

Kwee Hui Kian. *The Political Economy of Java's Northeast Coast, c. 1740–1800: Elite Synergy.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers/TANAP, 2006. 318 pages.

Robert Van Niel. *Java's Northeast Coast 1740–1840: A Study in Colonial Encroachment and Dominance.* Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2005. 424 pages plus appendix (CD-ROM).

Mary Somers Heidhues

In October 1740 Chinese rebels nesting in the outlying regions of Batavia attacked the city's outposts, then the city itself. The defenders were able to drive them back, while the European—and some of the native—population took a terrible revenge, murdering and plundering the Chinese living within the town, even though only circumstantial evidence linked them with the rebels, if at all.

Pursued into the countryside, the surviving rebels turned eastward, gathering adherents from among the Chinese residing in central and eastern Java and attracting Javanese supporters who had reasons of their own for challenging the influence of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in those areas, where it was a power factor but not a territorial administration. Fighting threatened the fragile kingdom of Mataram in Kartasura, where Susuhunan Pakubuwana II misjudged his options, almost fatally. Instead of managing to shake off Dutch influence with the help of the rebels, he found himself dependent on the same Dutch when it became necessary to flee from his capital and salvage something of his rule, challenged by a coalition of rivals from his own family. By 1743, he had to cede to the VOC important territories on the Northeast Coast of Java, often called the Pasisir, once-independent principalities incorporated into Mataram only in the previous century by his predecessor Sultan Agung. In the following decade the division of Mataram with his Javanese rivals added to his humiliation.

Acquisition of the Northeast Coast of Java, centered on already existing VOC stations like Semarang, Jepara, and Surabaya, transformed the Company into a territorial colonial power, not just a trading enterprise with a few bases at strategic sites. How to turn this area, at first still devastated by violence, into a profitable endeavor, both for the Company and for its employees, became a major challenge. These two studies, one by a mature scholar, known among other things for his work on the Cultivation System (1830–1870), the other by a recent graduate, address this question in different but complementary ways. They enlarge our knowledge of eighteenth-century Java, adding significantly to the insights of authors like Ricklefs, Nagtegaal, Remmelink,¹ and others.

¹ M. C. Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta under Sultan Mangkubumi 1749–1792: A History of the Division of Java* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); M. C. Ricklefs, *War, Culture and Economy in Java 1677–1726: Asian and European Imperialism in the Early Kartasura Period* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin for ASAA, 1993); Luc Nagtegaal, *Riding the Dutch Tiger: The Dutch East Indies Company and the Northeast Coast of Java 1680–1743* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1996); Willem Remmelink, *The Chinese War and the Collapse of the Javanese State, 1725–1743* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994). Neither author refers to Ricklefs's more recent work, *The Seen*

Kwee Hui Kian's study is the third volume published in the TANAP (Towards a New Age of Partnership) program, which brought some thirty young scholars from twelve universities in Asia and South Africa to do research in the Netherlands' VOC archives, most of them at the PhD level. Kwee's political economy approach follows a "game-synergy metaphor" to analyze the actions and interactions that resulted from the new situation after the 1740s.

Such interactions between local elements and the Company took place according to this analysis in three fields: so-called "contingents" and other obligatory deliveries of strategic products, tax farming, and, perhaps at first surprising, the coining of money. Contingents were purchases of raw materials (but not at market prices) that the Company needed to support its activities in Batavia and the Spice Islands or for export. Most important were rice and, for constructing and repairing of ships and other building needs, timber. Other desired items included peppers of various kinds, sugar, cotton yarn, indigo, and occasionally other agricultural products. European officials, who were not paid salaries, were permitted to make allowances for weight loss, spoilage, and so on from the products they collected. This siphoning of the cream from deliveries was a recognized procedure until toward the end of the century, when observers began to denounce it as "corruption." Tax or revenue farming, on the other hand, was an established system when the VOC acquired the Pasisir. Especially important were the syahbandarships, the right to collect—for a fee—import and export duties in the harbors. Rulers and regional headmen had already practiced it, and it soon added to VOC income. Again, VOC officials took their cut. Finally, manipulating imported and locally minted coinage in silver, copper, tin, and lead; fixing of exchange rates; and determining the coinage for tax payments gave the Company an additional, considerable source of income. Given her elite emphasis, Kwee notes this manipulation of money without speculating how it might have affected the peasants, who had to pay in revalued coinage, while producers and urban traders had to accept payments in devalued monies.

