

## IX

### THE "CULTURE SYSTEM" (*Continued*)



THE culture system, as an experiment in colonial government and finance, was the greatest success and worked incalculable benefits to the islands and the native people, as well as to the assisted colonists and the crown of Holland. Great stretches of jungle were cleared and brought under cultivation, and more money was paid in wages directly to native cultivators and mill workmen each year than all the natives paid in taxes to the government. The Javanese acquired better homes, much personal wealth, and improved in all the conditions of living. The population increased tenfold during the half-century that the culture system was in operation—this alone an unanswerable reply to all critics and detractors, who declaimed against the oppression and outrage upon the Javanese. As the island became, under this system, a more profitable possession than it had been under the real tyranny exercised during the days of close-trade monopoly, the envy and attention of all the other colonizing nations of Europe were drawn to this

new departure in colonial government. Spain copied the system in its tobacco-growing in the Philippine Islands, but could not follow further. Philanthropic and pharisaical neighbors, political economists, advanced political thinkers, humanitarians, and sentimentalists, all addressed themselves to the subject, and usually condemned the culture system in unmeasured terms. Holland's voluntary abolition of slavery in its East India possessions by no means stilled the storm of invective and abuse. Leaders, speeches, books, pamphlets, even novels,<sup>1</sup> showed up the horrors, the injustice and iniquities said to be perpetrated in Java. It was shown that almost nothing of the great revenues from the island was devoted to the education or benefit of the natives; that no mission or evangelical work was undertaken, or even allowed, by this foremost Protestant people of Europe; and that next to nothing in the way of public works or permanent improvements resulted to the advantage of those who toiled for the alien, absentee landlord, i. e., the crown of Holland,—the country being drained of its wealth for the benefit of a distant monarch. It was estimated that between 1831 and 1877 the natives were mulcted of one billion, seven hundred million francs by the forced labor exacted from them, and the sales of their produce to the government at the low market prices fixed by the purchaser. By continued philippics and exaggerated accusations, the names of Dutch government and Java planter became, to the average European, synonyms for all of rapacity, tyranny,

<sup>1</sup> "Max Havelaar," by Edouard Douwes Dekker (Multatuli); translation by Baron Nahuys (Edinburgh, 1868).

A VIEW IN BUITENZORG





extortion, and cruelty, and there was an impression that something worse than Spanish persecution in the Netherlands, in the name of religion, was being carried on by the Hollanders in Java in the name of the almighty florin. All the iniquities and horrors of the Dutch management of the cinnamon-gardens of Ceylon, and all the infamy of the Dutch East India Company's misrule in Java during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were stupidly mixed up with and charged against the comparatively admirable, the orderly and excellently devised culture system of Governor Van den Bosch. Contractor planters vainly urged that the only tyranny and oppression of the people came from their own village chiefs; but philanthropists pointed steadily to the colonial government and the system which inspired and upheld the village tyrants.

In 1859 Mr. J. W. B. Money, a Calcutta barrister, visited Java, made exhaustive search and inquiry into every branch and detail of the culture system's working, and put the results in book form inwoven with a comparison with the less intelligent and successful management of the land and labor question in British India, where, with sixteen times the area and twelve times the population of Java, the revenue is only four times as great. His book, "Java: How to Manage a Colony" (London, Hurst & Blackett, 1861), is a most complete and reliable résumé of the subject, and his opinions throughout were an indorsement of the Van den Bosch culture system. He contrasted warmly the failure and inefficiency of the British India *ryot warree*, or land system, with the established

communal system which the Oriental prefers and is fitted for, and showed how a similar culture system in Bengal and Madras would have worked to the advantage, benefit, and profit of Hindustan, the Hindus, and the British crown. Mr. Money especially noted how the Dutch refrained from interfering with native prejudices and established customs; how the prestige of the native aristocracy was as carefully maintained as that of the white race, with no modern, Western notions of equality, even before the law, the Dutch securing regentship to the leading noble of a district, and giving him more revenue and actual power than were possible under the native emperor. Mr. Money noted only the best of feeling apparently existing between natives and Europeans, a condition dating entirely from the establishment of the culture system, and the general prosperity that succeeded. "No country in the East can show so rich or so contented a peasantry as Java," he said.

Alfred Russel Wallace, who visited Java several times between 1854 and 1862, while the culture system was at the height of its successful working, spoke in approval and praise of what he saw of the actual system and its results, and commended it as the only means of forcing an indolent, tropical race to labor and develop the resources and industries of the island. His was one of the few clear, dispassionate, and intelligent statements given on that side, and he summed up his observations in the declaration that Java was "the very garden of the East, and perhaps, upon the whole, the richest, best-cultivated, and the *best-governed* island in the world."

The competition of French beet-sugar, fed by large government bounties of West Indian and Hawaiian sugars, so reduced the price of sugar in Europe that in 1871 the Dutch government began to withdraw from the sugar-trade, and by 1890 had no interest in nor connection with any of the many mills which colonists had built on the island. Java ranked second only to Cuba in the production of cane-sugar, and now (1897) ranks first in the world. Trade returns now show sugar exports to the value of six million pounds sterling from the private plantations of Java and Sumatra each year, and the distillation of arrack for the trade with Norway and Sweden is an important business.

At the time that sugar began to fall in price, owing to Western competition, Brazilian and Central American coffees began to command a place in the European market and to reduce prices; and then the blight, which reached Sumatra in 1876, attacked Java plantations in 1879, and spread slowly over the island, ruining one by one all the plantations of the choice Arabian or Mocha coffee-trees. As the area of thriving plantations decreased, and acres and acres of the white skeletons of blighted trees belted the hillsides, vain attempts were made at replanting. Only the tough, woody, coarse African or Liberian coffee-tree, with its large leaves and large, flat berries,—a plant which thrives equally in a damp or a dry climate, and luxuriates in the poorest, stoniest ground,—seems to be proof against the blight that devastated the Ceylon and Java coffee-plantations so thoroughly at the same time. Many of the old coffee-plantations in Java, as

in Ceylon, were burned over and planted to tea; yet in many places in the Preangers one sees the bleached skeletons of Arabian trees still standing, and the abandoned plantations smothered in weeds and creepers, and fast relapsing to jungle. The virgin soil of Sumatra has so far escaped the severest attacks of the blight, and the center of coffee-production there is near Padang, on the west coast, whence the bulk of the crop goes directly to England or America in British ships.

The blight forced the Dutch government to begin its retirement from the coffee-trade, and but the smallest fraction of the coffee exported now goes from government plantations or warehouses. Nearly all the Sumatra plantations are owned or leased by private individuals, and the greater part of coffee lands in Java are cultivated by independent planters, who sell their crop freely in the open market. With the wholesale replanting of the Liberian tree in place of the Arabian, and the shipping only of the large, flat Liberian bean instead of the Mocha's small, round berry, it is questionable whether the little real "government Java" that goes to market is entitled to the name which won the esteem of coffee-drinking people for the century before the blight. The Dutch government still raises and sells coffee, but under strong protest and opposition in Holland, and as a temporary concession during these times of financial straits.

Public opinion was gradually aroused in Holland, and opponents of the culture system at last spoke out in the States-General; but not until the prices of sugar and coffee had fallen seriously, and the blight had



ruined nearly all the government coffee-plantations, did the stirring of Holland's conscience bid the government retire from trade and agriculture, and leave the development of the island's resources, in natural and legitimate ways, to the enterprise of the many European settlers then established in permanence in Java, who had begun to see that the government was their most serious rival and competitor in the market.

