

*Dependence on Green Gold: A Socio-Economic History of the Indonesian Coconut Island Selayar.* By Christiaan Heersink. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1999. xiii, 371 pp.

The island of Selayar lies off the southern tip of South Sulawesi, and is perhaps best known to the outside world for the presence there of a magnificent Dong Son bronze drum, which must have reached there along the trade routes from northern Vietnam some 2,000 years ago. The island has not been intensively studied, however, and this book breaks new ground in offering a detailed economic and political history of the period 1600–1950 in this somewhat neglected corner of the Indonesian archipelago. At the same time, Heersink sets out to situate Selayar within an Asia-centric historical perspective, one designed to produce a more integrated picture of both indigenous and external actors and relationships. Considerable documentation exists for the historian to draw on, since Selayar, in common with other parts of South Sulawesi, had its own well-developed historiographical traditions and court chronicles, while its local Dutch colonial archive escaped destruction in World War II and the Independence struggle.

Heersink explains the ups and downs of Selayar's economy in relation to its location as a marginal maritime zone in the "periphery of the periphery" of Indonesia and of the capitalist colonial world. This marginality, he argues, should not be judged as pure disadvantage, since Selayar's lack of wealth or natural resources tended to deflect interference from more powerful outsiders, which allowed its inhabitants a greater measure of flexibility in their responses to changing economic conditions. Although Selayar was one of the earliest Dutch possessions in eastern Indonesia (from 1670), its malarial climate and poverty of natural resources ensured that it remained a low colonial priority, and very few Westerners were stationed there. Its arid soils and fragile agriculture encouraged an orientation to maritime trade long before the penetration of a colonial export economy. Its strategic location between Makassar and the Moluccan islands gave it a well-integrated position in local eastern Indonesian trade networks, its merchants ensuring a flow of maritime and forest products to Chinese traders settled in Makassar.

During the seventeenth century Selayar was also a major exporter of locally produced coarse blue-and-white cotton textiles to other regions of the archipelago. By the early nineteenth century, when the market for its textiles was reduced by competition from Western manufactured cloth, *trepang* (sea-cucumber) and coconut products became Selayar's major export commodities, and by the 1850s, Selayarese ships were trading as far afield as Irian, Sarawak, and Singapore. From 1860, the Dutch intensified their presence on the island and made a number of attempts to promote the production of cash crops such as teak, cotton, kapok, and coffee, all of which failed. The relatively high population of the island meant that there was little unoccupied "waste" land for Dutch authorities to requisition for the introduction of a plantation economy. Moreover, the labour-intensive character of all these projects represented a real threat to subsistence for peasant farmers (though predictably, Dutch officials blamed their failure on the "lazy" and "superstitious" character of the Selayarese). The crop that was to provide Selayar with its extraordinary "boom" years was the coconut. From the early twentieth century, the demand grew for a new vegetable fat in industrialized countries, whose urban workers could not afford to eat butter; a useful by-product of the processing of coconut oil was glycerine, used for soap and the manufacture of explosives. The coconut's adaptation to sandy soils, and its low-energy technology of cultivation, could be easily integrated with Selayarese patterns of subsistence agriculture. Significantly, coconut cultivation was never organized on a plantation basis, but remained in the control of local élites and smallholders. Besides their commodity value, coconut palms also gained social importance, since they were used in the payment of bridewealth, and thus came to play a crucial part in the local status system. So it was that from 1900 to the Great Depression of 1929, Selayar's economy became heavily, even dangerously, dependent on copra production, at the expense of other economic activities. This was the "Green Gold" era of prosperity to which the book's title refers. It was an era which was to prove short-lived, due to the depression of world markets and the development of other substitute sources of edible oils. The resulting hardships, as Selayar's boom turned to bust in the 1930s, accentuated

an already established pattern of labour migration to mainland South Sulawesi. There was a simultaneous exodus of dentists, whose clientele could no longer afford the gold teeth they had previously favoured. Difficulties were further intensified by the Japanese Occupation, which brought more failed schemes for cotton cultivation, threatening subsistence to the point of famine and forcing the inhabitants to smuggle whatever textiles they could to the mainland in exchange for food. Copra production ceased, as smallholders reverted to making coconut oil instead. After the war, Dutch efforts to revitalize the copra industry were hampered by the fact that there were very few commodities available for people to buy with the proceeds, so that they were reluctant to render the necessary labour. Today, Selayar is better known as a producer of citrus fruit.

Coconuts, as the author points out, are a crop which seems to have aroused little excitement among historians working on the colonial economy; crops like pepper and rubber have been much more intensively studied. Heersink redresses the balance with an exhaustive analysis of Selayar's coconut cultivation and trade. Interwoven with this is a richly detailed account of local political developments. Selayar's pre-colonial society was dominated by an élite of local community chiefs, or *opu*, in a highly fluid and competitive political system. Prior to the coming of the Dutch, the Selayarese were already subject to domination by the more powerful states of Bone, Gowa, and Ternate, to whom at different times they were forced to pay tribute. This tributary relationship was relatively onerous: from the 1630s, for instance, Selayar rendered tribute to Gowa in the form of cotton cloths, cloves, money, and large numbers of *corvée* labourers, who were sent to Makassar for spells of three years at a time, probably to build fortifications; the nobility furthermore had to provide ten to twenty of their unmarried daughters as court dancers. The Dutch administration tended to stabilize and rigidify the positions of local chiefs, through whom they ruled indirectly, effectively transforming them into civil servants. The *opu* became increasingly conservative, but their wealth was undermined by the collapse of the copra economy, and their power was eventually challenged by the rise of various Muslim organizations during the 1930s,

of both a reformist and a mystical, heterodox character. These organizations were beyond the control of the *opu*, and were dismissive of many of the *adat* institutions on which traditional rulers depended for their authority. As economic conditions worsened, commoners also became bolder in seizing back control of the coconut trees they tended. After Independence in 1949, all the *opu*, many of whom had sided with the Dutch, were removed from power, and administration of the island passed to a single government-appointed Bupati.

To conclude, this thoroughly researched study provides a multi-dimensional picture of a previously overlooked part of Indonesia, articulating its position within both local and global networks of power and economic activity. The author has succeeded in his aim of demonstrating that Selayar, in spite of its marginal position, was not merely a passive and stagnant zone; rather, its people over the centuries actively developed their own trading networks, and have constantly been responding and adapting to changing commercial and political conditions and opportunities.

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