

The Structure of Society



The Netherlands East Indies

The Aristocracy

In the traditional Indonesian society, before the arrival of the Dutch in the beginning of the seventeenth century, the relationship between aristocracy and peasantry was complex and deeply integrated and part of the unquestioned cultural identity.¹

Although social subdivision was far advanced in some of the few harbour principalities, with the controls firmly in the hands of the ruling noble families, in the large country-side, seniors in the villages often enjoyed a traditional and independent authority with little control by their aristocratic rulers.² With the coming of the Dutch East India Company the situation began to change. The power of the Javanese nobility or priyayi was challenged by the new force. With the increase of power of the Dutch on Java, the Priyayi suffered a steady decline in prestige. The prestige of the aristocracy was not only weakened because the foreigner took away part of their independence, but also because the Dutch allowed them to maintain some power and control over the native people. The Dutch sometimes even strengthened their hand against local adat chiefs,³ in a system of "indirect rule", with the result that the peasantry began to identify, the priyayi class with the colonial rule. The system of "indirect rule" allowed the feudal nobility to retain, be it with lowered prestige, an important position in the Javanese society. The "colour line", enforced by the Dutch rulers, also guaranteed that the priyayi class remained part of the indigenous society.⁴

¹ Du Bois, p. 33.

² W.F. Wertheim. *Effects of Western Civilization on Indonesian Society*, p.20.

³ R. William Liddle. *Ethnicity, Party and National Integration*, p. 26.

⁴Dr. J.M. Pluvier. *Overzicht van de Ontwikkeling der Nationalistische Beweging in Indonesië in de jaren 1930-1942*. (Survey of the Development of the Nationalist Movement in Indonesia, between 1930 and 1942), p. 11.

With the introduction of Western capitalism in the form of plantation industry and mining explorations at the beginning of 20th century, the position of the aristocracy, was suddenly weakened. The new money economy introduced into the Javanese village or desa undermined the traditional structure of society, upon which the power of the priyayi was based. After 1910, the nobility was faced with the dilemma of having to chose between an alliance with the unfamiliar masses or an alliance with the equally unfamiliar, but obviously more powerful, Dutch colonial capitalists. As a result of this the attitude of the aristocracy became ambiguous. It was opposed to a colonial regime that had undermined its authority and had thwarted its efforts to become part of the colonial administration beyond the position of being simply an accessory the Colonial regime . But at the same time it regarded the nationalist movement on Java as a threat to its traditional authority. Several of the leaders of the nationalist movement were younger members of the priyayi class who had studied in Europe, where they had come into contact with European ideologies. Upon their return they became part of a new upper-class of Europeanised intellectuals, with quite a different social and political outlook than their more traditionally oriented elders. Many sons refused to serve in the subservient positions their fathers occupied and preferred to become doctors or lawyers, not servants of the Colonial government.⁵ There were other problems as well. Traditionally, the priyayi class had seen their role in society in the light of what Sudjatkomu calls the concept of *derma-nglakoni*, the idea than one had to fulfil or to implement the role assigned to one in accordance with that station in the order of things to which one was born.⁶ The Europeanised members of the aristocracy did not always abandon this idea completely and as a result many Indonesian intellectuals saw their role as spiritual leaders rather than as members of the Javanese populace. They also tended to see a moral significance between events that were not necessarily there. Dahm refers to this when he mentions the *djababaja* syndrome, the belief in some kind of cyclical movement in history, which determines one's role in society.⁷ Dahm, for instance, mentions how Sukarno was influenced by it, and how it played a significant role in his concept of *Ratu-Adil*, or "Just Saviour."⁸ This mythological *Ratu-Adil* was firmly rooted in the traditions of Java. For instance, the popularity of such a leader as Tjokroaminoto was, in a society permeated with mystical relationships, based to a large extent on the similarity between his name and that of the traditional *Ratu-Adil*: Praboe Heroe Tjokro.⁹ Although such concepts made it easier for the

⁵ Jeanne S. Mintz. *Indonesia, A Profile*, p. 63.