The common sense and cooler vision of these days since its abandonment have shown that the culture system was an inspiration, a stroke of administrative genius of the first order, accomplishing in a few decades, for the material welfare of the island and its people, what the native race of a tropical country never could or would have done in centuries. The American mind naturally puzzles most over the idea that twenty odd millions of people of one race, language, and religion should ever have submitted to be ruled by a mere handful of over-sea usurpers and speculators. Considering the genius and characteristics of all Asiatic people, their superstitions, fatalism, self-abasement, and continuous submission to alien conquests and despotisms, which all their histories record and their religions almost seem to enjoin, and remembering the successive Buddhist, Brahmanic, and Mohammedan conquests and conversions of Java, and the domestic wars of three centuries since Islam's invasion, the half-century of the culture system's prosperous trial seems a most fortunate epoch and the cause of the admirable and surprising conditions existing to-day in that model garden and hothouse of the world.

It was much regretted later that some part of the

culture system's enormous profits was not devoted to railway construction and the making of the new harbor for Batavia at Tandjon Priok, as, immediately after the system's abandonment, railways and the new harbor became more urgent needs, and had to be provided for out of the current revenues, then taxed with the vigorous beginning of the Achinese struggle—Holland's thirty years' war in the Indies, which has so sadly crippled the exchequer. In order to provide a crown revenue in lieu of the sugar and coffee sales, a poll-tax was imposed on the natives in place of the seventh of their labor given to culture-system crops, and increased taxes were levied on lands and property; but through the extensive public works, the long-continued Achinese war in Sumatra, and the little war with the Sassaks in Lombok (1894), the deficits in the colonial budgets have become more ominous every year since 1876. The crown of Holland no longer receives a golden stream from the Indies, and is pushed to devise means to meet its obligations.

The culture system brought to Java a selected lot of refined, intelligent, capable, energetic colonists, who, settling there in permanence and increasing their holdings and wealth, have become the most numerous and important body of Europeans on the island. The great sugar and coffee barons, the patriarchal rulers of vast tea-gardens, the kina and tobacco kings, really rule Netherlands India. The planters and the native princes have much in common, and in the Preangers these horse-racing country gentlemen affiliate greatly and make common social cause against the small aristocracy of office-holders, who have been

wont to regard the native nobles and the mercantile communities of the ports from on high.

The colonial government has never welcomed aliens to the isles, whether those bent on business or on pleasure. Dutch suspicion still throws as many difficulties as possible in the way of a tourist, and it took strong preventive measures against an influx of British or other *uitlander* planters when the abandonment of the culture system made private plantations desirable, and the opening of the Suez Canal brought Java so near to Europe. As a better climate, better physical conditions of every kind, and a more docile, industrious native race were to be found in Java than elsewhere in the Indies, there was a threatened invasion of coffee- and tea-planters, more particularly from India and Ceylon. The Boer of the tropics, like his kinsman in South Africa, found effectual means to so hamper as virtually to exclude the *uitlander* planters. Land-transfers and leases were weighted with inconceivable restrictions and impositions; heavy taxes, irksome police and passport regulations, and nearly as many restraints as were put upon Arabs and Chinese, urged the British planter to go elsewhere, since he could not have any voice in local or colonial government in a lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Six years' residence is required for naturalization, but the Briton is rarely willing to change his allegiance—it is his purpose rather to Anglicize, naturalize, annex, or protect all outlying countries as English.

The governor-general of the colony may revoke the *toelatings-kaart* of any one, Dutch as well as alien,

<sup>1</sup> See "A Visit to Java," W. Basil Worsfold, London, 1893.

and order him out of Netherlands India; and a resident is such an autocrat that he can order any planter or trader out of his domain if it is shown that he habitually maltreats or oppresses the natives, or does anything calculated to compromise the superior standing or prestige of the white people. The Dutch are severe upon this latter point, and the best of them uphold a certain noblesse oblige as imperative upon all who possess a white skin. The European military officer is sent to Holland for court martial and punishment, that the native soldiers may remain ignorant of his degradation, and the European who descends to drunkenness is hurried from native sight and warned. While the conquerors hold these people with an iron grasp, they aim to treat them with absolute justice. Many officials and planters have married native wives, and their children, educated in Europe, with all the advantages of wealth and cultured surroundings, do not encounter any race or color prejudice nor any social barriers in their life in Java. They are Europeans in the eye of the law and the community, and enjoy "European freedom." No native man is allowed to marry or to employ a European, not even as a tutor or governess, and no such subversion of social order as the employment of a European servant is to be thought of. There is a romance, all too true, of governmental interference, and the dismissal from his office of regent, of the native prince who wished to marry a European girl whose parents fully consented to the alliance. The laws allow a European to put away his native wife, to legally divorce her, upon the slightest pretexts, and to abandon her and her chil-

dren with little redress; but fear of Malay revenge, the chilling tales of slow, mysterious deaths overtaking those who desert Malay wives or return to Europe without these jealous women, act as restraining forces.

The Dutch do not pose as philanthropists, nor pretend to be in Java "for the good of the natives." They have found the truth of the old adage after centuries of obstinate experiment in the other line, and honesty in all dealings with the native is much the best policy and conduces most to the general prosperity and abundant crops. Fear of the Malay spirit of revenge, and the terrible series of conspiracies and revolts of earlier times, have done much, perhaps, to bring about this era of kindness, fair dealing, and justice. The native is now assured his rights almost more certainly than in some freer countries, and every effort is made to prevent the exercise of tyrannical authority by village chiefs, the main oppressors. He can always appeal to justice and be heard; the prestige of the native aristocracy is carefully maintained; the Oriental ideas of personal dignity and the laws of caste are strictly regarded, and, if from prudential and economic reasons only, no omissions in such lines are allowed to disturb the even flow of the florin Hollandward.

Already the spirit of the age is beginning to reach Java, and it is something to make all the dead Hollanders turn in their graves when it can be openly suggested that there should be a separate and independent budget for Netherlands India, and that there should be some form of popular representation—a deliberative assembly of elected officials to replace the

close Council of India. In fact, suggestions for the actual autonomy of Java have been uttered aloud. There are ominous signs everywhere, and the government finds its petty remnant of coffee-culture and grocery business a more vexing and difficult venture each year. The Samarang "Handelsblad," in commenting on it, says:

"The Javanese are no longer as easily led and driven as a flock of sheep, however much we may deplore that their character has changed in this respect. The Javanese come now a great deal into contact with Europeans, the education spread among them has had an effect, and communication has been rendered easy. They do not fear the European as they did formerly. The time is gone when the entire population of a village could be driven to a far-off plantation with a stick; the pruning-knife and the ax would quickly be turned against the driver in our times. The Javanese to-day does not believe that you are interested in his welfare only; he is well aware that he is cheated out of a large proportion of the value of the coffee that is harvested. Some people may think it a pity that the time of coercion is coming to an end in Java, but that cannot change the facts. The dark period in the history of Java is passing away, and every effort to prevent reforms will call forth the enmity of the natives."

The state committee on government coffee-plantations says in its latest reports:

"It cannot be denied that the intellectual status of the Javanese at the present day is very different from that during the time when the coffee monopoly was introduced. The reforms which we have introduced



JAVANESE COOLIES GAMBLING.

Mulyono Prager





in the administration of justice, the education according to Western methods, and the free admission of private enterprise have all brought about a change. If the native has not become more progressive and more sensible, he is at least wiser in matters about which he had best be kept in the dark, unless the government means to remove coercion at the expense of the exchequer."

The Amsterdam "Handelsblad" remarks that, "as far as the Dutch possessions are concerned, coercion and monopoly indeed must go. People who cannot see this betimes will find out their mistake rather suddenly."

That sage socialist, Élisée Reclus, remarks that "once more it appears that monopoly ends in the ruin not only of the despoilers, but of the state."