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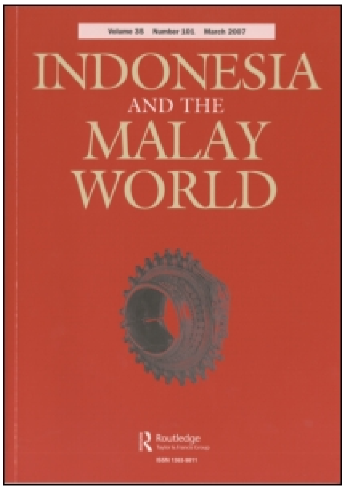

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Kwee Hui Kian

HOW STRANGERS BECAME KINGS

Javanese-Dutch relations in Java 1600–1800

This paper analyses the interaction between Mataram-Java and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the 17th and 18th centuries. In contrast to the previous discussions that tend to adopt opposing categories like European versus Asian, coloniser versus colonised, and strangers versus indigenous as their analytic frames, the paper attempts to identify the specific interests and conflicts at play during the 17th and 18th centuries. It seeks to determine how these changed through time, which groups and individuals among the Javanese sought the involvement and support of the Company, and why. It traces the nature and contours of the Company's territorial expansion and examines the circumstances under which its administrators were reluctant to assume rule, and the circumstances under which they actively did so.

Historians of colonial Indonesia acknowledge that the Dutch did not plan to colonise the archipelago from the outset, but grew interested in ruling it over time. In his discussion of Dutch colonial rule in Minahasa and the phenomenon of the stranger-king in Asia and Africa more generally, David Henley (2000, 2002) goes a step further in proposing that the roots of colonization in pre-state societies sometimes lay within indigenous societies and traditions themselves. In these stateless societies, Henley argues, local people were not only disunited, but also violently antagonistic towards one another. In order to resolve their disputes, they were in need of a neutral arbiter; different groups, however, could not trust each other to arbitrate, due to the expected favouritism of their own kinsmen. Henley argues that the same could be said for ‘relatively large and sophisticated’ political units such as Mataram Java:

> The proximate reason for the vulnerability of Javanese states to hesitant or reluctant VOC intervention in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, was surely that too many members of the Javanese nobility always hated each other more than they hated any foreigner, so that the [Dutch East India] Company was ‘inexorably sucked into Javanese affairs’ (Nagtegaal 1996: 16) by opportunistic requests for support in civil conflicts until finally a stable equilibrium was reached in which the Dutch found themselves playing what Ricklefs (1974: 420–1) explicitly calls a ‘mediatory role’ as ‘ultimate arbiters of insoluble disputes’ between two permanently separate Javanese kingdoms of roughly equal strength.
>
> (Henley 2000: 130–31)

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Leaving aside the fact that Henley's conceptualisation reminds one rather uncomfortably of how colonial historians tended to justify European intervention as bringing peace and order (Dutch: *rust en orde*) to fractious Southeast Asians, there are problems with his exposition. In his depiction, the indigenes were split since time immemorial; violence was prevalent, even endemic. Henley glosses over the varying intensity of warfare and violence in the societies he describes, the timing of requests for Dutch help, as well as Dutch depictions of local violence. There is, furthermore, little indication of the precise groups and individuals that sought foreign assistance, and those who they opposed. It is as if groups in the Asian theatre were *always* fighting, prior to and during the time of European arrival in the 16th and 17th centuries – as if *all* these groups wanted, or needed, outside intervention. There is also no exploration of *why* and *when* these groups wanted Dutch help – just the general claim that they were incapable of solving their own problems.

Henley does not explore why the Dutch wished to be involved, nor why they were willing to act as arbitrators. These are important questions, as they determine how 'neutral' the Dutch were in their interventions. Certainly there were times when they were invited to intervene, but there were also times when the Dutch, following their own agenda, sought to rule and dominate. Why did the Dutch remain reluctant to act on certain occasions while willing to strike on others? Why did some local groups ask for help, but not others? What were the contexts in which both parties operated? While the Dutch did not plan colonisation from day one, as some nationalist historians have claimed, this did not mean that colonisation was not subsequently entertained. Put simply, there is a lack of discussion of timing and context in Henley's discussion of the stranger-king phenomenon in Indonesia and other parts of Asia and Africa.

In order to illustrate the importance of timing and context in the phenomenon of stranger-kingship, my aim in this paper is to analyse the interaction between Mataram Java and the Dutch East India Company (VOC: alternatively, the Company) in the 17th and 18th centuries. In contrast to the above arguments that tend to adopt within their analytic frames oppositions like European versus Asian, coloniser versus colonised, and strangers versus indigenous, the paper studies the various nexes of powers at work regardless of ethnicity. It explicitly aims to identify the specific interests and conflicts, how these changed through time, which groups and individuals sought the involvement of the Company, and why. It also traces the nature and shape of the Company's aims and policies – at times when its officers were reluctant to assume rule, and at times when they actively did so.

A word on the choice of Java: few non-historians remember that the Spice Islands were the place in Indonesia where the Dutch first imposed direct rule, though many know that Java was the most important and profitable colony for the Dutch colonial enterprise after the Treaty of Giyanti in 1755. I refer here not to west Java, where the Company imposed a more direct form of rule from its headquarters in Batavia, but to central and east Java, namely the realms controlled by the Mataram court since the early 17th century. The region was not only where the lucrative Cultivation System (1830–70) – which generated more than 1,250 million guilders for the Dutch state – was imposed, but also the base from which colonial rule was expanded to other parts of what would become Indonesia (Horlings 2003: 155). Prior to 1830, it could be argued that the Dutch were generally reluctant to govern, doing so only when they were asked to interfere or when they were provoked. Tracing how Dutch rule and expansion was shaped in Java over the course of the early modern period is thus crucial for understanding colonialism in Indonesia as a whole.

The next section lays out the nature of the conflict for power which resulted in the formation of powerful indigenous states in Java. The following section discusses how the various *susuhunan* (Javanese rulers) and other political aspirants in the Mataram realm sought Dutch military assistance, and even overlordship, and the various conflicts in which the Company was involved.

The *mandala* system in Java

In the 17th and 18th centuries, central and east Java offered a wide variety of trade commodities including rice, teakwood, salt, birds' nests, cotton and tobacco. Traders from nearby regions such as Borneo, Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and Bali, as well as from India and China, had been visiting the north coast of Java (where waters were more navigable than the south coast and where natural harbours were more readily available) since the first millennium AD (Christie 1998; Andaya 1991).

The wealth and power of the Javanese ruling elite depended heavily on trading. The paramount ruler was the one who could attract the greatest number of producers and traders to his realm. As populations were much smaller in the early modern period, attracting inhabitants from the interior to bring goods to the coast was no easy task. An 1815 estimate of the population of central and east Java placed it at 3,590,178; it was likely even lower in earlier decades (Boomgaard 1989b: 166; 2003: 198–99). 'Territoriality' in Java at the time was defined more by population than by physical area.

The political scene in Java, as in most parts of Southeast Asia, was complicated by the multiplicity of polities. Political aspirants both on the coast and in the interior tried to assert overlordship over their neighbours when opportunities arose. Retaining population was a challenge as subjects, unhappy with bad harvests or oppressive rule, could vote with their feet, and a nearby ruler would always be happy to take them in if they acknowledged a relationship of dependency.[1] This phenomenon persisted into the 19th century.

A successful ruler in central or east Java would be one who could impel neighbouring rulers to submit to his authority, one who possessed a large subject population, and who was able to attract local as well as foreign traders. Political aspirants would try to maintain or expand their power bases by means of ideological indoctrination and effective administration, by extending their influence over other rulers through marriage alliances, or by resorting to the battlefield. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the *susuhunan* presented such gifts as money, kris, and high-quality textiles to powerful aristocrats, court officials and regents as a way of strengthening patron-client ties (Nagtegaal 1996: 55–9, 177, 214).

Due to this tug-of-war for subjects, political aspirants in central and east Java were engaged in a perpetual competition to become the pre-eminent overlord. Should a supreme authority appear, he would still be open to challenge. The political domain was thus in constant flux, a domain Wolters (1999) characterised as the 'mandala system', and Tambiah (1985) the 'galactic polity'.

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[1] See for example, VOC 2633 Tegal's resident Cornelis Breekpot to Batavia high government, 12 January 1744, ff. 56–9; Nagtegaal, 1996, p. 183. The 'VOC' numbers in the footnote refers to the Dutch East India Company archives kept in the National Archives, The Hague.

Conflict and competition were particularly intense between the interior and coastal regions of Java. Although both regions were suitable for cultivation, in order to increase their appeal to traders, coastal rulers needed to extend their rule into the interior so as to expand their subject populations and to gain access to further resources. Inland polities would attempt to resist such expansionist attempts from the coast, and at times would themselves dominate the *pasisir* areas. At the end of the 15th century, when the suzerainty of Majapahit weakened, the rulers of Demak and Gresik declared their independence and established independent kingdoms. By the 16th century, the rulers of Demak and Gresik had built up Jepara and Gresik as major ports on the north coast of Java. When in the early 17th century Banten emerged as the region's leading entrepôt, the two coastal districts became secondary ports, feeding and serving Banten's commercial interests (de Graaf and Pigeaud 1974: 11–4; Tjiptoatmodjo 1976: 178–85).

