Javanese Noble and the Misuse of Mosque Cash, 1890–1942

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Abstract—To avoid misuse and corruption spreading even more contagiously among government officials, the Dutch East Indies administration issued several circulars from 1890–1931. The circulars regulated Javanese nobles (priyayi) in accessing mosque funds (mosque cash, Dutch: moskeekas) unreservedly. However, misuse and corruption were still being practiced until 1942. This study delves into the modes of misuse in Moskeekas cases in Java that were carried out by colonial Dutch officials. It also seeks to explain how the cultural environment may have encouraged authorities to risk their reputations by conducting deviant behaviors. The study shows that the urge to add up operational costs and fulfill lifestyle needs could have led these bureaucrats to have a manner of misuses that this reasoning is quite contrary to the initial purpose of the funds themselves.

Keywords—Dutch East Indies, Java, mosque fund (moskeekas), Javanese noble (priyayi).

I. INTRODUCTION

It seems that corruption is a never-ending problem for developing countries. Indonesia is no exception because the practice of corruption and misappropriation of state funds seem to have become common. There is even the public opinion that finding honest officials is more difficult than finding corrupt ones. Historically, this problem has turned out to be traceable to the colonial period, during which officials abused their authority—at least from the perspective of the colonial government and certain civil society organizations—and used money from the mosque fund (Dutch: moskeekas) to satisfy their lifestyle cravings.

This study aims to explain the phenomenon of corruption and misuse in Java. The misuse of mosque cash funds becomes an entryway to answer why colonial officials continue to conduct malversation, even though the colonial government has strictly stipulated the use of mosque cash. Through examining colonial officials, this study considers the officials from indigenous groups called the priyayi (Javanese nobles). This term is used in the administrative areas that are now referred to as Central Java and East Java. Therefore, by limiting the categorization of officials, the boundaries of this research area are determined by themselves. For temporal limitations, this study looks at the process and development of misuse cases of mosque funds during the colonial administration from 1890–1940. It seems unnecessary to explain that this paper is a historical study. However, one important thing to be explained is that in its analysis, this study investigates aspect of the priyayi and their cultural environment to determine their sociocultural mentality.

Prior studies have examined the management of mosque funds as part of the Dutch East Indies administration [1], [2], [3]. In particular, the examination had clearly described the purpose of the funds in the community as well as the significance within the colonial government’s policy toward the religious aspects of their subjects. Other studies have presented the management of the funds as a field of contestation between colonials and local elites [4], [5], [6]. Indeed, the main cause of this commotion—not to mention the idle plethora of cash—is the large number of structural gaps and ambivalence in policies made by the colonial administration [7], [8]. A recent study provides a breakthrough by illustrating mosque funds as one of the critical parts of philanthropic development [9]. Albeit with the misuses that occurred from 1890–1942, there is no particular research that could explore the modes as a repetitive manner conducted by government officials because previous studies have analyzed the cases through structural aspects, not cultural ones. Thus, this article focuses on how the mentality of bureaucracy could drive the authorities to conduct fraudulent behaviors.

This study argues that the corrupt and fraudulent behavior of officials occurred because they had to maintain their social reputations by blatantly publicizing their lifestyle. Their lifestyle, moreover, was a cultural process consisting of status, power, and wealth in unison. The failure of one part of the entire mechanism—in this case where their wealth was supported by cash from the mosque funds—made their habits of displaying their lifestyles not function well and to some extent denigrated their reputations in the public space. Therefore, it is imperative to say that reputation could generate sociopolitical and economic opportunities and benefits to them as well [10].

In expounding the argument, this article will be divided into three parts. Firstly, it will delve into the mosque funds and how they manifest in the community. Secondly, it is important to explain further the concept of the priyayi examined in this study. In addition, an explanation of the “priyayi world” will be discussed in this section to show what kind of mentality urged them to maintain their social reputation. Thirdly, this paper will describe misuse of the mosque funds and how the funds were spent by the priyayi. This was done none other than to demonstrate that the modes of misuse conducted by the priyayi were to finance their consumptive lifestyle.