To realize Company (and personal) profits from these three fields, the European residents, "men on the spot," above all the governor of the region stationed in Semarang, depended on the cooperation or complicity of "three big players." First was the "Mataram trinity," consisting of the Susuhunan, now in Surakarta, the Sultan of Yogyakarta (after the division of the kingdom in 1755), and Mangkunegara, who had succeeded in splitting off a chunk of Surakarta territory in 1757. A second, composite player was the group of Northeast Coast regents or *bupatis*, formerly vassals of Mataram, now subject to the Company. The third group were Chinese *tokways*, perhaps surprisingly in view of the anti-Chinese reaction after 1740, but they soon proved as indispensable to Company rule as were the other two.

As far as the three successors to Mataram were concerned, the VOC sought not only to avoid antagonizing them, for they might resort to violence, but also to prevent them from joining forces against Dutch interests, which included crop deliveries and keeping the peace. After 1780 the rulers also became allies against the British in the Anglo-Dutch rivalry for power in the region.

Like the rulers, the regents of the Pasisir were responsible for delivering crops and, in some cases, managing tax farms—now they paid this homage and tribute to the Dutch. Kwee believes they were more enterprising than their reputation conveys, down to engaging in something Sultan Agung, Mataram's founder, once forbade them: maritime trade. On the other hand, they displayed considerable diversity in talent, prosperity, and willingness to cooperate, something Kwee's treatment tends to minimize. Marriage links enabled some to build up considerable alliances, but the Dutch officials were continually wary of permitting them too much leeway. Some regents like the Cakraningrats of Madura (Kwee curiously persists in describing the regents by place and name, as "Madura Cakraningrat") probably upstaged even Mangkunegara in power and influence, especially given the importance of fighting men from Madura to the Company.

Finally, the Chinese—in this case only the large traders called *towkays*—concentrated their efforts in tax farming, including the harbor duties. The Chinese community was, even in the eighteenth century, quite diverse, including, apart from rebels and *towkays*, laborers and petty traders, and also the important group called *Peranakan*, which in the eighteenth century meant long-settled Chinese who had converted to Islam, about whom Kwee says little.

Three phases of policy crystallize. The first spanned 1743–1757, when violence continued in central Java and when the governor and residents were casting about for a successful way of managing the territory. The period after the division of Mataram and up to the late 1770s allowed a strong emphasis on profits from shipments to Batavia (especially rice and timber) and expansion of trade in other export goods. The end of the century, especially after the Fourth Anglo–Dutch War beginning in 1784, saw the loss of many of the Company's possessions overseas, in particular in India, the capture of the tea trade with China by the British, and the loss of much Dutch shipping. The Dutch responded to this loss by emphasizing Java, and especially the Pasisir, as a place to grow cash crops for export to new destinations like northern Europe or North America, where demand for products like coffee was growing. These last decades were the twilight of the Company, which was finally taken over by the Dutch state at the end of the century, but the fixation on Java as the center of the Netherlands' colonial endeavor now grew.

By breaking off at the end of the eighteenth century, Kwee leaves the outcome of the discussion of how best to exploit Java, and especially the Pasisir, up in the air. She speculates nonetheless that the "three big players" watched their economic rewards grow, while they lost more and more political power.

The first half of Robert Van Niel's weighty book covers roughly the same period as does Kwee's book; he then takes the story well into the nineteenth century. He has combed the archives in The Hague and elsewhere to present a picture of the economy and, where possible, society of the Northeast Coast up to 1840. Casting his net widely, he shifts his focus between Europe and Asia, following decisions made in the Netherlands, Batavia, or on the Northeast Coast and examining their repercussions for the Javanese. The eighteenth century comes to an end with the rivalry with Great Britain, the decline and abolition of the VOC, and the reforming ideas of men like Dirk van Hogendorp and Herman Willem Daendels. Then Van Niel deals with the brief new wind brought by Sir Thomas Raffles under British occupation. Once the British

departed, restoration brought a transition to the Cultivation System, but not a smooth one, for the distance between Java and the Netherlands led to repeated misunderstandings, and rivalries plagued decision-making in both locations.