⁶ Soedjatmoko and Mohammad Ali, G.J. Resink, and G. McT. Kahin, ed. *An Introduction to Indonesian Historiography*, p. 411. Soedjatmoko claims that the Indonesian historian is operating under severe handicaps. As a modern historian he is largely working in a society that is basically a-historical. The concept of *derma-nglakoni* also influences the Indonesian historian as a cultural man, because traditionally he has seen his aim in life "not to influence or direct the predetermined course of events but to transcend it by living in an eternal present..." The tendency is to "mythologise" and the popularity of pseudo-Marxist teleology "may be indicative of a predisposition rooted in traditional Indonesian culture toward deterministic or eschtological forms of the historical process." The problem for the nationalist movement was that, while it was trying to modernise the Indonesian society, it was at the same time claiming a certain uniqueness of the Indonesian nation as represented by the rural society and elevated certain traits of the traditional agrarian culture into "immutable virtues."

⁷ Bernard Dahm. *Sukarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence*, p. 8.

⁸ *ibid*, p. 7.

⁹ *ibid*, p. 11-19. The prophesy predicted that the *ratu adil* would be poor and at first quite unknown. This was highly advantageous to most beginning nationalist leaders. The prophesy also talked about the decline of the nobility as real rulers, and Dahm claims that this was one of the reasons for the weakening of the aristocracy. A somewhat debatable statement. See also V. Singh. "The Rise of Indonesian-Political Parties". *Journal of South East Asian History*. Vol. II, 1961, p. 52.

intellectuals to lay contacts with the traditional peasantry, the feudal connotations made it difficult to use them as vehicles for the transmission of modern ideologies.¹⁰

The political and social activities of the aristocracy were thus the result of various motivations and one cannot simply regard the whole nobility as just another class simply interested in furthering their own position in the Indonesian society. One certainly has to make a distinction between the "carefully preserved museum pieces" of the older aristocracy and their more progressive sons.¹¹

In general, although several of the younger generation of the Javanese priyayi were politically active against the Dutch Colonial Government, the majority remained aloof, and if they were politically active their actions were limited as a result of their past and present role in Indonesian society. The fact that the Colonial Government deliberately limited the flow of students from aristocratic families to study in Europe indicates that it feared that too many of these Western educated aristocratic intellectuals, might become active leaders of nationalist movements.¹² Although the "new" intellectual élite might advocate a strong nationalist course, this did not always mean that they were also socially progressive. These "new" priyayi often combined a real desire for freedom and patriotism with the urge of betterment of their own social and economic position. As a result a "fundamental change in the existing social structure" was not necessarily their primary aim.¹³

The Middle Class

The middle class in Indonesia between 1910 and 1930 was so small that it almost seems irrelevant to speak about it were it not for the fact that this group had far greater importance than its size would indicate.

By 1925, of all industries employing more than six persons, 2,816 were owned by Europeans, 1,516 by Chinese, and only 865 by Indonesians, Arabs, and other non-Europeans and non-Chinese combined.¹⁴ In 1928, less than 2% of Western educated Indonesians were self-employed, 83% worked for wages, only 2.1% of their employers being Indonesians. The remainder was unemployed.¹⁵ In 1928, of the 33,044 Indonesians who had at least primary education 45% were in government employ. Taking into consideration that only 75% were able to find jobs means that 60% of those who did find work, were employed by the Colonial Government.¹⁶

The reasons for this situation are many. Everywhere during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Javanese commercially interested group had been outmanoeuvred by the Chinese who had a long tradition of entrepreneurial activity.¹⁷ The Javanese handicraftsmen were put out of work by the importation of cheap, mass-produced articles from Western Europe and later from Japan. As a colony,

¹⁰ See Chapter 3.

¹¹ Du Bois, p. 36.

¹² Ruth T. McVey, ed. *Indonesia*. Robert Van Niel. "The Course of Indonesian History", p. 292.

¹³ Wertheim, *Effects*, p. 71.

¹⁴ George McTurnan Kahin. *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia*, p. 29

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 30.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 27-28.

the Netherland-Indies were not allowed to develop a native industry. Even European controlled manufacturing industries could not survive in the colony, except for a short period during World War I, when the colony was isolated from the mother country.¹⁸ It was not that the Javanese society was still in a pre-capitalist state of development or that Dutch and Chinese entrepreneurial activities took place in virgin territory. The existing Javanese merchant class was eliminated by Western capitalism and Chinese traders who saw themselves supported by the colonial regime.¹⁹

The important consequence of all this was that the Javanese middle class was almost entirely non-entrepreneurial. It consisted of government clerks, administrative clerks in the private sector, and of teachers, who were all dependent on jobs controlled by Dutch enterprise or the Colonial Government. The educated Indonesian élite, thwarted in its efforts to climb the social and economic ladder was, of course, opposed to the status quo in the colony, but this did not mean that they were therefore willing to become automatically leaders of political agitation. The intelligentsia had to a large extent contracted out of the traditional system of adat, or customary laws and mores, and had accepted a Western moral code.²⁰ As a result communications between the educated élite and the Javanese masses were weak. Furthermore, the intelligentsia was socially heterogeneous. It not only included members of the non-entrepreneurial middle class but also of the sons of the priyayi. As many were government employees they were protective of their position in the colonial administration and often paid lip-service to the Government.

Variety in social background, combined with the employment situation and smallness of the middle class, caused serious problems when it came to formulating common policies. For instance, the concept of swadeshi so popular with the Indian Congress movement, which was attractive to many Indonesians in the middle groupings, could not be developed on a scale even remotely resembling the movement in Bengal, where Tagore had been so successful in spreading the ideas of an integral Indian nationalism among a much larger élite.²¹

But whatever the differences among them, there was one certain force that gave some cohesion to all Indonesians, whatever their backgrounds. They were on the same side of the colour-line and they were all regarded by the white Europeans simply as djongos or house boys. Under no circumstances did the Europeans as a group regard the Indonesian as a person of equal intellectual, not to mention political abilities.²²

¹⁸ J.A. Wartna. *De Indonesische Nijverheid*. (Indonesian Industry), p. 12. Before World War I, efforts to establish factory industries in brewing, cement, matches, soap, oil, and paper, were not very successful. Only beer continued to be produced in Indonesia, but as a subsidiary company of a large Dutch brewing company. During the First World War, the colony experienced a short period of industrial expansion. After the war, commercial interests in the mother country asserted themselves and reversed the policies advocated by the "Commissie tot ontwikkeling van de fabrieks-nijverheid in Nederlandsch-Indie" (Committee for the development of factory-industry in the Netherlands-Indies), which declared on September 11, 1915, that factory production on a Western capitalist basis would be beneficial to the colony. This statement was followed by an installation-speech of the new Governor-General Idenburg, which advocated the same. (Wartna, p. 9)

¹⁹ Nicolaas Dirk Ploegsma. *Oorspronkelijkheid en Economisch Aspect van het Dorp op Java en Madoera*. (Origins and Economic Aspects of the Village on Java and Madura), p. 179-181, as quoted by Kahin, p. 2-3.

²⁰ Harry J. Benda and Ruth T. McVey, ed. *The Communist Uprising of 1926-1927 in Indonesia*, p. xiv.

²¹ Jawaharlal Nehru. *The Discovery of India*, p. 257; K. M. Panikkar. *Asia and Western Dominance*, p. 252; Wertheim, *Effect*, p. 25-27.

²² J. de Kadt. *De Indonesische Tragedie*. (Indonesian Tragedy), p. 26-27. The author mentions how only a small percentage of the 250.000 Europeans, of which 200.000 were Indo-European, had "normal" every day relationships with Indonesians. "Normal" in the sense that the Indonesian was regarded as an equal partner. See also, Kahin, p. 49-54.

