

Historical Review of the Role of Saparua Chinese in the Spice Trade from the Colonial to the Reformation

Risa Junita Sari¹, M. Satria Nugraha², Livia Ersi³, Refni Yulia⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Department of Military History, Universitas Pertahanan, Bogor, Indonesia. Email: risajunjtasari12@gmail.com¹, muhsatriamug@gmail.com², ersy.via@gmail.com³, refniyulia17@gmail.com⁴

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the role of ethnic Chinese in the island of Saparua's spice trade. Spices are among the trade commodities with the highest prices. For decades, Chinese traders have been among the distributors of Asian spices to Europe. The progress of maritime routes also affected spice trade activities in the archipelago. In the 16th century, Europeans such as the Portuguese were directly involved in the trade in the Maluku, followed by a trade monopoly by Dutch companies. With the times, spices are no longer a priority in international trade. So, after independence, until the reform of spice prices, it experienced ups and downs. During the colonial government until the reform, Chinese traders played a vital role in the spice trade, especially on Saparua Island. It is necessary to analyze the role of ethnic Chinese in the island of Saparua's spice trade during the colonial and reform periods. Through a historical review using historical methods, from source collection to criticism, interpretation, and historiography, it was found that the role of Chinese traders in Saparua was as merchants as well as channels or distributors between local traders and buyers outside the island.

Keywords: Ethnic Chinese, Trade, Spices.

I. Introduction

Trade is an activity that has existed since ancient times and spices are a prima donna commodity that is highly sought after by various countries around the world, this paradise fruit is widespread in the archipelago, especially in Maluku, various ways are carried out to own and monopolize this commodity, such as Europeans, Arabs and other countries in Asia, including Chinese traders who are still spreading their wings in the trade sector.

China entered the archipelago, estimated to have been present since classical times, when its port city was very crowded with various traders. Many versions state the arrival of the Chinese in the archipelago. However, beyond that, ethnic Chinese have long inhabited the archipelago and have gone through several historical periods that are also very controversial among the Indonesian people. Ethnic Chinese, as part of the witness to Indonesian history, cannot be separated from their role in shaping trade history in the archipelago. Chinese traders even had a trade route known as the Silk Road. This route covers *Chang'an (Xian)*, China, passes through Central Asian trading cities, and ends in Antioch or Constantinople. It is said that, for decades, Chinese traders who knew the source of spices kept a tight hold over spice-producing areas, including the island of Saparua in Maluku (Gonarsyah, 1998).

Saparua is part of the Lesser Sunda archipelago, which produces cloves and nutmeg. During Dutch rule, Saparua became part of the area used as a center for clove cultivation. Saparua has 18 villages, with the majority of residents adhering to Christian or Protestant beliefs, and 2 villages that are Muslim. The inhabitants' backgrounds also include various clans from the native and ethnic Chinese communities, who have lived in Saparua for a long time and have blended with the natives. Chinese activities in Saparua, as part of the Lease archipelago, which produce the largest cloves since the Dutch colonial period, are exciting to trace culturally, socially, and economically. However, as an ethnic group symbolized as traders, this study will specifically describe the role and activities of the Saparua Chinese in the spice trade in the archipelago during the colonial period until the reform (Riniwaty Makmu, 2018).

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Spice Trade in Maluku and the Strategic Position of Saparua

The Moluccan Islands have historically been known as the world's center for producing spices, especially cloves and nutmeg, which have been integrated into the Asian European international trade network since the 15th century (Reid, 1993; Hall, 2011). The Lease Islands—which include Saparua—had a strategic position as a central clove-producing region during the colonial period, especially since the VOC established Maluku as the center of spice monopoly in the 17th century (Ricklefs, 2008). During the Dutch colonial period, Saparua not only served as a production area but also as a regional distribution hub, connecting local producers to inter-island trade routes. The VOC's monopoly policy changed the local economic structure but did not eliminate the role of non-European actors in the spice trade, including Chinese traders (Andaya, 1993).

2.2. Presence and Characteristics of the Chinese Community in Saparua

The Chinese diaspora in the archipelago has existed for a long time, predating European colonialism, primarily through Southeast Asian maritime trade routes (Lombard, 2005). In Maluku, the Chinese community is recorded as part of a group of immigrants who adapted to local and colonial economic systems, especially in trade and the distribution of goods (Suryadinata, 2015). In Saparua, the Chinese community did not develop as much as in major port cities such as Ambon or Banda, but local historical literature shows that they were present as a minority group active in trade, services, and liaison for the distribution of goods needed by the community, including spices (Chauvel, 1990). This position places Chinese traders as a medium-sized economic actor who plays a role in the circulation of commodities between local producers and regional markets.

