Printing the "Governed": Medan Prijaji, Advocacy Journalism, and the Formation of Indonesian National Consciousness, 1907–1912

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Abstract

This article examines how *Medan Prijaji* converted the material practices of an Indigenous-owned newspaper into a vocabulary and infrastructure of collective political consciousness in the Netherlands Indies between 1907 and 1912. Rather than treating the newspaper as an uncomplicated cause of Indonesian nationalism, it reconstructs the mechanisms through which it made dispersed colonial grievances intelligible as the shared condition of a *bangsa jang terprentah*—a "governed people." The research follows the historical method used in the underlying study: heuristics, external and internal source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, supplemented by the qualitative analysis of press discourse explicitly employed in that study. Its principal evidence consists of surviving issues from 1909 and January–June 1910, including articles by Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Diana, Raden Goenawan, and Bagelener, read alongside contemporary mastheads, legal columns, correspondence, institutional records, and relevant scholarship. The findings identify four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: the creation of an interregional reading public through Low Malay; legal pedagogy and advocacy that linked publication to investigation and defence; exposure and satire directed at both colonial and Indigenous officials; and the redefinition of political status through ideas of intellectual nobility, popular dignity, freedom, and collective organization. *Medan Prijaji* did not simply announce a nation already formed. It supplied readers with categories, procedures, and exemplary conflicts through which colonial subjection could be recognized as collective and contestable. Its historical significance therefore lies less in a demonstrable conversion of every reader than in the formation of a political public able to imagine common interests across locality, ethnicity, and inherited rank.

Keywords: advocacy journalism; colonial Indonesia; Low Malay; Medan Prijaji; nationalism; print culture; Tirto Adhi Soerjo

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Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, the press of the Netherlands Indies remained structurally unequal. European-owned newspapers—described in later Indonesian historiography as the "white press"—dominated ownership, printing capacity, language, and editorial authority. Many Malay-language publications existed, but they were often commercial ventures managed by Europeans or Chinese Peranakan entrepreneurs; Indigenous journalists rarely controlled the complete chain of financing, editing, printing, and distribution. Newspapers commonly privileged advertisements, commercial information, translated reports from European papers, scientific miscellany, verse, and serialized entertainment over direct criticism of colonial government. The expansion of Chinese-owned printing and the emergence of an educated Indigenous stratum under the Ethical Policy altered that field without erasing its racial hierarchy. By the first decade of the twentieth century, print had become both a colonial technology and a medium through which its monopolies could be challenged.[1]

Raden Mas Tirto Adhi Soerjo entered this field not merely as a writer but as an institutional innovator. His earlier work for *Pemberita Betawi* and his establishment of *Soenda Berita* in 1903 demonstrated that an Indigenous editor could organize a newspaper around Indigenous concerns. *Medan Prijaji*, launched on 1 January 1907, went further. Its financing, corporate structure, editorial network, choice of Low Malay, legal columns, reader correspondence, and deliberately confrontational journalism combined into an enterprise that treated print as political action. The newspaper's reported circulation of approximately 2,000 copies by 1909–1910 was modest by the standard of a mass society but substantial within a colonial market marked by limited literacy, expensive distribution, and restricted Indigenous access to formal education.[2]

The conventional claim that *Medan Prijaji* "awakened nationalism" captures an important historical intuition but remains analytically incomplete. A newspaper cannot be assumed to produce political consciousness simply because its editor intended to do so, and surviving issues do not permit historians to measure the inward response of every reader. The causal problem is therefore not whether *Medan Prijaji* single-handedly created Indonesian nationalism. It is how the paper made a political community thinkable and actionable: which terms named that community, which recurring genres made colonial inequality visible, and which institutional practices connected readers' complaints to public claims. Framed in this way, the newspaper's role can be established through evidence without attributing to the archive a reach it cannot prove.

Previous studies provide essential but partial answers. Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Sang Pemula* restored Tirto to the history of the Indigenous press and nationalist

[1] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Sang Pemula* (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra, 1985), 25; Soebagijo I.N., *Sejarah Pers Indonesia* (Jakarta: Dewan Pers, 1977), 11–14; Asep Halimi, "Suara Politik Pers Medan Prijaji: Kajian terhadap Tulisan R. M. Tirto Adhisoerjo Tahun 1909–1910" (Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2016), 57.

[2] M. Rodhi As'ad, *Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Bapak Pers Indonesia*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Yogyakarta: I:Boekoe, 2022), 100–101; Soebagijo I.N., *Sejarah Pers Indonesia* (Jakarta: Dewan Pers, 1977), 83.

movement. Biographical studies by M. Rodhi As'ad and Faizal Ad Daraquthny likewise foreground Tirto's intellectual and organizational career. R. M. Joko Prawoto Mulyadi directly examined *Medan Prijaji* and national consciousness, while Asep Halimi concentrated on Tirto's political writings of 1909–1910. Miftahul Habib Fachrurozi situated the newspaper in a broader account of the press, print capitalism, and early twentieth-century national awareness. These works explain why the newspaper matters, yet they tend to privilege either Tirto's biography, the broad relationship between press and nationalism, the newspaper's foundation, or selected political texts.[3] What remains insufficiently integrated is the relationship between the paper's material and institutional formation—capital, masthead, editorial network, rubrics, circulation, and legal service—and the specific discursive mechanisms through which it turned varied injuries into evidence of common subjection.

