

The Volatile State in Southeast Asia: Evidence from Sumatra, 1600–1800

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Introduction

The *communis opinio* of historians is that early modern, or precolonial, states in Southeast Asia tended to lead precarious existences. The states were volatile in the sense that the size of individual states changed quickly, a ruler forced by circumstances moved his state capital, the death of a ruler was followed by a dynastic struggle, or a local subordinate head either ignored or took over the central state power; in short, states went through short cycles of rise and decline. Perhaps nobody has helped establish this opinion more than Clifford Geertz (1980) with his powerful metaphor of the “theatre state.” Many scholars have preceded and followed him in their assessment of the shakiness of the state (see, for example, Andaya 1992, 419; Bentley 1986, 292; Bronson 1977, 51; Hagesteijn 1986, 106; Milner 1982, 7; Nagtegaal 1996, 35, 51; Reid 1993, 202; Ricklefs 1991, 17; Schulte Nordholt 1996, 143–48). The instability itself was an enduring phenomenon. Most polities existed in a state of flux, oscillating between integration and disintegration, a phenomenon which was first analyzed for mainland Southeast Asia by Edmund Leach (1954) in his seminal work on the Kachin chiefdoms. This alternation of state formation and the breaking up of kingdoms has been called the “ebb and flow of power” and the “rhythm” of Malay history (Andaya and Andaya 1982, 35). In this article, I will probe into the causes of the volatility of the Southeast Asian states, using material from Sumatra to make my case.

Before we move to an examination of volatility, we must look at the concept itself. Knowledge is the concern of power holders, and the historiographies of Southeast Asian states have been the outcomes of power struggles (Day and Reynolds 2000; Frank 1998, 1–3). There is a real risk that historians, usually from stable Western

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states, have overemphasized the instability as a manifestation of Orientalism. There was certainly a bias in the accounts of contemporary European observers (now often our main source of information), who wrote in disparaging terms about indigenous statecraft. When I use “volatility” and similar terms, however, I do not imply a value judgment in the sense of a failure, but mean that rulers lost control over most of their subjects relatively easily and that there was no Weberian bureaucracy that carried on its daily routines, regardless of who was in office. Whether or not stable states would be better and more advanced than the volatile states, let alone whether or not their inhabitants would be better off, is arguable but not the issue here. Nevertheless, stability was deemed desirable in the perception of the rulers themselves. The Sumatran rulers who will hold the stage in this article measured their success in terms of peace, a smooth transfer of power from one ruler to his successor, and the capacity to attract more people and to expand territorially (see Alatas 1997, 251–61; Barnard 1998, 6–7; Goudie 1989, 92–99; Salmon 1992, 23).¹ Taking the perspectives of the rulers, the study of the volatility of the state would not have been a judgmental academic exercise, but a matter of very practical relevance. Taufik Abdullah, a well-known modern Sumatran historian, says without reservations that the sultanates were “structurally weak” (1996, 37).

In Southeast Asia, the fundamental key to success in political competition was to gain control over people, not over land. Human power, rather than land, was the scarce production factor in this area with its vast forests and a low population density. Human power was more than the crucial production factor—it was also the symbol of wealth. Since the hold over property was insecure, riches were expressed in numbers of retainers (Bentley 1986, 290; Geertz 1980, 24; Gullick 1988, xix, 125; Reid 1988, 120–22, 129; Tambiah 1985, 268–69; Wisseman Christie 1995, 272). Slaves, debtors, close family members, and villagers living in the royal core domain were fully dependent on the ruler, but they formed only a minority of the whole population. The ruler tied his other subjects to himself indirectly via alliances with local heads, princes, or state officials, who all enjoyed quite a large degree of autonomy. If necessary a ruler could mobilize armed men through this network of loyalties (Andaya 1993a, 94–95; Bronson 1977, 44–45; Gullick 1988, 44, 95; Locher-Scholten 1994, 40; Nagtegaal 1996, 55–58; Reid 1993, 202, 251–52; Ricklefs 1993, 6–8; Wolters 1999, 34). The chiefs had direct access to human power and local sectors of the economy. They provided a check on royal despotism, and they determined a realignment of loyalties whenever one dynasty collapsed and another emerged in its place (Barnard 1998, 81; Gullick 1988, 54, 97; Kathirithamby-Wells 1990, 12; Schulte Nordholt 1996, 44–53). Stanley J. Tambiah has aptly called such kingdoms “galactic polities,” consisting of a center with satellites: a ruler with heads, each of which formed a replication of the center (1985, 252–59; see also Wisseman Christie 1995, 239).

Geertz’s *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* is about this relationship between rulers and followers, or the center and satellites. The core idea of the theater state concept is that the stupendous state rituals were not legitimizing means to the political end of exerting power, but that they formed the end themselves. The rulers were obsessed with splendor and prestige in general and the organization of state rituals in particular. The ceremonies were the events that drew a mass of people to the exemplary center, but at the same time these ceremonies were about all that the rulers could achieve as far as actual political dominance was concerned. All

¹M. C. Ricklefs remarks of rulers of Java that “most if not all Mataram monarchs . . . would have been absolute dictators if they could” (1993, 8).

rulers endeavored to make their own grandeur more resplendent, but if they pushed their respective followers too hard in this spectacle, they lost touch with their social basis (Geertz 1980; see also Schulte Nordholt 1996).

Geertz argues that his analysis of the Balinese *negara* is pertinent to Southeast Asia in general (1980, 3–10). Indeed, the idea of the exemplary center was common throughout the region. It was rooted in a Hindu-Buddhist ideology of kingship ultimately derived from India but adjusted to the local context, hence the now obsolete term for Southeast Asian state formation as a process of “Indianization” (Bentley 1986, 288; Wisseman Christie 1995, 236–37; Wolters 1999). The basic notion in this Hindu-Buddhist conceptualization of kingship was the interaction between macrocosm and microcosm, between the universe and the human terrestrial world. Welfare in the human world was attained by constituting harmony between the macrocosm and microcosm. The divine royal ruler was the person designated to establish this harmonious parallelism. The capital formed the magic center of the empire, just as the universe was centered on Mount Meru. The kingdom lay dispersed around the center in a series of concentric circles. The power of the ruler radiated from the center, like the light of a torch, with a fading intensity. A corollary to the cosmological model is that ideologically the center represented the whole kingdom. The indigenous term *negara*, meaning “town,” by extension referred therefore to the whole state, and states and capitals were usually designated by the same toponym. The Hindu-Buddhist notion of the divine king as the exemplary center of the world was in concert with indigenous beliefs that spiritual power permeates the world and that this power is differentially distributed in places and persons (Bentley 1986, 293–95; Evers and Korff 2000, 73–75; Hall 1985, 5–9; Heine-Geldern 1942; Manguin 2000, 161–62; Schulte Nordholt 1996, 9; Stuart-Fox 1995; Tambiah 1985, 252–67).

Many authors have noticed that the political economy of the kingdoms, the economic relation between ruler and subjects, was based on redistribution (Andaya 1993b, 194–200; 1997, 200–201; Bronson 1977, 44–45; Gullick 1988, 47–49, 95–97, 125; Hall 1995; Kathirithamby-Wells 1993, 77–83; Manguin 2000, 163; Miksic 1985, 444–46; Nagtegaal 1996, 35–50; Reid 1993, 202, 215, 245–247; Schulte Nordholt 2000, 5–6; Talens 1999, 88–121; Wheatley 1983, 419–20; Wolters 1999, 29–30). Allied subordinate heads provided the king with goods (consumer goods and commodities) and services (notably men for military campaigns but also labor for state projects). The local heads, replicating the overall ruler, obtained goods and services from their own followers. In return, the ruler offered protection against human foes and frightening supernatural powers and also mediated in social conflicts that could not be solved at the local level. Ordinary people sought the ruler’s protection because they constantly faced imminent death from famine, volcanic eruptions, epidemic disease, harvest failure, enemy attacks, or some other disaster. The rulers had to reward their allied local heads in a more individual way as well: with material presents (clothing, jewelry, gongs of bronze, swords, porcelain, and seals); new names and honorific titles; *piagem* (copper plates setting out rights and obligations); certain outward and visible privileges; and the honor of bestowing on them a woman with whom the ruler had first slept. In this redistributive system, every ruler had to strike a delicate balance between taxing his, or her, subjects to the utmost—for instance, by demanding corvée labor—but not alienating them with unreasonable claims. Princes, officials, and local heads who were pressed too hard by their overlord would rebel. The common recourse of overburdened ordinary people was to evade levies and

ultimately to move away in order to seek the protection of another ruler: "Flight was the final sanction against bad government" (Gullick 1988, 43).

This sketch, so far, of political economy would be appropriate to almost all Southeast Asian states, but a considerable variety becomes visible when the question is raised of how a ruler would obtain revenue. In order to fulfill the expectation of the allied local heads of material rewards, a ruler needed to control vital parts of the economy (Claessen and Velde 1991). A distinction is often made between rice-plain and riverine exchange networks (Hall 1985, 12–19; Manguin 2000, 154; Ricklefs 1991, 15–17; Wisseman Christie 1995, 264–76). In inland rice-growing plains, control of the economy meant creaming off the agrarian surplus at the local weekly markets; in riverine states, or "port polities" (Kathirithamby-Wells 1990), it meant control of international trade. Perhaps overemphasizing the point, Jan Wisseman Christie states: "[C]ontrol of trade appears to have provided the key to political development" in both riverine-exchange and rice-plain networks (1995, 277; see also Reid 1993, 202). The material basis of the states had more variety than what a geography consisting of inland rice plains and river basins would have us believe. Bali, for instance, was a small circular island partitioned into deeply cut river gorges widening at the arc-shaped coastal rice plain; the concomitant communications network had the form of the spokes and rim of a wheel. The prevalent struggles for political dominance between rulers and local heads were within a gorge (along a spoke), and transversal conflicts between states were restricted to neighbors who met on the circumferential road in the coastal plain (Geertz 1980, 19–23).

