



History of the Moluccan's Cloves as a Global Commodity

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the history of spice trade in Moluccas. Using two main approaches of firstly, Braudel, I intend to examine the history of spice trade in Moluccas in the 16th century in relation with the changing of the structure of economy that affected the social and political relations of the Moluccans. Secondly, applying Wallerstein approaches, I find out that trading activities from the 16th century until today have created a wide gap between post-colonial Moluccas and the Europeans. To conclude, I argue that economic activities have always been accompanied by forcing political power, such as monopoly and military power. Consequently, they have created unequal relations between the state and society.

Keywords: Moluccas, Spice, Braudel, Wallerstein, State-society Relations

A. Introduction

My research is about the clove trade as a long distance commodity exchange in the sixteenth century. I choose to look at a limited timeframe in order to see the Moluccan trade in connection with Fernand Braudel's work. Braudel focuses on a global trade in the period that centered in the Mediterranean during the sixteenth century. This paper examines the kind of social changes occurring in Moluccan society when cloves became a highly valued commodity in trade with the Portuguese during the sixteenth century. The aim of the paper is to see how the patterns of this trade represent the Portuguese as the 'core' and the Moluccans as the 'periphery.'

By using Braudel's approach, the aims of the paper are to explore the global history of society that is connected through unfair relations or colonization. As a unit of analysis, Braudel's method of global history is useful to see a world system theory that is divided between center and periphery. Later, Emmanuel Wallerstein, who gains much inspiration from

Braudel, argues that a world system is made up from the economic tension between center and periphery. By studying European agricultural systems in the sixteenth century, Wallerstein argues that market interdependency upon the commodities is mostly tinged with the political competition, in the sort of protection, and monopoly.² The emerging economy in the sixteenth century was evident since the state participated in collecting taxes, lending money, protecting state business and conducting monopoly.

Therefore, the main argument in this paper is that the market exchange of commodities between core and periphery was not based on the natural supply and demand; rather, it was based on the protection of monopoly, in which military forces and state-capitalist intervention could impose and change the value of the commodities. In the economic exchange, the European market system is based on technology and capital-intensive production, while peripheral societies like the Moluccans rely on only basic goods, raw materials and labor-intensive production. The differences of division of labor and mode of production make the unequal exchange system between the core and periphery.

The Moluccas was the peripheral area in which the traders sent and sold their commodities through Mediterranean ports to the center of the world, Europe. As a peripheral area, Moluccas extracted the raw materials, while the center had higher skill, intensive capital production, and technology of transportation to bring all of the extracted raw materials from the periphery. Thus, Braudel's global history can track the imbalance in global relations that is later more explored in the "World System Theory" by Emmanuel Wallerstein.

Braudel³ conceives time based on three levels: structure, conjuncture, and events. He argues that relations between the structures, conjunctures, and events are not separated, but they rather have a multifaceted interaction. In part one of his book, *The Mediterranean*, he describes that geographical time is a deep time, which correlated to the environment. Geographical time has *long duree* that covers thousands of year-time. The movement of time is slow, and the transformation is almost imperceptible in realms like climate, seasons, sea, islands, land, sea routes, water, geology and architecture. The geographical time becomes the main structure dominated to conjuncture time and events. In other words, Braudel believes that this *long duree* time can provide a wider background in explaining the social groupings that happen in a shorter time.

However, in this paper, I will focus more on the historical conjunctures. This includes the middle time span that covers economic systems, money, trade, and transportation. Braudel describes the

Mediterranean economy, an empire of civilization with a history of social groupings.⁴ He argues that although historical conjunctures such as economic factors have a limited time span to determine the long history of human progress, they can reveal structure of human history such as the human mentality, set of mind and point of view. Therefore, I focus on cloves, the commodity exchange, as one of the economic factors that can expose division of labor, social groupings and the *relationality* in the global history between the core and periphery.

B. Background of the Region and the Commodity

The project in this study is the Moluccas Province, which consists of several main islands, i.e. Ambon Island, Seram, Haruku, Saparua, and Nusa Laut Island. Each of these islands produces almost the same commodities. Like in the Mediterranean, the Moluccas is an area that stretches from the north to the south. Because of the similar environments; climate and seasons, land and soil, and wind and weather along the islands, the Moluccas Islands produce the same commodities like spices, coconut, and sago. The livelihood in the Moluccas also influences the pattern of politics, social organization, and the economic lives. However, I am not arguing that the environment becomes the determinant factor that changed the livelihood, as the political and technological factors could change back the environmental conditions.