This article addresses that gap by joining institutional press history to a close historical reading of the surviving newspaper corpus. It asks two questions. How did *Medan Prijaji* develop as an Indigenous-controlled press institution between 1907 and 1912? Through what connected practices did it contribute to the growth of Indonesian national consciousness? The argument is that the paper translated colonial experience into a shared political grammar through four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: Low Malay established an accessible interregional public; legal explanation and advocacy converted readers from passive consumers into petitioners and claimants; exposure and satire located injustice in the conduct of both European and Indigenous powerholders; and debates over the "governed," the *prijaji*, and the *wong ketjil* redefined political worth beyond descent and locality.

The contribution is both empirical and historiographical. Empirically, the article reads the newspaper's business structure, recurring columns, and political articles as parts of a single project rather than as separate subjects. Historiographically, it proposes a more precise account of print nationalism. *Medan Prijaji* did not merely circulate nationalist messages. It created a small but consequential infrastructure in which language, legal knowledge, complaint, investigation, and moral judgment could converge. Its novelty lay in making "the governed" not a passive administrative category but a possible collective actor. This formulation preserves the original research's conclusion that the newspaper helped awaken national consciousness while distinguishing demonstrable mechanisms from claims about reception that the surviving sources cannot verify.

[3] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Sang Pemula* (Jakarta: Lentera Dipantara, 2003), 68; M. Rodhi As'ad, *Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Bapak Pers Indonesia*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Yogyakarta: I:Boekoe, 2022); Faizal Ad Daraquthny, "Tirtho Adhi Soerjo (Studi Deskriptif Pemikiran Perintis Pers Pribumi pada Masa Kolonialisme Hindia Belanda)" (Universitas Brawijaya, 2018); R. M. Joko Prawoto Mulyadi, "Nasionalisme Pers: Studi Kasus Peran Medan Prijaji dalam Menumbuhkan Kesadaran Kebangsaan" (Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2011); Asep Halimi, "Suara Politik Pers Medan Prijaji: Kajian terhadap Tulisan R. M. Tirto Adhisoerjo Tahun 1909–1910" (Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2016); Miftahul Habib Fachrurozi, "Pers dan Bangkitnya Kesadaran Nasional Indonesia pada Awal Abad XX," *ISTORIA: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Ilmu Sejarah* 13, no. 1 (2017), https://doi.org/10.21831/istoria.v13i1.17613.

Method

This study employs the four stages of the historical method: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Heuristics involved identifying and collecting newspapers, documents, books, articles, theses, and visual evidence relevant to *Medan Prijaji*. The original research consulted the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia, the West Java Regional Library and Archives Service, the library of Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, and the Batu Api Library. Its principal primary corpus comprises the bound third year of *Medan Prijaji* (1909) and issues from the fourth year published between January and June 1910.[4]

External criticism assessed the provenance, date, place of publication, publisher's imprint, masthead, material form, and relationship between reproduced images and the physical newspaper bundles. Issues bearing the imprint of N.V. Javasche Boekhandel en Drukkerij en Handel in Schrijfbehoeften "Medan Prijaji" were checked against their stated year and issue sequence. Reproductions from the National Library were distinguished from personal documentation and later book editions. Secondary sources were evaluated through authorship, edition, institutional origin, and the credibility of the sources on which they relied.[5]

Internal criticism examined authorial competence, proximity to events, purpose, and corroboration. The newspaper is an indispensable primary source for its language, editorial claims, recurring genres, and public representation of conflict, but it is not a transparent record of colonial society. Its reports were written by actors engaged in disputes, mobilization, and commercial survival. Editorial statements are therefore used as evidence of declared purpose and political vocabulary, while claims about circulation, legal controversies, and institutional development are compared with later historical accounts. Letters printed by the paper reveal the kinds of claims the editors selected for publication, not an unmediated cross-section of all readers. Where only one source records an event, the interpretation remains cautious rather than converting silence elsewhere into confirmation.[6]

Interpretation proceeded through analysis and synthesis. Individual articles were disaggregated into their principal categories—governed and governing peoples, justice, dignity, association, freedom, language, nobility, and the "little people"—and then read together with the newspaper's institutional practices. A qualitative analysis of media texts is conducted by examining the political functions shaped through word choice, the repetitive use of phrases, the structuring of narrative scenes, irony, metaphor, and the juxtaposition of various editorial elements. This is not an additional method imposed on the study; it is the means by which its historical interpretation of newspaper discourse was conducted.[7] Historiography then reconstructs the

[4] Louis Gottschalk, *Mengerti Sejarah* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1985), 32; Sulasman, *Metodologi Penelitian Sejarah*, ed. Ahmad Beni Saebani (Bandung: CV Pustaka Setia, 2014), 93.

[5] Sulasman, *Metodologi Penelitian Sejarah*, ed. Ahmad Beni Saebani (Bandung: CV Pustaka Setia, 2014), 90, 101; Helius Sjamsudin, *Metodelogi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2007), 97.

[6] Louis Gottschalk, *Mengerti Sejarah* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1985), 80; Dwi Anton Laksono, *Apa Itu Sejarah: Ruang Lingkup, Metode dan Penelitian*, ed. Derwati Press (Pontianak, 2018), 109–110.

[7] Alex Sobur, *Analisis Teks Media: Suatu Pengantar untuk Analisis Wacana, Analisis Semiotik dan Analisis Framing* (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2001), 68–70.

development of the newspaper chronologically and interprets its political effects thematically. Because the accessible primary issues are concentrated in 1909–1910, direct textual claims refer chiefly to that corpus; the longer 1907–1912 trajectory is reconstructed through corroborated institutional history. This evidentiary boundary is crucial: the article identifies the political capacities produced by the newspaper without claiming to measure every reader's reception.

Results

From Sarikat Prijaji to an Indigenous Press Corporation

The institutional prehistory of *Medan Prijaji* began with Sarikat Prijaji in 1906. A circular distributed through Malay newspapers announced an association of Indigenous *prijaji* and aristocrats initially based in Batavia but intended to establish branches throughout the Indies. Its immediate purpose was educational: a *studiefonds* would support the schooling of Indigenous children. The committee included R. M. Prawirodiningrat as chair and Tirto Adhi Soerjo as secretary-treasurer, together with Thamrin Mohammad Thabrie, Taidji'in Moehadjilin, and Bachran. The circular reportedly attracted approximately 700 members. R. A. A. Prawiradiredja, Regent of Cianjur, contributed *f*1,000 and urged the association to publish its own paper with a political section capable of extending its organizational voice.[8]

The first issue appeared on 1 January 1907. Initially a small weekly printed by Khong Tjeng Bie in Pancoran, Batavia, *Medan Prijaji* was both a newspaper and an experiment in Indigenous commercial autonomy. Its financing joined Prawiradiredja's contribution to *f*500 from Pangeran Oesman Sjah, Tirto's brother-in-law. On 30 November 1908, Tirto, Haji Mohammad Arsad, and Pangeran Oesman appeared before the Batavia notary Marien John Smissaert to establish a limited-liability company; government recognition followed on 10 December. Originally called N.V. H. M. Arsad & Co., it became N.V. Javasche Boekhandel en Drukkerij en Handel in Schrijfbehoeften "Medan Prijaji," with stated capital of *f*75,000 divided into 3,000 shares. Later histories identify it as the first Indigenous press corporation of this kind.[9]

The corporate form mattered politically. Tirto sought subscriptions in advance and treated longer-term payments as a means of assembling circulating capital. This arrangement reduced dependence on European or Chinese owners and made readers' purchases part of the newspaper's institutional survival. Commercial autonomy was never complete—the enterprise still relied on printers, advertising, distribution, credit, and elite patrons—but it changed the locus of editorial decision. Ownership, organization, and political speech became more closely aligned than in Malay papers whose Indigenous writers remained employees within non-Indigenous firms.

[8] Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Pendaholoean Medan Prijaji," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909; Iswara N. Raditya and Muhidin M. Dahlan, *Karya-Karya Lengkap Tirto Adhi Soerjo: Pers, Pergerakan dan Kebangsaan*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Jakarta: I:Boekoe, 2008), 46–47.

[9] Iswara N. Raditya and Muhidin M. Dahlan, *Karya-Karya Lengkap Tirto Adhi Soerjo: Pers, Pergerakan dan Kebangsaan*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Jakarta: I:Boekoe, 2008), 23–24; M. Rodhi As'ad, *Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Bapak Pers Indonesia*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Yogyakarta: I:Boekoe, 2022), 85–86.

By its fourth year *Medan Prijaji* had developed from a twenty-two-page weekly measuring roughly 12.5 by 19.5 centimetres into a daily publication. This transition reportedly took place on October 5, 1910. The daily newspaper was not published on Fridays, Sundays, or public holidays. As part of its publishing operations, a special Sunday edition was also issued to complement the newspaper's regular publication. Circulation was reported at approximately 2,000 copies, a figure characterized by the colonial official D. A. Rinkes as strong even for a European daily in the Indies and especially notable for a Malay-language paper. Subscription packages ranged from *f*12 for the daily alone to *f*24 for a combination including the weekly *Medan Prijaji*, *Poetri Hindia*, and *Soeloeh Keadilan*.[10] The pricing reveals an integrated press business rather than an isolated title.