The ideology of the exemplary center and the Hindu-Buddhist sacral king, the political economy of redistribution between ruler and follower, and the material basis for the dominance of a vital part of the economy met and merged in a "complex interaction" (Claessen and Velde 1985, 1991) with positive and negative feedback effects, with the state as a result. There is no prime mover or determinant factor that explains of itself the existence of the Southeast Asian state. The above review of the literature, however, suggests that the *differential* strength and stability of the states might be explained to a considerable degree by only the variant material basis of the states. This basis is dependent on ecological and geographical circumstances, or, in other words, the "societal format": the size and distribution of the population in relation to the existing means of production and the local geography (Claessen and Velde 1991).

In this article, I want to elaborate on the study of the structural weakness of the Southeast Asian state by using evidence obtained from the central belt of Sumatra. This belt stretches from the west coast to the east coast of the island and covers the present provinces of Sumatera Barat (Padang), Bengkulu, Sumatera Selatan (Palembang), Jambi, and Riau. In this area within a limited geographical region we find a laboratory of different ecosystems, which offer ambitious rulers different chances of dominating the economy. At least three different ecological zones can be discerned in Sumatra, each with a different basket of agricultural products, a different transportation network, and a different settlement pattern, hence offering varying opportunities to control trade in certain strategic products. If, as I argue, historically ecology and geography had a significant impact on the volatility of the Southeast Asian state, the expected outcome would be that processes of state formation would have developed along different trajectories in each of these three zones. The central belt of Sumatra forms a natural laboratory for comparing the impact of the ecology and geography because other major factors of the state, such as concepts about legitimate rulership, knowledge of war technology, distance to international markets,

and the presence of foreign traders and the military, are roughly equal throughout the area. The central belt of Sumatra thus forms a nice test case of Geertz's claim that the theater state is a model valid throughout Southeast Asia. This article will also make a contribution to the theorizing on state formation processes in general, especially as far as the role of the societal format is concerned.

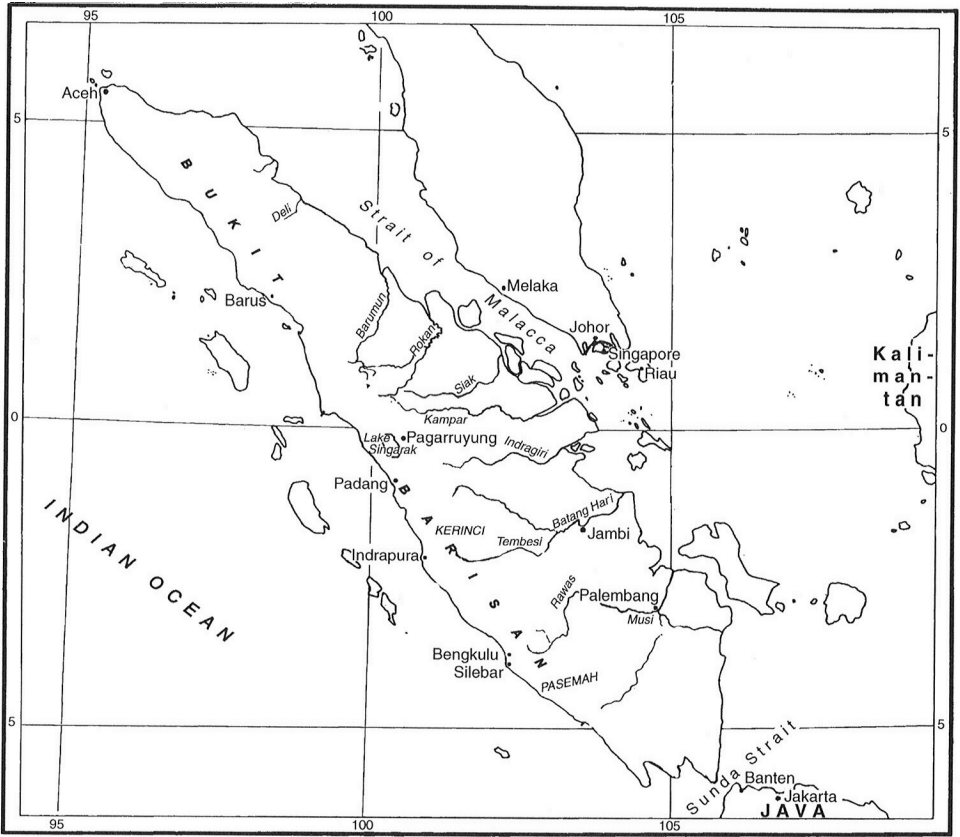
Making a strong point for the impact of the societal format is not the equivalent to ecological determinism. The distinction among three ecological zones, each with a characteristic societal format, is of course a simplification of the empirical world in the past. Polities within one zone do not follow the same development exactly because, for example, of the ecological and geographical variation within a zone. A more fundamental objection to ecological determinism is that ecology only offers opportunities that can be either seized or ignored by rulers. Other factors interfere. For instance, the central belt is also interesting, although not unique, because the people had to find an answer to the challenge posed to the Hindu-Buddhist legitimization of kingship by Islam.

Studies of Sumatran states to date have focused on single cases only, with the notable exception of Barbara Watson Andaya's (1993b) comparative study of two adjacent east coast states, Palembang and Jambi. In this article, I will make a comparison among all polities on both sides of Sumatra. The application of this cross-insular perspective means that the impact of ecological conditions on state formation can be specified and the reciprocal interaction between west coast and east coast becomes clear. The perspective offers an explanation of why state formation on the west coast failed altogether—a question which has so far been ignored by the historical discipline—and throws into sharper relief why one east coast state, Palembang, defies the accepted historiographical wisdom and was remarkably stable. The time span is limited to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period for which the Dutch and English outsiders have provided the historian with ample written information but a period in which they had not yet crushed the Sumatran states. I shall distinguish six factors that contributed to the political instability but shall begin with the societal format and an overview of major political events, which will serve as a chronological framework and an essential body of empirical evidence.

The Societal Format

Sumatra covers an area of 434,000 square kilometers, and measures 1,650 kilometers from north to south and 350 kilometers from west to east at its widest point (see map).² Its most distinctive feature is the mountain range, the Bukit Barisan, which stretches from the northern to the southern tip. The Bukit Barisan forms the backbone of Sumatra and divides the island into two unequal parts: the narrow western coast and the wide eastern half comprised of hills and alluvial lowlands. The Bukit Barisan itself is bisected by the Semangko Fault Zone, which cleaves the whole range into a high western half and a low eastern half. A number of volcanoes straddle the fault zone. Debris from erosion and volcanic eruptions has filled the highland valleys of the Semangko Fault Zone, providing them with flat floors.

²The actual geographical position of Sumatra is from northwest to southeast. In common parlance, however, one speaks of the north and south end of the island; the long sides are called the west and east coasts.



Map. Sumatra.

The asymmetrical location of the Bukit Barisan and the dissimilar relief of the western and eastern halves of Sumatra have a profound impact on hydrology. The high mountains on the western side of the Semangko Fault Zone form the watershed of Sumatra. From here, short rivers run down the steep western slopes of the Barisan toward the Indian Ocean. A number of long, wide rivers emptying themselves into the Strait of Malacca flow to the east: the Rokan, the Siak, the Kampar, the Indragiri, the Batanghari, and the Musi (Bemmelen 1949, 21–25, 188–89; Verstappen 1973, 6–9; Wolfram-Seifert 1992, 73–76).

Authors who write about human activities distinguish a number of parallel ecological zones for mainland Sumatra, ranging from three to seven (Charras and Pain 1993, 59; Collet 1925, 8–9, 18; Furukawa 1994, 14–15; Miksic 1985, 424; Sandbukt 1991, 42; Scholz 1988, 32; Withington 1985, 18; Wolfram-Seifert 1992, 74–81; see Whitten et al. 1987 for a finer grid of eozones). For my purpose, a categorization of five parallel zones seems to steer a fair middle course between precision and clarity. From west to east, these five zones are the western coastal strip, mountain zone, piedmont zone, penneplains, and eastern alluvial zone.³ The five zones are only discernible in the belt of central Sumatra. Northern Sumatra is different because there

³The piedmont zone is a hilly landscape at the foot of the mountains; the penneplain is an only slightly undulating plain; the alluvial zone is a flat plain composed of fine soil carried down from the mountains by the rivers.

the mountains cover almost the full width of the island. In the southernmost province of Sumatra, Lampung, the eastern rivers are shorter and empty into the Sunda Strait. The geopolitical position of central Sumatra is determined by the Strait of Malacca, a sea corridor which also has an impact on the west coast.

The western coastal strip of central Sumatra is a narrow alluvial plain that ends abruptly where the mountains of the Bukit Barisan begin. Sometimes the mountains sweep right down to the sea. The straight, flat coast offers little protection from the ocean winds, and most of it offers no suitable harbors. A few bays and the lee of some small islands near the coast provide roadstead suitable for anchorage; small boats can sail a few miles up the rivers. The flat floors of the highland valleys of the mountain zone form the most fertile area of the island and are well suited for wet rice cultivation. These valleys carried the highest population density in the early modern period. The piedmont zone is a transitional zone. The peneplains have predominantly poor soils, which form the underground for the famous lowland tropical rainforest. The peneplains are transected by big rivers, each of which has tributaries and flows in its own basin. There are seasonal rises of the water table of six to ten meters in normal years, and the subsequent floods have produced natural levees and back swamps along the big rivers. The alluvial soils of the natural levees and back swamps offer the best chance for pursuing agriculture, and the population was concentrated in settlements along the rivers; the levees also served as protection against floods. Most of the eastern alluvial zone is marshy and covered with peat-swamp forest. The funnel-shaped, brackish estuaries and the belt of tidal mud flats just off the coastline are the home of the mangrove forest. With the exception of the natural levees, where houses could be built on stilts, the peat swamp and mangrove forests were unfit for habitation (Furukawa 1994, 20, 46–54; Scholz 1988, 31–35, 46–47; Whitten et al. 1987, 9–10, 57; Wolfram-Seifert 1992, 75–80).