Spices have many functions, “too many to recount” according to the Dutch. For the Moluccans, spices were for delicacy and medicinal purposes. Cloves, for example, compared to sago or coconut was the most valuable commodity. When the fruits were still green, they were preserved in vinegar. Specifically for the Chinese, cloves were used for medicine and food flavorings. The powder of the cloves may be rubbed on the forehead to relieve head colds. For Europeans, the sweet smell of the cloves was distilled to strengthen the vision of the eye. Cloves may be added to food or drink to stimulate the appetite, and when they were drunk with milk enhance the pleasure of sexual intercourse.⁵ Before the seventeenth century, spices were luxury commodities. The enormous quantities of spices that reached to European represented “millions of gold”⁶. As spices have so many benefits, from medicinal drugs to the objects of decoration, the prices rose more sharply than any other commodity.

People have a division of season to harvest clove trees, as they do with sago trees. They harvest the cloves on the various islands from the end of August to November. They harvest the trees by breaking the clove branches and they only pick the head of the clove as the highest quality, not

the stalk of the clove. The pickers climb the trees by bringing the basket known as the *saloi*. They then break the end branches bearing the cloves. The climbers also use long poles to get the branches that are out of reach. When the basket is full, they lower the basket by a rope, while another person waits on the ground to carry the basket over. Before sending them to the market, the cloves are dried under the sun. Antonio Galvao, a Portuguese traveler noted a detailed account on how to harvest clove and sago.⁷ Up until now, the local method of harvesting sago and clove is still the same way since the colonial period in the sixteenth century.

Cloves as exchange commodities have an important role in this context because the Moluccas have a unique position in the global trade. Since the fifteenth century, the Moluccans almost entirely depended on imports for all the necessities of life such as agricultural crops (rice) and clothes from other islands. This dependency brought them into long distance trade and the exchange of commodities with Javanese merchants. The Moluccans also traded to the Celebes, the Philippine, New Guinea and they also had contact with the traders from the Eastern Solomon Island. The Moluccans exchanged cloves and nutmegs for traditional medicine from New Guinea; while pepper was exchanged for pieces of simple cotton, silks, silver, jewelry, and beads from Bali and Java.

The demand of the world market for the spices had increased rapidly since the sixteenth century by the coming of the Dutch. Global market in Western Europe required spices for household necessities, cosmetics, and drugs.⁸ Unlike China or India, where the commodities were produced by manufacture's skills, the commodities of Moluccas' spices come almost raw from its forests and seas. The Moluccans sold the spices, such as cloves, nutmeg, and pepper outside of the island. They only used a small amount of spices for necessities such as food seasoning, while the rest, the tons of spices were sent to the cigarette companies in Java. In a Moluccan barter system, the commodities that were exchanged were very diverse. Even though only two traders conducted the barter, they brought various commodities. For example, a Moluccan trader brought variety of spices and he could exchange various products with another trader, with the beads, linen, and sarong for example. Moreover, the lack of local currency and token money in the sixteenth century made cloves the principal exchange for cloth from India. The Moluccans also exchanged variety of spices with weapons, gunpowder, Javanese dagger (*dagger*), swords, shields, lances, cuirasses, habergeons, helmets, and muskets. All of these goods were imported from Melaka and Java.⁹

C. The Encounter, Exchange, and Monopoly

Because of the dramatic increase of the price of spices and the abundance of clove production in the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Tidore and Ternate became the center of the Moluccas world. The Makian Island, Batjan, Jailolo, Talai, Palisua, Sula, Mondona, Obi, Morotai, Halmahera, East Seram, and Loloda were the vassals of Ternate Kingdom.¹⁰ The Gamrange Island, Waigama, Raja Ampat in West Papua, some regions in the southeast Halmahera Islands such as Buli, Maba, Bicoli and Patani were the vassals of the Tidore court. Besides supplying clove and sago to the center, some of the periphery areas, like Raja Ampat and Weda sent a gift in a type of tortoise shell and the bird of paradise.¹¹

The Moluccans used the clove harvest and its growth as the medium of exchange. The relationship between center and periphery was intended to be a mutual benefit. The periphery regions supplied sago, rice, and spices, slaves, to Ternate and Tidore courts, while the center reciprocated it by delivering foreign goods such as cloth, cotton, porcelain, weapon, and guns. The periphery considered the court to be the symbol of supremacy, prestige, wealth, and happiness. They considered the goods that were supplied from the court to be the object of power transmission. In addition, the court exchanged cloves and sago from periphery for the new titles and religion. The lord gave the titles to the chiefs in the periphery, such as *raja*, *kolano*, *jojau*, and many other local variations of titles.¹² Thus, the lord did not see their vassals as remote areas; they rather treated the vassal as the complement relation in reciprocating goods and security. From the historical perspective, we can see above that clove became the anchor to mediate the pattern of relationship between center and periphery.

