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Java's last frontier : the struggle for hegemony of Blambangan, c. 1763-1813

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CONCLUSION

The Zenith of VOC Territorial Expansion in Java

The refusal of the High Government in Batavia to open a new trading port in Blambangan is a pertinent indication that the VOC was actually a fearful of over-stretching its territorial expansion. The decision to invade Blambangan in the second half of the eighteenth century was closely related to the provocation of British merchants who were pursuing attempts to establish a new trading-post in this region. After having their overtures rejected by the ruler of Banjarmasin and by the Malay merchants in Pasir, the British merchants continued their efforts to expand their trade to Bali and its surrounding areas, including Blambangan on the eastern tip of Java.

Territorially, Blambangan was part of *Java's Oosthoek* which had been ceded to the Company by *Susubunan* Pakubuwana II in 1743, but after this had been completely neglected. For more than a quarter of a century, the Dutch did not show any real interest in extending their trading network into the area. During this period of power vacuum, the control of the region was effectively in the hands of the Balinese ruler of Mengwi and regional trade networks developed significantly under his control. Local traders of different ethnicities came to this region and the economy began to prosper. In 1766, British country traders visited Blambangan, after receiving an unsolicited invitation from Kotabeda, and a few commercial transactions were carried out. This stirred the Dutch into action. In 1767, the High Government in Batavia sent its troops to the *Oosthoek* to impose administrative control thereby marking the first step in the commencement of the integration of the region into the colonial administration of Java.

In terms of territorial acquisition in Java, the Company reached its apogee at the end of the eighteenth century. Although there were severe cut-backs in many VOC trading-posts in Asia as the financial noose tightened, and some establishments were lost during the Anglo-Dutch War, its position in Java remained strong. The key to the success of the VOC in maintaining its hegemony in Java was

determined by its skill in fostering good relationships with the local rulers, especially after the last Javanese Succession War which ended in 1757. *Java's Oosthoek* could not have been fully integrated into the VOC hegemony in the Indonesian Archipelago without the support of the Company's local allies. The VOC and the local rulers each had their own interests and agendas but were united in a common cause in securing a balance of power on Java.

The Islamization of Blambangan

Contemporary Indonesian society is witnessing the strengthening of the role of Islam in politics and this religious ascendancy has had a significant effect on recent Indonesian historical writing. Much of this historical research is attempting to shed more light on the role of Islam in Indonesian history. Historians in this field postulate that one of the most significant contributions of Islam has been its vanguard role in resisting Dutch colonialism. The present thesis reveals a different pattern and runs counter to this approach. My study of the VOC occupation of Blambangan shows that in this case Islam played a central role in Dutch expansion in Java. In contrast, it was the Hindu community which offered the Dutch resistance.

The conquest and transformation of Java's *Oosthoek* from a wilderness infested with rebels into a frontier of economic progress and colonial state-formation was tremendously expensive and took far longer to achieve than in any other region in Java. In its attempts to integrate this region, the Company renounced its usual approach which had proved successful in the other regions on the north coast of Java, for instance by enforcing treaties and creating dependency relationships, and opted instead to espouse a Javanese (Mataram) manner of territorial expansion; it employed armed forces, leaned heavily on a Javanese loyalist elite, and encouraged the Islamization of the people in the conquered region. In their determination to subjugate Blambangan, the Dutch did not eschew the use of violence against the local people and showcased their moderate, 'pro-Islam' attitude to bolster their strategic collaboration with such Islamic allies as the Sultan, the *Susuhunan*, the Prince of Madura and other Muslim regents on the north coast of Java. Consequently, the Company became a driving force in Islamizing the people of Blambangan and simultaneously in the concomitant steady erosion of Hindu-Balinese

beliefs and culture. In a nutshell, the Dutch helped to accomplish the great mission of Sultan Agung: to create the world of Islam in Java.

The willingness to embrace collaboration was mutual. Islamic society in Java had helped the Company to secure its political and economic interests in Java. Conversely, from the Javanese perspective, the Company had assisted in creating the world of Islam. This collaboration between the Dutch and Islamic society in East Java was a unique event, confined within the compass of this particular place and period. Assuredly, certain political and cultural circumstances encouraged the genesis of this unique collaboration. Both parties, the Dutch and the Javanese, pursued different agendas but faced one common enemy: the Hindu-Balinese element. When it was ceded by the *Sunan* in 1743, Java's *Oosthoek* had been hailed as a future investment for the VOC. None the less, the *Hoge Regering* in Batavia also believed that it was the task of the *Sunan* and the Sultan to deal with such dissenting elements from Central Java as *Pangeran* Prabujaka and Raden Mas, who had found a haven in the *Oosthoek*. Eventually it was the arrival of British merchants in this region which opened up the eyes of the Dutch: they could no longer afford to leave the settlement of the *Oosthoek* affairs to their Javanese allies. The time had come for the Company to assert its hegemony over the whole of Java. The strong resistance initially offered by the people of Java's *Oosthoek* forced the Company to seek collaboration with its main allies, the *Sunan*, the Sultan, and the *Panembahan* of Madura.