There were roughly three different settlement patterns in mainland central Sumatra: a central-place pattern in the mountain valleys; a dendritic pattern in the piedmont zone, peneplain, and alluvial plain of the east coast; and what I call a comb pattern on the west coast. The flat valley floors in the Padang Highlands come close to the *Idealtyp* of W. Christaller's central-place system (1933; see also Nas 1990, 127–29; Wolfram-Seifert 1992, 292–93). The plateaux showed a settlement pattern composed of many villages or strongholds (*koto*) spread out fairly evenly over the land. These places were united in leagues, the names of which indicated the number of the constituent villages (for instance, VII Koto, IX Koto, XII Koto, XIII Koto, L Koto). Circles of villages had a market, each on a different day of the week—for example, the markets in the seven principal villages around Lake Singkarak (Raffles [1830] 1991, 355). Some towns developed a daily market and can be considered as the central places in the system.

A dendritic pattern of settlements developed in the river basins of the east coast (Bronson 1977, 43). The swamp land of the peneplain and eastern alluvial zone impeded regular overland traffic, so that almost all transport went by river. Goods were frequently transferred from one boat to another. It was economical to combine goods from several small boats on a larger vessel, as soon as the depth of the river offered enough draft. Trade centers developed at transshipment points, at the confluence of rivers, at junctions of rivers and forest paths, and at upper navigable limits for certain types of ships with a specific draft. The trade centers formed a hierarchy of collection and distribution points, which can be represented schematically as a tree with the base of the trunk on the coast and the branches in the interior (hence the term “dendritic”). In the piedmont zone, a tightly knit network of footpaths

connected the upper reaches of all rivers. There were few connecting footpaths in the penepains, but a short footpath between Kampar and Siak formed a relatively easy connection (Dobbin 1983, 6; Müller 1837, 28–33; Oki 1986, 12–22, 36–38). The dendritic pattern left room for only one sea port on each major river.⁴ All of the seaports lay between fifty and one hundred kilometers inland, which was roughly the border between alluvial plain and penepain. At this point, all of the tributaries had flowed into the main stream, but the river was not yet split up in a delta (Bronson 1977, 42–43; Hall 1985, 3; Miksic 1985, 437). This was the lowest point where solid soil was found. Finally, a situation at some distance from the coast provided a certain protection against surprise attacks by pirates and other enemies. Palembang, on the Musi river, and the capital of Jambi (Tanahpilih), on the Batanghari river, are the best known examples of such riverine seaports. The only possible place for a trade port was on the riverine system, as any port on the coast between the rivers would be devoid of a hinterland and, from a practical point of view, situated on soft mud.

There was little natural differentiation on the west coast, and one place was more or less as good as another for establishing a trading port. Therefore a large number of small settlements with only marginal differences in accessibility sprang up. H^c van Bazel mentions no fewer than thirty-nine coastal places between Barus and Indrapura, and further south, in the direction of Bengkulu, still more places were to be found (Bazel, “De Radicaale Beschrijving van Sumatra’s West Cust,” 13 April 1761, Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Leiden [KITLV] H167).⁵ Each place had a single route—path or river—inland, and this route inland was as straight as possible because of the cost of travelling into the mountains. The result was a comb, with the coast as the back and a tooth of the comb at each coastal town. This arrangement of a large number of small towns arranged in one line is a clear contrast to the small, fixed number of ports on the east coast.

Roughly three types of polities correspond to the three settlement patterns. In the highland valleys, the Minangkabau kingdom emerged, which, “though poorly understood, appears to have rested on a unique combination of sublime royal rhetoric and politicized fragmentation, conventionally simplified as ‘three kings’” (Reid 1993, 264). These three kings were virtually devoid of any effective power, and it is doubtful whether the Minangkabau kingdom would fit the criteria of a functional definition of an early state (Claessen and Skalník 1978, 640).⁶ The archive sources give only sparse information about the interior, and I have little to add to Jane Drakard’s (1999) study of the Minangkabau kingdom. On the east coast, riverine states developed. On the west coast of Sumatra, no independent states developed, although some leaders appropriated the title of “sultan” for themselves for a short period of time (Kathirithamby-Wells 1976; Kroeskamp 1931, 106).⁷ In the central belt of Sumatra,

⁴Two caveats must be made: first, a seaport could be eclipsed by another port slightly up or down the river, as happened several times on the Siak; and, second, some rivers had outports populated by pilots, customs officers, guards, and fishermen.

⁵Indrapura and some other places did not lie directly on the coast, but a little inland. For his survey, Bazel obviously made use of an older work: Jacob Jorisz. Pits, “Beschrijvinge over de Westcust caerte,” 25 September 1672, Algemeen Rijksarchief (ARA), Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) 1290.

⁶The Minangkabau kingdom was, however, a “traditional state” in the terminology of Anthony Giddens (1985, 3–4).

⁷According to Christine Dobbin, the leaders on the west coast were so-called *orang kaya* (literally, “rich men”), whose function was that of commercial brokers, linking the interior producers of commodities to the foreign suppliers of import goods (1983, 71).

then, there were riverine states on the east coast; one weak state on the inland rice plateaux; and no local states on the west coast, although this coast was sometimes incorporated into outside empires.

A Calendar of Events

Lying between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, for centuries the Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula have played a pivotal role in international seaborne trade, and consequently they have been very open to outside influences in the political, economic, and cultural domains. Because ships sailing between India and China had to wait in the Strait of Malacca until the next monsoon before they could continue their voyage, the strait was an ideal area for an entrepôt (Andaya and Andaya 1982, 10, 18; Meilink-Roelofs 1962, 13; Wolters 1967). Srivijaya (seventh to thirteenth centuries) is the earliest major example of such a port.

In the early fifteenth century, the Chinese emperor sent out six enormous trading expeditions to Indonesia and the Indian Ocean, which Anthony Reid takes as the beginning of the "Age of Commerce." These six fleets and the complementary tribute missions from Southeast Asia to the imperial court stimulated demand for Indonesian products, including gold and nontimber forest products from Sumatra. Thriving under these conditions, Melaka (Malacca), lying on the Malay Peninsula, developed into an emporium and also gained political control on both sides of the Strait of Malacca. Indragiri, Siak, Kampar, and the Riau Archipelago all submitted to Malaccan imperialism. After the Chinese expeditions ended, trade in the Indian Ocean from Melaka to the eastern coast of Africa was mainly in the hands of Arabs, Gujarati, and other Muslim traders. Melaka became a fervent supporter of the spread of Islam, but the introduction of Islam in Sumatra predated the rise of Melaka as a center of trade with the Middle East. The first Muslim tombstone in Sumatra, found in northern Sumatra, is dated 1297. In the interior of Sumatra, the Minangkabau kingdom was converted somewhat later. This kingdom had been founded by Adityawarman, a Javanese courtier, in 1347; at some point after his death, the royal functions had been divided among three members of the family, who all resided at or near Pagarruyung (Dobbin 1983, 61–64; Drakard 1999, 20–36; Hall 1955, 180–84; Kahin 1999, 21–24; Kwa 1998; Meilink-Roelofs 1962, 21, 27–31; Reid 1993, 12).

The Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in 1498 and took Melaka by force in 1511. They disrupted Asian trade temporarily but did not sound the death knell of the Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia. As far as trade in Sumatra was concerned, the Portuguese were just more buyers at the market. Nevertheless, their indirect impact on commerce was considerable. The fall of Melaka shattered the trade network centered on that town and triggered the development of new trade centers: Aceh, at the northern tip of Sumatra, and Banten, in West Java. Some of the shipping shifted from the Strait of Malacca to the Sunda Strait, as well as up and down the west coast of Sumatra, in order to circumvent Portuguese control (Boxer 1969, 46–49; Meilink-Roelofs 1962, 140, 144; Reid 1993, 208–14).

The Portuguese also had an important indirect impact on agricultural production, in particular that of pepper. Pepper was the most important Asian export product in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Portuguese control of western India, the native area of pepper, stimulated the growth of still underdeveloped but independent pepper-growing regions in Sumatra and elsewhere. Pepper provided an enormous

impetus for the development of the west coast of central Sumatra, where cultivation began in the sixteenth century. Once the coast's economic and agronomic success was proven, Minangkabau peasants from the highlands began to settle on the west coast in far greater numbers than before. Both Banten and Aceh tried to control pepper production in Sumatra, launching their conquests from the southern and northern tips of the island, respectively. During the second half of the sixteenth century, Banten acquired the area of Lampung and Bengkulu up to Silebar by a combination of force and a successful matrimonial policy. Aceh first subjugated the northeast coast of Sumatra and then extended its authority over the west coast, reaching Indrapura by 1628. It appointed military governors (*panglima*) in the main ports, who bought the pepper at fixed prices and also demanded pepper as tribute (Bastin 1961, 7, 24–25; Dobbin 1983, 72–76; Reid 1993, 7–20, 257).

Pepper cultivation received a boost from the arrival in the archipelago of the Dutch Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, also known as the Dutch East Indies Company) and the English East India Company (EIC) around 1600. These northern European companies had more capital and larger human resources at their disposal than the Portuguese and, pertinently, had swifter, more heavily armed ships, allowing them to become much more active players in Sumatran commerce and politics (Meilink-Roelofs 1962, 173–77, 191–94; Reid 1993, 13–22). The Minangkabau traders in the western Sumatran pepper ports, whose trade had been depressed by the restrictions imposed on them by the Acehnese governors, offered to sell the VOC all of the pepper and gold produced in exchange for Dutch support in dislodging the Acehnese overlords. The upshot of this mutual support was the so-called Painan Treaty (1663). The same year, the VOC established a factory at Padang, a place too small to be of much importance to Aceh. In order to legitimize the VOC's dominance, the Dutch offered the suzerainty over the west coast to the Minangkabau rulers in Pagarruyung, creating the fiction that the company had liberated the coast from the Acehnese yoke for the benefit of the Minangkabau court. The VOC tried to attract all trade to Padang, which had become the company's West Sumatran headquarters in 1667, gradually suppressing the trade of the other ports. The obvious reaction of the other west coast people was to rise up against the VOC repeatedly and to solicit Acehnese or English help against the Dutch (Dobbin 1983, 65; Kroeskamp 1931; Leeuw 1926). Nowhere else were treaties between Asian rulers and the VOC breached and concluded again as often as they were in western Sumatra (*Corpus* 1934, 3:423).

At the invitation of the local heads, the English established themselves at Bengkulu, which was an insignificant place of no great importance to the VOC. In contrast to the VOC, which, apart from the exploitation of a gold mine near Padang, had confined itself to trade only, the EIC obtained sovereign rights at Bengkulu. Because of their political position, the English became much more involved in the production of cash crops and in 1695 obliged every household in a certain district to plant two thousand pepper vines. Generally speaking, the Sumatrans failed to appreciate forced cultivation; in 1719 they revolted and put the English to flight. The English returned after one or two years, however, and resumed their experiments to increase pepper production (Bastin 1965, xi–xxvii; Kathirithamby-Wells 1977, 22–44, 75–79).

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Jambi was the only Sumatran pepper area beyond the control of both Aceh and Banten; this made it of considerable importance to early northern European traders. For a while, Jambi even eclipsed its big brother, Palembang, in the potential to deliver pepper. The EIC and VOC arrived

at Jambi in the same year, 1615, and were the first traders to drive out Asian competitors by violence. Having sown the wind, they reaped the whirlwind, however, and the Europeans were also often molested. After attacks on their respective factories, the English left Jambi for good in 1679, and the VOC, which had been repeatedly absent for shorter intervals, left the settlement for good in 1724. The VOC kept a post near the mouth of the Batanghari until another attack in 1768 (Andaya 1993b, 43–56, 62–65, 176; Bastin 1961, 30; Tideman 1938, 29–30).

The endemic succession disputes weakened the royal family of Jambi, a situation which reached crisis point when there were two simultaneous rulers, one downstream and one upstream on the Batanghari. Often, one of the contenders would solicit support from the VOC and the company would help a prince to the throne, as happened in 1687, 1708, 1711, 1719, 1726, and 1742.⁸ In the short term, the VOC support was profitable to both the VOC and the victorious contender, but in the long term, both sides lost. Their dependence on external support circumscribed the sultans' freedom to maneuver, and they were forced to sign treaties promising the Dutch the exclusive rights to purchase pepper at fixed low prices. In order to maintain Dutch military support in exchange for the agreed quantity of pepper, the sultans were compelled to put pressure on the upstream pepper growers. The majority of the pepper growers lived in Minangkabau, and, by 1750, reportedly outnumbered the original population in Jambi in the upper reaches of the Batanghari ten to one. The harder the sultan pressed the cultivators, the more the latter diverted their trade to other eastern rivers or to the west coast. The problems of Jambi were exacerbated by the fairly unsuccessful wars that it waged with its neighbors. These wars usually followed the insult of a failed royal marriage, which, had it prospered, should have forged a diplomatic bond. Upstream, Jambi fought with Palembang over the population living along the Tembesi (upper Batanghari) and Rawas (upper Musi). Downstream, Jambi and Johor (the successor to Melaka) started taking turns sacking each other in 1667. In 1681, however, when Jambi was threatened with destruction by Palembang, Johor temporarily helped its foe in order to restore the balance of power in the strait. The outcome of all of these problems and tensions was that by 1680 the glory of Jambi's pepper had almost completely evaporated (Andaya 1993b; Locher-Scholten 1994, 30–31).

On the surface, Palembang resembled Jambi as far as royal legitimacy, sociopolitical organization, and the central role of pepper in the state economy were concerned. The two states "lived as brothers" (Andaya 1993b), yet, after the first decades of the seventeenth century, prospects in Jambi were increasingly doomed, whereas the political economy of Palembang flourished. In 1642 Palembang promised the VOC the exclusive rights to buy pepper, a privilege later extended to another commodity, tin, in exchange for protection against Banten and central Javanese aggressors. The complex estuary of the Musi permitted the sultan to circumvent the contractual Dutch monopoly and to export pepper and tin to China. Nevertheless, he still sold so much pepper to the VOC that the Palembang ruler and the VOC remained on friendly terms and managed to find reasonable solutions to mutual complaints (Andaya 1993b, 68–70, 115–16, 121–22; Kielstra 1920, 127–28).

⁸In 1727, after the sultan of Jambi had died of smallpox, the VOC agent, Gouin, even took the daily administration (*maniement der rijxsaken*) into his own hands. The VOC headquarters in Batavia were infuriated by Gouin's extreme involvement in local politics and had him arrested and sent to Batavia in chains (Generale missiven [GM] 27-10-1727, 31-1-1728, in *Generale* 1985, 8:122, 156).

After Melaka fell into Portuguese hands in 1511, the sultan of Melaka fled to Riau and from there to Johor (at the southern tip of the peninsula). Henceforth, he was called sultan of Johor. A triangular struggle among Johor, Portuguese Melaka, and Aceh ensued, colored by changing chances and shifting alliances, with Johor as the weakest side, which created another instance in which the arrival of the VOC and the EIC complicated the diplomatic and military struggle. A Dutch-Johor force wrested Melaka from the Portuguese in 1641. The alliance with the Dutch during the siege of Melaka was now rewarded by trading privileges for Johor from the Dutch, and Johor reaffirmed its suzerainty over Siak and Indragiri. The interminable war with Jambi, however, drained Johor's resources as much as it drained those of Jambi (Andaya and Andaya 1982, 68–71; Hall 1955, 257, 283–88; Kwa 1998, 124–27; Meilink-Roelofs 1962, 136–42).

In 1699 Sultan Mahmud of Johor was murdered by his own nobles, ending a dynasty that, via the sultanate of Melaka, allegedly traced its roots to Iskandar Zulkarnain (Alexander the Great). The nobles bestowed the title of sultan on Mahmud's principal minister, who lacked the sacral authority, the white blood of true royalty, of his predecessor. This questionable legitimacy of the new ruler helped Raja Kecil, a Minangkabau adventurer who claimed to be the posthumously born, fugitive son of the murdered Sultan Mahmud, seize Siak in 1717. From his base in Siak, he took Johor the next year. Buginese migrants from South Sulawesi came to the assistance of the sultan of Johor: in 1721 they drove Raja Kecil back to Siak and placed Sultan Sulaiman, son of the former principal minister of Sultan Mahmud, on the throne of Johor. Sulaiman moved his capital to Riau permanently, and from then on it was usual to speak of the sultan of Riau. One of the Buginese was appointed viceroy. During the second half of the eighteenth century, Riau, which had been a transit port since the late seventeenth century, developed into the dominant emporium of the Strait of Malacca, in the tradition of pre-1511 Melaka. It outshone Melaka economically, and eventually it grew so mighty that it also became a military threat to the Dutch stronghold in the strait. In 1784 the unexpected arrival of a fully fledged Dutch state (not VOC) naval force, with a firepower unprecedented in these waters, ended Buginese domination forever (Andaya and Andaya 1982, 44–45, 74–84, 99–106, 112; Hall 1955, 292–94; Matheson and Andaya 1982, 1–4; Vos 1993, 64, 121–25, 147–85).

Despite the state fleet, Dutch power in these waters was clearly crumbling at the end of the eighteenth century. With the breakdown of VOC monopolies, which began about 1760, a new period of commercial expansion, cash crop production, and urban life began in Southeast Asia. The entrepôt trade at Riau before its conquest by the Dutch in 1784 and the growing tin export from Palembang outside the confines of the Dutch "monopoly" are examples of the late-eighteenth-century economic resurrection in Sumatra (Lewis 1995, 69–85; Reid 1997; Vos 1993, 73–117). On the west coast, Dutch possession faded into insignificance; British forces kept an eye on it during the Napoleonic Wars.

A striking example of a political and economic upsurge in eastern Sumatra was Siak. It gradually assumed the contours of a political entity in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The number of ships from Siak calling at Melaka rose from 9 in 1761 to 207 in 1785. Siak added pepper from its newly acquired dependencies on the northeast coast of Sumatra to its old export of goods from the Minangkabau highlands and forest products. Siak reached the height of its might under the half-Arab Sultan Sayid Ali (1791–1821), when it gradually united the east coast from Deli down to the Kampar basin into a loose confederation. In the course

of this process, the Minangkabau identity was replaced by a Malay identity (Barnard 1998, 210–55, 264–72; 2001; Kathirithamby-Wells 1997).

In 1798 the Dutch state decided to liquidate the VOC, and on 31 December 1799 the company's charter expired and was not renewed. Anything left of the VOC possessions was transferred to the responsibility of the Dutch state. Although Britain was the predominant force in maritime Asia in the nineteenth century, it did not seek to displace other European colonial powers. Following the Napoleonic Wars, it preferred the Dutch to any other, stronger, colonizing Western state in Indonesia. In 1824 the Treaty of London delineated a British and a Dutch sphere of interest, with the dividing line running down the Strait of Malacca. The Minangkabau saw the return of the Dutch to Padang in May 1819. This town took on a new lease of life in the wake of the success of coffee cultivation in the highlands and the development of a road network centered on the port. In 1821 a sizeable Dutch armada conquered Palembang after very heavy fighting. In 1825 the last sultan was deposed, and Palembang came under direct Dutch administration. In other central Sumatran areas, Dutch imperialism was guided by contiguity (protecting its interests in western Sumatra and Palembang), preemption (staking out claims before other imperialist powers), and responses by local officials to local threats, without prior consultation with Batavia or The Hague. The independence of several east coast states ended in 1858, when the Dutch concluded a series of new treaties with Indragiri, Siak, and Jambi. In this last kingdom, Dutch troops drove Sultan Taha out of his capital and installed a more amenable prince as the new sultan of Jambi. As far as the people of Jambi were concerned, Sultan Taha remained the rightful sultan, ruling from his base in the upper reaches of the Batanghari (Kielstra 1920, 33, 132–45; Locher-Scholten 1994, 91–136, 271–74; Tarling 1992, 9–18; Woelders 1975, 5–27).

Conflicting Ideologies

One cause of the structural weakness in Sumatran states was the tension between an egalitarian and a hierarchical, even absolutist, model, coexisting simultaneously. This situation is different from that of Bali and of the classical Javanese kingdoms, in which considerable village autonomy was permitted within the state structure, but not as an alternative stateless model for the organization of the society as a whole. The egalitarian, democratic principles were deeply rooted in the Minangkabau villages (*nagari*), which formed the basic units of social and political organization. Village affairs were decided in a council of male lineage heads (*penghulu*), each representing his matrilineal kin group. Decisions were taken by consensus after protracted deliberations, in which the *penghulu* representing the original settler lineages enjoyed a higher status than other villagers and consequently were more influential. The *penghulu* did not have an unconditional mandate, and each of them was obliged to consult first his own lineage members, including the women. Women had a considerable power because the usufruct of the lineage land belonged to them. Many adults, but not the slaves, were therefore involved in the decision-making process.⁹

⁹To what extent a Minangkabau *nagari* was a truly corporate body, a village republic, and not merely a bunch of matrilineal groups (*suku*), is a matter of debate (Kahn 1993, 71–72). This brief sketch of the Minangkabau village democracy ignores local variations and changes during the early modern period. To start with, a rough distinction existed between more

In the other mountain valleys of the Barisan Range, in Rejang and Pasemah, and on the upper reaches of the Indragiri, the heads were also scarcely differentiated from the other people, except by their title. Decisions were based on consent and heads did not have coercive power. The equivalent of the Minangkabau *nagari* in western Sumatra in Palembang and Jambi was the *marga*: loose alliances of villages inhabited by certain clans or lineages. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial state transformed the *marga* into territories with fixed boundaries (Andaya 1993b, 17, 30, 232; 1995, 545, 548–49; Galizia 1995, 41; Marsden [1811] 1966, 210–11, 215–16; IJzerman et al. 1892, 18–21).

The hierarchical ideal of sacral kingship had its roots in the world religions that had come from or via India. The adoption of Indian ideas about sacral kingship in Sumatra was a prolonged process, during which the Southeast Asians picked out elements they favored; many prestate ideas of their own persisted. Many ideas reached Sumatra not directly, but via Java (Casparis 1983; Kulke 1993, 265; Wolters 1999, 35, 58–67; see, however, Jordaan 1999). Even the sultanate of Melaka, through its predecessor Srivijaya, legitimated itself by a Hindu-Buddhist ideology of sacral kingship. Whereas in many Southeast Asian capitals the cosmic order with the ruler in the center of the realm was reflected in the physical layout of the cities (Reid 1993, 78–85), in the Sumatran states the image of concentric circles existed only at a conceptual level. The actual orientation of these towns was linear, with buildings stretched out along the rivers.

The regicide of Sultan Mahmud of Johor in 1699 ended the divine kingship in the Malay world, but the sacral king persisted in Islamic ideas, albeit in a modified form. Despite what orthodox exegetes may have said, after conversion to Islam, the rulers continued to claim divine status (Gullick 1988, xiv; Reid 1993, 170).¹⁰ Islam provided a new ideology which strengthened kingship “by depicting a Moslem ruler as ‘the Shadow of God Upon the Earth’” (Andaya and Andaya 1982, 53). Islam at a theoretical level does not separate the religious and secular domains, and the ruler was as much a moral and religious leader as he was a political leader. A good powerful ruler, typically called “sultan,” should quell rivalries within the community for the benefit of the common good. If a ruler’s decrees were in accordance with Muslim principles, divine authority would be attracted to him and his realm (Alatas 1997, 255–64; Johns 1993; Milner 1982, 113–14).

The main ideological prerequisites of a king can be deduced from indigenous historical chronicles. During the reign of a good king, the country was bountifully blessed by prosperity, cheap provisions, good rice harvests, peace and order, and a dense population. The king himself was of illustrious descent and was just, to foreigners as well as to his own people, and bestowed charity on the needy. He led discussions with his court members, seeking consensus and gaining unity. He took the lead in the harvest ceremonies and was the spearhead of the defense (Goudie 1989, 83–85, 95–97, 111, 119; Kathirithamby-Wells and Hashim 1985, 47, 49, 65;

democratic villages of the Bodi-Caniago tradition and the more hierarchical villages following the Koto-Piliang tradition. There were also supravillage structures, so it would go too far to speak of autonomous village republics. Most colonial and postcolonial representations of Minangkabau culture have a gender bias and underestimate the political power of women. For a more sophisticated treatment and details, see Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 1985, 245–46; Blackwood 2001; Dobbin 1983, 12–20, 63; Graves 1981, 14–15; Kahn 1993, 155–61; Reenen 1996, 68–74; Tanner and Thomas 1985; Vellinga 2000; Young 1982.

¹⁰A court chronicle of Siak stated that the sultan “descended from Iskandar and the gods [*sic*] of Heaven” (Goudie 1989, 127).

Woelders 1975, 238, 240, 242, 385). The rulers invested part of their income in an elaboration of their legitimacy. Various kings used their power and wealth to build a mosque and make their capital a center of Islamic teaching. The court of a good king attracted Islamic leaders from Java and, increasingly, Arabia and was thronged with many *haji* (people who have completed the pilgrimage to Mecca) (Andaya 1993b, 241; Gommans 1995, 100–101; Matheson and Andaya 1982, 161; Woelders 1975, 238, 385–87). It was commonly held to be a good thing to wage a holy war and, if necessary, be a martyr for Islam (Goudie 1989, 119).

The sultans of Melaka and later the sultans of Aceh and Banten—states which all propagated Islam—provided role models for the smaller rulers in central Sumatra. Of these three states, Aceh had the closest contacts with Mughal India, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire and had borrowed most political features from Islamic statecraft (Andaya 2001). The more fashionable that the title “sultan” (an Arabic word that denotes an independent ruler) became, the more the word became meaningless (Gullick 1988, 21; Johns 1993, 23, 27). The rulers of Palembang and Jambi began to use this title in the 1670s (Kathirithamby-Wells 1987, 41).

Like the Malay kingdoms on the east coast, the Minangkabau kingdom in the interior was also founded in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition; like its east coast counterparts, the Minangkabau royal family strove to retain the mystique of its supernatural power after conversion to Islam. It never adopted the title of sultan (Dobbin 1983, 118–19; Drakard 1999). Its supernatural status was undisputed, and its members were seen as holy men, rather than as worldly rulers (GM 30–12–1689, in *Generale* 1975, 5:327–28).

Egalitarian and hierarchical visions of the society existed side by side, but how they were related to each other in the daily praxis is unclear. The two ideals may reflect, first, an alternating hegemony through time; second, a geographical variation between the west and east coasts; and, third, a different point of view between center and periphery. If we think of the two ideals as alternating through time, each king, and occasional queen, was like a big man (Hagesteijn 1986, 107; Kulke 1993, 271) who had to prove his success. When he, or sometimes she,¹¹ was successful, an ideology of sacral kingship was readily available to buttress the ruler. If the ruler were not successful, then people would desert him (or her) and villages would become autonomous. Despite whichever of the two models was realized, at a conceptual level, the other one was always viable as an alternative.¹² The egalitarian model, derived from the Minangkabau highlands, was possibly more entrenched on the west coast, which was predominantly settled by migrants from those highlands, than on the east coast, with its mixed population. If Minangkabau leaders settled on the east coast, their cultural roots became mixed (*kacu*) with other traditions (Barnard 1998, 1–3), and democratic ideals became diluted. When the most powerful leader on the west coast (in Indrapura) assumed the sultan’s title in 1660, however, he soon came into

¹¹For instance, Jambi in 1633, Palembang in 1641, and Indrapura in 1775 were ruled by the queen mother (GM 15-12-1633, in *Generale* 1960, 1:415; GM 12-12-1641, in *Bonustoffen* 1895, 3:21; GM 31-12-1775, ARA, VOC 3421, f. 772v).

¹²A similar tension existed among the Kachin of highland Burma. The Kachin were a people with a so-called *gumlao* type of social organization, an egalitarian society at the village level. At the same time, they were also familiar with the feudal hierarchy in the adjacent Shan states. Actual political organizations of the Kachin oscillated between these two poles because aspiring chiefs, in imitation of the Shan princes, were toppled now and then by *gumlao* revolts (Leach 1977; Friedman 1979; Wolf 1982, 344–46; see also Andaya 1995, 552; Tooker 1996, 325).

conflict with the other chiefs who asserted their authority from the egalitarian Minangkabau culture. Despite Dutch support, this Sultan Muhammad Syah was unable to win political credibility (Kathirithamby-Wells 1976, 72–76). Whether someone endorsed the egalitarian or hierarchical view could have depended on that person's position at the top (center) or bottom (periphery) of the state. The hierarchical, centralized ideal was the ruler's perspective, and the egalitarian model was the interpretation by the common people at the periphery of the kingdom who may have simply ignored the encompassing pretensions of the hierarchical model (Tooker 1996). A. C. Milner's explanation that ordinary people did not consider themselves citizens of state but, rather, as subjects of a *raja* would then overestimate the commoners' consciousness of the king's existence (1982, 9, 114). The Sumatran states did not have spectacles comparable to the Balinese theater state, where it would have been impossible to ignore the ruler.

Unlike the archetypical big men from Melanesia, the Sumatran rulers did not have to achieve their position from scratch. Noble status was hereditary and, hence, ascribed to a limited number of persons who were candidates for the throne.