The Masses

The penetration of Western capitalism in Indonesia, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had a great disruptive effect on the subsistence economy of Indonesia. The great plantation industries were at complete variance with the small-plot-rice-paddy agriculture of Java. The plantation industry needed large lots of land and either acquired estates or rented the land from whole communities.²³ As a result a labour surplus was created, which the plantation industry nor the mining companies could absorb, and immigration from Java to the outlying areas of Indonesia remained totally insufficient.²⁴ Plantation industry also forced the peasants into more strictly controlled village communes because the plantation owners preferred to deal with the powerful village council rather than with individual peasants. The village headman was often in the pay of the plantation. Although communal ownership did exist on Java, this new "communal" system did not benefit the peasant, whose role in the community was reduced to the point that he became little more than an underpaid labourer in the compulsory service of the plantation.²⁵

The introduction of a money economy and a more efficient and heavier tax system threatened the economic life of the Javanese peasant even further. Excluded from the markets by the Chinese, and forced to pay his taxes in cash, the Javanese peasant was forced to grow cash-crops for his Chinese moneylender, who not only told him what to grow, but set the purchase price as well. The result was that those Javanese peasants who had not already fallen victim to the plantation industry, became tenants on their own land, with the Chinese middlemen controlling more and more crop land. The cultivation of export-crops did therefore not benefit the Javanese peasant and figures illustrating the rapidly increasing export trade are very misleading as interpretations of the general welfare of the Javanese population.²⁶ Although the Colonial Government, for reasons explained later, tried to put a barrier between Western capitalism and the traditional society, and promoted private versus communal ownership to the extent that by 1932, eighty-three percent of the land was privately owned, the Javanese peasant could not make a living of his private plot of land over which he had only nominal control.²⁷

As the economic position of the agricultural masses of Java, and in the other regions of Indonesia as well, deteriorated, serious discontent followed and the failure of the development of a radical

²³ Pluvier, p. 7. The author discusses in some detail the causes of the increasing poverty in the Javanese desa or village. See also McVey, ed. *Indonesia*. Douglas S. Paauw. "From Colonial to Guided Economy", p. 157; Wertheim. *Indonesian*, p. 95.

²⁴ Mintz, p. 62. Also, Kahin, p.13.

²⁵ McVey. *Indonesia*. Paauw, p. 157. Also, Wertheim. *Indonesian*, p. 95.; Kahin, p. 14-18. These influences were not transitory but were felt till 1942, even though the Colonial Government had made an effort to protect the peasant from capitalist plantation-industry, with the main aim to maintain a politically stable traditional structure. In 1920, however, it had already become impossible for the peasant to improve his position in the changing economic structure around him.

²⁶ J.W. Meyer Rannett en W. Huender. *Onderzoek naar den belasting druk op de Inlandse bevolking*. (Investigation of Taxation Pressure on the Native Population), p. 11, as quoted by Kahin, p. 19-25. For instance, during the Depression the government protected Western rubber estates at the expense of native producers through export taxes on native rubber. "The evidence indicates that even prior to the Depression the general level of economic welfare of the native population was declining, while at the same time it was being obliged to shoulder a heavier burden of taxes." See also. C.Ch.W. Uffellie en W.H.J. Elias. *De Lands financiën. Rapport Visman* (Government Finances, Report Visman), Vol. I, p. 42.

²⁷ J.W. Stoppelaar. "De Aard van het Inlandsch Bezitsrecht op Java en Madoera." (The Nature of Native Property Rights on Java and Madura). *Koloniaal tijdschrift*. 1937, p. 398, as quoted by Kahin, p. 16-17.

movement among the peasantry cannot be explained by stating that their economic position had improved to the extent that they were not willing to revolt. Other reasons will have to be explored. To maintain that the Javanese peasant was simply too passive that this made him a defenceless victim of the new money-economy, as Wertheim claims, is not satisfactory either, because there were several major peasant revolts.²⁸

The conditions among the urban masses was different, but not much better. The urbanisation of Java proceeded along caste lines, and the Indonesian masses in the urban centres were segregated from the European elements. The housing of the Indonesian poor was abominably bad, while the bungalows of the Europeans were extremely beautiful, and the Indonesian urban worker was daily confronted with the colour-line.²⁹ As he spoke either Dutch or Malay, the lingua franca of Indonesia, he could be reached more easily by political organisers. The result was that the urban worker was more militant than the rural peasant. But the number of urban workers was small and the urban regions few in number.³⁰ Although they were employed in vital industries and transportation, where they could exert pressure through strikes and other militant action, they were, at the same time, also vulnerable to quick action by the police and army of the Colonial Government.

