

Book Reviews

Village Java under the Cultivation System 1830–1870. By R.E. Elson. Southeast Asia Publications Series no. 25. Sydney: Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1994.

The Cultivation System (CS), aimed at spurring the production of export crops on Java, existed for only about forty years, but the image of the colonial experience in Indonesia, both in the popular mind and in historical research, draws heavily on the economic conditions and social relations of the period. R.E. Elson suggests that this emphasis is not misplaced:

Directly and indirectly, the Cultivation System consolidated village Java in social, economic, political and even spatial shapes from which it has never substantially escaped and which have subsequently provided the essential context in which generations of peasants have lived out their lives. (p. xix)

Is this addition of yet another title to the long list of books and articles regarding the CS justified? The answer is also an unqualified “yes”. This volume provides much previously unpublished statistical data; the 44 tables and 28-page bibliography will serve as important references in themselves. The voluminous notes (163 pages) are half as long as the main text. The volume supplies historiographic commentary of a significant nature. The ultimate questions raised pose an interesting dilemma for those who wish to draw lessons for human behaviour from history.

The study sets itself the objective of constructing a picture of social change among nineteenth-century Javanese peasantry. The book consists of three sections. The first describes rural Java before 1830; the second depicts the operation of the CS; and the third attempts to compare the data from the two periods in order to measure change.

The intent of the CS was to force farmers to grow certain crops and deliver them to the colonial government at fixed prices (often no more than remission of “land rent”). Initial implementation of the CS was arbitrary in the extreme. Peasants were forced to plant crops on unsuitable land, or to walk 100 kilometres to acres allocated to them. In 1851, one district officer estimated that the average peasant in his district worked 176 days on indigo plants, 76 days in a factory, and 60 days for *corvée*, a total of 312 days. This left only 53 days for the farmer himself, far short of the time needed to grow his family’s own food (p. 88). Some unrest did result: migration from more- to less-demanding areas; sabotage; passive resistance; violence; strikes; and public demonstrations. “By far the most common response among peasants, however, was simply to make the best of their circumstances” (p. 96).

Droughts and epidemics struck Java in the late 1840s. Famines ensued. Some Dutch concluded that the admittedly severe effects of drought and disease were exacerbated by an overemphasis on export crops at the expense of food production. Reforms were introduced, eliminating unprofitable crops, changing the political system, and encouraging private enterprise.

It is very difficult to draw general conclusions regarding the effects of the CS. The CS was not uniform; it displayed many local variations. Pre-existing local conditions in various parts of Java differed greatly. Elson does not gloss over variability; he gives evidence of having faced the obstacles to generalization squarely. Having shown that generalization is possible only within certain broad limits, he proceeds to produce valuable conclusions regarding the nature and causes of social change in rural nineteenth-century Java.

In Chapter 6 the author deduces changes in village politics and socio-economic conditions caused by the CS. The link between the Javanese village and the wider world has always been one of the principal subjects of discussion in Javanese history. The Dutch thought that Javanese villages were too small and irregular; they wanted to introduce more organization, centralization, and unity. Village chiefs were no longer *primus inter pares*, they were given independent power. The Dutch wanted to

destroy the notion of the village being a mere subservient appendage to indigenous authority ... to service its whims ... By 1846 a Cirebon resident could boast that "each village is as it were a small independent republic ..." (p. 155)

The author's depiction of the Javanese village as a relatively vague and ill-defined entity may be true for the early 1800s, but it may be asked whether this situation had always characterized the village. According to inscriptions, villages were spatial and taxation units 1,000 years ago. Although the Dutch introduced a new element by centralizing power in the hands of a single leader, the village as a "small independent republic" could well mark a reversion to an earlier condition. On the other hand, new economic conditions compromised the role of politics as a determinant of status by accentuating mobility linked to non-agricultural income.

The main question is whether the welfare of Javanese peasants rose or declined during the CS. Famines of the late 1840s gave ammunition to Dutch liberals who argued that the system was both evil, due to its reliance on forced labour, and inefficient, in that it caused a decline in the material conditions of village life. Modern historians tend to accept both arguments. Elson's thought-provoking contribution to the debate is his conclusion that

there is a large stock of countervailing evidence which suggests that the CS promoted a previously unknown level of general prosperity among the peasantry. (p. 305)

While many cases of deprivation occurred, they do not prove general impoverishment. Pages 310–13 present statistical evidence in the form of a series of tables showing that as time passed, crop payments to farmers rose faster than land rent, so that growers increasingly profited from the system. Peasants' spending power rose. Artisans obtained more work, making equipment needed for the implementation of the CS, thus reducing poverty associated with landlessness.

Food production expanded through several mechanisms. The CS led to intensive irrigation systems. Double cropping of food increased after the introduction of the CS. After the famines of the 1840s, the government encouraged double-cropping of food. The proportion of rice

in the peasants' diet declined, but was replaced by maize and cassava.

