasture/village land), and only after the land was surveyed, measured, and mapped, with the intention to lease publicly announced, leases on Java were also to be conditioned to avoid infringing village governance and the legitimate influence of indigenous chiefs (Arts. 1, 4-5).

By combining statistical evidence from the *Koloniaal Verslag* (1855-1880) with archival discourse, field-level practices, and visual artifacts, this research demonstrates that colonial land governance operated through the production of administrative truth: customary tenure counted insofar

as it could be made legible within these administrative categories and proofs (cultivation status, exclusive data use, mapped boundaries, and recognized interests). Where customary relations to land did not meet, or could not be made to meet, these documentary and cartographic thresholds, they became administratively 'unproven' and thus practically available to be leased or converted into exclusive contractual claims. This operational chain also surfaces in Priangan disputes (e.g., Waliran-Kandangan), where contracts were treated as implying government-backed exclusivity.

The first contribution of this article is historiographical. It revises the prevailing periodization that treats the Agrarian Law of 1870 as the principal starting point of agrarian liberalization by showing that key infrastructures of privatization, categorization, leasing rationalities, and documentary legitimation, had already been institutionalized through *woeste gronden* in the preceding decades. In this sense, the later dominance of *erfpacht* is better understood not as a sudden legal rupture but as the consolidation of an earlier classificatory regime. The *Koloniaal Verslag* statistics (1855–1880) are therefore not merely descriptive records, they index the administrative success of redefining ownership and reallocating access, evidenced by the dramatic escalation of lease revenues over time.

The second contribution is analytical and methodological. This study strengthens Foucauldian analytics, especially governmentality within Indonesian agrarian history by demonstrating how colonial rule worked through mundane techniques of legibility, mapping, classification, calculation, and documentation rather than overt coercion alone. The 1857 Priangan Residency map illustrates how state space was produced through selective visibility, while archival traces of leasing practices and disputes show how written contracts became privileged instruments for authorizing territorial control. Read together, these materials reveal epistemic violence in the redefinition of land status and the transformation of legal form into a mechanism of exclusion.

Finally, the study speaks to contemporary land governance debates. The historical trajectory of *woeste gronden* underscores how administrative labels such as empty, idle, or unowned land can operate as powerful legal fictions that erase customary claims when evidentiary standards privilege documentary legibility over lived tenure relations. The findings therefore offer a conceptual caution for present-day land administration reforms, spatial planning, and mapping practices, stronger safeguards are needed to prevent classificatory regimes from reproducing dispossession through technical language. Ultimately, this case shows that the most effective land seizure was not always enacted through war or direct conquest, but through maps, paperwork, and legally sanctioned categories that made dispossession appear orderly and legitimate.

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