Islam

Islam in Indonesia was, as in other Muslim nations in Asia, undergoing important changes during the first decades of the twentieth century. The two major movements were Pan-Islamism and the Islamic Modernist movement and both were active in Indonesia. The Dutch Colonial Government was at first mainly concerned with the Pan-Islam movement, because it feared the international character of its ideology. As a result of this the Islam Modernist movement could easily spread throughout Indonesia.³¹ It was only later that the Government realised that the Modernist movement was the more dangerous one, because it tried to combine modern scientific concepts with the teachings of Islam, and was thus attractive to the educated élite in Indonesia who were trying to combine their traditional upbringing with the new values they had absorbed in Europe. The aim of the Modernist movement to "restate the principles of Islamic ethics in terms of social values"³² was more appealing to the Indonesian élite than the more conservative concepts of Pan-Islam. Islam in Southeast Asia, and specially in Indonesia, had never been the intense religion it was in the heartland of Arabia. Through reinterpretation and diffusion with local traditions, Islam in Indonesia had adapted itself to the culture of the region. As a result the Pan-Islam movement never gripped the imagination of the Muslims in Indonesia to the same extent as it did in the Islamic nations of the Middle East.³³

²⁸ Wertheim, *Effects*, p. 3.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 40-41.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 43-44. The 1920 census showed that 6.63% of the population of Java lived in towns. According to the 1930 census, 8.7% lived in 102 places regarded as towns. Of these half lived in towns of more than 100.000 inhabitants.

³¹ C. Snouck Hurgronje. *Ambtelijke Adviezen van ... 1889-1936. Uitgegeven door E. Gobée en C. Adriaanse.* (Official Recommendations by ... 1889-1936. Edited by E. Gobée and C. Adriaanse). Volume II, pp. 1107-1109 and 1615- 1716.

³² Kahin, p. 46. The author claims that the danger for the Colonial Government did not come from Pan-Islam ideas brought back by students from Mecca, but from the Modernist Islamic ideas taught in Cairo, "in particular those stemming from the teachings of Mohammed Abduh."

³³ Du Bois, p. 30.

Although Islam had played an important role in earlier uprisings in Indonesia, the modern revival of Islam could be used more effectively to counter foreign political as well as foreign religious influences. It could become a focal point for antigovernment action, because it had become more international and modern in outlook which appealed to the educated elite. It now became useful as a means to unite the people of Indonesia, who regardless of their geographical position in the widespread archipelago, or of differences in language, in general adhered to Islam. Some historians in Indonesia during the 1920's claimed that Islam was a hindrance to political socialist activism and that Islam was a cover for the bourgeois elements in Indonesian society, from behind which they maintained control over the nationalist movements.³⁴ But many Indonesian leaders sincerely believed that the concepts of Islam were a prerequisite rather than a hindrance to national unity, and that the international character of Islam would lead to a feeling of togetherness in the own national sphere.³⁵ The fact that so many of the marxist-socialists in Indonesia were Dutchmen, who had but little understanding of, and use for, Islam, and who regarded the religion essentially as an alien ideology, explains much of this opposition to Islam among the socialist leaders in Indonesia. They forgot that Islam had a long tradition in Indonesia of supporting resistance not only against the Dutch, but against their priyayi henchmen as well, who had not hesitated in the past to help the Dutch in suppressing-Islamic *fanaticism*. In general the new Islamic movements of the twentieth century had a revolutionising and modernising effect on Indonesian society, and the Dutch authorities strove to limit its influence, by supporting the rule of the adat chiefs and to encourage local patriotic feelings, and by presenting the Modernist movement in the areas beyond Java as a new form of Javanese domination.³⁶

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³⁴ Ir. S.J. Rutgers. *Indonesië. Het Koloniale Systeem in de periode tussen de eerste en de tweede wereld oorlog*. (Indonesia. The Colonial System during the period between the First and Second World War), p. 153.

³⁵ Hadji A. Salim. *Djedjak Langkah* Hadji A. Salim, p. 96. From an article Salim wrote in *Madjahah*, "Het Licht" (The Light), vol.1, March 2nd, 1926

³⁶ Wertheim. *Effects*, p. 54-55