Islamic society represented by the *Sunan*, Sultan, *Panembahan* of Madura and other *bupati* in the region of the north-east coast of Java had its own agenda. Politically, many regents on the north-east coast, including the *Panembahan* of Madura, had only reluctantly accepted the political hegemony of Mataram and showed a marked tendency to ally themselves with the Company, as Nagtegaal has explained in his pioneering study. However, as Islamized territories, they were in favour of pursuing the creation of the world of Islam initiated by Sultan Agung. In Blambangan, the Company and these Islamic elements found themselves confronted by a common enemy in the Hindu-Balinese element. The political hegemony of the Company and the world of Islam could only be created by a joint elimination of the Hindu-Balinese element in Blambangan.

Colonialism within Indonesia

Discourse on colonialism in Early Modern Indonesia has tended to be focused on Western colonialism, whereas 'colonialism within' Java has been poorly discussed. Perhaps, it is because the history of Java of this period has been written mostly from the perspective of Central Java. After the fall of Majapahit, Mataram rose as a new colonial empire whose colonies covered almost all of Java, including Madura. Across the Bali Strait, the Balinese kingdoms of Gelgel and Mengwi had played the same role. Both realms had colonized Blambangan in Java's *Oosthoek* for almost one and half centuries. This study has shown that discussing 'colonialism within Indonesia', in this case, the colonial strategies both by Mataram and the Balinese realm, explain much about regional development in Java's *Oosthoek*, especially in Blambangan. The collapse of this state was not a direct consequence of the Dutch invasion in 1768; it was more the culmination of a protracted process of a clash of civilizations between Hinduism and Islam in Java; an antagonism which had commenced with the rise of Demak, the first Islamic kingdom in Java. This had contributed to the demise of Majapahit. The inter-religious discord which arose in this period simmered on until the second half of the eighteenth century. Hindu Majapahit was only the first victim of Islam and Hindu Blambangan was the last.

Throughout the whole of its existence, the Blambangan kingdom had to struggle against the threat of foreign occupation. It was doubly inspired as it was prepared to battle not only to maintain its political sovereignty, but also to preserve its religious beliefs. This determination only strengthened when Mataram, which was wont to fly the banner of Islam in its political disputes, and Europeans tried to extend their influence in this region. As a Hindu kingdom, Blambangan had shown itself a doughty opponent of Islam since the fifteenth century and of the Roman Catholic mission in the late sixteenth century. Although Mataram and other Islamic parties failed to Islamize Blambangan by force, inexorably the influence of Islam gradually penetrated the court through marriage ties between the elite of Blambangan and the Islamic communities in Probolinggo and Lumajang. Eventually a new Islamic faction formed inside the court itself and exerted influence on the King, pushing him to eliminate the Hindu elements which were predominantly supported by the Balinese and the *peranakan*-Balinese. This internal conflict scattered the dynasty

and opened the door to the Balinese intervention. Although the kingdom was ruled by their co-religionists, anti-Balinese sentiment persisted and the Balinese occupation of Blambangan ended in rebellion. Then the arrival of the Company set the seal on the eclipse of the Blambangan kingdom, and a new political organization characterized by dual administration and leadership was established by the Company.

Ethnic Formation and Disputes

Another significant impact of the Balinese colonialism was on the ethnic composition in Blambangan. The Dutch and the local sources present significant pieces of evidence which can be pieced together to shed more light on the local dynamics, particularly the changes in ethnic formation before and after the Dutch occupation. This helps to illuminate the many speculations made by anthropologists and linguists about the origin of the *Wong Osing* and *Basa Osing*, believed by many to be the native language and native inhabitants of Blambangan. These factors have coalesced into a potent myth in present-day Blambangan and beyond; offering the region a charter of mythology to justify its own identity. The local sources drop strong hints that a new ethnic configuration was formed during the period of the Balinese colonization in Blambangan. Serious depopulation occurred in this area after a series of military expeditions mounted by Sultan Agung and Amangkurat I in the period 1625-1649. The colonization by Balinese in the subsequent period had effected a repopulation. In the second half of seventeenth century especially, a large number of Balinese migrated to Blambangan and settled there. Gradually a new ethnic group that of the *peranakan*-Balinese, was formed. Although the quantitative data are lacking the eighteenth-century Dutch sources give indications that the *peranakan*-Balinese ethnic group dominated the population in Blambangan. When the new administration was formed in Banyuwangi, the Dutch experienced enormous difficulties in finding any chiefs of Javanese origin. Among all the village chiefs available throughout the whole Blambangan, only two were of Blambangan (Javanese) origin and the rest were *peranakan*-Balinese. This situation came to light after the rebellion of Regent Sutanegara in 1771, when many Balinese and *peranakan*-Balinese in Blambangan were hunted down and killed. But, even after this episode of ethnic cleansing, this

mixed ethnic group still dominated the population in Blambangan. There are also salient indications that most of these *peranakan*-Balinese had been born in Blambangan and had never been to Bali. These pieces of evidence provide strong indications that the members of this new ethnic group were the main speakers of the language which was later called *Basa Osing* (the Osing language). Linguistic studies have demonstrated that this language has been strongly influenced by Balinese.

