

Title—Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule

Author—Ann Laura Stoler

Year—2002

Categories: Gender, Empire, Sex/Sexuality

Place: Dutch Indies

Time: 1860-1930

Argument Synopsis:

Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule is primarily focused on the colonial management and discourse surrounding carnal matters such as sexual activity, reproduction, and marriage. In particular, Stoler attempts to identify the politics that made **racially-coded notions of intimacy** a primary concern of colonial policy. She argues that the colonial concept of European men staying away from colonized women was an ideal of domesticity that few European men were able to realize, or even want. Stoler demonstrates how this directly contradicts the knowledge that has emerged from colonial studies; that European men should use native women to perform domestic work, service their sexual needs, and provide physical care.

Through her discussion of the management of intimate matters, she argues that colonial conceptions of racial membership varied greatly across time and place and should not be taken as a static category. She argues that it was often intimate matters that helped determine one's racial status in the colonies. She claims skin color was far too ambiguous a marker to base racial distinctions between colonizer and colonized on. Her book reflects a rejection of the fixity of racial categories. Stoler aims to reveal the degree of investment colonial states had in knowledge about the carnal, which in turns highlights the instability of colonial categories.

A series of studies on the colonial order in the Dutch Indies in the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century. Specifically, Stoler is focused on the Javanese heartland of colonial Indonesia and the North Sumatran plantation belt of Deli; although she includes comparisons to other empires. All the chapters discuss domestic arrangements, affective ties and the management of sex. They are organized in the order they were written, seemingly spanning decades. She characterizes her book as a series of **interconnected and intersecting plots**, all organized around the question of the role of the intimate in the creation of colonial categories distinguishing between the ruler and the ruled. She is particularly concerned with colonial categories, especially those of race and class, and how those interacted with concepts of gender and control over intimate affairs, as well as the dichotomy of public vs private.

Colonial regimes were uneven, imperfect and sometimes indifferent knowledge-acquiring machines. She calls for a stronger commitment to working concepts, as opposed to fixed or rigid concepts. Working concepts help promote analytic openings by being subject to change. She reveals the flaws in commitment to fixed social categories—conceptual frames should be fluid and not inert structures.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Intimate matters often helped determine racial status in the colonies
- Gender history has been too focused on women—need a broader gender history
- Key symbols of colonial state were secured through the regulation of gender, patrolling of sexuality, and policing of race