2.3. The Role of Chinese Traders in the Colonial Spice Trade System

In the colonial economic structure, Chinese merchants generally served as middlemen, mediating between local producers and colonial rulers (Blussé, 1986). Although the VOC sought to control the spice trade on the ground, informal spaces existed for non-European traders, including Chinese, for small- to medium-scale distribution and trade (Andaya, 1993). This role is also evident in the Lease Islands region, including Saparua, where Chinese traders are involved in local trade, transport produce, and provide consumer goods to local communities (Ricklefs, 2008). With a flexible trade network and adaptability to colonial policies, the Chinese community was able to maintain its economic existence despite being in a repressive monopoly system.

2.4. Post-Colonial Dynamics to the Reform Era

After Indonesia's independence, the spice trade structure transformed alongside economic nationalization and shifts in development orientation. The role of spices as the main export commodity is gradually declining, replaced by other more industrial economic sectors (Booth, 2016). This change also affected the position of the Chinese community in the archipelago, including Saparua. During the New Order period, the policy of assimilation and the restriction of ethnic Chinese socio-political activities also reshaped their role in local economic life, focusing more on general trade and small- and medium-sized enterprises (Suryadinata, 2015). Entering the Reform era, political openness and recognition of ethnic plurality reopened the space for the Chinese community's socio-economic participation. However, the spice trade was no longer the primary sector as it had been during the colonial period.

2.5. Literature Synthesis and Research Gaps

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that Saparua has an important historical role in the spice trade as part of the Lease Islands (Reid, 1993; Andaya, 1993). The Chinese community in Saparua is present as a local economic actor that functions primarily as distribution intermediaries and regional traders (Blussé, 1986; Chauvel, 1990). Colonial monopoly systems limited their involvement in the large-scale spice trade but did not remove their role in local economic networks (Ricklefs, 2008). Post-independence political and economic changes to the Reform shifted the role of the Chinese community from the spice trade to the general trade and service sector (Booth, 2016). However, the literature specifically discussing the role of the Chinese Saparua in the spice trade remains limited and fragmentary. Therefore, further research based on colonial archives, oral history, and local studies is needed to enrich the understanding of the Chinese community's contribution to the dynamics of the spice economy in Saparua across historical periods.

III. Research Method

This study uses historical research methods to examine the role of the Chinese community in the spice trade in Saparua from the colonial period to the Reformasi era. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to systematically and critically reconstruct past events based on relevant historical sources. The methodological framework for historical research is the stages proposed by Gottschalk, which include: heuristic, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The heuristic stage is an initial stage that focuses on collecting historical sources. In this study, data were collected using a qualitative approach, employing two primary techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with resource persons with knowledge or experience of the history of the spice trade and the presence of the Chinese community in Saparua, including community leaders and local historical actors. Second, literature studies examine written sources, such as history books, results of previous research, scientific journal articles, archives, and other documents relevant to the topics of spice trade and the Chinese diaspora in Maluku. The next stage is source criticism, which assesses the validity and reliability of the collected sources. Source criticism is carried out in two forms: external criticism to test the authenticity of the source (its origin, time, and author or source's authority), and internal criticism to assess the credibility of the source's content, the consistency of its information, and possible bias. This stage is important to ensure that the data used has a level of validity that can be accounted for academically.

Next, the interpretation stage is carried out, which involves interpreting historical facts that have escaped criticism from sources. At this stage, information on spice trade activities involving the Chinese community in Saparua is analyzed in the context of each historical period's social, economic, and political conditions. The relevant data is then classified and synthesized to build a coherent understanding of the role of the Chinese Saparua in the spice trade network.

The final stage is historiography, the preparation of research results into a systematic, chronological, and analytical historical narrative. At this stage, the research findings are outlined in a scientific paper that not only describes the events but also explains the causal relationships and dynamics of the changing role of the Saparua Chinese community in the spice trade from the colonial period to the Reformation era. By applying the four stages of the historical research method, this research is expected to produce an objective and comprehensive historical reconstruction and to make an academic contribution to the study of economic history and the Chinese diaspora in Indonesia.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Ethnic Chinese in Saparua

The arrival of the Chinese in the archipelago is estimated to have occurred during the classical period. It is estimated that the relationship between China and the archipelago's kings has been established on both political and economic grounds. Furthermore, the Chinese arrived when trade was active in the archipelago's ports. At first, this trade group only stopped by. However, in its development, the traders began to settle down and establish contact with the natives through marriage (Septian Aji Permana & Ary Purwantiningsih, 2021). Various factors influenced the arrival of the Chinese in their area of origin. According to Houn, during the Dutch colonial period, the arrival of Chinese people in the Dutch East Indies was relatively large, influenced by economic factors, political turmoil, natural disasters, and others. However, the migration of the Chinese to the island of Saparua cannot be definitively described.