The Personalized Nature of the State

The second destabilizing factor was the role of rulers and dynasties as the focus of their kingdoms. Every sovereign could justly say, "*L'état, c'est moi*" (I am the state), but, alas, upon his demise, a successor could not exclaim with equal confidence, "*Le roi est mort, vive le roi!*" (The king is dead; long live the king). The death of the ruler created a crisis, a time muddled by equivocal rules of hereditary succession. Factions formed around brothers, sons, and other eligible relatives of the deceased ruler, who jockeyed for power, and, since rulers had many wives, they had an exceedingly large number of relatives. Most princes could put forward genealogies of comparable status. In Siak power rotated between two lineages. Each transition—or each coup—was marked by conflict and open warfare. Rulers who had fallen from grace fled in search of support to make a comeback to the throne (Andaya 1992, 419; Barnard 2001, 333; Milner 1982, 2). Each successor to a throne had to rebuild the state structure around himself. The personal network around a ruler formed the essence of the state, and there was no Weberian bureaucratic core which would remain intact to carry on state functions, regardless of who was in office. Bureaucratic states, whatever their flaws and merits, tend to be more permanent than patrimonial states (Evers and Schiel 1988, 231–33; Nagtegaal 1996, 51–52; Weber 1958, 214–16, 228–30, 245–52).¹³

The orientation to the ruler was expressed in royal symbols which focused on the person. Unlike the kingdoms of the Asian mainland and Java, which visualized the Hindu-Buddhist order in the world by the construction of spectacular temples and palaces (Day and Reynolds 2000, 3–7; Kulke 1993, 286–89), monumental buildings were conspicuous by their absence along the swampy east coast of Sumatra, where most buildings were constructed of perishable materials. In Sumatra, therefore, the prime symbol of royal power was possession of the regalia. Because the potency of the regalia continued unabated, mere possession of the regalia was strong proof of a ruler's charisma (Bentley 1986, 295; Gullick 1988, 45–46; Wheatley 1983, 243). Some of

¹³China under the Ming and Qing emperors and their contemporary Korean state provide examples of stable bureaucratic states (Mackerras 1995, 93–96).

the regalia, such as jewelry, anklets, and a *keris* (a dagger with magical power), could literally be carried by the ruler in person. For example, Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II, who was expelled from Palembang by British forces in 1812, took the regalia with him and remained the actual ruler despite his exile. The same is true of Sultan Ingalaga of Jambi, exiled to Batavia by the VOC in 1688 and, later, Sultan Taha, who was driven from the capital of Jambi by Dutch forces in 1858. All of these exiled sovereigns remained the real rulers—that is, they still commanded the people living in Palembang and Jambi, respectively—instead of the straw men put on the throne by Europeans (Andaya 1993a, 111; Locher-Scholten 1994, 144, 195; Kwa 1998, 119; Woelders 1975, 7–8). Although the rulers who had fled or had been exiled had kept the symbolic resources of their position, their actual hold over their followers was reduced because they had to make do with much less of their previous economic resources.

The fact that power was vested in the king personally gave special force to his words and letters. Decorations, seals, letterheading, phrasing, and the use of metaphors were all prescribed using local conventions. The broadcasting of a ruler's existence in the medium of writing was already an expression of his potency, through the wielding of the sacred script, seals and formulae. The power of words was the main asset of the Minangkabau rulers, who worked in a different political economy than the kings on the east coast. Palembang and Jambi sultans issued *piagem*. A letter was the representative of the ruler and deserved to be treated with the same respect as the ruler himself (Drakard 1999; Putten 2001, 5–15; Wolters 1999, 115–20, 176–78). For their part, courtiers showed the power of words and addressed the ruler using a special speech form and displayed other respectful behavior (Barnard 1998, 212–13).

The instability of the state could be exacerbated by whole usurpatory dynasties in search of a kingdom: the events set in motion by Raja Kecil are a case in point (see Barnard 1998, 212–13; Wisseman Christie 1995, 271). The personalized nature of the state was not confined to the top, but manifested itself throughout the political system, which was based on patronage. An aspirant king needed “little more than personal magnetism and enough early success to attract followers” (Bronson 1977, 49).

The Political Economy and the Tension between Rulers and Followers

The third destabilizing factor was the material basis of the states, which rested on followers instead of a territory,¹⁴ as well as the concomitant tension between ruler and subject. The relationship between ruler and followers was based on redistribution. At a theoretical level, one could understand that a successful ruler would try to alter the terms of exchange and give more immaterial, ideological rewards in return for material goods and services from his subjects. This act would alleviate the demand for material goods but would not eliminate it. To fulfill this expectation, a ruler

¹⁴One should not stretch too far the point that there was no notion of a territory. A group of peasants seeking protection from one ruler usually had to leave their old village and move into the area of another lord (Andaya 1993b, 197). Merely shifting allegiance without a physical move was not enough. An idea of territory was also clearly expressed in the 1681 treaty between Palembang and Jambi, which mentioned the transfer of the control over ten villages (DR 9-10-1681, 24-12-1681, in *Dagh-register* 1919, 597, 774–76).

needed to control vital parts of the economy, and in Sumatra, this meant international trade. Secure in a steady source of export earnings, the kings could procure both basic necessities to maintain their private followers and overseas luxury goods to placate their allied subordinate heads. The luxury goods served as prestige goods, products which are, in the words of Kasja Eckholm, “not necessary for material subsistence, but which are absolutely indispensable for the maintenance of social relations” (1977, 119; see also Claessen and Velde 1991, 8–13). The more exclusive a prestige good was, the more it was valued as reward by royal followers. A royal monopoly on luxury import goods ensured these goods were highly exclusive and enhanced their political value as a prestige good.

The Age of Commerce, the trade boom of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, poured unprecedented amounts of wealth into the hands of those rulers who successfully plugged into the world economy, subsequently promoting the formation of new states around centers of international trade. Rulers tried to tap the trade in cash crops by levying export duties and anchorage fees or by claiming the exclusive right to sell the crops to foreign merchants. Some kings even equipped ships themselves with a view to trade or piracy. The earnings derived from international trade flowed directly into the coffers of the rulers and, unlike the foodstuffs and services required from the populace, were not creamed off at each successive level of lower-ranking heads. Their access to foreign products, not control of rice or *corvée* labor, placed the kings above their noble peers (Reid 1993, 202–4, 217, 219; Tambiah 1985, 273–74).

Taking account of the societal format in combination with the political economy based on trade, one can see immediately why kingdoms emerged only on the east coast and not on the west coast. On the east coast, all trade had to pass along one of the few main rivers that could be dominated from one single spot. The west coast, by contrast, did not have such a differentiated landscape, but was characterized by the comb pattern. Dozens of ports were located right on the west coast, each as good as the next. Any ambitious local head who tried to control foreign trade would see buyers and sellers move to a neighboring port which offered more freedom. Even within one port, a man could not make himself master. All of the coastal settlements were governed by a council of elders, usually four to eight *penghulu*, often with a *primus inter pares* as a spokesperson, styled *raja*, *pamongca* (from *pamong praja?*), or *sultan*.¹⁵ Only outsiders—Aceh, Banten, the VOC, and the EIC—managed to subjugate the west coast people because they had their power base elsewhere. In contrast to local rulers, these outsiders developed something of a Weberian rational bureaucratic administration. This is perhaps most obvious in the organization of the European companies, but Aceh also appointed governors to the west coast who were replaced every three years; the system of appointed administrators outlived the

¹⁵Lists of place names and the composition of their administration can be found in ARA, VOC 1290, f. 638–43, Jacob Joriszn. Pits, “Beschrijvinge over de Westcüst caerte,” 25–9–1672; KITLV, H. 167, H¹ van Bazel, “De radicaale beschrijving van Sumatra’s Westcüst,” 13–4–1761; ARA, VOC 1518, f. 313v–55, “Memorie van Overgave Salomon le Sage,” 1–11–1692; Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI), Sumatra’s Westkust (SWK) 125–3, “Jaarlijksch verslag Sumatra’s Westkust 1819–1827”; ANRI, SWK 125–6, Algemeen Verslag (AV) Sumatra’s Westkust 1837. When one compares these lists, there appears to be both continuity and change in the place names, in the ranking of dominant and subordinate places, and in the number of *penghulu* and *raja* at each place. Because the lists are obviously sometimes adjusted copies of each other, no exact diachronic analysis of these lists was possible. The letters sent by these councils to the VOC mention between ten and twenty heads per place (*Dagh-register* 1899, 306).

Acehnese ruler who had introduced this system (Andaya 2001, 53–54; Reid 1993, 257–61). Even these foreign forces repeatedly faced rebellions which were far more frequent there than on the east coast, and they were powerless to prevent the smuggling of the local pepper and gold to other foreign buyers.

On the east coast, trade was much easier to control from one single point because of the dendritic pattern of riverine trade. At this point, the capital acted as “gatekeeper” (Wisseman Christie 1995, 249, 270). Every so often, however, the king sailed upriver in an attempt to bring rebellious people to heel personally.¹⁶ A special functionary, the *syabbandar* (harbor master) was given the task of seeing that no trade eluded the king’s scrutiny. Other nobles traded only with the ruler’s permission. Loyal groups of sea nomads patrolled the coast to detect traders who had not paid their duties (Andaya 1993b, 64, 121–22; Reid 1993, 120).¹⁷ Nevertheless, even here, kings were not despotic, and when they resorted to the extortion of their subjects, their group of followers would soon melt away.¹⁸ This relationship is the classical tension between the *hilir* (downstream) king and *hulu* (upstream) subjects. At an ideological level, the downstream port, *hilir*, may have been superior; but from a practical point of view, this was not the case. The *hulu* communities enjoyed a demographic superiority and controlled the cash crops and sometimes food supplies that the *hilir* capital needed. The rise of pepper cultivation in Sumatra’s *hulu* regions placed higher stakes on the *hulu-hilir* relationship and infused it with sharper political and economic conflicts. The tribal people in interfluvial and littoral areas also played a role as collectors of nontimber forest products. These tribal groups lived in dispersed groups and were highly mobile (Andaya 1995, 540; Barnard 1998, 55–60; Kathirithamby-Wells 1993; Sandbukt 1991, 44–45).¹⁹

The ports which relied solely on being entrepôts were the most vulnerable. An example is Riau, which collapsed totally after 1787. Ports with their own hinterlands, producing nontimber forest products or cash crops, in particular pepper, were more stable; the bigger the river basin was, the bigger the potential stock of export goods would be and the more successful the state tended to be (Miksic 1985, 441). One reason why Palembang eventually gained the upper hand over its neighbor Jambi was because the people in the *hulu* of the Musi did not have as many alternative outlets as the people in the *hulu* of the Batanghari. The Musi was a more tightly circumscribed area (Carneiro 1970) than the Batanghari or any of the other rivers on

¹⁶For instance, in the case of Palembang, see DR 12-4-1664, in *Dagh-register* 1893, 119.

¹⁷By the end of the eighteenth century, the sultan of Palembang could not prevent the smuggling of tin from his dominion of Bangka (Andaya 1993b, 219–21). Bangka, however, was an island off the Sumatran mainland and did not comply with a dendritic societal format. The considerable amount of Palembang pepper that circumvented the VOC monopoly was only called “smuggling” from the Dutch point of view. The pepper escaped Dutch scrutiny through one of the arms of the Musi delta, but this pepper did not escape the sultan’s attention higher up the river, above the point where the Musi was split up in the delta.