The paper's masthead also projected reach. Tirto appeared as director and chief editor; named editors or representatives included R. M. Djojosepoetro, Goenawan, R. B. Karta Diredja, J. J. Meijer in the Netherlands, A. L. Wawo Runtu for the Moluccas and Manado, R. Ng. Tjitro Adhi Winoto in Priangan, and Soetan Radja Nan Gadang in Sumatra, with Arsad managing administration. Other journalists associated with its newsroom included Mas Marco Kartodikromo, Martodharsono, Raden Goenawan, Bagelener, and Haji Moekti. The network did not make the paper equally accessible across the archipelago, but it advertised an editorial geography larger than any single ethnic court or locality. For younger journalists such as Mas Marco, the newsroom also functioned as a school whose adversarial style continued in later movement papers.[11]

Table 1. Institutional Development and Political Capacity of Medan Prijaji, 1906–1912

Period	Material form	Institutional development	Public function	Evidentiary significance
1906	Association circular	Sarikat Prijaji; educational fund; approximately 700 members	Organization and fundraising	Linked print, education, and collective association before the newspaper
1907	Small weekly	Launch on 1 January; printed in Pancoran, Batavia	Political information for Indigenous readers	Established an Indigenous editorial platform addressed to the governed

[10] M. Rodhi As'ad, *Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Bapak Pers Indonesia*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Yogyakarta: I:Boekoe, 2022), 81–82, 100–101; Soebagijo I.N., *Sejarah Pers Indonesia* (Jakarta: Dewan Pers, 1977), 83; Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Kelepasan Kita dari Redaktur S.K.B. Pantjaran Warta," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909, 514–515.

[11] Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Halaman Muka Surat Kabar Medan Prijaji," *Medan Prijaji*, 1910; Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Gerakan Redactie," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909, 431; M. Rodhi As'ad, *Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Bapak Pers Indonesia*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Yogyakarta: I:Boekoe, 2022), 233–234; Iswara N. Raditya and Muhidin M. Dahlan, *Karya-Karya Lengkap Tirto Adhi Soerjo: Pers, Pergerakan dan Kebangsaan*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Jakarta: I:Boekoe, 2008), 74.

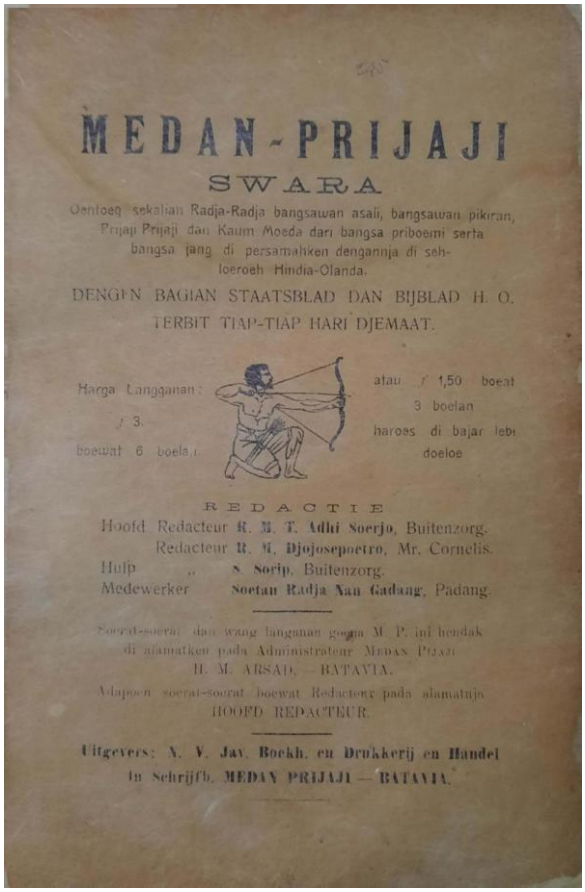
1908–1909	Weekly and press enterprise	Incorporation; *ƒ*75,000 capital; 3,000 shares	Greater commercial and editorial autonomy	Connected readership, subscriptions, and Indigenous ownership
1909–1910	Expanded weekly, then daily	Circulation reported at about 2,000; interregional editorial network	News, law, complaints, fiction, and advocacy	Made recurring public engagement possible across genres
1912	Publication ceased	End of the newspaper's five-year run	Institutional legacy in journalists and movement press	Demonstrates short duration but continuing influence beyond the title

A Newspaper Organized around Information, Law, and Complaint

The paper's regular columns demonstrate that its politics exceeded polemical editorials. Its eight declared aims were to provide information; offer guidance toward justice; give legal assistance; receive complaints from people whose interests were neglected; help readers find employment; encourage the people to organize; awaken and advance them; and strengthen them through trade. These functions were compressed into a masthead identifying the newspaper as a voice for rulers, hereditary and intellectual nobles, Indigenous officials and merchants, and other "governed peoples" treated like children of the country throughout the Netherlands Indies.[12] The formulation was capacious but not socially neutral. It addressed readers with different positions while defining their shared relation to colonial power.

The front page reproduced in Figure 1 is therefore evidentiary. Its masthead placed the newspaper's name, corporate identity, editorial direction, and intended constituency in a single visual field. The formula "*bangsa jang terprentah*" was not hidden in an occasional essay; it was part of the paper's repeated presentation of itself. Each issue could thus restate a political relationship before a reader encountered any particular report.

[12] M. Rodhi As'ad, *Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Bapak Pers Indonesia*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Yogyakarta: I:Boekoe, 2022), 77, 131–135.



MEDAN-PRIJAJI

SWARA

Oentoek sekalian Radja-Radja bangsawan asali, bangsawan pikiran, Prijaji Prijaji dan Kaum Moeda dari bangsa priboemi serta bangsa lang di persamahken dengannja di seh-loeroeh Hindia-Olanda.

DENGAN BAGIAN STAATSBLAD DAN BIJBLAD H. O.