On the eve of the Company's entry, the court of Mataram in south-central Java had the upper hand in the struggle for supremacy. Between 1588 and 1646, and especially under the rule of Sultan Agung (1613–45), the Mataram court captured all the port polities on the north coast. Coastal regents were obliged to pay personal homage to Mataram during the annual festival of Garebeg Mulud. This could be a day of doom for those whom the *susuhunan* considered uncooperative, as regents could be put to death. A regent's failure to visit the court on that festive day could incur such wrath that the *susuhunan* would send armed forces against him (de Graaf 1958; Nagtegaal 1996: 82–3).

Despite constant power struggle and competition, it was possible to reach consensus through negotiation, marriage alliances or force. Peace would ensue if all groups recognised a 'big man' (Wolter's term) in their midst, as was the case during Sultan Agung's time. Thirty years after Sultan Agung's death, the Mataram empire was itself challenged by a rising big man in the form of its Madurese vassal, Trunajaya. At this point, rather than surrender to the fittest contender, the Mataram ruler Amangkurat I (1646–77) sought military assistance from the Company.

Strangers ahoy!

The Dutch first appeared in the waters of the Indonesian archipelago at the end of 16th century. The VOC founded a trading post on the northwest coast at Banten in 1603 and gained a brief foothold at Gresik before it fell to Mataram. A small trading post was established in Jepara in 1613 to facilitate Dutch trading on north-coastal Java but the post was forcibly closed down by the local Javanese authorities in 1618. In 1619 the VOC conquered the small fishing port of Jayakarta and built a fortified town, which they named Batavia. Sultan Agung made two unsuccessful attempts in 1628 and 1629 to dislodge the Dutch from their new base. In 1651, with the acquiescence of his successor, Amangkurat I, the Company re-established a trading post at Jepara and resumed its commercial activities on the *pasisir* (de Graaf 1958: 58–63 and chapter 8; Nagtegaal 1996: 17–8).

The Dutch were not destined to be small players on Java's northeast coast. In 1677, perceiving no hope of putting down Trunajaya's uprising with his own forces, Amangkurat I requested military assistance from the VOC. Although the rebellion was suppressed, ambitious *bupati* (district chiefs) on north-coastal Java began to approach the Dutch authorities in Batavia, expressing grievances as vassals of Mataram and seeking Company overlordship. Most of these requests were turned down; by the 1680s Batavia had accepted as vassals only Sumenep, Pamekasan, Cirebon and Semarang (Nagtegaal 1996: 41–3, 82; de Graaf 1978: 296–97).

The VOC's lack of interest in political expansion did not stop coastal lords from trying to involve the Company in local power struggles. In 1704, in the face of the Kartasura court's intensifying centralising policies, unhappy coastal regents in Pekalongan, Batang, Demak, Jepara, Gresik, Surabaya and Madura sent tribute and solicited the Company to become their patron. By this time, the VOC had become a political and military power in the region, particularly after expeditions against Makassar and Banten in 1665–67 and 1682–84. The regents expressed their desire for independence from the *susuhunan* and sought to become vassals of Batavia, promising to send tribute annually and to supply rice, and grow cash crops such as indigo should the Company authorities so desire. By 1717, the Kartasura court was so frustrated with the Surabaya and Madura *bupati* that it declared war against them; the protracted fighting did not end until 1721. It could be argued that the Surabaya and Madura regents would likely have gained independence had it not been for the support the Company was rendering the Mataram court (Nagtegaal 1996: 70–78, 80–83).

This did not mean the Mataram court was happy with the situation. Any independent-minded regent could now play to the Company's needs and gain greater independence from the court – among them the 'political entrepreneurs' and 'portfolio capitalists' Jayadiningrat in Pekalongan, Puspanegara in Batang, and Jayasantika in Kudus, all of whom became wealthy by cooperating with the Company in growing such cash crops as indigo and coffee (Nagtegaal 1996: 164–66, 178, 219). Moreover, as the Dutch gained in politico-economic stature on the *pasisir*, the profits of some coastal regents were undercut. In Tegal, Batang, Demak and other districts, the *bupati* suffered diminished incomes when Company personnel bypassed their commercial mediation and purchased rice directly from producers. All of these incidents were deleterious to the Mataram court.

Dissent not only emerged between inland and coastal polities, but also arose within the Mataram court itself. Disgruntled brothers, cousins, nephews, uncles, etc. were plotting and waiting to pounce on the incumbent *susuhunan*. In 1705, Pangeran Puger managed to convince the Dutch to support him against his nephew, the incumbent Amangkurat III (Puger had unsuccessfully vied for the throne with his brother, Amangkurat II, when their father Amangkurat I died in 1677) (Schrieke 1957: 7).

