

Spices in Indonesian History and Its Revival



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Abstract

This article discusses the fluctuating importance of spices in history with a particular reference to Indonesia. Drawing upon secondary historical materials, it shows that spices once played a central role as the driving force of world history. They became a source of prosperity in many parts of the world where the commodities flowed to reach their final destinations. The quest for spices had created fierce competition among the Western nations for spices monopoly, which led to the development of Western colonialism and imperialism. From the most needed products, spices gradually lost their importance and became marginal in the colonial economy. New commodities such as coffee, sugar, tobacco, and rubber developed and became important under the Western colonial systems. After going unnoticed for about two centuries, new interests in spices are returning, thanks to the growing public and academic interest in spices, which the Covid-19 pandemic has also accelerated.

Keywords: Spices; Indonesian History; Fluctuating Importance; Revival

Introduction

Spices are essential commodities that have influenced the development of world history for centuries. World demand for spices grew throughout the Roman era and into the medieval period. The demand for spices has influenced economic development from India to Europe. This demand gave birth to ancient international trading networks that shaped the structure of the world economy in a way and influence that can still be felt today. Mastery over spices proved capable of enlivening many regions and diverting the flow of wealth worldwide. The story of spices has become an essential part of many nations' historical development. It is common knowledge that spices are the main reason for exploration by Western nations in search of a new world.

The factor that determined the start of the story of the exploration of the world by the Portuguese and European nations was the control of Constantinople by the Turks, who then expanded to Asia Minor and Greece. The domination of the Turkish Islamic Empire in the Middle East had threatened the spice trade to Europe due to the protracted tensions between the Islamic world and the Western Christian world. In the era of ancient trade, products from Asia were on their way to Europe through three main gates, namely the Malacca Strait, the Persian Gulf, and the

Red Sea. The emergence of Turkish power has blocked the trade flow of Asian goods to the West. In 1498, Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama made the first sea voyage from Europe to India, skirting the west coast and the southernmost tip of the African continent [1]. Its most important mission was to find direct routes to places where spices were abundant at low prices without going through very long intermediary traders from producers in the Archipelago to consumers in Europe. This article elaborates the fluctuating importance of spices and its revival in the recent period after losing its important role due to the development of new commercial commodities under the colonial rule.

Materials and Methods

This article used secondary source materials in the form of historical books and relevant articles. Among the used sources are classic books on spices and their trade in the Indonesian Archipelago in the past that have been produced. It employed a historical method that generally includes four main stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography [2,3]. The information taken from the collected sources is critically treated to establish facts that are considered credible. The collected facts were then interpreted and composed into a historical argument of the article.

The Quest for Spices

The arrival of Da Gama on the Malabar Coast of India, the heart of the spice trade, marked the start of an ambition to dominate the trade in these exotic products, which involved a chain link between Europe and Southeast Asia. Portuguese control of the spice route is regarded as a heavy blow to traders in the Arab world and the cities of the Mediterranean Sea [4]. The desire to establish direct trade could gradually be realized after the Portuguese were able to control important cities such as Goa in India (1510), the City of Malacca (1511), the City of Ormuz in the Persian Gulf (1514) [1]. The shifting of spice transportation routes made intermediary traders lose their role in the spice trade chain that connected Asia and Europe. The trading cities of the Arab world and Egypt suffered a setback. They languished because of the disappearance of the spices trade in their cities, which had been a source of livelihood and prosperity for centuries. Islamic traders and trading cities in the Mediterranean world were victims of the revolution in the spice trade route introduced by the Portuguese [1].

Spices were an excellent commodity that was contested. The desire to obtain monopoly rights over the spice trade has created competition, often leading to conflicts and wars between imperialist powers. The four giant European countries, Spain, Portugal, England, and the Netherlands, were involved in fierce competition for control of spices. These four European countries mobilized all their resources from the capital, knowledge of sea navigation, ship technology, war equipment, logistical supplies, and cartography, to skilled sailors, on long journeys for spices [5].