II. MOSQUE FUND IN COLONIAL TIMES

There is no exact record of when the mosque funds began to exist in history. The historical pursuit from the
kingdom era until the presence of the Dutch trading company (VOC) shows that the mosque funds had not yet been formed at that time [11] [1]. The closest socioeconomic system to the mosque cash was probably the bayt al-maal (state treasury) that was practiced by several mosques in the archipelago (Nusantara) since the time of Islamic kingdoms. However, one certain thing is that the birth of the mosque funds cannot be separated from efforts to modernize the government system by the Dutch colonial government because in addition to institutionalizing customary powers, the Netherlands also sought to modernize the supervision of religious affairs. This resulted in the emergence of the department of indigenous affairs (Kantoor voor Inlandsche Zaken) in the colonial Dutch administration. The penghulu, as the executor of Islamic religious affairs at the district level, became an extension of the department and arranged several activities related to the implementation of Islamic law and customs. The penghulu have multiple roles at the same time that enable them to be the mufti, qadi, imam, amil zakat (zakat officer), and “directors” of the mosque. For the latter task, it turns out to have further consequences for their extra assignments. Since they are culturally obliged to manage the mosque funds and are responsible for the mosque cash, they seek funding to maintain the mosque operational costs [12].

So, how do the penghulu obtain revenue? At the beginning of their appearance, the penghulu did not receive monthly revenue from the colonial government like the other colonial officials who originated from indigenous groups, such as regents, did [4]. Nevertheless, they were allowed to collect fees from their main duties. By overseeing marriages, adjudicating marital and inheritance disputes, praying for and soliciting dead people, and becoming amil zakat, the penghulu were entitled to acquire administrative fees. They even could obtain extra income when people gave them tips, as is the usual tradition in Java [4]. As an illustration, the penghulu would obtain f 0.5–f 2, approximately equivalent to € 6.3–€ 25 per 2016, each time they did their primary assignments.

The cultural obligation to find funding for the maintenance of the residency as well as district mosques made penghulu set aside their income to the mosque [13]. There was no certain percentage of how much the penghulu had to spare to the mosque. All went according to the traditions of each mosque in each residency or district. Seemingly, based on this practice, the mosque funds began to take shape. However, not all residencies or districts had mosque cash in their mosques. During the 19th century, for instance, mosque funds could not be found in Batavia. While in Banten and Pasuruan, new mosque funds emerged at the end of the 19th century after European officials suggested this to the regents [1]. However, it is important to emphasize that the appearance of mosque cash did not always have the same pattern in every region in Java, as explained. There was mosque cash that appeared culturally, but there were also mosques that arose due to the reactive encouragement of local officials because many mosques in other regions began to obtain mosque funds. For this latter behavior, Snouck Hurgronje advised the colonial government to reprimand the concerned regents [12].

Another important fact regarding the mosque funds is that if the regents had full access to the funds, this was looked upon with bitterness, even though the penghulu and the religious officials below them acted as fundraisers of the mosque funds [4], [2]. This could happen because administratively the position of the penghulu—all the more so the mosque and its management committee—was under the regent jurisdiction. Things went from bad to worse because culturally the position of the regent is the same as a the raja kecil (royal duke). Yet, the position of the resident and assistant resident were also important in the early development of the mosque funds in Indonesia’s history given their position, which was administratively higher than the regents in the context of the colonial bureaucracy. Thus, it was not surprising at all that some residents dared to propose the establishment of the mosque funds to the regents.

In terms of usage, the mosque funds were initially used for mosque maintenance and restoration. This occurred because, according to colonial government circulars, cash in the mosque funds might only be used to maintain the cleanliness of the mosque, the availability of water, and the replacement of mats, lamp oil, and broken furniture. However, the cost of maintaining a mosque was not actually that much. So that the average cost spent would not be more than f 20 [11], [14], approximately equivalent to € 251 per year 2016. In fact, the renovation and financing of mosque construction could cost more and would deplete the mosque funds swiftly, but the existing regulations—at least nine circulars issued from 1890–1931—forbade the stakeholders from taking mosque cash beyond the rules. As a result, cash in the mosque funds was increasingly swelling. The mosque cash income was not worth the expenditure. Moreover, the penghulu and their staff were at least able to collect around f 700–f 3,000 per year, depending on the level of population density in each region in Java [9].