The CS also required improved transportation. Although roads were laid out with regard to needs of the exportation system rather than local marketing systems, by the mid-1830s it was reported that in Semarang a hinterland network of new roads fostered "petty internal trade" (pp. 252–53). It has been argued by economic geographers that the "dendritic pattern" associated with colonial plantation economies does little for internal market efficiency, but in the Javanese case this does not seem accurate. Without official compulsion, roads would not have spread nearly as rapidly:

These efforts to improve village roads were not viewed favourably by villagers, who thought that their security against "evil people" was being prejudiced by opening up villages in this way. (p. 462, fn. 22)

Once the roads were constructed, however, numerous sources indicate that the pace of intra-hinterland commerce accelerated.

In East Java, especially, even severe Dutch critics of the system admitted that the population was prosperous and happy. Nevertheless many Dutch felt uncomfortable with the way their empire was being run. Ironically, although the British were normally highly critical of Dutch colonial methods, several prominent British visitors were convinced that the CS was better than their own methods in India. J.W.B. Money, author of *Java or How to Manage a Colony*, born in British Calcutta, saw India as poor, discontented, and rebellious, while Java was rich, happy, and peaceful. Compared with India, especially after the mutiny of 1857, Java was in a much better condition, having been peaceful since the end of the Java War thirty years earlier. Another British visitor who commented favourably on the CS was the famous naturalist A.R. Wallace, who considered that

the Dutch system is the very best that can be adopted. ... Our [British] system has always failed. We demoralize and extirpate, but we never really civilize. (Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, 1869, pp. 196–97)

The interesting quandary posed by the CS is that moralistically it would be convenient if despotism could be shown to be correlated with

economic disadvantages. But what do we do if the opposite appears? More hard thinking about morality versus material comfort is needed; the relative evils of colonial versus indigenous oppression also need to be considered. If “political correctness” is allowed to take precedence over accuracy, this simply avoids a confrontation with the real moral issues.

The CS was designed to encourage fundamental cultural change. The objective was to make Javanese peasants “both eager for and dependent upon the fruits of production for the world market” (p. 192). In this respect it is no different from modern developmental strategies which depend on the stimulation of “felt needs” to motivate peasants to produce more. That the policy did succeed is well demonstrated by this book, as is the main reason for that success: regular payment given to peasants, predictable compensation (p. 192). Farmers had incentive to make money to pay land rent; additional income from surplus production went into increased consumption.

Landless villagers benefited from the CS, becoming less dependent on landed patrons (p. 205). The CS also enabled landless people more chances to improve life by moving; better roads made moving easier (p. 300). Richer areas may not have benefited much from the CS, but poorer areas seem to have seen their lot improve.

The abolition of the CS in the 1870s was not intended to alleviate the burden of the peasant; it was meant to open the Netherlands East Indies to private enterprise. Pressure for this change came from Dutch colonists. Already in the 1850s private entrepreneurship, formerly forbidden, was thought to be the best way to relieve economic stagnation, thus spurring officials to tinker with the system. By the end of the nineteenth century the privatization process had gone much further. To the American traveller Eliza Scidmore, in the 1890s it seemed that “the great sugar and coffee barons, the patriarchal rulers of vast tea-gardens, the kina and tobacco kings, really rule Netherlands India”.

Although the CS came to a formal conclusion in 1870, many of the processes of change which it set in motion can still be observed in operation. Van den Bosch gave officials more coercive power, and devolved power to lower levels of the hierarchy. This power was frequently mis-

used, for the system incorporated no checks. As Elson and others have shown, the worst abusers were local chiefs (p. 1222). The Dutch, as liberals argued, were equally guilty; they did not protect the villagers as they were supposed to according to the original justification for the CS. Patterns of corruption and abuse of power instituted 150 years ago still exist.

In the book's brief concluding section, Elson describes the CS as "just the first chapter in a story which is reaching its denouement only today" (p. 324). Just how true this is can be seen from problems associated with the Indonesian Government's Intensification of People's Cane [TRI] Program. The market price of sugar, a major component of the Javanese diet, is subsidized. In order to plant sugar, large areas of contiguous land must be planted in a co-ordinated effort by many smallholders. Sugarcane's eighteen-month growing cycle takes land out of production for a long period. Much of the land used for this in Java is smallholder's wet rice land. Whole villages are "strongly advised" by the government to co-operate in planting sugarcane. The cane is then sold to the government at a fixed price. In a letter submitted to the *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, a Central Javanese newspaper, in 1986, a farmer noted that in 1985–86 farmers received a net income of Rp. 270 per lobang (10 square metres). The same land, he calculated, could have yielded a net of Rp. 2,360 if planted with rice. Thus, it is not surprising that incidents of sabotage still occur, in which farmers burn their own cane before harvest in order to be free to plant rice again.

This reviewer has one minor plaint as well. This book would have benefited from more careful proof-reading. Distracting typographical errors abound. These do not, however, detract from the long-term benefits which this masterful and convincing book will confer on scholars from many disciplines.

John N. MIKSIC

John N. Miksic is Senior Lecturer in the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore.