

RETHINKING INDONESIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE ROLE OF SMALL SCALE ECONOMY IN THE COLONIAL SOCIETY

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1. Introduction

The most neglected aspect in the early Indonesian historiography was small scale economy, although economic activities have so far been an old theme in the study of Indonesian history. From colonial period to 1990s, many historians have dealt with different economic activities in the region either as a colony or as an independent state. Yet, the study of small scale economy or economic activities of common people has been disregarded. Small scale economy and estates or high capitalized economy have been separated and isolated from each other in the explanation of Indonesian history.

One reason for this divorce can be found in the Boeke theoretical heritage of Indonesian economy, a romantic view of subsistence Asiatic society. The heritage which shaped much of the modern study of economic aspects of Indonesian history - and that is responsible for the artificial separation of small and high capitalized economy is dualistic economy.¹ Dualistic economy theorists rejected the concept of a unified small scale and high capitalized order in Indonesian history and replaced it with two separate orders. Consequently, reconstruction of past event of Indonesian economic history has been concentrated on high capitalized or state economic activities. Indonesian historians, for the most, ignored the role of

small scale economy or economy of the common people in past economic life of colonial as well as independent Indonesian society.

Another development that caused small scale economy or the economy of common people to be neglected is the emergence of wrong direction of what is called Indonesian centrist historiography among Indonesian historians. The Indonesian critical historiography to replace colonial historiography went to the direction of overriding historical objectivity. Sartono Kartodirdjo provided an excellent alternative critical methodology to understand Indonesian history in terms of Indonesian centrist.² Unfortunately, most later generation of Indonesian historians did not properly understand Sartono's ideas.

Except some studies, decolonization of historiography has become the main nature of most historical writing by the Indonesian. They stressed too much on the exploitation of colonial regime as well as private foreign capitalists, and considered the common people just as victims of the system. From the beginning, most studies just tend to prove the bad sides of the colonial state and capitalism rather than to understand the complexity of the past event of colonial society.³

Consequently, history is highly politicized and so formal. Colonial centrist is one extreme and Indonesian centrist is another extreme. The state became the main actor of the history instead of the society and its people. The role of common people in past In-

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Indonesia mainly focused on their response politically through riots, rebellions, protests or other kinds of social and political movements. There was no economic activity of the common people which can be considered historic. Therefore, the important role of small scale economy or the economic activities of common people in their own society was undermined. Any Indonesian historian who wants to have a different perspective tends to be considered as having been influenced by neo-colonial centrist rather than as having broken through methodologically.

It is true that colonialism had caused tremendous problem to the people.⁴ In the case of Java sugar industry for example, any decisions for distribution of resources were made by colonial government, often in favour of sugar companies. Historically, however, colonial period consisted of different unique events which could not be generalized comprehensively as exploitation. It is better if the aim of studying Indonesian history during the colonial period is not to blame colonialism politically, but rather to understand the colonial society.

The fact that many documents separate current studies reflects the emergence of small scale economy or economic activities of common people as legitimate and relevant object of studying Indonesian history during the colonial period. The dynamics of the role of small scale economy or the economic activities of common people is in need of far greater investigation that can be attempted in the present context. This is the main aim of the present article, to reorient Indonesian historiography.

2. The Important role of Common People

The important role of small scale economy can be exemplified on the establishment of native crop planting, small scale commercial farming and off farm activities during nineteenth and early twentieth century. People did not stick to the traditional activities and took undue risk in the commercial production. It challenges the concept of limited people needs in conservative dualistic economic theory.

In her study on west Sumatra, Christine Dobbin pointed out local people's response to the changing for wider market. Rice, cotton and coffee were expanded commercially from late eighteenth century instead of depending just on gold washing, gathering wood products or subsistence production. People responded to market opportunities and attempted to maximize their profit from the commercialization of their crops. Consequently, west Sumatra became an important rice exporter for the consumption of most people in the southern part of the island. Meanwhile, the growing of local cotton provided sufficient raw materials for the expansion of local textile industry.

In the same time, the Minangkabau world of Agam and Limapuluh Kota started to produce *Arabica* coffee for the world market. It was reported in 1819 that the Americans transported as much as 3,000 *pikul* coffee on one single ship. Although coffee trade via Padang declined due to the Dutch regulation and duties in 1828, in fact coffee was still expanding in the hinterland, from where mostly coffee brought directly by the local and Chinese traders to new growing port of Singapore.⁵

As far as the Minangkabau world was concerned, the growing of domestic economy from late eighteenth century brought about Islamic revivalism as well as the Padri movement. The emerging of new spirit on Islamic teaching and a movement against Dutch political, administrative and economic expansion occurred in the middle of local economic boom.⁶ It was reported in 1812, Bonjol itself was a prosperous area due to the increasing industry and trade. Many people from neighbouring places came to Bonjol because of the competitive prices of foodstuff as well as for trading.⁷ These economic advantages made possible to build strong stone outer walls to protect the town and to have hundreds of suitably trained arms-bearing men.

A similar reaction toward commercial activities among ordinary people occurred in other areas. The small rubber cultivators in Southern Sumatra and Southeast Kalimantan, for example, responded eagerly to the expansion of a commercial crop for the world market in early twentieth century. This

adoption of a new commercial crop enabled the people to remain as agricultural producers, and avoided working as wage labourers on foreign plantations, mines and on government projects.

The small commercial agriculture provided a major return to the local people which made them capable of avoiding unpaid force labour. They paid cash instead. The people was paid only 10 guilders per year in 1910s but it rose to 70 guilders per year per person during the high rubber prices of the 1920s. Consequently, there was a shortage of forced labour in many rubber producing areas. The colonial government then encouraged the migration of labour from Java to meet these labour demands.

Besides that, the smallholder rubber were also able to pay personal and income tax. Although the government continued to increase tax demands, it was still able to reach its revenue target every year. Arrears were usually below 1%. In Muara Tebo, for example, the government received income tax paid by indigenous people increased from 57,581.08 guilders in 1923, to 69,038.34 guilders in 1924, and to 149,497.15 guilders in 1925. The government received just 1,185.78 guilders less than those targets during these three years. Moreover, the target for income tax of indigenous people in Jambi Residency was increased from 169,365 guilders in 1920 to 1,386,838 in 1926.⁸

The colonial government once again received tremendous advantages from the expansion of small scale rubber cultivation, when export duty and special export duty for rubber smallholder was introduced between 1925 to 1937. In Palembang, for example, the total annual income from the export tax, outside the mining sector, was 172,000 guilders in 1924; but it rose to 1,107,000 guilders in 1925, of which 927,000 guilders came from the export duty on rubber smallholder over the last six months. The government received more than 11 million guilders from the export duty on smallholder rubber in Palembang and Jambi from mid-1925 to 1933, or an average of more than 1.2 million guilders a year. Moreover, the government obtained about 24 millions guilders in Palembang and Jambi from the

imposition of the special export duty on rubber smallholder over the following two and half years between 1934-1937. This amount was very significant, compared to the revenue received from oil. The government received about 17 million guilders from export tax on oil in Palembang from 1934 to 1936.⁹

The important role of small scale agriculture economically can be seen on the level of income. In Palembang, for example, the income of a rubber tapper along Ogan River was at least 75 guilders a month in 1925, compared with the income of a low level government official of 20 to 40 guilders per month at the same period. A similar situation occurred in Jambi. One unskilled labourer was able to bring home 70 guilders a month, and a house maid was paid 40-50 guilders per month; this was twice or three times higher than the income of a house maid in Jakarta at the same time. This was also far higher than the income of unskilled labourer and government official in Jambi in 1912, where a *kuli* received 75 cents a day, and the salary of a low level government official was 15-25 guilders per month.¹⁰

In fact, the expansion of small scale agriculture was also in competition with high capitalized sector run by private foreign capitalists or the state. New interpretation over Roger Knight's study on Pekalongan-Tegal sugar industry provided a different picture over economic activities of common people. According to Knight, the management of Tirta sugar factory in Pekalongan complained about having a shortage of labour due to the fact that people worked to harvest rice far to the west in 1919. A couple years later, the managements of sugar factory Ketanggungan Barat and Kemantren had to compete in attracting waged workforces because high wages paid in the town and wages were also rising in native crop-planting. People who used to work for sugar plantations or factories had been attracted by better wages paid by local artisans and peasant landholders for planting or harvesting rice and for making handicrafts. This means that local agrarian and off farm activities were tough competitors to sugar industry on recruiting locally available labours during one period of time.¹¹

