Pepper Trade and the Sultanate of Banjarmasin in the 17th – 18th Century

Dr. Ita Syamtasiyah Ahyat¹, S.S., M.Hum²

Study Program of History, Department of History, Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia, Depok

Abstract: Due to its proximity, between Java Sea and the Strait of Makassar, had made Banjarmasin the favorite port of call for many merchants ships from other islands, including Java, Sulawesi, even from abroad such as China and Gujarat (India). Furthermore, its strategic location, which was situated on the coast and on the estuary of a large river, had convinced Van Leur, a Dutch historian to come up with a theory that during its heyday, the Sultanate of Banjarmasin must be a maritime kingdom. Because of that reason, the kingdom was placing a strong emphasis on sea commerce for its livelihood and focusing its military might on a naval power. At that time, the area was already bustling with commercial traffic consisting of vessels and sailing ships from all over, travelling back and forth. To have control over such a heavily travelled body of water was obviously an advantage, because from the perspective of the route taken, maritime commerce was seen as less circuitous and more straightforward. The rise of the Sultanate of Banjarmasin as a significant maritime trading power occurred in the 17th century following the shifting of trade routes to the Moluccas (Maluku). Previously, the route was through Gresik, Bali, Sunda Kecil (Nusa Tenggara) and from there to Banda; later the route shifted through Makassar, Banjarmasin, Pattani, and China or from Makassar to Banten and from there to India. As a result, the port of Banjarmasin became one of the ports that supplanted the role of Gresik, when all the ports along the northern coast of Java fell under the influence of the Kingdom of Mataram under Sultan Agung, who moved the commercial center in Java to the city of Jepara. In addition, with the move, the Javanese traders at that time turned Banjarmasin as their capital center and the hub for their shipping activities. In the course of its relationship with the VOC (The Dutch East India Company (Dutch: Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) that lasted for two centuries; Banjarmasin, more or less managed to preserve some sort of sovereignty; however, it was at such a great cost, the pepper plantation, which was the kingdom’s unique identity and its main commodity was completely devastated. The same fate also befell its maritime commerce activities as well as the trade practices. Consequently, the kingdom’s prosperity slowly deteriorated and replaced by periods of shortage and turmoil. The Sultanate of Banjarmasin eventually went into a deep decline and simply lost its influence.

Keywords: Java, Makassar, trade, Banjarmasin, VOC

1. Background

Geographically speaking, Banjarmasin was sandwiched between Java Sea and the Strait of Makassar. Therefore, at that time the city was like a magnet, attracting traders from other islands such as Java, Sulawesi and even from abroad such as China and Gujarat (India). Structurally, by the end of the 16th century Banjarmasin was under the sphere of influence of the Sultanate of Demak from Java, which led to a trade relationship between the two entities. Traders from the northern coast of Java came to this port for gold, diamond, pepper and forest products and brought in onions, rice, tamarind and salt.

With regard to its geographical location, which was on a coastal area and on the estuary of a large river, Van Leur, a Dutch historian theorized that on its heyday, the Kingdom of Banjarmasin must be a maritime state. It was quite logical that such an entity would put an emphasis on the importance of sea commerce for its livelihood and entrusting its security on a naval force. At that time, the area was already bustling with commercial traffic with vessels and sailing ships travelling back and forth. Controlling such a heavily travelled body of water such as that was clearly an advantage, because from the perspective of the route taken, maritime trading was seen as less circuitous and more straightforward[1]

The rise of the Sultanate of Banjarmasin as a significant maritime trading entity occurred in the early part of the 17th century, following the shifting of trade route to the Moluccas (Maluku). Previously, the route was through Gresik, Bali, Sunda Kecil (Nusa Tenggara) and from there to Banda, later it shifted through Makassar; Banjarmasin, Pattani, and China or from Makassar to Banten and from there to India. As a result, the port of Banjarmasin became one of the ports that supplanted the role of Gresik, when all the ports along the northern coast of Java fell under the influence of Mataram during the reign of Sultan Agung (1613-1645), who transferred the commercial center in Java to the city of Jepara. In addition, with the move, the Javanese traders at that time turned Banjarmasin as their capital center and the hub for their shipping activities [2]

2. Focus of Discussion

This brief paper will explore matters related to the pepper trade and the Sultanate of Banjarmasin. The period covered in this writing is limited from the 17th century during the heyday of pepper trade in the Sultanate of Banjarmasin up to its decline in the 18th century. This work will bring to light the rise and fall of Banjarmasin and explore the local scenery at that time.

