From ‘piracy’ to inter-regional trade: the Sunda Straits zone, c. 1750-1800

Incessant ‘piracy’ in the Sunda Straits Zone in the second half of the eighteenth century tied to the expanding Canton trade. Bugis, Ibanun, Malay, Chinese and English traders were directly or indirectly involved in the plunder of pepper, a profitable commodity to exchange for tea in Canton. Their activities accelerated the demise of the already malfunctioning Dutch East India Company trading system and the emergence of a new order in Southeast Asian trade.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the emergence of the Canton trade began to seriously affect the Dutch trading system. As tea was becoming more and more profitable in Europe, East Indians, the English East India Company (EIC), English country traders, and the VOC, among others – enthusiastically promoted their trade in Canton, the only port in Qing China open to foreign traders.

To facilitate their trade in tea, European traders needed Southeast Asian products, which were in great demand in China. Tin, pepper and noble maritime products were, in this order, the most valuable commodities in terms of trade value; the EIC, English country and Chinese traders sought after these products in independent ports outside the Dutch trading system. In response, Riau, the capital of the kingdom of Johor, emerged as a new trade centre. Southeast Asian products were transported by local and Bugis traders to Riau in exchange for Chinese and Indian commodities, and carried by Chinese and English country traders to Canton. In contrast to the ineffective VOC monopoly system, Riau prospered by attracting traders from various regions in Asia.

The growing Canton trade and its demand for Southeast Asian products transformed the maritime trade in the Archipelago. Demand for products ‘banned’ by the VOC fuelled ‘piracy’ and ‘smuggling’.

Raiding intensified from the late 1780s. Two factors were behind this. First, Lingga emerged as a major base for raiding. The 1784 VOC attack on Riau and its subsequent occupation abruptly ended Riau’s prosperity. Although Sultan Muhammad of Johor successfully recaptured Riau three years later with the help of traders from Bugis and English traders, reports, some 10,000 piku (one piku = 61.75 kg) of pepper were traded in Riau in the 1780s. This meant that English country traders collected the greater part of their pepper in Riau. Nevertheless, important pepper-growing regions, such as Lampung, Palembang, Jambi, and Banjarmasin had already been incorporated into the Dutch trading system. This is why a certain proportion of the pepper had to be collected by way of ‘piracy’ and ‘smuggling’.

Although the Dutch continuously attempted to prevent raiding, their efforts proved ineffective. Dutch ships could not catch up with those of the raiders, as the latter could move faster with their lighter construction. It was also difficult to find the raiders hidden in small inlets and on the many islands in the area.

A new pattern in inter-regional trade

The risky business of raiding would not have been possible without a network that exchanged the booty for money or access to opium from Bengal gave the English an upper hand in competition with the Dutch.

Notes
1. My discussion is based on Dutch and English primary sources from the National Archives in The Hague and Jakarta, and in the British Library. Source references will be given in my forthcoming PhD dissertation.
2. Although Chinese-owned plantations in Sumatra turned to privateering, British traders were usually involved in this activity. The risky business of raiding and inter-regional trade existed in this area since older times, the trade patterns in this period were distinguished by two new factors: the role of the English in inter-regional trade and the role of Bengali opium. Since opium was further distributed in the area by the Chinese, the English and the Chinese emerged as partners. These factors became precursors to the South-East Asian trade that the British presided over after the establishment of Singapour in 1819. Raiding and the new trade patterns in the Sunda Straits Zone in the late eighteenth century were a result of the new order in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia.

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