Whereas Kwee mentions calculations of profit and loss, Van Niel provides the reader with extensive data, charts, and archival references. If a resident could skim profits from contingents and other deliveries, this work offers an estimate of what such an official or, correspondingly, a native regent could expect to take in. If we learn from Kwee that certain products were important, Van Niel tells us how they were produced and processed for export. Nose to the documents, he builds his case in a way that will continue to be useful to other researchers. Also impressive are the thirty-seven appendices (on CD-rom), with tables of statistics (often ballpark estimates made by the officials but useful for trends) on population, crops, and earnings. In addition, these include translated documents relevant to policy discussions that have not appeared previously in printed collections. For example, Kwee refers to Dirk van Hogendorp's oft-cited proposals to change relations with the peasants, who seldom benefited from the sale or requisitioning of their crops. Van Niel provides an English translation of his sketch on improving Java's administration. Complete without its appendices, this book takes readers through known territory while pointing to half-hidden signposts that promise new insights.

Following the developments into the nineteenth century, Van Niel assesses the period under Raffles as an attempt to move from VOC merchantilism to a land-based system of revenue (with implications for both regents and peasants). The re-establishment of Dutch control after 1816 resulted in a period of experimentation and bureaucratic infighting. With the new King of the Netherlands eager to turn a profit from Java, and needing money, the choice finally fell on merchantilism and, with the beginning of the Cultivation System under Governor General van den Bosch, a return to many of the methods of the old VOC. Here, the emphasis seems to drift from the Pasisir, although Van Niel shows that this region, augmented by neighboring territories in the nineteenth century, was economically and demographically highly dynamic throughout the period studied.

Chinese rebels touched off the developments followed here and, in both accounts, ethnic Chinese play an important role. Kwee concentrates on the *towkays* or commercial interests, giving slight mention to other groups. Thus she overlooks the role of *Peranakan* (that is, Muslim) Chinese as regents (except for one member of eastern Java's Han family), but Van Niel reminds us that prominent *Peranakan* families actually held the regencies of Pekalongan and Bangil, among others. How did these *Peranakans* link up to the *towkays*, if at all? In addition, impecunious regents often rented entire villages to Chinese, who either worked them on a long-term basis to plant export crops like sugar, or chose shorter leases for exploitation. Short-term arrangements often led to excessive pressures on the peasants and stoked unrest or flight—"voting with their feet" was the most common way for peasants to protest misrule, so long as Java remained short on labor and well-endowed with land. The long-term leases appeared to benefit the peasantry, giving them a guaranteed share of the produce they grew and paying them for their labor instead of demanding unremunerated corvée labor as the regents did. The author recognizes that the Javanese peasants might have been better off under such long-term leases offered by

Chinese entrepreneurs, and he notes suggestions that they could be released from the rule of the regents and the system of crop requisitions. In the end, however, he is convinced that the alternative of having individual Javanese peasant landowners, who would pay individual taxes to the state and sell their crops on a free market, was unthinkable—and unworkable. Preliminary attempts at such reform showed this would give Chinese, Arab, or native merchants and moneylenders a chance to gain more influence in the villages. If they were “freed” from the old system, peasants still needed capital, cash income, and credit—all of them not available from any other sources.

The debates on relations with the peasants or the powers of the native regents were not drawing-board disputes. As mentioned, Van Niel is interested in showing how the “game” that Kwee describes affected peasants’ lives. Kwee, for example, suggests that Burger’s idea of “feudalization”—that Dutch colonialism froze Javanese society in a hierarchical, feudal mode—is a plausible theory (pp. 126, 226). Van Niel sees it somewhat differently. He states clearly that the introduction of the Cultivation System left Java with a divided economy, “a copper economy of picis and duits for the Javanese, and a silver economy of Rijksdaalders and Guilders for the European and Chinese part of the society (p. 393).” He is convinced that the Javanese peasant was already trapped in “an hierarchical structure with strong dyadic relationships, fluid and flexible it adjusted to pressures and made do with what was available (p. 395).” Attempts to organize economic and social relations with “free” labor and individual landholdings, with individual assessments of taxes and an open market for export products were doomed. Instead the Indies government reached down to the level of the village, not the individual, empowering the village headmen and at the same time reducing the regents to a more purely administrative (and symbolic?) role. Armed with the data in this book, scholars can test such assertions.

One puzzle about these publications is that the authors appear to be oblivious to one another’s work. Given the ease of networking in the Nationaal Archief’s reading room in The Hague, this seems a little strange. No matter. The wise reader with an interest in Java’s history will simply consult both.