3. Discussion

In the mid of 17th century, with the decline of commercial centers along the northern coast of Java, such as Demak, Tegal and Jepara due to territorial expansion of Mataram, a kingdom based in the inland region of Central Java, had made a number of Javanese traders who were unwilling to bow down to Mataram to turn their focus to other regions outside Java and established trade relations with these regions, including Banjarmasin. Furthermore, the new trade
Banjarmasin was an area traversed by many rivers that connect the coastal and inland region. These rivers were the crucial lanes for economic growth as well as for political reasons, because they were easier to travel in comparison to the almost impenetrable land route through the dense forests. Barito River, the biggest river in the Sultanate of Banjarmasin was the most important river for transporting commodities from the inland to the coastal region. Of the many branches of Barito River, Banjarmasin River and Negara River were two of the most important, because they connect the inland to the coastal region. The port of Tatas (Banjarmasin) was situated at the point where Barito River branched into Banjarmasin River, and it was also the location where VOC built its trade representative office in 1747. Around 20 km to the east of the port of Tatas, on the bank of Banjarmasin River, there was a place called Kayutangi; it was here where the sultan’s palace was located. In 1771, the palace was moved by 18 km to the east toward Martapura to a place called Bumi Kencana [4].

Long before the spread of Islam in Nusantara, the sea has been widely used to facilitate commerce between islands and various kingdoms and entities in the region. For example, during the era of the Kingdom of Srawijaya, Srawijaya was a kingdom that ruled the commercial traffic in the western part of Nusantara. It was obvious; that many of the flourishing cities that situated on the bank of large estuary would eventually grow into a bustling city. The same was also true for the Sultanate of Banjarmasin and its port, the Port of Banjarmasin, which were visited by numerous vessels that dropped anchor there. These ships were there to buy pepper. This commodity almost by itself had pushed the growth of Banjarmasin, made the city thrived and elevated the status of the sultanate to a maritime trader kingdom.

Additionally, Banjarmasin was also known as a port of transit for commercial traffic from and to the Port of Banjarmasin. Since its inception, Banjarmasin had been visited by commercial vessels and ships carrying textiles, clothing, salt, rice and opium and chili pepper. These commodities were then traded with unique products from the Sultanate of Banjarmasin. The ships coming to Banjarmasin were from all corners of the globe, such as China, Malay, Bagis, Makassar, Java, Arab and Europe [5].

The rise of the Sultanate of Banjarmasin as a significant trading sultanate must have occurred in the 17th century, following the shift of trade route to the Moluccas (Maluku). While the previous route was through Gresik, Bali Sunda Kecil (Nusa Tenggara) and straight to Banda, it was then shifted through Makassar, Banjarmasin, Pattani and China; or Makassar and straight to Banten and India. As a result, this city port became one of the ports that supplanted the role of the Port of Gresik, following the annexation of city ports along the northern coast of Java by the Sultanate of Mataram, which later moved the commercial center in Java to the city of Jepara. Furthermore, the transplanted Javanese traders also turned Banjarmasin as their capital center and the hub for their shipping activities [6].

Pepper was the Sultanate of Banjarmasin’s most important commodity in the 17th century, in fact it could be said that that century was the golden age for the sultanate. This in turn made Banjarmasin felt it could safely turn away from the influence of the Kingdom of Mataram, which at that time was sizeable Islamic sultanate[7].

The growth of pepper trading was marked among others by the expansion of pepper plantations, which mostly were grown in the inland areas or upper area in a river system. Pepper is a tropical crop that needs to be planted on inclined or slanted ground. Banjarmasin possesses vast slanted areas in its inland region that allowed for the expansion and cultivation of pepper. The proliferation of pepper plantations and their valuable crops had made Banjarmasin dependent on the commodity for its livelihood.

One of the plantations was located in surrounding area of Kayutangi and Tanah Laut, near the center of government. Meanwhile, the larger plantations could be found in the inland areas, such as in Negara, Amuntai, and Tanah Dusun. Traders who frequently visited Banjarmasin had identified three varieties of pepper from the region; they were Negara pepper, Tanah Laut pepper, and Kayutangi pepper. Of the three varieties, the Negara pepper was the most common compared to the varieties produced in other regions [8].

Pepper trading in Banjarmasin in the 17th century was dominated by merchants from China. The large volume of pepper bought by the Chinese to be sold in their home country had escalated the pepper trading into a high level. Usually, when they arrived, the Chinese jungs were bursting with their load of porcelains, ceramics and other commodities to be traded, and on their way back, these jungs were loaded with pepper. The golden age of pepper trading was in the 18th century, at that time, it was common for fleet of Chinese merchants who arrived in Banjarmasin to consist of at least 12 jungs [9].
The demand for pepper continued to increase after 1747. Besides harvest from the appanage (land or other provision granted by a king for the support of a members of the royal family) of the sultan and members of the royal family and court officials (mantri), this strategic commodity was also cultivated by ordinary farmers, who live on fertile farmlands. Each harvest season, the sultan and members of the royal family and court officials purchased the produce through an intermediary or pembekal, who dealt directly with the pepper grower farmers[10].

