

Max Havelaar and the Cultivation System

E. Douwes Dekker has been aptly described as the Harriet Beecher Stowe of the East Indies, for it was Max Havelaar which served as much to bring about the demise of the Cultivation System in the Dutch East Indies as Uncle Tom's Cabin did to end the system of slavery in the United States. Published in 1860, Max Havelaar describes conditions under which the Indonesians labored. Fully acquainted with Indonesia, having been in Dutch governmental service in Sumatra and Java for seventeen years, Dekker challenged the Netherlands to prove that the substance of his book was false. The debate which it provoked has not ceased to this day.

... [A] native functionary is placed at the head of a district of Java, who adds to the rank given him by the Government his autochthonous influence, to facilitate the rule of the European functionary representing the Dutch Government. Here, too, hereditary succession, without being established by law, has become a custom. During the life of the Regent this is often arranged; and it is regarded as a reward for zeal and trust, if they give him the promise that he shall be succeeded by his son. There must be very important reasons to cause a departure from that rule, and where this is necessary, a successor is generally elected out of the members of the same family. The relation between European officials and such high-placed Javanese nobles is very delicate. The Assistant Resident of a district is the responsible person; he has his instructions, and is considered to be the chief of the district. Still the Regent is much his superior—through local knowledge, birth, influence on the population, pecuniary revenues, and man-

E. Douwes Dekker (Multatuli, pseud.), *Max Havelaar, or Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company*, trans. Baron Alphonse Nahuys (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868), pp. 62–68.

ner of living. Moreover, a Regent, as representing the Javanese element, and being considered the mouthpiece of the hundred thousand or more inhabitants of his regency, is also in the eyes of the Government a much more important personage than the simple European officer, whose discontent need not be feared, because they can get many others in his place, whilst the displeasure of a Regent would become perhaps the germ of disturbance or revolt.

From all this arises the strange reality that the inferior actually commands the superior. The Assistant Resident orders the Regent to make statements to him; he orders him to send labourers to work at the bridges and roads; he orders him to gather the taxes; he summons him to the Council, of which he, the Assistant Resident, is President; he blames him where he is guilty of neglect of duty. This peculiar relation is made possible only by very polite forms, which need not exclude either cordiality, or where it is necessary, severity; and I believe that the demeanour to be maintained in this relation is very well described in the official instructions on the subject, as follows, "The European functionary has to treat the native functionary, who aids him, as his younger brother." But he must not forget that this younger brother is very much loved, or feared, by his parents, and in the event of any dispute, his own seniority would immediately be accounted as a motive for taking it amiss that he did not treat his younger brother with more indulgence.

The innate courteousness of the Javanese grandee,—even the common Javanese are much politer than Europeans in the same condition,—makes this apparently difficult relation more tolerable than it otherwise would be.

Let the European have a good education, with some refinement, let him behave himself with a friendly dignity, and he may be assured that the Regent on his part will do all in his power to facilitate his rule. The distasteful command put in an inviting form is punctually performed. The difference in position, birth, wealth, is effaced by the Regent himself, who raises the European, as Representative of the King of the Netherlands, to his own position; and the result of a relation which, viewed superciliously,

would have brought about collision, is very often the source of an agreeable intercourse.

I said that such Regents had precedence over the European functionaries on account of their wealth; and this is a matter of course. The European, when he is summoned to govern a province which in surface is equal to many German duchies, is generally a person of middle or more advanced age, married and a father: he fills an office to gain his livelihood. His pay is only sufficient, and often insufficient, to procure what is necessary for his family. The Regent is "Tommongong," "Adhipatti," yes, even "Pangerang," that is, a "Javanese prince." The question for him is not that of getting his living; he must live according to his rank.

While the European lives in a house, *his* residence is often a *Kratoon* [palace], with many houses and villages therein. Where the European has a wife with three or four children, he supports a great number of women with their attendants. While the European rides out, followed by a few officers—as many as are necessary to draw up reports on his journey of inspection,—the Regent is followed by hundreds of retainers that belong to his suite, and in the eyes of the people these are inseparable from his high rank. The European lives citizen-like; the Regent lives—or is supposed to live—as a Prince.

But all this must be paid for. The Dutch Government which has founded itself on the influence of these Regents, knows this; and therefore nothing is more natural than that it has raised their incomes to a standard that must appear exaggerated to one unacquainted with Indian affairs, but which is in truth very seldom sufficient to meet the expenses that are necessarily incurred by the mode of life of such a native chief.