The Dutch presence on the *pasisir* also undermined the position and privileges of the Mataram ruler more directly. Though the military expeditions were not of their making, the Dutch did not fail to acquire commercial advantages and other economic benefits through each act of assistance. In exchange for assistance against Trunajaya, the Mataram court granted the Dutch a monopoly on textile and opium sales, privileges and concessions in rice and sugar purchases, an exemption for Company goods from import and export tolls, and a number of other lucrative rights. From 1705 to 1709, the Mataram court signed treaties with the Company which, besides the formal cession of Cirebon, East Priangan, and the territories of Sumenep and Pamekasan on Madura, contained two main provisions: firstly, by way of payment of its war debts incurred since 1677, the court had to supply 800 *koyang* of rice[2] annually to the Company, free of charge, for 25 years; secondly, the court had to pay the expenses of the Company garrison in Kartasura, estimated at 15,600 Spanish reals per year. From 1680, the garrison was stationed directly opposite the *kraton* (court) at the request of Amangkurat II, in order to guarantee his protection (Nagtegaal 1996: 26, 69–70, 84, 115–17; de Graaf 1940: 56–86; Schrieke 1955: 202; Heeres and Stapel 1955: 326).

These amounts were increased again after the Company helped the *susuhunan* in the 1718–21 war against the Madura and Surabaya regents. Another VOC-Mataram treaty was signed in 1733 to address the arrears in war debts of 220,000 reals and 6,537 *koyang* of rice, accumulated since the 1677 Trunajaya uprising. Following negotiations, the 800 *koyang* of rice delivered annually was raised to 1,000, while the cash payment was raised from 15,600 to 25,600 reals per year (Nagtegaal 1996: 215).

Because of these onerous charges, the *susuhunan* tried to rid his realm of the Dutch when he perceived an opportunity during the Chinese War (1741–43). When Chinese insurgents fought the Dutch in central and east Java following a week-long massacre of Chinese in and around Batavia in 1740, the Javanese ruler supported the insurgents. Unfortunately for Amangkurat II, other Javanese and Madurese princes wanted to use the war to oust him. The Chinese forces chose to support a challenger, Sunan Kuning, a grandson of Amangkurat, and besieged his *kraton*. As a result, in January 1742 the *susuhunan* had to beg for the Company's military assistance against the attacks of Chinese, Madurese and various Mataram *pangeran* (princes), such as Mangkunegara, nephew of the *susuhunan*, and Singasari, the *susuhunan*'s half-brother (Vermeulen 1938; Blussé 1981; Remmelink 1994; Ricklefs 1974: 39).

The VOC extorted concessions from the *susuhunan* in his desperation. The VOC-Mataram treaties signed in 1743 and 1746 entailed the cession of the north coast of Java from Brebes in the west, six kilometres inland, as well as the island of Madura and the eastern part of Java. Besides territorial cession, the *susuhunan* had to deliver a variety of agricultural and forest products and to surrender coastal monetary taxes, including poll-taxes and tax farms. These were to be in lieu of his payment of, firstly, war debt incurred since 1677 and its accumulated interest (namely, 2,691 *koyang* of rice and 51,200 reals); secondly, new debts arising from the ongoing battle against the Chinese rebels and other rebellious Mataram princes; and, thirdly, payment for the upkeep of the 400 Company troops stationed in Kartasura for the protection of the Mataram court, amounting to 31,200 Spanish reals annually. Meanwhile, for the cession of the tax farms on the Pasisir, the Company would pay the *susuhunan* 20,000 Spanish reals as an annuity.[3]

From 1746, the Dutch had to deal with a concerted rebellion against the *susuhunan* by various powerful Mataram *pangeran* including Mangkunegara, Mangkubumi, Singasari and Buminata. The first was a nephew; the latter, three half-brothers of Pakubuwana II. Attacks only ceased after separate peace settlements had been made with the two chief rebels, Mangkubumi and Mangkunegara, in 1755 and 1757 respectively.[4] The revolt against the *susuhunan* ebbed as the two parties turned on each other. Mangkubumi, the first to conclude peace talks with Company authorities, was granted half the Mataram empire and the title of 'Sultan Mataram', and established his court in Yogyakarta. Mangkunegara was admitted to the ranks of major lord in the realm of the Surakarta-based *susuhunan*. The latter also ceded the prince 4,000 *cacah* (households)[5] and appointed him the *wedana* (upper-regent]) of Banyumas.[6] Following the peace settlements with these major participants, the other rebelling princes either surrendered or were defeated by the Dutch-*susuhunan*-sultan coalition.

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[2] One *koyang* of rice is approximately 1,750 kg.

[3] VOC 2611, commissioner and plenipotentiary Verijssel presently in Kartasura, 12 October 1743, ff. 38–9; arts. 11–4 of the Company-Mataram treaty on 11–3 November 1743, *Corpus* 5: 367–70; Company-Mataram treaty on 18 May 1746, *Corpus* 5: 423–24; Batavia high government to Gentlemen Seventeen, 31 Dec 1746, *Opkomst* 10: 62–3.