TERBIT TIAP-TIAP HARI DJEMAAT.

Harga Langganan:
f 3.-
boewat 6 boelan.

atau f 1,50 boeat
3 boelan
haroes di bajar lebi
doeloe

REDACTIE

Hoofd Redacteur R. M. T. Adhi Soerjo, Buitenzorg.
Redacteur R. M. Djojosepoetro, Mr. Cornelis.
Hulp „ S. Soeip, Buitenzorg.
Medewerker Soetan Radja Nan Gadang, Padang.

Soerat-soerat dan wang langganan googa M. P. ini hendak di alamatken pada Administrateur MEDAN PRIJAJI H. M. ARSAD. — BATAVIA.

Adapoen soerat-soerat boewat Redacteur pada alamatnja HOOFD REDACTEUR.

Uitgevers: N. V. Jav. Boekh. en Drukkerij en Handel in Schrijfb. MEDAN PRIJAJI — BATAVIA.

Figure 1 The front page of Medan Prijaji, 1909. The masthead publicly identified the paper's audience and corporate publisher, making institutional ownership and political address visible together.

Regular content reinforced that public address. The newspaper printed copies of the *Staatsblad* and its supplements, civil-service transfers, advertisements, serialized fiction, letters, questions, and editorial replies. Legal question-and-answer columns were especially important. A reader could ask whether a judgment might be suspended by petition to the governor-general, request the relevant regulation, and expect the editors to explain or reproduce the rule. The column thereby translated the intimidating textual apparatus of colonial government into Malay and made law an object of public discussion. Knowing a statute did not equal power over its enforcement, but ignorance no longer had to remain the monopoly on which officials could rely.

The article "Kerempoekan," printed in response to a legal question, moved from the requested explanation to a wider theory of progress. Tirto rejected isolated advancement—the success of a few educated officials or aristocrats—as evidence that the Indigenous population had advanced collectively. He contrasted individual adaptation with organized endeavour, using Chinese associations, philanthropy, and newspaper support as examples of the strength produced by unity. The legal column thus did more than solve a technical problem. It converted a reader's question into a lesson about common interest, association, and the material obligations of readership.

Serialized fiction and advertisements were also part of this ecology. Stories such as *Hikayat Siti Mariah*, *Tjerita Njai Ratna*, *Boesono*, and *Beli Bini Orang* attracted

readers and explored social relationships that formal news could not represent in the same way. Their presence does not make every instalment nationalist. It shows that the political newspaper sustained itself through a mixed repertoire of utility, entertainment, commerce, and argument. The political public was assembled by the regularity of reading across these genres, not by editorial doctrine alone.[13]

Low Malay and the Naming of the Governed

Language was the first of the newspaper's four principal mechanisms of political formation. *Medan Prijaji* used Low or Market Malay, a lingua franca associated with ports, markets, labour, and communication among people with different first languages. Colonial language hierarchy often reserved Dutch for Europeans and a small educated elite, while High Malay carried its own literary and administrative prestige. Low Malay's mixed, flexible, and supposedly improper form made it available to a broader public. The very characteristics that diminished its status in elite judgment enlarged its political usefulness.[14]

In "Bahasa Olanda di Hindia Olanda," Tirto defended a simple Malay that had developed in coastal contact zones and was easily learned by different peoples. His argument did not deny linguistic mixture; it made mixture evidence of utility. The article transformed the market language from a tolerated instrument into a legitimate carrier of public reasoning.[15] In doing so, the newspaper created what later scholarship has called a "home" for language: a recurring textual space in which readers separated by geography could encounter the same categories, controversies, and forms of address.

The category *bangsa jang terprentah* intensified that effect. In early twentieth-century usage, *bangsa* could denote a lineage, ethnic community, regional people, race, or broader collectivity. Tirto's formulation defined community relationally: the governed were constituted by their position under those who governed. The phrase could include Indigenous people and other subject populations—Chinese, Arab, or Indian readers—without erasing every difference among them. It therefore did not yet name the Indonesian nation in its later sovereign form. It performed a prior political operation: it made rule and subjection, rather than blood alone, the boundary of a possible collectivity.

[13] Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Kerempoekan," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909; Haji Mukti, *Hikayat Siti Mariah*, ed. Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Jakarta: Lentera Dipantara, 2003), 138–147; Maya Sutedja-Liem, "Menghapus Citra Buruk Njai dalam Karya-Karya Fiksi Berbahasa Melayu (1896–1927)," *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 10, no. 2 (2008): 277–286, https://doi.org/10.17510/wjhi.v10i2.197.

[14] George McTurnan Kahin, *Nasionalisme dan Revolusi Indonesia*, ed. Dewi Anggraeni, Iffah Adilah, and Tasha Agripina (Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2013), 53; Ahmat Adam, *Sejarah Awal Pers dan Kebangkitan Kesadaran Keindonesiaan (1855–1913)*, ed. Eko Endarmoko and Jaap Erkelens (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra and KITLV, 2003), 149; Rudolf Mrazek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Perkembangan Teknologi dan Nasionalisme di Sebuah Koloni*, ed. Harmojo (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2006), 47; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Komunitas-Komunitas Terbayang*, ed. Omi Intan Naomi (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2008), xxxii.