A similar competition occurred in southern Sumatra. The foreign planters, miners and the supervisors on government projects were constantly complaining that contract labourers ran away before their contract was finished during the boom of smallholding of coffee, pepper, and rubber in the 1920s and even during the crisis of the 1930s. A labourer working to the smallholder obtained more than one guilder a day in early 1920, compared to 50 cents a day on the government projects or private plantations. Some reports in the 1930s noted that many labourers ran away from foreign plantations in Lampung, Jambi and Palembang, because a labourer could earn 1.50 guilders a day by working to local smallholder, while most foreign plantations, miners and government projects paid less.¹²

It has been mentioned above that rice production was important for the economy of the people in west Sumatra. However, Indonesian historians tend to neglect the important economic role of domestic rice production. The increasing amount of rice imported from abroad and highly disposition over resources in peasant agriculture due to the expansion of big plantations from the mid nineteenth century tend to be interpreted as the end of local rice production. In fact, despite those two mentioned conditions, annually million tons of local rice were produced and traded commercially during the colonial period.¹³

According to M.R. Fernando and Robert Elson, despite the introduction of the Cultivation System and heavy labour inputs into the production of commercial crops, rice production in Java, such as in Pasuruan and Besuki, rose considerably after 1835. Although this may have represented no more than a return to the level of production before the Cultivation System, many areas were still able to export rice in considerable amount to the neighbouring regions.¹⁴ A similar situation occurred in Purworejo, Kutoarjo and Klaten in the early twentieth century, despite the increasing demand over land for sugar and tobacco plantations.¹⁵ In fertile villages such as Tersidi Lor, Batareja and Kunir in Purworejo or Delanggu in Klaten, people produced more rice than their needs

and sold rice to the middlemen or to local market.

The important role of small scale agriculture for the economy of the people can be seen further in garden activities. The cultivation of *kopi pager*, coffee trees planted in the back or front yard, provided great profit for the people in Banyumas and Pekalongan. People of Kedu, Bagelen and Banyumas also received good income from the cultivation of coconut in their gardens. According to several reports, in the early twentieth century the owners of coconut trees in Purworejo earned 2,5 guilders per tree or between 120 to 160 guilders per year. Based on rough calculation, it was not less than 3 million guilders collected from the cultivation of coconut in 1903. Furthermore, a survey report in 1886 noted that all three sampled families received significant income from their gardens, it was 19.14 guilders per year or about 42% of their total income a year.¹⁶

The list will be longer if many more small scale economic activities such as poultry, livestock and fishery were added.¹⁷ But what is important here, all of this additional income provided to talled more than historian ever considered. A great attention must be taken with this sideline of peasants in the context of an emerging people who have the ability to pay in cash various taxes and social obligations levied to them. The achievement of the people was to compensate all obligations without merely depending on their main occupations.

Besides agricultural sector, the important role of small scale economy can be seen through off farm activities. Trading, home industry and services were three important activities. In his study on non-agricultural indigenous economic activities in Java in nineteenth century, M.R Fernando mentioned about the growing of this sector in several areas, such as Batavia, Bagelen, Banyumas, Rembang, Tegal, Pekalongan, Jepara, Semarang, Madiun and Surabaya, Gresik, Lamongan and Kediri during the implementation of the Cultivation System.

The construction of sugar factories, new buildings, bridges and other kinds of infrastructure contributed to the growing number of skilled workers, such as carpenters and construction workers. Blacksmith involved

in servicing machines, making agricultural and transportation tools and also building ships and boats. It was reported that there were more than 100 blacksmiths in Pekalongan in the late 1850s. Another report mentioned that many people involved as full time workers in brick and tile production in Bagelen and Madiun. At the same time, various home industries recruited more people due to expansion of production. Meanwhile, the improvement of road and other means of transport made it easier for traders to move from one place to another and to form market networks. Consequently, more markets came into operation in urban as well as rural areas of the coastal and the hinterland.¹⁸ Those traders then integrated areas and islands economically, as exemplified by several researches.¹⁹ In due time, many people had likely been employed as transport workers and domestic servants.