The attractiveness of strangers for weaker parties

The Dutch in the form of the VOC were a recognised military force in central Java from 1619 onwards. While individual garrisons were small – during times of peace in the second half of the 18th century, there might only have been 53 Company military men stationed on the *pasisir* – it was clear to all that the authorities in Semarang could summon more troops at will.[7] The Company was thus an attractive potential ally for weaker parties, and it could be argued that the latter often *had* to rely on Dutch help or face elimination. In 1677 Amangkurat I called upon Dutch military assistance against Trunajaya. In 1705 Pangeran Puger, who had legitimate claims to the throne, sought Dutch help against Amangkurat III, while in 1743 Pakubuwana II obtained Dutch help against Chinese-backed Sunan Kuning. Had the Dutch not existed, the *susuhunan* and princes who relied on them would have been exiled or eliminated in the power struggle, leaving the strongest to fight it out. Now the weaker powers could stay in contention provided that they obtained, and retained, Dutch assistance.

The parties that made use of the Dutch saw them as mercenaries, not arbitrators or potential rulers. The Dutch strangers were invited in, but were not expected to stay. As mercenaries and military allies, indigenous rulers and princes gave the Company trading privileges and benefits in return – expecting the arrangements to be temporary and that the strangers would soon leave. In other words, the end was not to make the Dutch a power in the land, but to exploit their military prowess. Although the inviter would sometimes invest the Dutch with some form of authority, this was a means to an end.

The inviter was keenly aware of riding a tiger, in that the powerful stranger could at any moment change sides and turn on his rider. Even those who cooperated with the Dutch were aware that they could choose to support the other side. For the time being disinclined to seek yet more power, the powerful stranger might one day become interested in doing so, and would become a very dangerous contender. Pakubuwana II therefore attempted to get rid of the Dutch when he thought he had a chance in the Chinese War, although he failed miserably when his plan backfired.

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[4] The two princes had fallen out at the end of 1752, 'presumably because of conflicting personalities and ambitions' (Ricklefs 1974: 58).

[5] Used as a measurement of land it was reckoned as the area needed to support a family.

[6] 13 Feb 1755, *Opkomst* 10: 298–303; Semarang governor to Batavia high government, 25 April 1792, *Opkomst* 12: 273.

[7] VOC 3364, Van der Burgh to Batavia high government, 7 March 1772, f. 23.

By the 1750s, after the drawn-out war between the Dutch-backed Pakubuwana II (and subsequently Pakubuwana III), and Mangkubumi and Mangkunegara, which historians have called the 'third Javanese war of succession', the surviving Mataram princes realised they had to fight it out amongst themselves. Dutch power had become a fixture – to which the weakest party would always resort. Mangkubumi, who became the Yogyakarta sultan following the Giyanti Treaty in 1755, resented the assistance the Dutch offered the Surakarta court. But before dealing with the Dutch, each of the Mataram factions had to contend with the threat from competitors within the Javanese realm.

In the second half of the 18th century, the *susuhunan*, sultan, and Mangkunegara each tried to secure sovereignty over Mataram. Armed struggle to gain supremacy was not an option since the authorities in Batavia and Semarang were watching closely. The one to initiate fighting would most likely be eliminated first. The three parties thus had to resort to political intrigue, alliances, and other non-violent means to negotiate power. At this juncture, marriage alliances were the arena in which politics were played, whether through divorce to prevent a competitor from attaining the throne, or through marriage to enhance the chances of one's descendants in the Mataram realm (Kwee 2006: 128–38).

Peaceful conditions imposed by Dutch power after 1755 allowed for economic growth and prosperity within the three rulers' realms. By Ricklefs' estimate, the population of the Mataram lands increased by 17% between 1755 and 1773, from 690,000 to 808,360. Between 1755 and 1795, the population increased by a further 45% (Ricklefs 1974: 71–2, 159–60). Historians have argued that the Surakarta and Yogyakarta courts strengthened their rule through their peace pact with the Company. In Burger's (1975, I: 32–48) words, the Company's presence and its demand for produce effected the 'feudalization' of Java: the position of rulers was reinforced, hierarchical relations between the ruler and ruled became more rigid, and the common Javanese were regimented into producing cash crops for the Company. The acquisition of weapons, monetary loans, regular supplies of petty coins and other items from the Dutch administration also fostered the Mataram rulers' plans for political centralisation. A steady inflow of Dutch copper doits enabled monetisation at the village level and eased the cumbersome tax collection.

In the political game between the *susuhunan*, sultan and Mangkunegara, the priority during the second half of the 18th century was self-strengthening and, as far as possible, the elimination of the other two contenders. Nevertheless, each member probably nurtured the thought that, in time, they would have a chance to strike back at the Company. This was clear from Pakubuwana IV's attempt to stage a revolt against the Company in 1790 when an English attack on Java was thought imminent and Dutch power weak. The *susuhunan*, however, backed down when the Company sought the sultan's assistance against him.[8] What the *susuhunan*, sultan, and Mangkunegara did not foresee was that changes in the late 1770s and 1780s were to entrench Dutch power in central and east Java and forever transform their fate.