As for the pepper transaction itself, even though they were the producers, the farmers could not set the price for their crops, because the sultan and members of the royal family and court officials had unilaterally set the price for the harvest, even though in this transaction, they were the consumers. As a common practice, the sultan paid 2 Spanish real for one pikul of pepper (a shoulder pole with loads attached at both ends) (one pikul weighs approximately at 125 kilograms) and resell them later for a profit. As an illustration, in 1755, the sultan sold pepper to VOC merchants at 6 Spanish real for a pikul of pepper or 8 Spanish real for a pikul of pepper to the British. The sultan’s profit could be even higher when he sold the harvest to Chinese merchants, who because of their strong capital backing, were able to pay up to 12.5 Spanish real per pikul. It was obvious that from this practices that the sultan would make a profit of 4-10.4 Spanish real for each pikul of pepper he sold or 100% to 200% of profit from the cost of purchase[11].

It was obvious, that pepper trading in Banjarmasin had brought prosperity to the sultan and members of the royal family and court officials. Proof of such could be observed from the Kayutangi Palace, which supposed to be quite prosperous, was decorated with diamond and gleaming precious stones[12]. In addition to that, the region of Kayutangi was famous for its abundant pepper crops and forest products that were exported to China. However, the richness of the region did not translate into wealth to the pepper growers. To them, the more flourished the trade, meant only one thing, more coercion and oppression to them, because the sultan and members of the royal family and court officials would not hesitate to force the pepper growers to relinquish their crop yields.

In the year 1747, VOC managed to solidify their position in Banjarmasin, through a treaty with the sultan that supposedly based on principles that would be mutually profitable to both parties. According to the agreement, Sultan Sepuh would allow VOC to set up a trade office in the port of Tatas. Furthermore, VOC was also gained the right to deploy their troops in Tatas under the pretext of protecting its trading interest. In return, VOC would protect Sultan’s interest in trading from harassment and competition from his rivals. Nevertheless, there were clauses in the agreement that were forced onto the sultan, i.e., a clause that forbid the sale of pepper to other parties except to VOC, thereby eliminating the opportunity to sell the crops to other buyer who were willing to pay a higher price, such as the British, a rival and also enemy of the Dutch, or selling them to the Chinese merchants. To secure its trade interest, VOC also placed a restriction to the activities of Chinese merchants. If prior to 1747, the sultan would let the Chinese to come to Banjarmasin freely, after the treaty, VOC would only let them come twice a year and the Chinese were only allowed to load pepper into a single jung[13].

The restriction placed on the Chinese merchants was a strategy by the VOC to control the price of pepper. However, the Chinese merchants persevered, and as a result, VOC had to take further action. In the year of 1756, or ten years after the enactment of the first agreement, VOC renewed their agreement with the sultan with even stricter provisions[14]. In the new agreement, it was stipulated that the Chinese merchants were only allowed to come to Banjarmasin once a year with only one jung.

The new agreement had solidified VOC’s position even more. However, apparently it did not present much of a hindrance with regard to the sultan’s relationship with the Chinese merchants. As before, the sultan granted them the rights to stay in a separate village near the coast. Sultan’s preferential treatment to the Chinese merchants was not without a risk, because in turn it fostered a feeling of antipathy and hostility among his own people who had their own agenda. One of them was, Tumenggung Jayanegara, a warlord, who was known to maintain a frequent contact with the British. To protect his interest and the interest of the British merchants who felt they were outdone by the Chinese merchants who were willing to pay a high price for pepper; in 1756, Tumenggung Jayanegara attacked and killed 100 Chinese[15]. The sultan reacted quickly and Tumenggung Jayanegara was arrested and detained, and the British lost their important partner. However, the British later found a replacement for the Tumenggung; they were members of the royal family and court officials in the inland region, including Ratu Anom Mohamad, who was the crown prince and Mangkabumi or Prime Minister of the sultanate in 1759, only a short while before he ascended the throne as the new Sultan[16]. Besides dealing with the British, Ratu Anom Mohamad also sold pepper to the Chinese merchants based in Tabanio. It was clear that this action was a contradiction to the content of agreement between the sultan and VOC. That’s why VOC consider his action as hostile, i.e. taking side with the enemy of the sultan and VOC, in this case the British.