The existence of Chinese orans in Saparua cannot be separated from past trade activities. One of the informants, Eka Van Tiouw, said, "The ancestors of the katong came from southern China who traded to Java, sailed to Maluku, stopped and settled in Saparua, and had faith, only after the Spanish and Portuguese came, they broadcast religion from house to house". In Saparua, the Chinese people are not very familiar with the history of their ancestors' arrival; they only know that they came to Saparua to trade and work against their fate. In the past, they were only small traders who worked for the indigenous people. The situation of the Chinese in Saparua is not much different from that of their arrival in big cities in Indonesia.

The evidence for the early arrival of the Chinese in Saparua lacks clear time markers; some of the oldest Chinese burial evidence has been lost due to excavation and tomb theft, and the lack of concern for these factors makes the earliest evidence of their presence uncertain. However, the proof that they have been in Saparua for more than a hundred years is a tomb in a Chinese cemetery, dated 1902, with a pattern that still uses ancient Chinese writing; its structure and shape still highlight the characteristics of Chinese culture. No symbol of Christian or Confucian beliefs shows the religion adhered to, with a very distinctive tomb shape, namely a female womb, signifying that humans are born from a woman's womb. After Death, they are reborn from a womb to live the next life. The community believes that their ancestors used the original religion when they anchored in the land of Pia, Saparua. According to the speech of the people of Pia, they believe that Chinese traders pulled over on the coast of Pia. Pia also once had an ancient Chinese tomb, more than a thousand years old. Unfortunately, it no longer exists because it was looted for its treasures, so it could not prove the earliest existence of the Chinese in Saparua.



Figure 1. Chinese people's cemetery, Saparua, Saparua District, Central Maluku Regency, Maluku. Private Collection

There is no one to support the early beliefs followed by the Chinese in Saparua, but for the Christian faith, they have an old church called Hok In Tong. This church is the oldest Chinese-owned church to have undergone a name change, namely the *Indische Kerk* during the Dutch period and the Maluku Protestant church during the New Order period.



Figure 2: Hok Im Tong church, private collection

Proof of the rapid presence of China in Saparua is the existence of a Christian Chinese school, which was established during the Dutch rule, but currently the school is just a dilapidated building that has not been maintained since it was closed during the Soeharto administration, all forms of Chinese agencies are closed and even places of worship are closed by the government, the situation began to stabilize during the reign of Abdurrahman Wahid (Rumadi, 2010)

4.2. Spice trading activities in Saparua

Ethnic Chinese, as a minority community, have a significant influence on the archipelago's spice trade, especially in Maluku, including Saparua. China's involvement in spice marketing can be seen in Chinese historical records, such as the Tang dynasty, which mentions the spice island as *Mi-li-kiu*. Around the 14th century, the Ming dynasty described clearly that the Maluku archipelago has fertile land. There are mountains of incense or Incense Mountain (Sutrisno, 1997). Chinese traders served as intermediaries for the local community in dealing with traders outside the region and abroad. Chinese traders had a very clever strategy: for centuries, they managed to conceal the existence of spice-producing islands from foreign nations. Before the 16th century, most Moluccan spices were shipped to China. In addition, Majapahit ships sailed eastward to transport spices (Nurhajarini et al., 2019). In its development, the spice began to be brought to the Middle East and Europe (Reid, 2011). However, around the 16th century, the Portuguese entered, followed by Spain,

and it was finally controlled by Dutch traders (VOC). The VOC carried out spice trading in Maluku. According to Sutherland (2007), commercial exposure in the field of trade in the early 19th century encouraged the availability of trade commodities from indigenous and Chinese ships.

During Dutch rule, Chinese traders served as intermediaries between local people and Dutch merchants. During the Dutch era, they sold spices to Seram, namely to the Ondordemen company, which was the center of the Dutch government's spice purchases. The types of spices bought and sold are Tuni cloves, Sansibar cloves, and forest cloves. In Saparua, they highlight Tuni cloves, which are characteristic of Saparua, as well as various cloves, nutmeg, and mace.



