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BETWEEN PRESTIGE AND IMPORTANCE: THE REASON WHY THE BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY SURVIVED IN BENGKULU, 1685-1825

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyse the reasons why the British East India Company (EIC) maintained its power in Bengkulu during the period 1685-1824. The research question in this study is: what were the main factors that encouraged the British to remain in Bengkulu? This study employs historical methods, including topic selection, heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography. The results of this study indicate that the main factor behind the EIC's persistence in Bengkulu was not solely due to the economic benefits of the pepper trade but also to maintain hegemony and prestige in competition with the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago. Pepper in Bengkulu became a political symbol and an extension of the EIC in the region. The EIC remained in Bengkulu until the London Agreement of 1824, which marked the end of its rule in Bengkulu. The conclusion of this study is that political dimensions and colonial prestige can be strategic factors as powerful as economic motives in maintaining colonial territories.

Keywords: *EIC, Bengkulu, Pepper, Economy*

ABSTRACT

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis alasan mengapa Perusahaan Hindia Timur Inggris (EIC) mempertahankan kekuasaannya di Bengkulu selama periode 1685-1824. Pertanyaan penelitian dalam studi ini adalah: apa faktor utama yang mendorong Inggris untuk tetap berada di Bengkulu? Penelitian ini menggunakan metode sejarah dengan pendekatan politik-ekonomi. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa faktor utama di balik keteguhan EIC di Bengkulubukan hanya karena keuntungan ekonomi dari perdagangan lada tetapi juga untuk mempertahankan hegemoni dan prestise dalam persaingan dengan Belanda di kepulauan Indonesia. Lada di Bengkulu menjadi simbol politik dan perpanjangan tangan EIC di wilayah tersebut. EIC tetap berada di Bengkulu hingga Perjanjian London tahun 1824, yang menandai berakhirnya kekuasaannya di Bengkulu. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa dimensi politik dan prestise kolonial dapat menjadi faktor strategis yang sama kuatnya dengan motif ekonomi dalam mempertahankan wilayah kolonial.

Keywords: EIC, Bengkulu, Pepper, Economy

INTRODUCTION

European colonialism in the Indonesian Archipelago is a historical phenomenon that has shaped the political and economic dynamics of the region for centuries. Since the

16th century, various European powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch and British have competed to control the lucrative spice trade route in the archipelago (Reid, 2011). In the context of Indonesian historiography, this narrative of colonialism tends to be dominated by the study of *the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) and the Dutch East Indies Colonial government. This dominance is very natural considering the long period and the profound influence of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia (Kartodirjo, 2014). However, the excessive focus on the VOC and the Netherlands has resulted in the marginalization of the study of other European colonial powers that also played a significant role in the history of Indonesia, especially the British through *the British East India Company* (EIC).

This historiographical imbalance creates a knowledge gap that needs to be filled to gain a more comprehensive experience of the dynamics of colonialism in the archipelago. As argued by Caplan (1989), balanced historical writing requires an exploration of perspectives and actors that have received little attention. In the context of British colonialism in Indonesia, academic attention tends to be focused on the brief but dramatic period when the British ruled Java (1811-1816) under the leadership of Governor Thomas Stamford Raffles. Classics such as Raffles' *own History of Java* (Bastin, 1978), as well as Peter Carey's modern study of this period, have dominated academic discussions of English in Indonesia. The focus on Raffles' period in Java, while important, has obscured the much longer British presence in other regions of Indonesia.

Long before the British controlled Java, the EIC had established its influence on the west coast of Sumatra, especially in Bengkulu, since 1685 (Roeloffsz, 2016). The British presence in Bengkulu lasted for almost 140 years until the Treaty of London of 1824, making it one of the longest episodes of European colonialism in a region in Indonesia. However, as stated by Purwanto (2017), the study of the west coast of Sumatra, including Bengkulu, tends to be ignored by historiography, given the importance of this region as a center of pepper production and as a base of British power in the Indonesian archipelago for more than a century.

Several works have tried to fill this gap, John Bastin in *The British in West Sumatra 1685-1825* (1965) provides an overview of British activities in Bengkulu. Other works such as Alan Harfield (1980) and D.K. Basset (1964) have also made important contributions. However, most of these studies tend to focus on the administrative and economic aspects of the pepper trade, without exploring in depth the more fundamental

question: why did the British hold on to Bengkulu for so long despite the frequent loss-making pepper trade?

This question becomes even more interesting when we consider that historical documents show that Bengkulu was often a financial burden for the EIC (Wilkinson, 1938). If pure economic motives are the main reason, then the rational decision is to leave Bengkulu. But in fact, Britain survived being forced to give up the territory through the 1824 Treaty of London. This article argues that the explanation for the British in the Bengkulu region cannot be understood solely through an economic lens, but requires a more comprehensive analysis that includes the political dimension, colonial prestige, and hegemonic competition with the Dutch.

Thus, this study proposes the thesis that the main factor behind the firmness of the EIC in Bengkulu is not only the economy of the pepper trade, but also and perhaps more importantly the desire to maintain hegemony and prestige in competition with the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago. Pepper in Bengkulu, in this context, serves not only as an economic commodity but also as a political symbol and a tool to maintain British influence in the region, this perspective offers a new understanding of colonial motivations that go beyond the economic paradigm that has dominated the study of European colonialism in Southeast Asia (Tarling, 1999).

METHODS

This research uses historical methods, while historical research consists of five stages: topic change, heuristic, verification, interpretation, and historiography. As for the selection of the chosen topic, Bengkulu during the British colonial period (1685-1825). The selection of topics in this study is based on the historiographical void that discusses British colonialism in Bengkulu which has been underpaid in historical writing. The selection of this topic is very important to produce a meaningful historical work (Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

Next is the heuristic stage, which is the stage in the process of finding primary and secondary sources related to British colonialism in Bengkulu. The primary sources found in this study include colonial archives and documents directly related to British activities in Bengkulu. The archives include reports of *East India Company* (EIC) officials, official correspondence between the British colonial government in Bengkulu

and the center of British power in India, as well as administrative records regarding the pepper trade, defense policy, and British relations with the local rulers of Bengkulu. In addition, treaty documents were also found between the British and the local elite showing the form of political and economic relations established during the colonial period. These primary sources provide a direct picture of British interests. Meanwhile, secondary sources are obtained from various historical works in the form of books, scientific journals, and research articles that discuss British colonialism in Southeast Asia, especially in the Sumatra region. Several historical works mention the role of Bengkulu as a center for the pepper trade and a strategic British post in the face of Dutch domination in the archipelago. In addition, the historiographical study of the East India Company, British colonialism, and the dynamics of colonial economic-politics is an important reference to enrich the analysis. These secondary sources help researchers understand the broader context and strengthen interpretations of the primary sources that have been found. This stage is very important to support the validity of the research and for the next stage (Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

Next is the verification stage, at this stage the sources that have been obtained will be searched to find the meaning and credibility in them. As for this stage, the process of source criticism is carried out, both external and internal criticism. This step is very important to take because it ensures that the data obtained from historical sources can be trusted (Kuntowijoyo, 2003). Interpretation, this stage is the process of giving meaning to the source or data that has been obtained. At this stage, approaches such as politics and economics are used to further understand why the British lasted so long in the Bengkulu area. Furthermore, the last stage is historiography, the stage of writing history based on the results of giving meaning. The historiography is the presentation of a meaningful and informative historical narrative about the reasons why the British lasted for a long time in Bengkulu. This historiography is arranged in such a way as to provide a deep understanding of events to readers (Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A. Trade Competition between the VOC and the EIC in the Indonesian Islands: The Roots of Hegemonic Competition

To understand why the political dimension and prestige were important factors for the British to rule in Bengkulu, it is necessary to first understand the context of the competition between the VOC and the EIC in the Indonesian archipelago. This rivalry was not purely economic competition, but was part of a broader hegemonic rivalry between the two European colonial powers.

The spice trade was the main motive of Europeans in traveling through other parts of the world in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Indonesian archipelago, with its wealth of spices, is one of the most important trading centers in the world. Tome Pires noted that the Port of Banten is a very crowded spice town, attracting traders from all over the world (Reid, 2011). However, what happened then was the transformation from free trade to a system of monopoly and political hegemony imposed by European powers.

The port of Banten, which is famous for its spice commodity trade, makes it a special attraction for Europeans to look for spices. In the early 17th century, the Sultanate of Banten controlled the spice trade in the western region of the Indonesian archipelago. Banten's dominant position required Europeans to ask for permission and make treaties with the Sultan of Banten. In developing the trading wings in the Indonesian archipelago, the Europeans then established trading companies: the VOC from the Netherlands and the EIC from the British. The two companies simultaneously opened a trading plant in Banten (Kartodirjo, 2014).

What is important to understand is that from the beginning, the relationship between the VOC and the EIC was characterized by intense competition, not only for economic gain but also for prestige and political influence. Further developments showed that the VOC gained a more favorable position in Banten, as evidenced by the close relationship between Banten and the VOC (Ricklefs, 1975). This diplomatic victory of the VOC was a heavy blow to British prestige and the starting point of a pattern of competition that would continue.

The turning point occurred when an internal conflict erupted between Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa and his son Abdul Kahar regarding the policy of the Banten sultanate in trade. The VOC cleverly used this conflict for its own benefit (Kartodirjo, 2014). The involvement of the VOC in the internal conflicts of the Banten sultanate provided a monopoly advantage on the pepper trade in the Banten sultanate area (Pudjiastuti, 2000). This event was very detrimental to the EIC who had already established a lodge in Banten, and because of this problem, British trade in Banten had to end (Roelofsz, 2016).

The expulsion of the British from Banten was not only an economic loss, but also a blow to the British colonial prestige in the region. In the context of colonial rivalry in the 17th and 18th centuries, losing positions in important ports such as Banten meant losing political influence and becoming a sign of weakness in the eyes of local rulers as well as other European competitors. It was this dynamic that then motivated the British to seek alternative bases in the Indonesian archipelago not only for economic interests, but also to maintain their political presence and influence in the region. Bengkulu is the answer to this need.

B. Finding the Real Treasure: Bengkulu as an Alternative Hegemony Base

The arrival of the British to Bengkulu in 1685 needs to be understood not solely as a commercial expansion, but as a strategy to maintain a political presence in the Indonesian archipelago after their defeat at Banten. The fact that the British chose to invest in building permanent infrastructure in Bengkulu despite the region's geographical and health challenges is a marker that the motivation for their arrival to Bengkulu goes beyond mere economic calculations.

Fierce competition in trade in the Indonesian archipelago has led British EIC companies to set up their trading companies in other regions. The British search to establish a spice trading lodge first went to Aceh, but they were rejected and turned towards the west coast of Sumatra. The previous British landing plan was in Priaman but ultimately landed in Bengkulu on February 24, 1685 (Bastin, 1965). The British were welcomed by the locals who were expecting their arrival, in the hope of being able to trade directly and freely, without going through the intermediaries of Banten. In 1686, the local ruler even asked the British to settle in Bengkulu (Siddik, 1996).

Before the British entered Bengkulu in 1685, this area was recorded as a vassal of the Sultanate of Banten, so the pepper trade in the Bengkulu area was sold to the port of Banten (Research Team, 1978). The arrival of the British in Bengkulu thus had an important political dimension: they effectively cut off the pepper supply lines of Banten and reduced the economic strength of the VOC alliance with Banten. This is not only an economic strategy, but also a rapid political move by the EIC in greater competition with the Netherlands.

After setting foot in Bengkulu, the British established cooperation in the field of pepper trade with local kingdoms such as Sungai Itam, Sungai Lemau, and Silebar in 1697 (Harfield, 1995). This collaboration was then evidenced by the establishment of a British lodge and fort in Bengkulu named Fort York (Anri, 2022). The construction of this permanent fortress is significant because it demonstrates the long-term commitment of the United Kingdom. Forts are symbols of political and military power, not just trading posts. This decision to build expensive defensive infrastructure showed that the British saw Bengkulu not only as a source of pepper, but as a base to maintain their political influence in the Indonesian archipelago.

On the way, the British in Bengkulu not only controlled the pepper trade but also controlled the entire political and economic system in the region. This strategy is in line with Furnivall's (1944) argument about how European trading companies in Southeast Asia gradually evolved from commercial entities to political powers. Thus, the British presence in Bengkulu fulfilled a dual function: as an economic source through the pepper trade and as a political base to maintain British influence in the Dutch-dominated region. This dual function explains why Britain has survived despite inadequate economic gains.

C. Bengkulu Pepper as a Form of British Hegemony in the Indonesian Archipelago

To prove that pepper is not only an economic commodity but also functions as a tool of political hegemony, it can be seen from the complexity of the government system developed by the British in Bengkulu as well as from the symbolic value of Bengkulu pepper in the power competition with the Dutch. If Britain's goal was purely economic, they would certainly be a system of simple and efficient government systems. However, the facts show otherwise.

During the British in Bengkulu, the government system or administrative, economic, and pepper cultivation developed rapidly. The administration of the Bengkulu region underwent three changes under the British EIC rule: in 1685-1760 the Bengkulu region was in the form of a subordinate Residency of the British region in Madras, India; in 1760-1785 Bengkulu became a Presidential area led directly by the Governor; and finally in 1785-1824 it again became a Residency area under British rule in Indian Bengal (Setiyanto, 2010).

This change in administrative status reflects more than just a bureaucratic adjustment. The change of the status of the government of Bengkulu to the Presidency (1760-1785) shows that the EIC considered this region to be strategically important enough to be given the same status as other British-owned territories in India such as Madras and Bengal. Presidential status means that Bengkulu has its own governor who is responsible for reporting directly to the EIC Board of Directors in London, rather than through a regional hierarchy. This decision cannot be explained through economic motives alone, especially considering that during this period the Bengkulu pepper trade often experienced a deficit (Wilkinson, 1938). Rather, this decision makes more sense if it is understood as a strategy to maintain political prestige and influence in the region.

This complicated system of government is also reflected in the policy of pepper production. The placement of EIC employees in various areas of Bengkulu is carried out in order to supervise the pepper yield policy, where every EIC employee is required to ensure that each head of the family plants 2000 pepper trees (Marsden, 2013). This forced labor policy was similar to the forced planting system later developed by the Dutch in Java, and reflected how economic interests were carried out through political power. This system also shows that for the British, maintaining Bengkulu pepper production is not only a matter of profit, but also a matter of political control over the territory and its population.

The symbolic meaning of Bengkulu pepper in competition with the Netherlands is very important. Bengkulu pepper is known as the best pepper with various varieties living in it. Bengkulu pepper is famous for having high quality with several types growing. This pepper is divided into three main types, namely Kaur pepper, Manna pepper, and Jambi pepper or pepper that lives in the highland areas of Bengkulu or Rejang (Marsden, 2013). In the context of colonial competition, the ability of the British to claim that they controlled the production of the highest quality pepper in the Indonesian archipelago had great prestige value. This is clear evidence that the British had an important role in the archipelago's spice trade, even though the VOC dominated other territories.

Bengkulu pepper thus became a political symbol of the existence of the British over the control of the spice trade in the Indonesian archipelago. As argued by Braudel (1982) in the context of the Mediterranean world-economy, certain commodities can have a value that goes beyond their market price they become symbols of power and prestige.

In competition with the Dutch, the ability of the British to maintain a monopoly on pepper from Bengkulu gave legitimacy to their claim as a major colonial power in the region. Losing Bengkulu would mean losing this symbol and acknowledging the power of the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago.

D. Declining Productivity of Bengkulu Pepper: Challenges to Economic Reasons

The period of decline in pepper productivity in Bengkulu provides the clearest evidence that the British presence in this region cannot be explained by economic logic alone. If economic gain is the main motivation, then times of loss should have encouraged the British to leave Bengkulu. However, the reality is different.

The pepper trade in Bengkulu is in fact experiencing ups and downs related to pepper productivity. Significantly, production decreased and losses, which then made the Bengkulu area downgrade to a Residency area in 1785, after previously succeeding as a Presidential area. The decline in the government system and the decline in pepper production are caused by several factors: (1) internal factors of the EIC, and (2) community factors and the natural conditions of Bengkulu. In some records, it is stated that the pepper trade in Bengkulu by the British was losing money from year to year (Wilkinson, 1938).

The factors for this decrease in productivity are diverse and complex. Natural conditions that have an impact on health became a serious problem, with many disease attacks that infected Europeans in Bengkulu, thus disrupting the productivity of the pepper trade (Wilkinson, 1938). In addition, internal factors such as corruption committed by residents also worsened the situation (Siddik, 1996). Structural conflicts between the locals and EIC officials due to the implementation of agreements that do not meet the expectations of both parties also hampered production (Kartodirjo, 2014). Conflicts can be seen in various protests and rebellions: the Sultan Shah Protest (1752-1789), the Kaur People's Protest (1774), the Seluma People's Protest (1777), and the Bengkulu People's Attack on Resident Thomas Parr in 1807 (Siddik, 1996).

Furthermore, in 1796-1799 the British opened another commodity in Bengkulu by planting coffee, cloves, and nutmeg seeds, so that pepper production received less

attention (Siddik, 1996). The emergence of these other commodities indicates that from an economic perspective, Bengkulu pepper is no longer a profitable investment.

The important thing is that although the British faced great financial losses, the British did not abandon Bengkulu. Even when the British attention was focused on other regions, for example when they controlled Java in 1811-1816 under the administration of Thomas Stamford Raffles, Bengkulu was still maintained. This decision to survive cannot be explained by the calculation of economic profits and losses alone. On the contrary, this attitude makes more sense when viewed from the perspective of factors and prestige: leaving Bengkulu meant that the British acknowledged the failure to compete with the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago and handed over the entire territory to Dutch hegemony.

As explained by Cain and Hopkins (1993) in theory *Gentlemanly capitalism,*Britain's decision to exercise imperialism was not always based on economic calculations. The decision is also influenced by prestige, political influence, and the interests of certain elites. The Bengkulu case supports this view. Although Bengkulu was economically disadvantaged, this area was still maintained because it was considered important for the British colonial prestige and to maintain their position in competition with the Dutch. Therefore, the period of decline in production actually strengthens the argument that non-economic factors, especially politics and prestige, have an equally strong role, even stronger than economic factors in explaining why the British remained in Bengkulu

E. Learning From the Past and Welcoming the Land of Hope: Singapore and the End of the Bengkulu Era

The end of British rule in Bengkulu and the transition to Singapore further confirmed that British colonial policy in the region was not only driven by economic reasons, but also by political and strategic interests. The British finally gave up Bengkulu through the Treaty of London in 1824 not because they surrendered due to economic losses, but because they found another place that was much more profitable to maintain their influence and prestige in the region, namely Singapore.

The great losses experienced by the British in Bengkulu during the reign of Thomas Stamford in 1818 made Raffles begin to question the importance of Bengkulu as

a trade route. So far, the British have stayed in Bengkulu mainly because of the competition with the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago. But Raffles began to see that there were other areas that were much more strategic, especially in the Malay Peninsula. This area was very important because it connected the British trade route between India and China. Raffles also planned to establish a free port, and the choice fell on Temasik Island. Bengkulu is considered too remote in the western region of Sumatra, while Penang is considered less strategic because of its position far from the Malacca strait (Wijaya, 2020).

On 16 February 1819, Raffles made a political approach to the Kingdom of Johor and Temasik Island, which at that time were still allies of the Dutch. This effort was successful, and the British established the Singapore trading post, which was then administratively under Bengkulu (Stephens, 1889). Raffles' success angered the Dutch government, especially Governor General Van Der Capellan. The situation was further complicated by the British Governor in Penang, Bannerman, also claiming that Singapore should be under Penang. However, the Board of Directors in London led by Sir Robert Inglis supported Raffles' action because Singapore was considered very strategic for British trade. Over time, Singapore developed very rapidly into a large port with very lively and profitable trade activities (Crawfurd, 2011).

Singapore's success as a free port changed Britain's calculations. With Singapore, Britain had a much more strategic and advantageous base to control the trade routes between India and China and maintain its influence in Southeast Asia. In addition to economic benefits, Singapore also provides great prestige value for the UK. This port became a symbol of British colonial success and was able to rival Batavia, the center of Dutch power.

Because of Singapore, the British were finally willing to give up Bengkulu. To end the conflict between Britain and the Netherlands in the Indonesian archipelago, both sides signed the Treaty of London on March 17, 1824 (Kemp, 1903). In this treaty, the British ceded Bengkulu to the Dutch, while the Dutch ceded Malacca to the British and recognized British rule over Singapore.

This series of events shows that the British gave up Bengkulu not because of economic failure. For decades the British remained in Bengkulu despite losses. They only

left it after finding a better alternative. Singapore offers something that Bengkulu does not have: a strategic location, great economic advantages, and increased prestige in the region. Therefore, the decision to leave Bengkulu is a strategic decision based on political considerations and prestige, not because of economic decisions alone.

Thus, the transition from Bengkulu to Singapore reinforces the main idea that political factors and prestige have an equally strong role and can even be stronger than economic factors in British colonial policy in the Indonesian archipelago. The British held on to Bengkulu for almost 140 years despite frequent losses as the area was important to their influence and prestige. They were only willing to let go of it when they found Singapore, which was able to replace Bengkulu's role with much greater economic advantages and strategic positions.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to explain why the British, through the *British East India Company* (EIC), remained in Bengkulu from 1685 to 1824. The main question is: what exactly is the reason why the British remain in Bengkulu? The results of the study show that this reason cannot be explained only from the economic side. To understand it, it is necessary to look at political factors, the prestige of colonial power, and the competition of Britain with the Dutch.

This study found that Bengkulu pepper is not just a commodity. Pepper also has a political significance because it is a tool for the British to show its influence and presence in the Indonesian archipelago. The system of government built by the British in Bengkulu was also quite complicated, even this region was elevated to the status of the Presidency in 1760–1785. This shows that Bengkulu is considered strategically important, not just economically profitable. The well-known quality of Bengkulu pepper gave the British its own pride and became a way to affirm that they still played a role in the archipelago's spice trade, despite having to compete with the Dutch VOC.

More interestingly, the British remained in Bengkulu despite continuing to suffer financial losses. Historical records, including those of Wilkinson (1938), show that the colony rarely provided profits. Pepper production often declined, and conflicts with the local population often occurred. From an economic point of view, the British should have left Bengkulu a long time ago. But in reality, they persisted until the signing of the Treaty

of London in 1824. This reinforces the conclusion that political interests and colonial prestige are just as important and perhaps even more important than economic gains.

The British move from Bengkulu to Singapore further confirms this. The British were only willing to leave Bengkulu after discovering Singapore, which was able to replace Bengkulu's role as the center of British influence in the region, but with much greater economic advantages and strategic position. So, the release of Bengkulu is not a sign of failure, but a mature and planned political decision.

These findings are important for understanding the history of European colonialism in Southeast Asia. This research shows that colonial motives are not as simple as seeking economic benefits. Political factors, competition between colonial states, and prestige of power are often the main reasons for a territory to be maintained. In addition, this research also helps to balance Indonesian historical writing by paying more attention to the role of the British, especially in areas that are rarely discussed such as Bengkulu.

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