Meanwhile, the close surveillance conducted by VOC and the sultan on the Port of Tatas had forced the British merchants to nurture a closer cooperation with the Chinese merchants. The pepper they had obtained was shipped directly to Bengkulu, which was the British base in Nusantara. In the effort to overcome this shortcoming, the British in Bengkulu decided to establish bases in Pasir and Tabanio. The consideration was because both of these bases were very strategic and close to Banjarmasin and they were not closely monitored by VOC. As a result, the British managed to get a freer hand in the area, particularly when they had to contact the members of the royal family in the inland region of Banjarmasin through Tabanio. In the year
1766 and 1770, three large ships belonging to the British managed to load a large amount of pepper from Banjarmasin.

Not only the British merchants and others including the sultan profited from trading in pepper, members of the royal family and court officials, such as the Princesses were also profited. They became rich, particularly in monetary term. They were able to afford various necessities for themselves and their families, even to buy guns. They considered gun ownership as a necessity to protect the interest of the members of the royal family and court officials, even though they were protected by their ally, the British. One of them was Pangeran Mas Dipati. In later development, believing that they had sufficient power, they had become emboldened and brave enough to attack and destroy Sultan’s merchant ships, when these ships were sailing into the inland regions. From the first half of the 18th century, the attack became more frequent. Attack by court officials became more and more common in 1770 and 1771, which reflected a shift of power in the Sultanate of Banjarmasin.

That fact above was the last blow that contributed to the decline and weakening of the sultanate in the mid of the 18th century. Finally, hostilities erupted and there was a battle of power between members of the royal family. Throughout this conflict, VOC was always involved, even though their involvement was selfishly intended more toward protecting their own interest.

In the year 1784, after a rebellion by Pangeran Wirasuta was crushed, it was soon followed by another one led by Pangeran Amir. Pangeran Amir wanted to revenge the death of his brother who was murdered in the last revolt. Just before the hostility erupted, the reigning ruler at that time, Sultan Nata, accused Pangeran Amir of destroying pepper plantation owned by the sultan in Muaraeteve, a village situated in Tanah Dusun. The accusation was made by the sultan to compel VOC to provide military assistance to the sultanate. His ploy worked because the Dutch Resident at that time, P. Welbeek immediately deployed his troops armed with muskets and cannons. Therefore, pepper, a commodity that was high in demand by VOC, had been used effectively by the local ruler to gain the military power of the Dutch Indies Company to crush the opponents of that local ruler, thereby protecting his interests [17].

Nevertheless, the continuing conflict in turn had resulted in a decline of pepper trading, following a drop in the price of that commodity. Another cause of the decline was the pirates, who made the area in the vicinity of Pulau Laut near Barito River as their bases. The pirates, sometimes put a blockade of the traffic passing Barito River, disrupting the traffic of ships loaded with pepper from the inland to port. Confronted by this dreadful fact, the sultan had to lower the expected revenue from pepper yields to the lowest minimum level, in fact, 1793 he simply destroyed the remaining pepper plantations.

The decline in revenue from pepper trading had clearly weakened the position of the Sultanate of Banjarmasin. While the kingdom was at its weakest, in the year 1787, VOC managed to impose another agreement with the Sultanate of Banjarmasin, which at that time was under the reign of Sultan Nata. In essence, the agreement stipulated three major points. First of all, the sultan had to yield all of his territory to VOC, except for Kayutangi, Martapura, Tanah Dusun, Amuntai, and Sampit; and even though these areas were still under the sultan’s, these areas were loaned to him, he was borrowing the areas he rule from the VOC. Meanwhile, the region of Tatas, Tabanio, Tanah Laut, Tanah Bumbo, and Kotawaringin were surrendered in full to VOC.

Secondly, the court officials (mantri) were required to appear before the sultan twice a year to show their loyalty to him. These two provisions were a confirmation of the provisions that had been stipulated before. The third point governed the appointment of a court official, in which it stated that before the sultan could appoint a court official, he must seek approval from VOC[18].

It could be discerned from the names of the regions surrendered to VOC that almost of them were coastal regions. Tatas was the largest port in Banjarmasin. So were Kotawaringin, Tabanio, and Tanah Laut, which were the gates for outside merchants who wanted to trade in Banjarmasin. Meanwhile, even though, it was located on the estuary of Martapura River, it was considered close to the coast of Makassar Strait. A prolonged war that lasted for several years in support of the sultan in the fight against his competitors had convinced VOC leaders on the importance of maintaining a strong military power to preserve a favorable situation in order to expand its trade interest even further in Banjarmasin and to solidify its position. For that purpose, in every region under its control, VOC established a military post consisting of troops and patrol ships. In Tatas, which was the largest port, there were nine experienced VOC troops in addition to a number war ships[19]. Meanwhile in Tabanio, they deployed 49-trained troops.