[15] Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Bahasa Olanda di Hindia Olanda," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909, 466–467.

Advocacy, Exposure, and Political Dignity

The second mechanism was advocacy journalism. Readers who considered themselves wronged by officials or other powerful actors were invited to bring their cases to the newsroom. The editors might investigate, collect information, publish the alleged abuse, explain applicable law, and, when disputes reached court, connect the complainant to legal defence. Later scholarship rightly treats this as more than the dissemination of news. It joined representation in print to intervention beyond the page, although the newspaper's own account of its effectiveness must still be read critically.[16]

The Bapangan affair shows the relationship between advocacy and collective identification. Villagers supported Tirto in his dispute with the assistant controller A. Simon and reportedly offered to contribute toward a possible fine. *Medan Prijaji* printed their Javanese-language letter, making village solidarity visible to a wider Malay-reading public. Tirto's polemic escalated when he labelled Simon a *snot-aap*—a contemptuous Dutch insult—in connection with alleged interference in the selection of a village head. The language was risky and personalized, but its political force lay in reversing the normal direction of colonial humiliation. An Indigenous editor publicly named and judged a European official rather than accepting the official as the sole judge of Indigenous conduct.[17]

The third mechanism, exposure and satire, also targeted Indigenous elites. "Baoe Goela" described a regent whose sudden ability to purchase motorcars followed the establishment of a sugar factory. Its recurring cry of *ewu*—"thousand"—linked conspicuous consumption to pressured land leases, the restriction of food cultivation, burdens placed on village heads, and coerced labour. The article did not oppose Europeans while absolving Indigenous intermediaries. It interpreted colonial exploitation as a relationship reproduced through local office, fear, land, labour, and patronage.[18] Such criticism was central to the paper's national significance: the governed could not become a political subject if inherited status insulated Indigenous rulers from scrutiny.

The fourth mechanism was the redefinition of dignity. Diana's "Mendjoendjoeng Bangsa" narrated the everyday violence suffered by a coachman slapped after requesting adequate payment and a labourer beaten by an overseer for failing to show deference. These scenes reduced the distance between abstract domination and bodily experience. Diana's answer, however, was not a simple appeal to sympathy. Indigenous people had to cultivate intellectual resources, sustained work, and unity so that they might become strong enough to end abuse. Political

[16] R. M. Joko Prawoto Mulyadi, "Nasionalisme Pers: Studi Kasus Peran Medan Prijaji dalam Menumbuhkan Kesadaran Kebangsaan" (Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2011), 70–71; Iswara N. Raditya and Muhidin M. Dahlan, *Karya-Karya Lengkap Tirto Adhi Soerjo: Pers, Pergerakan dan Kebangsaan*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Jakarta: I:Boekoe, 2008), 23.

[17] Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Soeratnja Orang-Orang Desa Bapangan pada Hoofd Red M.P.," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909, 15; Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Persdelict: Oempatan dan Penistaan, Aspirant Controleur A. Simon Contra R. M. Tirto Adhi Soerjo Hoofd Redacteur Medan Prijaji," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909, 224.

[18] Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Baoe Goela," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909, 787.

elevation required organized agency rather than an expectation that authority would voluntarily become just.[19]

Tirto's "Deradjat Boemi Poetra" likewise examined the degrading position assigned to Indigenous people within racialized law and administrative practice. It connected formal ranking to encounters in police courts and to the routine authority of both European and Indigenous officials. "Kehinaan Orang Djawa," published on 7 May 1910, turned part of the criticism inward by identifying disunity, passivity, and self-abasement as conditions through which domination endured.[20] Read together, the articles neither blamed the oppressed for colonialism nor reduced domination to an external force. They presented national consciousness as a struggle over structures of rule and learned habits of deference.

Other contributors expanded this argument beyond Tirto's voice. In "Pertimbangan," Raden Goenawan contrasted inherited nobility with *bangsawan fikiran*, or intellectual nobility. Historical worth no longer followed automatically from ancestry; education, character, work, and service could establish a new elite. The article's contrast between older and younger generations opened a temporal horizon in which social rank might change.[21] Bagelener's "Kemerdikaan Orang Ketjil" reversed paternal claims of rule by insisting that rulers could not exist without the people, whereas people could survive without particular rulers. The article linked the freedom of the "little people" to protection from coerced cultivation, administrative burdens, and arbitrary command.[22] In "Siapa Jang Haroes di Djadiken Prijaji?," Bagelener argued that the title *prijaji* should rest on competence and conduct rather than descent, and explained the newspaper's name as a field for selected minds across nations and social ranks.[23]

These texts did not offer a single systematic doctrine. Their importance lies in a shared direction of argument. Language, legal knowledge, public accusation, association, intellectual capacity, and popular dignity repeatedly displaced heredity and obedience as the basis of political value. *Medan Prijaji* made the newspaper itself a demonstration of that displacement: an Indigenous-owned institution claimed the authority to investigate, translate law, judge officials, and define who could count as a *prijaji*.