¹⁸Bennet Bronson states that port towns were eclipsed when foreign traders shifted their favors to a rival port (1977, 47). Because foreigners flocked wherever goods were offered, I believe that port towns declined for internal reasons: when a ruler pressed his subjects too hard, and they deserted him and no longer delivered goods for sale. Other external factors, such as a pest which destroyed the crop or an epidemic disease among the local population, may also have caused a decline in trade.

¹⁹*Hulu* producers of cash crops and tribal collectors of forest products could not, however, desert their *hilir* king scot-free. Moving away implied losing the ruler’s supernatural and more tangible protection, abandoning productive resources such as pepper gardens and *sialang* (trees with bees’ nests), and facing an increased risk of accidents in a new and unfamiliar environment.

the east coast. Furthermore, the Palembang ruler developed a second source of income: tin mining on Bangka (Andaya 1993b, 93–94, 185).

War and Diplomacy

Yet another destabilizing factor consisted of a protracted series of wars of conquest and a diplomacy of checks and balances. One way for a king to expand his resource base was to press his subjects harder, but, as we have just seen, there was a limit to this, such as when his heads rebelled against the ruler, the ordinary people deserted him, and traders eschewed his capital. There was also an external means of expanding his resource base: through the subjugation of neighbors. In Sumatra warfare was endemic on the west coast (Kroeskamp 1931, 117).²⁰ No party ever gained a decisive victory, and intervillage feuds dragged on from generation to generation. On the east coast, according to Bennet Bronson's dendritic model pertaining to the riverine states, to subdue the whole riverine system, it would suffice to occupy the downstream capital (1977, 46–48).²¹ The picture drawn by Bronson is not inaccurate, but is too simple. Defeated kings often retreated upriver and continued their rule from a hulu place. The interstate war, then, became a variant of hulu-hilir tension.

Instead of actually making a conquest, a ruler would more commonly gain suzerainty over neighbors.²² Powerful kings offered protection to weaker confreres. Sometimes minor kings deemed it wise to pledge allegiance to several suzerains at the same time or to change sides. For instance, in the fifteenth century, the young state of Melaka began to acknowledge distant China in addition to the overlordship of Siam and Majapahit. States expanded or contracted, depending on alternating fortunes, and the hierarchy among lords, overlords, and super-overlords was constantly changing. Therefore, Tambiah added the adjective "pulsating" to his image of the galactic polity (1985, 259–61). The changing of positions was facilitated by the fact that each subordinate center was a replica of the core center. The center not only faced the risk that a subordinate center might break off but also that the latter might subjugate the former center. Because centers and subcenters could interpret their relationship differently, the overall picture is one of overlapping circles of kings, or *mandala* (Wolters 1999, 27–40, 126–54; see also Kulke 1993, 263–84; Wheatley 1983, 422; Wisseman Christie 1995, 239–40). The prime example of a pulsating galactic polity was the sultanate of Melaka-Johor-Riau, which gained, lost, regained, and lost again control of the eastern Sumatran states. The rise and demise of Siak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Barnard 1998, 173–209, 246–71) and the changing balance of power between Jambi and Palembang are other examples.

²⁰Two eighteenth-century observations about the endemic warfare are William Marsden's classical work ([1811] 1966, 214) and the 1715 report of C. F. Hofman, published by F. W. Stapel (1935, 463). The contemporary European observers may have overstated the incidence of warfare and missed the mechanisms for peacekeeping, but the Dutch comparative characterization of the inhabitants of Sumatra's west coast as the most warlike people in the archipelago is telling.

²¹A necessary condition in Bronson's model is that the interfluvial countryside is so inaccessible that all movements of goods are confined to the rivers. In reality, however, there were footpaths between the Sumatran rivers, and since the condition of a strict separation between river basins was not met, one expects war would have been extended beyond attempts to control capital cities. Indeed, Jambi and Palembang fought about the control of the Tembesi (upper Batanghari) and Rawas (upper Musi).

²²A more limited aim than gaining suzerainty was the taking of captives.

The possibility of diplomacy aimed at checks and balances prevented sanguinary out-and-out warfare, but simultaneously it formed an important reason why warfare was protracted and rarely decisive. No overlordship was ever enduring. Endless opportunities for alliances were encountered on the west coast and in the interior, where political power was scattered. Clever political maneuvering could gain a competitive edge precisely because there was no clear economic differentiation on the west coast and in the mountain valleys. Alliances could develop into more or less stable village leagues, indicated by the number of places involved. In the Strait of Malacca, pragmatic rulers forged very unlikely coalitions in order to restrain a dominant rival (Matheson and Andaya 1982, 3). For instance, in 1681, in the middle of the Johor-Jambi war, Johor supported Jambi against Palembang in order to prevent the latter extending its hegemony.

European Intervention

The arrival of European seaborne powers introduced new political aims and military means without precedent and upset the local balance of power. The swift European military success against superior numbers of Asians needs some explanation. It could be attributed to a ruthless determination acquired in the European tradition of warfare and reinforced by missionary zeal, so much so that the adventurers often risked their lives rather than flee or surrender; the innovation (in Asian waters) of heavy artillery on board ships; the internal rivalries within and among the Asian states, allowing a minor European force to tip the balance; and the use of seaside fortresses virtually impregnable on the land side that could withstand the siege or assault of numerically superior armies (Boxer 1969, 49–50; Meilink-Roelofs 1962, 118–22; Reid 1993, 271, 281–82).

The VOC, the main European player, often did not retain its position in the intra-Asian trade by commercial means alone. Because of the high overhead costs of its military apparatus, the VOC had to ask a higher price for goods sold (or offered a lower price for goods bought), as compared to Asian merchants who did not have the military overhead costs and spent more on trade itself. The VOC therefore also applied force to trade and concluded contracts with coastal rulers which assured the Dutch of favorable fixed prices or a monopoly. These contracts were, no doubt, often forced upon the Asian states, but the latter received a twofold benefit in return, namely protection against third parties as well as a reliable customer. Conscious of these advantages, states quite often took the initiative in concluding such treaties (Meilink-Roelofs 1962, 260–61; Nagtegaal 1996; Vos 1993, 45–48, 57–58, 208). In any case, by the mid-seventeenth century, Dutch and English interference had brought the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce to an end (Reid 1993, 23, 270). In the course of the eighteenth century, however, Buginese traders, Arabs from the Hadhramaut, English country traders, and reemerging Chinese merchants freed once more from imperial restraints formed an increasingly important outlet on the east coast of Sumatra and an alternative to the VOC (Blussé 1999, 113–16; Gommans 1995, 91–94). On the west coast, English country traders and Chinese ships presented an alternative to the VOC. In the Strait of Malacca, the gradual growth of international trade took off in a new phase of rapid expansion after 1760.

In many cases, the treaties with the Europeans led to irritation and even caused armed conflicts between the contracting parties. One problem was the disparate

interpretation of peace treaties between local and European powers. Whereas the Indonesians considered them letters of intent and ritual objects which formed part of ceremonies expressing friendship, the Dutch wished to stick to the letter of the contents. For Palembang and Jambi, the most important clause in contracts was the first one, which contained an affirmation of lasting friendship and the promise of mutual help (Andaya 1993b, 146; Drakard 1999, 48–49).²³ The Indonesians were disappointed when their European ally refused to provide military support against an enemy by citing some clause in the contract.²⁴ The Dutch constantly scolded their counterparts for breaching agreed monopolies. Drakard argues that, for the Sumatrans, a contract sworn with unbelievers did not have the same significance as an oath sworn in the sight of Allah (1999, 49). On top of this, Malay and Dutch language versions of a contract could differ in content (Barnard 1998, 77–78).

European intervention itself was of course not unique to Sumatra, but what matters is how this worked out locally. The insurmountable obstacle in the Sumatran-European relationship was the different economic objectives of the buyer and the seller on the market. The foreign buyers, not only the Europeans but also the representatives of the kings of Aceh and Banten (Kathirithamby-Wells 1987, 32, 36), wanted a monopoly of the cash crops in order to prevent a price war in Sumatra and so that they might buy the goods as cheaply as possible.²⁵ This clashed with the ambitions of the cash-crop producers, who wanted an open market where they could sell to the highest bidder (Sutherland 1995, 137). Therefore, the leaders of the west coast offered the VOC a pepper monopoly in order to lure it into action to break the Acehese monopoly. As soon as the VOC had ousted the Acehese, the Dutch monopoly became too restrictive for the pepper sellers, and the coastal leaders invited the Acehese to return, or offered the pepper monopoly to the EIC.²⁶ In Bengkulu, local heads asked for protection alternately from Banten and the EIC, offering pepper in return (GM 19-1-1697, in *Generale* 1975, 5:817; GM 4-2-1721, in *Generale* 1979, 7:535; GM 6-10-1734, in *Generale* 1988, 9:593). For the local leaders, every successful attempt to break a foreign monopoly with the help of a third party brought in the Trojan horse of another monopoly. The result was a continuous breaching of contracts and endless

²³Although the VOC underestimated the relational aspect of the treaties, it understood the importance of the regular exchange of letters, which were received with much pomp. The letters remained one or two days on board on the roadsteads of Batavia before they were received with salutes, carried to the governor-general escorted by an armed guard, and read aloud in the court (for descriptions of such a reception, see, for instance, *Dagh-register* 1898, 380; Woelders 1975, 240). These missives did not just represent the king but were also treated with the pomp appropriate to the royal sender himself. As the governor-general once assured the king of Palembang, two of his letters were “received with the honor and solemnity which one usually offers to mighty kings” [met de eere en solemniteyt ingehaelt zyn, die men gewent is groote Koningen te geven] (*Dagh-register* 1901, 182). Letters from the Sumatran rulers were accompanied by royal presents, such as a pair of elephant tusks or a rattan cane with a gold handle. The recipient was entreated to receive the present as a “little flower without fragrance.”

²⁴The Painan Treaty of 1663, for instance, stipulated in which cases the VOC would provide military support and in which case it would abstain; for example, it would abstain when the Indonesian side would be attacked by a neighboring village or state.