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[8] Greeve's *dagregister*, extracts 21 October-1 December 1790, in *Opkomst* 12: 209–10. Commander Staringh, commander of the state squadron, agreed to ship 180 men for field duty in Pasuruan. See further details in the document and Batavia high government to Gentlemen Seventeen, 15 October 1789, *Opkomst* 12: 165–75.

The 'reluctant imperialist'

Company administrators were well aware that attempts to gain territorial control in the East Indies incurred expenditure for the actual expedition, the subsequent rebuilding of the economy and society, and the maintenance of administration. They did not undertake such ventures lightly, unless they were certain that exercising territorial control would significantly benefit trade. Military conquest may have made economic sense had central and east Java yielded commodities like fine spices that could fetch great profits for the Company, as was the case for the Moluccas. However, for most of the 17th and 18th centuries, Company administrators viewed the Javanese region as a rice and timber warehouse which would supplement the Priangan's production of pepper, indigo, cotton yarns and other cash crops. From the late 17th century, the Dutch also needed a foothold on the north coast to guard against the English.

Military assistance was generally rendered after careful calculation. The Company's involvement in Trunjaya's uprising in 1677 was largely motivated by the fear that political instability in central and east Java would affect food supplies to Batavia. Dutch administrators avoided accepting Mataram's requests to attack Surapati in 1684, as well as appeals by most *bupati* to be made Company vassals; Sumenep, Pamekasan, Cirebon, and Semarang were incorporated under Company rule only because of the personal ambitions of Cornelis Speelman, commander-in-charge of the 1677 expedition, who later became governor-general (1681–84). The Company decided to involve itself in Mataram politics in 1705 because of plans to expand cash crop cultivation in central and east Java, where it considered Pangeran Puger more amenable than Amangkurat III (Nagtegaal 1996: 77–9). In 1743, the Company's attack was also an act of self-defence. Forced to retaliate, the Dutch had initially wanted to support Pakubuwana II as the sole monarch in Mataram, believing this was the best way to keep the peace. When the Company administrators realised that Mangkubumi and Mangkunegara were too strong and would continue fighting guerrilla wars, they decided to compromise; the costs of fighting were deemed too great, not least the diminished income from its coastal territories during the period of hostilities.

In short, during the 17th and a large part of the 18th century, the VOC was a 'reluctant imperialist' in central and east Java. Company administrators did not fail to demand commercial and other benefits each time they provided military assistance; for them each expedition was a commercial transaction, recorded as debit or credit in its books. But the fact remains that the Company interfered in Javanese politics, mainly through the provision of military assistance, or by becoming the overlord of the *susuhunan*, princes and coastal *bupati* who sought their protection. The reluctance of the Dutch to assume direct rule, and their willingness to be paid in currency and produce, must have formed part of their attraction for the local elite.

After the mid-18th century peace settlements with Mangkubumi and Mangkunegara, Company administrators tried to keep the peace by preserving the balance between the *susuhunan*, sultan and Mangkunegara. Although they were certain that diplomacy and peace keeping would be cheaper than warfare, they did not always understand how politics transpired within the family, marriage and succession issues within the courts of Surakarta, Yogyakarta, and Mangkunegara.

The Company's attempts to assert some form of political superiority was a means to remind rulers of their vassalship and 'duties' in ensuring the deliveries committed to in the treaties. For instance, the Mataram rulers were instructed to send their *patih* (first minister in the Javanese court) and other important courtiers to pay homage in Batavia whenever a new governor-general was installed. But the Company administrators did not push hard for the implementation of these regulations. Although the treaties stipulated that the *patih* of the Surakarta and Yogyakarta courts should be nominated by the Company, in practice the rulers had their say over these appointments. Batavia accorded the *susuhunan* and sultan control over administration, economy and justice in their realms. The Company authorities also fulfilled their requests for monetary loans, weapons, and exotic status goods such as elephants and Persian horses. They also turned a blind eye to shortfalls in deliveries of cotton yarn, pepper, and cardamom (Kwee 2006: 122–25). While it was stated in the VOC-Mataram contracts that the *susuhunan* and sultan were only ruling their areas as a loan from the VOC (*in leen van de Company*), the Javanese rulers were largely acting as sovereigns in their own right.

Dutch economic plans for Java until the 1770s did not favour expansion, hence the phenomenon of reluctant imperialism. The Dutch remained strangers, without seeking to assume kingship and on occasion even rejecting it. Nevertheless, as the Dutch were drawn into local politics, and as more and more of their economic interests came to be tied to their political position it became less and less likely that they would leave. But this situation did not have to translate into direct rule over Java. It required major shifts in relative economic power between the Dutch and English, and the disruption of global coffee production in the 1780s, for Dutch interests to favour this transformation in political status.