Although it could not be denied that expansion of foreign commercial crop was an important factor in increasing the number of off farm economic activities, it has been significantly exaggerated by scholars. The rapid growing of off farm economic activities or the growing occupational diversity should be explained in the context of changes in the small scale economic life of the indigenous people. This could not be separated from the emerging of economically well-being peasants and artisans.²⁰ The expansion of indigenous small scale cigarette industry in Kudus or textile industry in Pekalongan, Majalaya, Surakarta and Yogyakarta in late nineteenth and the early twentieth century was a part of this amazing role of small scale economy.

Finally, the small scale economic activities are not so vulnerable to the macro economic crisis. When the market prices of all agricultural products, including rubber fell during the world recession of the 1930s, most export oriented agricultural producers suffered. But some studies on smallholder tend to strengthen the view that the decline in economic welfare for smallholders at this time was not as severe as has been widely accepted. Although the smallholders received less money income than that before the recession, they were able to maintain their

living conditions in part by abandoning unnecessary expenditures.²¹

The living condition of most people in the rubber producing areas of Jambi, Palembang, and Southeast Kalimantan for example, remained good and the people were better of than expected. Although there was a sudden decline in imports in the early 1930s, they began to recover soon after. In a different context, small scale economic activities also had important role for urban society during the depression of 1930s. As their companions in the village, the *kampung* dwellers of the urban centres responded positively to their economic environment and achieved a degree of new economic opportunities through the diversification of economic activities.²²

3. The Drives Behind The Grass Root

In view of the growing small scale economic activities during the colonial period, it is difficult to believe that small scale economy played no crucial role in history of the nation. The current situation strengthens the argument. It is a unique situation. Whenever most Indonesians are in economic difficulty and the number of poor people is increasing due to current monetary crisis, the smallholders of coffee, rubber, pepper, coconut, nutmeg and clove in parts of Java, Sumatra, Bangka, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku and Timor are in another *hujan emas* era. The crisis is mostly an urban phenomenon and the failure of artificial pseudo industrialization. The past New Order government built industry in appearance only while agriculture was sacrificed.

Small scale economy has not enjoyed a good attention; it has been significantly undermined by the scholars. In the fact it is important historically. Our conclusion must be that many new questions should be asked to the existence of Indonesian historiography and new problems should be drawn into future studies. Thus, a new discourse and methodology must be developed. The role of small scale economic activities is just an example to attract wider attention into various aspects of Indonesian history which so long have been neglected. Those aspects, include mentality, intellec-

tual, management, health, woman and environment.

It might be proposed here, that social science approach to the methodology of history must come together with conventional approaches, such as hermeneutics and phenomenology based on new perspective.²³ Instead of "colonial sources", the new trend is supported by "local sources", such as documents written in local languages or characters, local literary works, folklore, and data collected through oral history.

The current research at the Department of History of Gadjah Mada University proves that data collected from documents written in local language could be used to write a different Indonesian history as we know now. Many believe that local literary works consist no historical fact. The fact, new way of reading the script is able to present a credible data to fulfill the missing links and to reconstruct a new history. It is not impossible that one day, a quantitative economic historian will draw graph or table based on data from manuscripts such as *serat*, *suluk*, *bad*, *lontara* or *tambo*.

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- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 117—187.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 163.
- ⁸ Bambang Purwanto, "From Dusun to the Market; Native Rubber Cultivation in Southern Su-

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⁹ Ibid., pp. 340—341.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 326—327; *De Indische Gids*, 34, 1912, p. 805.10.

¹¹ G.R. Knight, "Gully Coolies, Weed-Woman and Snijvolk; The Sugar Industry Workers of North Java in the Early Twentieth Century", J.Th. Lindblad, ed., *New Challenges in the Modern Economic History of Indonesia*. (Leiden: PIS, 1993), p.76.

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