NEW VIEWS ON JAVANESE HISTORY


The large quantity of easily-accessible Dutch-language material from Java’s nineteenth and twentieth centuries has led to disproportionate scholarly attention. Concentration on a period for which ample documentation is available, not the least in the form of statistical data, gives the erroneous impression that significant events took place only during the relatively short “colonial era” between, say, 1830 and 1942. For want of a countervailing picture, everything that occurred during the much longer period of European engagement in the island’s affairs is of little consequence.

Moreover by beginning the story of Europeans on Java in the middle, the results of Dutch influence are confused with conditions of pre-colonial society. Studies of the latter era of European presence on Java focus on the impact of Dutch colonialism, albeit in slightly different form. The degree of “traditional-ness or modern-ness” of Javanese society at the opening of such studies is conveniently passed over in silence. The tacit meaning is that this constituted the “timeless” or “traditional” state of society. The history of Java begins only with nineteenth-century Dutch imperialism as “…the structure of Java of around 1700 was not appreciably different from that of the Java of around 700.” (Schreike 1957: 4). At any rate “…during these four hundred years [the late 16th century to the present] no basic changes seem to have taken place in the structural organization of the Mataram state, nor in the ideological bases of state-life.” (Merton 1968: 6).

The dominance of these views in the scholarly literature increases the significance of M. C. Ricklefs’ scholarly work, particularly that of *War, Culture and Economy in Java 1677-1726. Asian and European Imperialism in the Early Kartasura Period* considered here. The book provides a refreshing breath of historical scholarship in which contemporaneous Javanese occupy stage-center. More important is its contribution to the small, but growing, number of scholarly monographs dealing with Java in the pre-Cultivation System period. As such its contents can be used as a spring-board for discussing issues fundamental to further study, one of the most pressing being the effects of European presence on Asian society.

*War, Culture and Economy in Java 1677-1726*

The work traces the fortunes of the Kartasura court from its origins in the late 1670s down to 1726. Appeal for military assistance on behalf of the heir to the Central Javanese Empire of Mataram after its fall in 1677 began what the Dutch East India Company initially saw as a once-off commitment. In exchange for re-establishing the dynasty at Kartasura (near present-day Surakarta) the Company was to receive compensation either directly or through increased trade. Company response led to a more or less permanent engagement in Javanese affairs. Attempts to sever increasingly costly military commitments were frustrated by the actual turn of events. At critical junctures such as the Surapati “revolt” of 1686 and the slaughter of Europeans at Kartasura or the tensions of the inter-war years preceding the First and Second Javanese Wars of Succession (1704-08 and 1717-19), a choice had to be made between continued engagement in hopes of obtaining some return or breaking off contact altogether and losing that already spent. By 1719 the Company-Kartasura alliance had become sufficiently powerful to hinder renewal of armed conflict. For the Dutch guarantee of the Kartasura dynasty’s survival, Java’s economy would be redirected toward the realization of Company goals.

As suggested by the title, the categories of political, cultural, and economic activities can
be utilized to discuss the issue of institutional change resulting from European activities during a period equivalent to Europe’s early modern history.

Political

On the most superficial level representatives of Asian and European political systems—a chartered company and an Asian state—met on the battlefield. The 1677-1726 period for Central Java is portrayed primarily in terms of warfare, preparation for renewal of such, and the aftermath, itself leading to the next round, etc. Ricklefs’ well-written and well-documented narrative brings the reader through the tortuous succession of events in which European company and Javanese potentates participated, culminating in the emergence of the former as the dominate partner, one of whom in the following quarter-century would preside over the division of the realm (Ricklefs 1975).

But what about European influences? With regard to the military confrontation and/or co-operation between Dutch and Javanese “Imperialists” the situation is straightforward. There weren’t any because there was little difference between respective military capacities. Contrary to expectations, Ricklefs demonstrates that whatever technological advantage initially held by the Dutch Company the Javanese court could easily close (p. 224). The specific example of the Coehoorn (hand) mortar is a case in point (p. 131, 176-7). Regardless of developments toward the close of the colonial experience, in this period Javanese showed considerable ability to respond to and absorb technological innovations. Sluggishness in the diffusion of technology, if it exists, must therefore be a result of Dutch intervention rather than a pre-existing phenomenon of the society described by Ricklefs.

Yet if the Dutch had little technical military advantage, and then only temporarily, and the Javanese clear numerical superiority, why did they lose? The answer supplied by War, Culture and Economy seems reasonable as far as it goes. The Javanese court was its own worst enemy. Indeed one of Ricklefs’ strengths lies in the fully-documented and convincing picture he provides of Javanese court intrigues, dynastic politics, and the general scramble for power between competing groups at court in which the Dutch were seen as a means of advancing factional ambitions at the expense of national ones. Without questioning the veracity of the explanation, one wonders if other factors were not contributory. Since wars are seldom won on the battlefield alone, would not differences in the effectiveness of the whole military apparatus of logistics, transport, and support utilized by the Javanese and Dutch provide important criteria for accounting for respective performance? While the reader can piece together such a picture, conscious study of the issue would have strengthened the narrative.

Even further afield, could the adoption of European military organization by Surapati, a former officer of the Dutch Company, help to account for his success in the field against the Javo-Dutch forces? A tantalizing suggestion which would strengthen the case for transfer of military, including organizational, technology but one for which documentation seems unlikely.

Cultural

The very intensity of interaction between Asians and Europeans on the battlefield renders the question of resultant cultural change even more to the point. Within this context Ricklefs advances the idea of cross-cultural influences under conditions of armed conflict. In addition to transference of military technology, this tends towards intensification of “‘cultural (and political) identities, thereby exacerbating rather than resolving the conflict which was the occasion for the intervention.’” (p. 234) The idea warrants more attention than that given in the book’s examples, which focus upon details of dress and relative minor changes in behavior.

Possibly more useful would be how the idea can help to explain growing tensions within Javanese culture in the institutional sense. Very roughly, Javanese potentates either