The quest for spices had sucked up a lot of energy and resources, ranging from enormous costs for years of exploration, wars between countries, and subjugation of local people who refuse the forced control of spices. The spice commodity invited the Dutch to the Archipelago, who later formed a trade partnership called Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC). By force of arms, the VOC tried to impose a monopoly on the spice trade against various indigenous power centers in the Archipelago that controlled the production and trade of spices [5]. Through military conquest, the VOC successively obtained pepper monopoly rights in Palembang in 1642 [6], followed by the capture of the monopoly on the spice trade from the Sultanate of Makassar in 1669, and from the Sultanate of Banten in 1682. Around 1700, the VOC already held trade monopolies in Maluku, Makassar, Banten, Jambi and various other places [1].

Why were spices so tempting to European nations that they did not hesitate to shed blood to master them? For European nations, spices have many benefits. First, spices were essential in the taste of Western nations. The use of spices became a critical element of the European diet as a food flavoring ingredient which became a show of prestige at the dinner table among European aristocrats. Spices also presented many nuances of exotica for those who served and consumed them. However, the taste was

only the reason for some things. Many reasons still strengthened spices' charm and appeal [7].

The uses of spices were very diverse. Spices are used as food preservatives, medicines, burial processes, room deodorizers, and cult paraphernalia and are even used as sexual stimulants [7]. The use of vibrant spices has made the value of spices surpass precious metals in the past. The extraordinary benefits of this spice have encouraged the search for spices in the "new world" by Europeans since the fifteenth century, which was first carried out by Christophorus Columbus, an Italian explorer employed by the Spanish Empire in 1492, but a Portuguese explorer, Vasco Da Gama was more often regarded as a pioneer of the spice route, which began exploring the paradise of spices since 1497 [4,7].

Declining Role of Spices and New Commodities

The heyday of spices has indeed receded into the background, especially since the nineteenth century. Its prestige was fading, and its role as an export commodity for world markets was shrinking due to being eroded by new commodities that have sprung up and dominated trade in international markets. Since the collapse of the VOC trading partnership, Dutch interests in Indonesia began to evolve from a nation of traders who originally played a limited role as collectors of Indonesian products to a colonial nation with ambitions to build colonies and intervene in the process of plant cultivation. This laid the foundations through the control of the territory and the formation of the Dutch East Indies colonial state. Coffee, sugar, and other commodities, especially Java, became essential products produced in the Dutch East Indies. The growing global demand for plantation products has driven the large-scale conversion of forests to land for coffee plantations. Likewise, established rice fields and rural peasants were integrated into the sugar commodity production system to serve the interests of the colonial government in colonial exploitation ambitions to make the most of the opportunities arising from growing global market demand [8].

During the 19th and 20th centuries, spices pushed aside their prestige. The role of spices has become increasingly nebulous, pushed back and far from the center of attention with the advent of the tobacco commodity in the second half of the 19th century and rubber since the early 20th century. The role of spices as the main force driving historical developments has been replaced by plantation commodities such as coffee, sugar, rubber, and palm oil. The heyday of the Dutch East Indies colonial power was then more often identified with the exploitation of plantations, which for more than a century had gripped and transformed the society and economy of colonial Indonesia.

Under the government-sponsored Cultivation System and later through the commercial plantation system run by European companies, Indonesia's territory has shifted its image from a country of spices to a country producing coffee, sugar, tobacco, and rubber [8]. This legacy continued into the independence

era during the Sukarno and Suharto eras, making plantations a mainstay sector to support the national economy. During the New Order era, history witnessed how oil palm plantations experienced rapid expansion outside Java, especially Sumatra, and Kalimantan. The glory of spices and the prosperity that resulted from them have faded from memory.

Reviving Spices

Spices that have long been forgotten have again attracted widespread attention, and their revitalization was fought for in the early 21st century through public literacy. At least two critical factors are driving this development. First, the success of China in making part of the silk route in its territory a UNESCO-recognized world heritage. The Chinese Section of the Silk Road includes the Land Route and the Sea Route. This Overland Route covered ancient trade routes that started in ancient Chang'an, the city of present-day Xi'an, and the center of politics, economy, and culture in the old period of ancient China. This route refers to the commercial overland route connecting Asia. Africa and Europe also serve as main avenues of economic, political, and cultural exchange between East and West. At first, the function of trade routes was to transport silk, an elegant and expensive product that represented ancient Chinese civilization. Meanwhile, the Silk Road Seaway was a maritime trade route connecting East and West, using monsoons, ocean currents, and traditional navigation technologies [9]. The Chinese section of the Silk Road can be seen as a cultural bridge connecting different regions and countries with rich historical information. Therefore, when the name "Silk Road" was first given by the German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen in the 1870s, this name became widely accepted [9].

The success of China's cultural politics has inspired and aroused intellectual interest in Indonesia to revive Indonesia's historical role as a spice haven and for this role to gain formal international recognition. Various events/activities were held to echo Indonesia's significant role in the global spice route, including the "Spice Route: Untold Story" exhibition held at the National Museum in Jakarta on 18-25 October 2015; The Nusantara Spice Trail Exhibition, which was held on 4-18 November 2017, the 2018 Spice Route Expedition, The History of the Spice Trail and Kie Raha's Biological Wealth, which was held by the Ministry of Education and Culture 28 September-10 October 2018 [10].

The precedent for a revival of attention and interest in spices is inseparable from the publications about spices that have appeared since the 2000s. Several essential publications can be mentioned here; among them is the work by Robin A. Donkin, *Between East and West: the Moluccas and the Traffic in Spices up to the Arrival of Europeans*, which highlights the traffic of the spice trade from Maluku that links the East and the West [11], followed by the publication of *The History of a Temptation* (2004) by Jack Turner [7] and *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (2008) by Paul Freedman [12]. Fred Czarra's work

(2009), *Spices: A Global History*, examines spices from a global historical perspective [13]. It is also necessary to mention the publication of M. Adnan Amal (2016), *The History of the Spice Islands: The Historical Journey of North Maluku*, which reviews the long journey of about seven centuries of North Maluku history as a producer of spices [14,10].

The second factor that is no less important is the Covid-19 pandemic. The global panic caused by this outbreak has stimulated interest in utilizing the wealth of spices as an alternative weapon to maintain the body's immunity so that it is not easily infected with the virus that has shaken people worldwide. The passion for consuming spices and herbal ingredients is increasing among people. Many people searched for all kinds of spices in the markets, so prices soared, and it was common for the items sought to become rare and difficult to obtain because many consumers needed them. No less excited, in the academic world, spices have become a hot topic and are widely discussed in academic forums. Among the various events that were held, for example, a discussion with the theme "Spices in Commerce and Medicine" was held by BPNB Yogyakarta on June 17, 2020; The seminar "Path Versus Network: Spices Warm the World" was held by the Directorate General of Culture, Ministry of Education and Culture on July 24, 2020. The National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia also held a series of seminars on the spice route, for example, 'Preservation and Restoration of Ancient Manuscripts and Archival Sites/Artifacts Spice Path' on November 26, 2020 and "Tracing the Spice Trails Through Archives, Ancient Manuscripts, Sites and Artifacts" December 4, 2020. There are still many similar events to be added to the list, but all of them indicate one thing: the growth of new hopes for the wealth of spices as a valuable capital to build the nation's prosperity.

Conclusion

Historical experience in the past clearly shows that the story of spices has linked the Western and Eastern worlds, forming a global network that involves many nations, bringing together various ideas and influences in economic, sociological, political, and even cultural dimensions. Revitalizing spices requires cross-disciplinary collaborative efforts. The diversity of perspectives does not need to be contested but synergized as collective capital and strength in revitalizing spices. The revitalization of spices is not only a matter of technical cultivation but also related to more complex and broader aspects. An essential part of it is awareness and the ability to appreciate the richness of spices in cultural spaces creatively. In this context, spice literature in the large family of spice humanities has the potential to make a real and actual contribution to human civilization.

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