Discussion

From Print Circulation to a Political Public

The results qualify any linear account in which the printing press automatically generates nationalism. A common language and simultaneous circulation can enable people who never meet to imagine membership in the same community, but neither paper nor language predetermines the political content of that community. Low

[19] Diana, "Mendjoendjoeng Bangsa," *Medan Prijaji*, 1909, 764–771.

[20] Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Deradjat Boemi Poetra," *Medan Prijaji*, February 26, 1910, 88–91; Tirto Adhi Soerjo, "Kehinaan Orang Djawa," *Medan Prijaji*, May 7, 1910, 214.

[21] Raden Goenawan, "Pertimbangan," *Medan Prijaji*, January 22, 1910, 29–31.

[22] Bagelener, "Kemerdikaan Orang Ketjil," *Medan Prijaji*, March 19, 1910, 126–130.

[23] Bagelener, "Siapa Jang Haroes di Djadiken Prijaji?," *Medan Prijaji*, April 16, 1910, 180.

Malay had circulated before *Medan Prijaji*, including in commercial newspapers. What changed was the recurrent association of that language with the governed, their injuries, their legal questions, and their capacity to organize. The paper's intervention lay in the combination of medium, vocabulary, and practice.[24]

Taufik Rahzen's concept of "print-nationalism" is useful if understood in this institutional sense. *Medan Prijaji* did not use print only as propaganda. It stabilized a linguistic space in which the everyday language of trade could become a language of law, political judgment, and collective aspiration. The newspaper's readers were addressed as members of a public with responsibilities: they should subscribe, write, ask, contribute, associate, and defend common interests. The transition from audience to public occurred not because all readers behaved identically, but because the newspaper repeatedly offered such roles.[25]

The term *bangsa jang terprentah* was especially consequential. It named inequality without requiring agreement on a fully developed constitutional future. Its grammar made subjection an active condition—people were being governed—and thus potentially changeable. It also shifted the axis of solidarity from a collection of isolated grievances to a relationship shared across districts and occupations. A coachman's humiliation, a labourer's beating, a peasant's coerced land, a village election, and racial inequality before a court could appear as different manifestations of the same political order.

This relational community was broader than a purely ethnic nationalism but remained historically unfinished. The newspaper's title and readership still reflected the prominence of educated men, officials, merchants, and aristocrats, even as its articles defended villagers, workers, women in serialized fiction, and the *wong ketjil*. The language of "intellectual nobility" challenged descent but could produce another hierarchy grounded in education. National consciousness in *Medan Prijaji* should therefore be understood as an opening rather than a completed egalitarian settlement: it enlarged the field of political membership while retaining tensions over who could speak for the people.

Advocacy Journalism as Counter-Authority

Advocacy gave the paper's discourse practical credibility. Translation of laws taught readers that colonial authority operated through texts that could be identified, quoted, and disputed. Correspondence allowed private injuries to be recoded as public questions. Investigation and the prospect of legal defence implied that the newsroom might act as an intermediary between scattered complainants and institutions they could not confront alone. This sequence formed a counter-authority: not a state and not yet a political party, but an institution claiming competence to verify conduct and pronounce public judgment.

[24] Ania Loomba, *Kolonialisme/Pascakolonialisme*, ed. Hartono Hadikusumo (Yogyakarta: Bentang Budaya, 2016), 65–66; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Komunitas-Komunitas Terbayang*, ed. Omi Intan Naomi (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2008), xxxii.

[25] Taufik Rahzen, *Tanah Air Bahasa: Seratus Jejak Pers Indonesia*, ed. Muhidin M. Dahlan (Jakarta: I:Boekoe, 2007), 420–424; Taufik Rahzen, *Seabad Pers Kebangsaan (1907–2007)*, ed. Muhidin M. Dahlan (Jakarta: I:Boekoe, 2007), xvii–xix.

The Bapangan letter is particularly revealing because it complicates the direction of influence. The paper did not only speak downward to passive readers. Villagers wrote back, offered material solidarity, and furnished the editors with evidence of a political constituency. Publication then amplified that response. The relation was circular: editorial advocacy elicited reader action, and reader action authenticated the newspaper's claim to represent the governed. The surviving printed letter cannot tell us how typical this response was, but it proves that the paper could stage reciprocity as a political norm.

Satire strengthened this counter-authority while increasing risk. The insult directed at Simon and the *ewu* refrain in "Baoe Goela" made officials vulnerable to ridicule, a form of sanction outside administrative hierarchy. Yet the target was not race alone. By exposing an Indigenous regent who allegedly profited from sugar expansion, *Medan Prijaji* refused a nationalism based on the unconditional defence of native elites. Its anti-colonialism was directed at the structure of arbitrary rule and its local agents. This helps explain why the paper could be both a voice for *prijaji* and a critic of inherited priyayi privilege.

The advocacy model also clarifies causality. It is difficult to demonstrate that a particular article caused a reader to adopt a national identity. It is possible to show that the paper linked otherwise separate acts—reading, petitioning, subscribing, giving evidence, learning law, and supporting a defendant—within a common political field. National consciousness emerged through these connections as much as through explicit declarations about the nation.