In the very early period, the Moluccan traders have connected the rest of the world. They supplied clove to the central port in the Melaka. They also exchanged cloves with other commodities that were brought by the Javanese traders, ruling Chinese and Arab elites in the coastal towns in Java. The first time Antonio Pigafetta and Ferdinand Magellan arrived in the Moluccas in 1521, they figured in detail the clove as an icon that has indexicality with the Moluccan Islands. Pigafetta wrote:

On that day of Sunday I went ashore to see how the cloves grow. The tree is tall and as thick as a man. Its branches in the center spread out widely, but at the top they grow into a kind of peak. The leaf is like that of a laurel, and the bark of the color of brown tan. The cloves come at the tip of branches, ten, or twenty together. These trees almost always bear more of them on one side than on the other, according to the season. When the cloves sprout, they are

white; when ripe, red; and when dried, black. They gather them twice a year, at Christmas and again on the feast of St John the Baptist, because at these two seasons the air is most temperate, but more so at Christmas. And when the year is hotter, and there is less rain, they gather three or four hundred *bahar** of cloves in each of those islands, and they grow only in the mountain...Nowhere in the world do good cloves grow except on five mountains of those five islands...We saw almost every day a cloud descend and encircle first one of those mountains and then the other, whereby the cloves become more perfect.¹³

*A bahar is a unit of weight approximating 400 pounds.

The Molucca Islands, which is commonly called “the Spice Island” was known to produce cloves, nutmeg, mace and pepper even before the fourth century. The Arabic traders, from the Southern Yemen, introduced Moluccan spices to the Europeans until finally the Portuguese wrested the Arabic spice monopoly. In the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese wrested the spice monopoly from the Arab by destroying existing Muslim dominated spice routes of trade. They seized the central international routes in India, The Strait of Hormuz as well as the Red Sea, which before were under the domination of Muslim traders.¹⁴

Initially, before the arrival of the Portuguese, cloves were incorporated into the traditional ritual exchange. Cloves were raw products that symbolized “the first fruit of the land” and become the symbolic exchange to reaffirm the bonds between the people and the chiefs. The people offered raw cloves to the rulers and the rulers domesticated the cloves by cooking them with foods. They later consumed them in a community feast.¹⁵ However, the Europeans transformed the cloves by exchanging the product with the imported textiles, ceramics, iron, and weapons. Thus, colonialism transformed a reciprocal gift exchange into a commodity exchange.

The dominance of Portuguese in the spice trade route over the Muslim was not separated from the power of the Portuguese in the Mediterranean, the central port of pepper trade. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese succeeded to beat the Muslim Turks, in the Turco-Portuguese war, and it affected to the domination of spice trade route.¹⁶ Portuguese’s determination to organize Asia and the New World faced less resistance in the Indian Ocean. The power of the Portuguese in the Mediterranean allowed them to have a long-distance trade up to the Moluccas. The Portuguese sent their massive big ships to convoy and load

spices from Calcutta, Gujarat, and Moluccas almost without facing any significant rebellion.

The demand from the European upper classes became a driving force in the flow commodities from the Moluccas to Europe. Furthermore, the complex relation between demand and circulation of commodities was inevitably intertwined with the exchange system under colonial rule. The monopoly of commodity trade conducted by the colonizer attempted to limit the production of spices for making this commodity became a luxury product. Monopoly of trade managed to keep spices as the expensive imported goods that only elite classes can consume.

Since clove was a world trade commodity, the price easily fluctuated under the impact of the condition of social and market relations and by the relations with other things. Clove as commodity frequently represented products that were governed by the law of supply and demand. To keep the price of the spice high in the global market, the Dutch that replaced the Portuguese's monopoly, maintained the scarcity of supply. They curtailed the production by burning all of the spice trees in the Moluccas. The Dutch maintained the Lease Islands in the Central Moluccas (Saparua, Haruku and Nusalaut Island) as the only clove producing areas. In addition, each household in these islands was obliged to plant ten new clove trees every year. The Dutch were also using rowing fleets to inspect the people throughout Moluccas Islands. The inspection that was later known as the *hongi fleets* operation was to make sure that nobody planted the spice trees, except on the Central Moluccas Islands. Consequently, local resurgence among the islanders happened everywhere against the monopoly.¹⁷

The Dutch introduced compensation of cloves for exchange of desired imported foreign goods, such as cloth and iron. Since then, the reciprocity that previously was based on the spiritual values was altered into a purely economic exchange based on profit and power. *Hongitochten* or fleets operation had contributed to eradicate the traditional ritual exchange between the rulers and the people. The *hongitochten* in the nineteenth century had something to do with not only the transformation of cloves as production relation in the new context but also the new desire to become global commodities.

The goal of burning the clove trees had something to do with controlling oversupply and thus bringing the prices down in European markets. The destroying of the trees had some disadvantageous consequences to the society. However, as its growth was limited, the Moluccans were more aware that spices had some sort of value. The control

of the growth of the clove trees concentrated wealth that was shared only with both of the Dutch company officials and the local Moluccan rulers.

Moreover, the Dutch company provided compensation to the local rulers for the destruction of the spice trees and attempting to control them. As a consequence of the compensation, the local rulers became wealthier and they retained their prestige and status in the community by consuming foreign products and luxury goods such as Indian cloth and tapestry. Through the clove monopoly and its compensation, the elites could also mimic the Dutch lifestyle. They ate Dutch food, wore Dutch fashion, and built a town in the Dutch style as the manifestation of being civilized. The conspicuous consumption created not only a growing disparity of taste but also status and class.¹⁸ Since the monopoly of clove was enforced, the distinction of class and status between the local officials and the people of the land became more obvious. The ordinary Moluccans, however, were impoverished by the policy of monopoly. This also affected to the inability to consume luxury and prestige goods as trade monopoly removed the primary income revenue of the head villagers, the owners of land, and the ordinary people.¹⁹ With monopoly, a new consciousness emerged. Cloves that before were valued as a free trade commodity turned into a politicized product.

D. Conclusion

This paper mainly uses Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Wallerstein's works as tools of social analysis to see global history of trade and the encounter of people from the center with the peripheral society. Braudel influenced Wallerstein in perceiving history from the perspective of long-term processes. Wallerstein mainly argues that the unequal relation between center and periphery is a result of the long-term encounter between the center and the periphery. The differential strength of the system of political consolidation and the mastery of technology created imbalanced exchange between the center and periphery that is still taking place to date. The technological advances, the high industrialization, and the strength of military, owned by the center, lead to a process of capital accumulation over the peripheral society.

To sum up, the long-term perspective on historical processes can reveal that the pattern of exchange and the monopoly system initiated in the sixteenth century and the unequal relation between the center and the periphery continues to shape today's relations of trade and production. Emmanuel Wallerstein in the "world system theory" reveals that even in the

modern period, the center states that are more powerful and wealthy still dominate the subordinated postcolonial countries.

Endnotes:

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 - ² Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), p. 347.
 - ³ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip 11*, Vol 1. (Harper and Row Publisher, 1966).
 - ⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*.
 - ⁵ Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), p. 1 and Fernand Barudel, *The Mediterranean World*, p. 551.
 - ⁶ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, p.551
 - ⁷ Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, pp. 76-77.
 - ⁸ Roy F Ellen, "The Trade in Spices," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 5:12 (1977):21-25. see also John Villiers, "Trade and Society in the Banda Islands in the Sixteenth Century", *Modern Asian Studies* 15, No. 4 (1981): 723-750.
 - ⁹ Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, p. 95.
 - ¹⁰ Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, pp. 82-98.
 - ¹¹ Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, p. 82.
 - ¹² Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, pp. 108-109.
 - ¹³ Antonio Pigafetta, *Magellan's Voyage: A Narrative Account of the First Circumnavigation* (Connecticut: New Haven, 1969), p. 120-121.
 - ¹⁴ Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, p. 3.
 - ¹⁵ Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, pp. 56-57.
 - ¹⁶ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, p.549
 - ¹⁷ Dieter Bartels, "Guarding the Invisible Mountain: Intervillage Alliances, Religious Syncretism and Ethnic Identity Among Ambonese Christians and Moslems in the Moluccas" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1997). see also G. J. Knapp, "Crisis and Failure: War and Revolt in the Ambon Islands, 1636-1637". *Cakalele* 3, (1992): 1-26.
 - ¹⁸ Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, pp. 201-202.
 - ¹⁹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an Economic Study of Institution*, Reprinted (Kila, MT: Kessinger, 2004).

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