It is no uncommon thing to find Regents in pecuniary difficulties who have an income of two or three hundred thousand guilders. This is brought about by the princely indifference with which they lavish their money, and neglect to watch their inferiors, by their fondness for buying, and, above all things, the abuse often made of these qualities by Europeans. The revenue of the Javanese grandees may be divided into four parts. In the first place, their

fixed monthly pay; secondly, a fixed sum as indemnification for their bought-up rights, which have passed to the Dutch Government; thirdly, a premium on the productions of their regency,—as coffee, sugar, indigo, cinnamon, etc.; and lastly, the arbitrary disposal of the labour and property of their subjects. The two last-mentioned sources of revenue need some explanation. The Javanese is by nature a husbandman; the ground whereon he is born, which gives much for little labour, allures him to it, and, above all things, he devotes his whole heart and soul to the cultivating of his rice-fields, in which he is very clever. He grows up in the midst of his *sawahs* [rice fields] . . . ; when still very young, he accompanies his father to the field, where he helps him in his labour with plough and spade, in constructing dams and drains to irrigate his fields; he counts his years by harvests; he estimates time by the colour of the blades in his field; he is at home amongst the companions who cut paddy with him; he chooses his wife amongst the girls of the *dessah* [village], who every evening tread the rice with joyous songs. The possession of a few buffaloes for ploughing is the ideal of his dreams. The cultivation of rice is in Java what the vintage is in the Rhine provinces and in the south of France. But there came foreigners from the West, who made themselves masters of the country. They wished to profit by the fertility of the soil, and ordered the native to devote a part of his time and labour to the cultivation of other things which should produce higher profits in the markets of Europe. To persuade the lower orders to do so, they had only to follow a very simple policy. The Javanese obeys his chiefs; to win the chiefs, it was only necessary to give them a part of the gain,—and success was complete.

To be convinced of the success of that policy we need only consider the immense quantity of Javanese products sold in Holland; and we shall also be convinced of its injustice, for, if anybody should ask if the husbandman himself gets a reward in proportion to that quantity, then I must give a negative answer. The Government compels him to cultivate certain products on his ground; it punishes him if he sells what he has produced to any purchaser but itself; and *it* fixes the price actually paid. The expenses of

transport to Europe through a privileged trading company are high; the money paid to the chiefs for encouragement increases the prime cost; and because the entire trade *must* produce profit, that profit cannot be got in any other way than by paying the Javanese just enough to keep him from starving, which would lessen the producing power of the nation.

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Early French Imperialism in Cochinchina

Francis Garnier, who under the pseudonym G. Francis, published several remarkable pamphlets on Cochinchina in the 1860's, was a precocious young man who had served as ensign in the French Imperial Navy in China and subsequently became an outstanding administrative official in Cholon. He strongly opposed the "retrocession" of the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina ceded to France, a subject seriously debated in Paris at that time. This attitude is clearly reflected in the excerpts taken from "La Cochinchine française en 1864" and "De la colonisation de la Cochinchine," written in 1864 and 1865, respectively.

FRENCH COCHINCHINA IN 1864

Communal organization remains the basis of Annamite society; this basis is so strong that, in spite of the war, in spite of efforts by the Annamite authorities of the French provinces, emigration outside of the French territory has taken place only to a very minor degree. We have here a powerful means of action of which we must carefully maintain (even) the least important cogs. Let us give the most complete liberty to the election of the mayors [chiefs]; let us increase (their) influence, (their) privileges, let us

Georges Taboulet, ed., *La geste française en Indochine* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1956), Vol. II, pp. 542-545. English translation by Margaret W. Broekhuysen. By permission of the author and Adrien-Maisonneuve.

make of them the born natural defenders of the population. . . . When this foundation of the structure is thus carefully preserved and respected, the Annamites will accept very quickly. . . . French administrators replacing the greedy mandarins at the head (of the state). At the same time, the arrival of European commerce, the opening up of markets will increase the general wealth a hundred-fold and will topple the latest prejudices. When the works have been executed, when the means of communication will have been established, the measures taken for the benefit of public hygiene will appear to them to be worthy of admiration and gratitude. . . .

It is scarcely three years ago that we definitely took possession of the shores of the "Donnai"; only a year has gone by since the last troubles. . . . Already taxes are coming in well, our orders are being carried out perfectly. The instigators of the insurrection who, eighteen months ago, ran through the country in all safety, strong through the secret sympathy of all, now have difficulty in finding a safe asylum; some have even been handed over by the villages where they had taken refuge. Unfortunately it is not so everywhere; in the most remote districts, where the insurrection for a time had the possibility to establish itself more completely, the rebel chiefs have preserved all their prestige. There an implacable repression is necessary. We must reassure the Annamites by unchallengeable proofs that our establishment is a stable one. . . .

If I have correctly evaluated the case with which the population could be made to submit promptly and completely, we can hope, after a very short lapse of time, to see the armed occupation reduced to more normal proportions and the military government replaced by a civil administration. Without ignoring all that the former has done for the conquest and the organization of the colony, one cannot deny that it has the drawback of constantly causing a certain uneasiness. . . . (because of) the frequent and inevitable changes which it makes in the direction of (our) affairs. . . . (Also it is) too absolute in its way of seeing things, it often is wrong in wanting to have the country adjust to its ideas, instead of modifying the latter in accordance with the country. . . .

. . . It is indispensable that France follow with an attentive eye