The term *Osing*, whether designating an ethnic or a language unit, is scarcely to be found in the VOC archives. The Dutch called the natives of Blambangan *Balemboangsch* or Blambanganese. The Company officials posted to this region never indicated that the people spoke a specific language which was later known as *Basa Osing*. On many occasions and in many kinds of communications with the native people of Blambangan, the Company officials always used Javanese. Many contracts, treaties, *plakaat* (official decrees), announcements and other types of document pertaining to Blambangan people were published in Javanese. The Blambangan community in Surakarta and Yogyakarta, who were known as *Wong Ponggir*, also spoke Javanese, and there is no linguistic evidence that they communicated with each other in a specific dialect which might later have been known as *Basa Osing*. In short, the evidence seems to point to the fact that *Basa Osing* was developed during the period after the Mataram military expeditions to Blambangan, the last of which took place in 1649, during the reign of Amangkurat I.

The upsurges of local resistance which occurred in Java's *Oosthoek* between 1768 and 1773 were a reaction to Dutch intervention, not so much in economic as in political affairs. Both ethnic and religious sentiments were an inherently serious issue in Blambangan politics, but some time had to pass before the Dutch realized this. Unequivocally, the Dutch pro-Javanese and pro-Islam attitude was the source of the rebellions. The opposition to the Company was not a direct response to oppression and economic exploitation, but a heart-felt resentment of the unwanted intrusion of new foreign (Javanese and Islam) elements. Consequently, nativism emerged as the main ideology supporting any thoughts about and attempts at rebellion. After the banishment of *Pangeran Wilis*, the Hindu religious and spiritual leaders assumed the leadership. They created a 'pretender' chosen from the ruling dynasty of Blambangan to be a symbol of resistance. Elements

of Hindu-Javanese culture were also adopted into the rebellion to reinforce it.

The oppressive measures imposed by the Dutch greatly affected the population. A large number of the local inhabitants who were predominantly *peranakan*-Balinese were killed or displaced. However, by and large the Dutch had to face the fact that they could not eradicate the Balinese element from the politics and socio-cultural life in Blambangan, because the latter had long been the dominant party in the ethnic composition in this area. When they gained the upper hand, the Dutch tried to introduce a more balanced administration, installing an indigenous chief at the top of the administration. Although ethnic segregation could not be implemented pragmatically in either the administration or in the social life, the prevalence of anti-Balinese sentiment was still rife in Dutch minds as they set themselves the task of managing the local administration. The repudiation of the promotion of chiefs of Balinese origin and the decision to appoint Javanese to the higher echelons of the administration in Blambangan were born of such misgivings.

Political and Economic Integration

With the conquest of Malang, Lumajang, and Blambangan, in 1768 Java's *Oosthoek* was integrated politically into the VOC administration in Java. Economically, such integration required a longer process and a different story-line. The economy of Java's *Oosthoek* was still dominated by foreign influence. The budget of the Company was insufficient to cover the cost of initiating the economic exploitation of the newly acquired area. The dearth of inhabitants in this region after a decade of war and conflict dimmed the prospects of economic expansion even more. In an effort to initiate the process, the Dutch exempted the Regent of Blambangan from any kind of compulsory deliveries to the Company during the first three years of his administration. Nevertheless, the major part of the economic benefits from this region was still enjoyed by such private parties as Chinese entrepreneurs, Mandarese *juragan*, and Buginese pirates. The only really valuable product to be found in the area was the edible swift's nests, found on the cliffs and in caves on the south coast of Java. After the 1770s, the gathering of these nests was leased to a Chinese entrepreneur. In the bird's nest region, the Chinese lessee was unable to enjoy the benefits

which might have accrued from his leasehold because of the depredations by Buginese pirates. Once again, the Company had to invest more money to mount some expeditions to eradicate these felons. There could be no doubt that the income of the Company from this newly conquered region depended on either the exertions the Chinese entrepreneurs or on the opportunistic attitudes adopted by such Mandarese *juragan* as Capatain Buton; groups which were both saddled with their own economic and political agendas. Until the liquidation of the Company, owing to a dearth of evidence, it is not clear to what extent this region was economically integrated with Batavia. During the transition period, there are strong indications that the economy of Java's *Oosthoek* had fallen almost completely into private hands, especially during the administration of Marshall Daendels. This suggests that Java's *Oosthoek*, *Bang Wetan*, in the economic sense remained a frontier far into the nineteenth century.