The 1780s: the stranger who would be king

In the 17th and early 18th centuries, the VOC made most of its profits from its trade in fine spices. This explains the effort and money it expended on securing direct rule over the Spice Islands, and on patrolling the eastern Indonesian seas to maintain its trading monopoly. However, by the mid-18th century, Chinese tea and Indian textiles had become the Company's main trade goods; pepper, coffee, cinnamon, sugar and tin became subordinate goods that complemented trade in one of the main products or made particular settlements more profitable (Jacobs 2000).

The Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784) changed the scheme of things. After the war, the Company had to cede all its trading factories in India to the English, affecting the trade in Indian textiles and opium. At the same time, the trade in pepper and spices was suffering. By the late 1780s, the yields of many pepper-producing areas in Banten and Lampung were in decline, while a violent tropical storm destroyed nutmeg cultivation in the Moluccas. By the mid-1790s, the Company was left with Java and parts of the central and eastern Indonesian archipelago as its only possessions in the Indies. It tried to ally itself with the French in Mauritius in order to protect its possessions in Ceylon, but to no avail. By 1796, the Dutch had lost Ceylon to the English, together with Padang, Melaka, and the Cape of Good Hope.[9]

The loss of the Indian textile and opium trade and the China tea trade, compounded by poor yields of pepper and fine spices, meant that the Company was left with Java as practically its only source of income in the East. In the 1780s and 1790s, prices for sugar and coffee – items that could easily be grown and produced on Java – were especially high in the wake of the steep decline in supply from Latin America and the Caribbean, the main production areas during the Napoleonic Wars. The slave rebellion in Santo Domingo in 1791 caused particular shortfalls of coffee and sugar on the global market (Jacobs 2000: 188–89, 195–96, 295; Boomgaard 1989a: 99–100).

Taken together, these events strengthened the conviction of the Company directors in the Netherlands that exploiting Java was the only way to salvage their losses and to stage a comeback. They thus sought to extract as much as possible from the island. In 1792, the Dutch authorities negotiated with the Mataram and Mangkunegara rulers either to expand the cultivation of cash crops like pepper and indigo, or to cede lands and subjects for the Company itself to pursue production. In 1793, the Gentlemen Seventeen sent two commissioners-general, S.C. Nederburgh and S.H. Frijkenius, the Company's barrister and a naval officer respectively, to check what could be done to maximise the Company's income from its possessions in the Indies. On the orders of the commissioners-general, in 1796 Governor van Overstraten submitted survey reports to the Batavia high government on the number of villages, *inlanders*, *cacah*, leased villages, buffaloes, the size of rice fields and estimated rice harvests. The first census of the Company territories in central and east Java (1,495,908 persons) was made during this survey. The Company had a clear purpose for requiring such information, namely to calculate the extent to which the cultivation of various crops could be increased.[10]

By the fiscal year 1795–96, Java's northeast coast was producing about half of the pepper and most of the cotton yarn and indigo that the Batavia authorities obtained from Java. Three years later, the north coast overtook Banten as the leading producer of pepper for the Company[11], while sugar deliveries from the north coast of Java amounted to 32,000 *pikul*, or half of the cargo sent on return ships in 1795.[12] The commissioners-general assured the Netherlands directors that cash crop cultivation could be further expanded if necessary.[13] Company papers from 1795 thus began referring to Java as 'precious island' (*onschatbare eiland*) and 'lucky island' (*gelukkig eiland*).[14]

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[9] Batavia high government secret resolution, 20 June 1786, *Opkomst* 12: 76–79; Batavia high government to Gentlemen Seventeen, 31 January 1794, *Opkomst* 12: 319; van Overstraten to Nederburgh, 9 May 1796, *Opkomst* 12: 400–1.

[10] VOC 3968, Van Overstraten to Batavia high government, 15 July 1792, pp. 14–5; Van Overstraten to Batavia high government, 22 July 1796, *Opkomst* 12: 406–15.

[11] For the figures, see appendix on the various cash crops, 1795–1801, compiled from *Opkomst* 13: 234–40.

[12] Batavia high government to the Committee to the Matters of East Indian Trade and Possessions [Comité], 13 November 1798, *Opkomst* 12: 452–53.

[13] Report of the commissioners-general to Gentlemen Seventeen on the prospects of the Company in the Indies, Batavia, 4 July 1795, *Opkomst* 12: 342–43.

[14] Ibid.: 343; Van Overstraten to Nederburgh, 9 May 1796, *Opkomst* 12: 400.