On the other hand, in addition to losing his territory, the 1787 agreement also put the Sultanate of Banjarmasin in a subjugated position under VOC. That agreement was also the reason that pushed the British to cease all of its trade activities and abandoned Pasir, their last post in Banjarmasin on 1789 and withdrew all of its personnel to Bengkulu[20]. That move by the British had made the court officials lost their strong ally, just like the Bugis. Court officials whose role in pepper trade had been greatly diminished finally also lost their military support and made them weak and unable to stand up against the sultan. This development clearly benefitted the sultan. It was true that the sultan had been a beneficial collaborator of VOC and he had lost some of his territory; however, he was still the ruler.

In accordance with the agreement, after the inland areas were secured by military expedition, the areas were then transferred to the sultan. To maintain security and order in the region, VOC and the sultan conducted joint patrol along the riverbanks that served as the main road from the palace to the inland regions. To support the patrol, in 1790 in Tabanio and Tanah Dusun, which were located on the estuary of Barito River, at the farthest extend of the sultan’s territory; however, he was still the ruler.
intended as a show of force by the sultan toward his rebellious court officials in the inland areas.

In the meanwhile, the obligation to appear before the sultan twice a year was eventually obeyed by the court officials. A number of court officials from Negara came to the sultan’s palace bearing diamonds, some pepper and other forest products. The audience of court officials from Negara occurred in 1791 or four years after the decree was enacted in the agreement. Another way to show deference was to pay head money. Head money or tax was charged to each household to the amount of 1 Gulden and may be substituted by other goods such as gold or diamond of the same value. Head money or tax was charged to each household to compensate for the lost revenue from pepper harvest, whose production had declined significantly over the years. In 1791, a court official collected head taxes in Amuntai. A year later, another court official, whose name was Pangeran Probo delivered the head taxes to Sultan Nata in Martapura.

The obedience by the court officials to pay their respect to the palace and their compliance in paying the head taxes in lieu of pepper harvest revealed the strong grip the sultan had over his subordinates. Until the early 19th century, there were no more rebellion against the sultan in Martapura by his court officials; hence, the sultan and VOC no longer had to send large expeditionary forces as before [21].

It could be said that there had been a shift in Sultan’s position. The court officials were no longer competing against the sultan, not unlike the golden age of pepper trade. The crucial blunder made by VOC was the reluctance of the Governor General in Batavia to learn from the past trading history between Banjarmasin and the Europeans. Banjarmasin kept its eyes peeled on the danger that threatened its sovereignty with regard to its relationship with the Westerners, and at the same time showed that it is a peace-loving sultanate [22].

4. Conclusion

In the course of its relationship with VOC that lasted for two centuries, Banjarmasin managed to maintain its sovereignty, more or less; however, it was at such a great cost, the pepper plantation, which was the Kingdom’s unique identity and also its main commodity was completely ruined. The same fate also befell its maritime commerce activities as well as the trade practices. Consequently, the kingdom’s prosperity slowly deteriorated and replaced by periods of shortage and turmoil. The Sultanate of Banjarmasin eventually went into a decline by the mid of the 18th century.

In the year 1809, the Dutch abandoned Banjarmasin when the British overtook the Dutch influence. In 1826 the Dutch returned, and pushed the sultanate to enter a treaty that for all practical purposes robbed the sultanate of its sovereignty. The Netherland Indies administration later realized the value of the sultanate as a source of revenue, and when they discovered coal in the region of Pengayon and Banyu Irang, they forced the sultanate into a concession agreement [23].

For member of the royal family and court officials as well as the sultan’s family, the agreement between the sultan and the Dutch meant that their revenues from the appanage (land or other provision granted by a king for the support of a members of the royal family) would decreased, their incomes would be lower, and more taxes to the ordinary people that drove them to poverty. On the other hand, the rich and the merchants, including ship owners were not affected by this [24]. According to EB Kielstra, in 1860 only a few regions in Nusantara had a level and wide spread of prosperity such as found in Banjarmasin.

Endnotes

[6] Saleh, Banjarmasin, page 55. VOC or Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie was the institution/merchant office established in 1602. VOC was a federation of six merchant institutions that since 1595 had been sending its merchant vessels to important ports in Nusantara.
[16] Sulandjari, Ibid., page 82.

References