²⁵Examples of monopoly contracts between the Dutch on the one side and Silebar, Indrapura, Palembang, Padang, and Indragiri on the other can be found in *Corpus* 1931, 2:163, 165, 209, 252, 291. In addition to price considerations, the European buyers liked a monopoly to ensure that a pepper-collecting ship would not be sent in vain; conversely, the Sumatrans disliked a monopoly for the restricted supply and variety of import goods (cloth).

²⁶Thus, the political unrest did not arise from an enduring rivalry between more or less stable pro- and anti-Acehese factions, as Jane Drakard suggests (1999, 47, 53–54).

revolts, which earned the Sumatrans the epithet “treacherous” in European eyes. Where there were not two but six European players,²⁷ as in Banjarmasin (Borneo), the sultan could play the Europeans off against each other, granting each party a fixed portion of the pepper but not a monopoly.

Local circumstances determined whether a contract with a European ally was a boon or a nail in a sultan’s coffin. In the cases of Palembang and post-1641 Johor, the Indonesian rulers appreciated the contracts with the VOC. Palembang never had to bear the full brunt of a Dutch monopoly because of the massive volume of trade (smuggling) which did not comply with the conditions set out in the treaty with the Dutch. The Dutch could afford to ignore the trade which eluded their monopoly contract—and did not have the means to prevent it—because they still received huge quantities of pepper and tin. In Jambi, by contrast, the Europeans upset the balance between hilir king and hulu subjects. The ruler had always lured followers from the hinterland by creating attractive commercial conditions. The treaties with the VOC and the EIC gave the sultans the ill-founded idea that they could at last tip the balance of power between downstream and upstream in their favor. Lulled into a false sense of security, the sultans began to exert more pressure on the hulu pepper growers, for instance, during upstream hunting and fishing trips. This policy backfired because the people living in the penepain and piedmont zone had, as always, alternative export routes at their disposal and simply eschewed the capital. When the upland pepper deliveries to Jambi diminished rather than increased, the European companies stepped up pressure on the ruler to fulfill his contractual obligations. The ruler now found himself caught in a downward spiral of increasing extortion of his hulu subjects and decreasing allegiance (Andaya 1993a; see also Reid 1993, 220–26). The sultan’s fate was sealed when the EIC withdrew from Jambi for good in 1677, leaving him at the VOC’s mercy. Within two years, he had to permit the Dutch a contract with a fixed, very low price for pepper and a monopoly on the import of Indian cloth (Andaya 1993a, 109–10).

Interference between the West and East Coasts

I believe that there is one more reason for the structural weakness of the Sumatran polities: the reciprocal interference between the west and east coasts. Most historians have focused on one state—with the exception of Barbara Watson Andaya (1993b), who studied two “brothers” (Jambi and Palembang) on the east coast. The political analyst should cast the net even wider, I think, and take the broader view of the west and east coasts together. In this balance between the west and east coasts, the main contenders on the west coast were not the nonextant local kingdoms, but the Dutch and British settlements at Padang and Bengkulu, respectively.

Some examples illustrate my point. Dutch attempts to enforce the 1663 Painan Treaty on the west coast immediately drove trade to the east coast (Barnard 1998, 62). In 1668 twelve elders from Kerinci, a large, fertile valley in the Barisan Range, signed a contract to bring their pepper down to the west coast, thereby turning their backs on Jambi. As a token of Dutch gratitude, each head received one piece of cloth (*Corpus* 1931, 2:410). In 1731 and 1762, the ruler of the Minangkabau kingdom, cooperating with the VOC at Padang, promised to close the route from his country

²⁷Dutch, British, French, Danish, Spanish, and Portugese (Knapen 2001, 68).

to Siak, on the east coast, in order to direct the trade to the west coast (GM 2-2-1731, in *Generale* 1988, 9:212; GM 31-12-1762, ARA, VOC 3031, f. 954r-v); whether he managed to implement this promise is unclear. In 1755 the heads of Pauh, a village at the western foot of the Barisan Range, promised to cultivate pepper and deliver the yield to the VOC, and explicitly committed themselves not to take produce into and over the mountains. The same year, the VOC sent an envoy to the king of Palembang because of the rumors that pepper was being taken to the other side of the island and sold to the British at Bengkulu (*Corpus* 1955, 6:51, 59). In 1734 and 1735, local VOC officials on the west coast reported that trade diminished because of the increased activity in Indragiri and Siak. Three decades later, the same was reported further south on the west coast when the villages in the interior at the same latitude ended a simmering conflict with Palembang and reestablished trade with the east coast. In 1790, only four years after the British had established Penang off the Malay mainland, the Dutch agents in Padang observed that their trade had declined because export products from the interior evaded the west coast and went to the new port via Siak (GM 30-11-1734, 12-10-1735, in *Generale* 1988, 9:603, 658; GM 31-12-1764, ARA, VOC 3099, f. 1656v; GM 31-12-1790, ARA, VOC 3869, f. 1995).

In short, the west and east coasts competed for resources from the same hinterland in the mountain zone. Two major ports on both sides of the island could not exist at the same latitude. Whereas on the east coast Palembang eclipsed its northern neighbor, Jambi, on the west coast the positions were reversed: Padang dominated its southern neighbor, Bengkulu. The fact that the VOC made Padang an important port that sucked resources away from Jambi should be added to the many reasons summed up by Barbara Watson Andaya in explaining why Palembang gained the upper hand over Jambi during the late seventeenth century. One century later, when the VOC at Padang was sinking into oblivion, Siak, not Jambi, seized the opportunity to expand its trade with the Sumatran mountains and piedmont zone. The prosperity in Siak was short lived not because Dutch forces disrupted trade in Siak itself, but because the Dutch rebuilt Padang's prime position on the west coast. In the course of the nineteenth century when the Dutch built a road network centered on Padang, they changed the centuries-old comb-pattern societal format decisively (Colombijn 2002, 95–98). Palembang had more resources than any other place and remained an important town throughout the whole period under scrutiny. Bengkulu consequently never had a chance to develop, and although the British settlement remained small and needed few provisions, it found itself repeatedly on the verge of starvation.

In this balance between the two coasts, the east coast was the favored side of Sumatra. Arab and Portuguese sailors in the sixteenth century and Dutchmen in the seventeenth century called the east and west coasts of Sumatra, respectively, the “inner” and “outer” coasts.²⁸ These words are not neutral but value laden and indicate that the Strait of Malacca was the privileged, sheltered route. When trade was liberated from Dutch, and earlier Portuguese, sea patrols, the east coast was the more prosperous coast. If we take the watershed in the Barisan Range as the natural dividing line between the west and east coasts, the east coast simply had a much larger area from which rulers could draw export goods to shore up their hold over the economy.

Conclusion

The evidence from Sumatra confirms that the early modern states in Southeast Asia were characterized by a structural volatility and that their rulers constantly had

²⁸For instance, see Alfonso d'Albuquerque 1506 in de Barros 1706, 209; Sīdī Ali Čelebī 1554 in Ferrand 1914, 510; DR 7–10–1675, in *Dagh-register* 1675, 1902, 259.

to worry about the continuation, let alone expansion, of their power. In the case of the central belt of Sumatra, various factors contributed to this instability: the tension between an absolutist ideology backing royal power and an egalitarian principle legitimizing village autonomy; the personalization of the state in the ruler, which plunged every (inchoate) state into uncertainty each time there was a succession to the throne; the far from perfect royal control of the international trade, which should have provided the ruler with basic necessities and prestigious luxury items with which to reward his followers; endemic warfare perpetuated by diplomatic alliances; European intervention that upset the local balance of power; and the commercial interference between the east and west coasts of Sumatra, which influenced the political economy of port polities that seemingly were neither political nor economic rivals. These six factors had a reciprocal impact.

Geertz's claim that the model of the theater state is widely applicable in Southeast Asia is not confirmed by the cases from Sumatra. Although the concept of the exemplary center was also found in the Sumatran polities, acting out this concept in big ceremonies was not the main aim of political activity. The exemplary center did not constitute the only legitimation of the rulers. The Sumatran rulers shored up their legitimacy by the introduction of Islamic elements that were blended creatively with the Hindu-Buddhist ideology of kingship.

The peculiar ecology of Bali, which does not play an insignificant role in the analysis of Geertz, is drowned in his strong argument for ceremonial concerns. The Sumatran evidence suggests first that ecological factors that are mediated through the societal format and the economic opportunities can to a considerable extent explain the differential stability of states, which is not the same as environmental determinism because the six factors recapitulated above cannot be separated from each other. Secondly, the Sumatran evidence shows that the popular distinction between riverine states and rice-plain states in Southeast Asia is too crude to be useful because all Sumatran polities discussed in this article fall into the category of riverine states, yet there is significant internal variation.

State formation progressed furthest on the east coast, where the societal format—the concentration of both inhabitants and traffic along the few navigable rivers—enabled royal control of the international trade. Palembang was the most stable state: it lay in the biggest river basin, and, hence, its ruler commanded the most resources. Its river basin was more circumscribed than the other eastern rivers, which means that the up-river population found it relatively difficult to leave the sphere of influence of the sultan. Conditions were less favorable in the more northern states on the east coast—Jambi, Siak, and others, where the footpaths between different rivers impeded firm royal control of riverine trade in one single river basin—and this, in turn, made warfare an attractive alternative option by which to establish such a monopoly. In the end, however, warfare weakened, rather than strengthened, the states. Not surprisingly, the weak rulers of these states were much more easily bullied by the VOC and had only meager success in staking out absolutist claims in confrontation with the egalitarian-minded inhabitants in the hinterland. The political economy of these states was further eroded by the location of the Dutch headquarters at the same latitude on the other side of Sumatra at Padang. On the west coast, no states developed at all. The major impediment lay in the societal format of the “comb pattern.” This coast had an undifferentiated landscape, offering the possibility for trading places to develop off any beach or a rivulet. Many villages lined the coast, each with a small hinterland of its own; but no single village, or any enterprising individual, lineage,

and clan, could control the economy as a whole. Therefore, there was no economic basis on which a strong leader may have build a large following.

The considerable variation in political development found in the relatively small area of the central belt of Sumatra casts considerable doubt on any attempt, such as, but not only, Geertz's theater state, to make generalizations for Southeast Asia as a whole.

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