Thus Java became practically the sole hope for Dutch economic recovery in the East Indies at the beginning of the 19th century. But the Javanese elite did not notice the sea change, as the Company appeared to be in a state of crisis; Dutch administrators had to divide their energies to deal with such pressing issues as piracy and defence. Faced by the threat of English attacks, they required the assistance and cooperation of the coastal *bupati* and Mataram rulers to provide troops. It was important to maintain their goodwill, so that they would not join the English.

It soon became clear to all that the Dutch had developed an interest in assuming greater control over central and east Java for purposes of cash crop production, particularly after the English interregnum (1811–16). In 1819, under the governor-generalship of van der Capellen (1816–26), the Batavian authorities (now officials in the employment of the Dutch state) issued a placard prohibiting regents from conducting trade. The salaries of *bupati* and their subordinate officials were fixed and their claims to land abolished. In a letter of 1820, the governor-general alleged that most residents viewed the regents as 'superfluous cogs in the government machinery' (Schrieke 1955: 215–17). If the Company authorities had asked for the cession of some Surakartan, Yogyakartan, and Mangkunegaran villages for pepper and indigo production in the 1790s, now they demanded greater control over land and people within the Mataram realm. In 1822, van der Capellen proclaimed before a gathering of Surakarta nobility that Javanese inhabitants would be better off under Dutch rule. The rulers in the 1810s had rented land to private interests to grow coffee and other export crops, but the fall in prices after 1820 (especially of coffee) made cash-crop cultivation less profitable and bore negatively on the general economy. In 1823, van der Capellen proclaimed that all leases of land granted by these rulers would cease to be effective in January 1824 (Carey 1976: 68–9; Stevens 1982).

These actions paved the way for the colonial government's annexation of the Mataram realm. The move threatened the interests and stoked the resentment of its rulers, *pangeran* and court ministers, many of whom combined forces with religious leaders to oust the Dutch, resulting in the Dipanegara Uprising, or Java War, which lasted from 1825 to 1830. The Dutch won the war at great financial cost and emerged the effective rulers of Java. The stage was now set for the imposition of the Cultivation System (1830–70) – the culmination of Dutch economic exploitation of Java (Carey 1976: 52–78; Fasseur 1992; Cribb 1993: 225–45; van der Eng 1999: chapters 2 and 3).

Conclusion

As historians have cautioned, it should not be assumed that the Dutch planned to colonise Indonesia from the outset. But neither should one simply essentialise violence among the locals, as Henley does, by claiming that indigenous societies were quarrelsome and disunited, that violence was endemic, and that strangers were needed to arbitrate their disputes. Instead, we need to examine the political calculations made by the Dutch over time to understand when and under what circumstances they became interested in dominance over the region. We also need to examine the motives of indigenous groups: when and why they wanted foreign intervention, and in what form – and how all of these factors changed over time.

Ruling groups in central and east Java in the 17th and 18th centuries were locked in a competition for power. Conflict, however, was not endemic, and there was the possibility of reaching consensus – through negotiation or force – when a 'man of prowess' (in Wolters's conception) was recognised by all. Men of prowess had appeared in the history of Java and the Indonesian archipelago in the eras of Srivijaya and Majapahit, whose spheres of influence extended to almost the entire length of the Indonesian archipelago and the Malay peninsula. If there was a 'tradition' of violence in central and east Java, similar to that described for northern Sulawesi by Henley, it was part of this 'tradition' of competing for power, which generally ended in a settlement and a period of peace.

When the Dutch arrived in Java in 1597, this pattern of political contestation was occurring within Mataram-Java, between the court based in south-central Java and the *bupati* on the north coast, and among the *susuhunan* and the princes themselves. In the 17th century, their military power made the Dutch desirable allies, especially for the weaker contenders within Javanese politics who solicited the Company's help to subdue their rivals. Mataram princes saw the Dutch as allies or mercenaries – not arbitrators – paying them off with trading rights and privileges in parts of the realm. In effect, the Mataram groups implicitly recognised the Dutch as the 'men of prowess'. They stopped conducting major military expeditions against one another, aware that the first to attack could promptly be eliminated by the combined forces of their rivals and the Company.

As van Goor (1998: 190–91) and Gaastra (2003: 61–2) aptly put it, the Company in the 18th century was a 'reluctant imperialist', if only because it saw central and east Java as a mere supplier of rice and timber. The Company's engagement in local Javanese politics was a function of its economic interests and policy. These interests changed in the 1780s. English supremacy after the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War of 1780–84 meant that the VOC lost access to its supply of Indian textiles, one of its key trading items. In addition, yields of pepper and fine spices – the other key commodities in the Company's trade – declined due to natural causes in the late 1780s and 1790s. The 1791 slave rebellion in Santo Domingo led to a shortage of sugar and coffee, driving their prices sky-high on the European market. Java, which was able to produce both, thus emerged as the Company's island of hope. The stranger now sought actively to be king – palpably after the English interregnum in 1816 – and precipitated the Dipanegara Wars.

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