Continuity, Limits, and Historiographical Position

The newspaper's five-year life imposes an important limit. Financial vulnerability, legal pressure, political conflict, and the dependence of the enterprise on Tirto's leadership constrained institutional continuity. The surviving primary corpus is also uneven: the present study has direct access chiefly to 1909 and the first half of 1910. Claims about the entire period from 1907 to 1912 must consequently distinguish between evidence contained in the issues and later reconstructions of publication history. The archive supports a strong account of political vocabulary and journalistic mechanism, but not a statistical account of readership by ethnicity, region, occupation, or gender.

Nor does the evidence sustain the assertion that *Medan Prijaji* directly caused the creation of Budi Utomo, Sarekat Islam, or the Indische Partij. Its emergence belonged to the same historical transformation: Ethical Policy education, the growth of towns and communications, Asian anti-colonial examples, Chinese and Arab associations, Indigenous commerce, and the proliferation of voluntary organizations. The newspaper strengthened this environment by teaching organization and furnishing later journalists with experience, but those movements possessed distinct founders, constituencies, chronologies, and ideological trajectories. Influence is best understood as enabling and connective, not as exclusive origin.

Within the historiography of Indonesian nationalism, this interpretation mediates between biography and structural print history. A biographical approach is indispensable because Tirto's decisions shaped the paper's language, corporate form,

legal orientation, and confrontational style. A purely heroic narrative, however, can obscure the agency of other editors, correspondents, investors, subscribers, and complainants. Conversely, a structural account of print capitalism can explain how reproducible texts cross distance but not why this paper selected law, dignity, and advocacy as its central political practices. *Medan Prijaji* resulted from the interaction of structure and agency: colonial print technology, commercial markets, and linguistic circulation were reorganized by historical actors pursuing Indigenous autonomy.[26]

The paper's newsroom extended that legacy beyond its own closure. Mas Marco Kartodikromo's later career in movement journalism, Martodharsono's work in regional papers, and Raden Goenawan's activity in *Pantjaran Warta* and political organizations indicate that *Medan Prijaji* trained or connected figures who carried adversarial journalism into other institutions.[27] Continuity therefore did not require the survival of the original company. It operated through personnel, genres, editorial habits, and the expectation that a newspaper could be an actor in politics rather than a neutral container of information.

The article's principal historiographical proposition follows. The novelty of *Medan Prijaji* lay neither in being the first Malay paper nor in inventing every nationalist idea it printed. It lay in assembling an Indigenous-controlled institution in which commercial organization, a vernacular reading public, legal translation, complaint, exposure, and a relational definition of the governed sustained one another. That configuration made national consciousness more than an abstract sentiment. It gave it a recurring form of practice.

Conclusion

Medan Prijaji contributed to the formation of Indonesian national consciousness by transforming the newspaper into an institutional meeting point between language, law, grievance, and collective action. Founded in 1907 out of the organizational world of Sarikat Prijaji and incorporated as an Indigenous press enterprise in 1908, it developed a circulation, editorial network, and mixed repertoire of news, law, correspondence, fiction, and polemic that distinguished it from a paper devoted only to commerce or elite information.

Four mechanisms explain its historical role. Low Malay permitted an interregional public to encounter shared political categories. Legal pedagogy and advocacy enabled readers to frame injuries as claims and connected publication to investigation and defence. Exposure and satire subjected European and Indigenous officials alike to public judgment. Debates over the *bangsa jang terprentah*, intellectual

[26] Ahmat Adam, *Sejarah Awal Pers dan Kebangkitan Kesadaran Keindonesiaan (1855–1913)*, ed. Eko Endarmoko and Jaap Erkelens (Jakarta: Hasta Mitra and KITLV, 2003); Dharwis Widya Utama Yacob and Firdaus Syam, "Gerakan Politik Tirto Adhi Soerjo," *Jurnal Kajian Politik dan Masalah Pembangunan* 12, no. 1 (2016): 1749–1756.

[27] M. Rodhi As'ad, *Tirto Adhi Soerjo, Bapak Pers Indonesia*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Yogyakarta: I:Boekoe, 2022), 233–234; Iswara N. Raditya and Muhidin M. Dahlan, *Karya-Karya Lengkap Tirto Adhi Soerjo: Pers, Pergerakan dan Kebangsaan*, ed. Taufik Rahzen (Jakarta: I:Boekoe, 2008), 74; Taufik Rahzen, *Seabad Pers Kebangsaan (1907–2007)*, ed. Muhidin M. Dahlan (Jakarta: I:Boekoe, 2007), 53.

nobility, freedom, and the rights of the *wong ketjil* relocated political worth from descent and obedience to knowledge, character, association, and dignity.

The newspaper did not single-handedly create a nation, and the available evidence cannot measure the response of every reader. Its contribution was more specific and historically defensible: it made colonial subjection legible as a shared, contestable relationship and furnished roles through which readers might enter a political public. The article's novelty lies in showing that the paper's institutional history and its discourse were inseparable. Indigenous ownership made adversarial editorial authority possible; vernacular address enlarged the imagined constituency; and advocacy gave nationalist language procedural form. In this sense, *Medan Prijaji* did not merely report the awakening of "the governed." It helped construct the practices through which the governed could recognize themselves as a collective historical agent.

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