Figure 3: Cloves before sun-drying and after sun-drying, private collection

Trade activities in Saparua continued. When the Japanese entered, the merchants were accommodated on boats that already had engines. They also obtained convenience during the Soekarno administration. However, when President Soekarno issued Government Regulation 10 of 1959 prohibiting foreigners from engaging in trading activities, this regulation forced many Chinese traders out of business, thereby affecting the return of Chinese citizens to China. The repatriation of Chinese citizens occurred in 1960.

The information conveyed by the chairman of the Chinese Indonesian Bakti Foundation which was formed in 2013 in Saparua, namely Eka Tiouw or Thio Tjie Phing "During the Soekarno administration, Chinese traders were not allowed to carry out trade activities except for the exchange of goods or barter, the ethnic Chinese were returned to their country of origin, the facilities used must be closed which is known as PP 10, fortunately when the repatriation only happened in big cities in Indonesia even though I was already preparing to return to China at that time". In this case, China is experiencing difficulties and crises in Indonesia. However, the Chinese people in Saparua have pretty good relations with the local community, so they cooperate with the indigenous people by using the community's name for various purposes, even in education.

During the Indonesian New Order regime, Clove self-sufficiency was achieved in 1984. However, this condition did not last long, and the price of cloves decreased (Gonarsyah, 1998). So the government created the BPPC in 1991. The trade challenge continued again when Tommy Soeharto took part in the clove trade dispute. Tommy monopolized trade through price equalization. As a result, not only traders but also farmers who sell spices are affected, as traders and farmers cannot negotiate appropriate prices; all must be sold to BPPC (Clove Marketing Buffer Agency). Since then, public attention to *dusung* or clove gardens has decreased, as the price is not in line with their costs, and farmers have to wait years to harvest, far from community expectations.

In 1999, a riot in Ambon made it difficult for Chinese traders to export spices to Java, so they suffered losses: cloves were depreciated or too dry, reducing their weight; nutmeg developed cracks or broke, and the price dropped to half. During Gusdur's reign, the price of Cloves soared. At that time, the price of cloves reached 80.00 to 90.00/kg (Rumadi, 2010). Furthermore, Eka Tiouw explained, when the government of Gusdur, the price of cloves soared, he stated that "traders made contracts with foreign parties, then the people knew about it, and they did not want to sell the spices they had, so traders slammed the price high to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Here, there is a price war between fellow traders, so that the price of cloves soars to

reach Rp200,000 per kg or per 12 cups". Unstable price conditions create 2 possibilities: large profits and maximum losses, as prices can fall at any time. This was proven when the gusdur stopped holding the price of cloves, which gradually fell to reach Rp20,000/kg. Until now, China still plays a significant role as an influential trader in Saparua, because of its function as a distributor of the connections they have in the city center so that the indigenous people can easily relate to buyers from outside so that prices can generate profits as done by a spice trader, San Khu, he has collaborated several times with cigarette companies in Surabaya such as Djarum, He was given capital to buy spices from the community and then distributed to Surabaya, but if it were only sold to Ambon, the problem of price wars would occur with other traders so that there were often losses and even could not sell the spices they brought because they considered the capital spent on a large amount of market prices.

The big problem now is that taxes are too high. At the same time, profits are only small, which is very noticeable when personal capital is used as initial capital to buy spices from the community. If the price of cheap cloves is forced not to be sold and eventually loses, not to mention spices such as nutmeg that are damaged, then the price will fall. However, if the cigarette company gives the capital, it does not suffer a loss. The ups and downs of trade that Chinese merchants have experienced have taught them to remain optimistic, diligent and diligent in managing their businesses, history has encouraged them to advance and become an influential ethnic in the romance of trade because business will not betray results and will definitely be flavored with struggle and sacrifice, but that is what makes them successful today even though spices are not as glorious as they used to be.

V. Conclusion

Despite differences in time and challenges, the activities and roles of ethnic Chinese in Saparua have experienced ups and downs. They play an active role in various situations. During Dutch rule, Chinese traders in Saparua served as intermediaries between the local community and the Dutch government. Even after independence, the trade relations established between the Saparua people and ethnic Chinese have contributed to social harmony, shaping the history of Saparua. The role of Chinese traders has helped market spices, especially cloves, from the Saparua region. They began cooperating with various companies, especially cigarette companies, as San Ku did on the island of Java. This research is expected to increase knowledge of the role of Chinese people in Indonesia, thereby reducing and even eliminating sentimental attitudes towards ethnic diversity in Indonesia. Apart from the negative views of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, they also took part in the history of the Indonesian nation.

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