Until the Dutch colonial government collapsed in 1942, mosque cash could be found on many islands in Indonesia. Still, there are no documents that explain the activities of government interference in the mosque funds outside Java and Madura. Media coverage of the existence of the mosque funds outside these islands is rather slight. The only clear thing is that by September 1920, the mosque fund balance in Java and Madura had reached a significant amount. Based on the collection of R.A. Kern (DH 797 no. 460), the average mosque on these two islands had a deposit of around f 700–f 36,000. These funds were actually nothing compared to the mosque funds before the colonial government issued several circular letters regarding restrictions on total cash collected in the mosque funds. So it makes sense why the mosque cash often reaped polemics and was subjected to fraudulent behaviors of regents, the pithi (duke), the penghulu, and even residents and assistant residents in various regions of Java Island.

III. PRIYAYI: JAVANESE NOBLES IN COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION

Endeavors to define the priyayi, both the priyayi as individuals and as a social group, have been carried out by many scholars. It is no exaggeration to say that a scholarship dictionary on the priyayi can be compiled given the detailed information already available. “Priyayi” itself refers to certain government administrative officials, and because of this position, they were given the right by the colonial
government to use honorific titles, such as Raden (prince) or Raden Mas (royal prince) [15]. They were a social group that controlled and monopolized government positions, so it makes sense if the “priyayi bureaucracy” became the main feature of the indirect government style adopted by the colonial government [8].

It seems that there are not many scholars who have exclaimed that the royal parentages became an important element for someone to be called priyayi [16], [17], [18]. As for them, the priyayi are feudal nobles and heirs of the culture of the kraton of Jogjakarta and Surakarta [19][20]. Therefore, not all government officials can be pronounced as priyayi. While other scholars agree more that “priyayiness” is not seen from the origin of their descendants, their position as bureaucrats in the colonial government system implies this [10], [21], [22].

The institutionalization of Western education became an important element in the formation of the priyayi in Java [18], especially in Central Java and parts of East Java [10]. This is because, with the expansion of Dutch interests in their colony—along with the rapid pace of global capitalism—they also expanded their need for educated government officials. In this case, educational institutions are important so that indigenous officials have the basic ability to write letters, make reports, communicate in foreign languages, and understand Western customs more deeply.

Apart from this, whether the priyayi as cultural heirs of Javanese culture or administrators in the colonial government, lifestyle became the main factor to show their “loyalty” in the public sphere. Their lifestyle became a form of the totality of various procedures, customs, behavioral structures, complexity of symbols, attitudes to life, and mentality of the social group that completely influenced their daily lives [23]. This is because it was a function of social stratification and an indication of the differences or dividing lines between the groups. So it is important to underline that the factors of status, power, and wealth determined the lifestyle model they wanted to create and defend.

Lifestyle, when viewed from a symbolic perspective, was a subculture of the Javanese tradition of Kejawen (Javanese syncretism) as the Great Javanese Tradition, which was supported by certain social groups. A sociocultural space was created in which groups with a lifestyle could live their lives according to their status and roles. With this lifestyle they also maintained the prestige and social power that was needed to maintain their political and economic position. Here, there was an influence that was mutually reinforcing. Surely this social prestige enabled the lifestyle of the elite to become a model and encourage other social elements to emulate it, not because the lifestyle itself became a status symbol. Here, we find a specific value related to status that in Javanese is also called praja and is more recently referred to as “prestige” [10].

On the one hand, colonial politics actually intended to modernize the system of the government, which was usually based on a legal-rational system, while on the other hand, strong support for the bureaucrats led to the development of more traditional power, which was more feudal in nature. In this case, the influence of the district head in his area turned out to be increasingly widespread, and Dutch supervision was not strong enough to prevent development toward feudalization [10], [24]. The reforms carried out since Daendels (1808–1811) and his successors later succeeded in reducing many entourage regents, which would remain throughout the 19th century, mainly because its feudalistic nature could not be erased. Thus, the position and role of the regent at that time was full of ambivalence. On the one hand, it was necessary to obey the colonial government regulations, which wanted to enforce bureaucracy with legal-rational authority, while on the other hand, his position as regional ruler was still based on traditional authority. Not surprisingly, frequent conflicts occurred between the Dutch governor-general and the indigenous rulers. One well-known conflict occurred between E. Douwes Dekker (Mulututli) and K.R.T. Karta Negara, regent of Lebak [25].

Traditional values placed it as a traditional authority with all its powers and rights, but while it was demanded from the legal-rational colonial bureaucratic function, conflict arose in a personal situation, which is a source of “corruption.” In a traditional environment, a prominent figure is expected to uphold his dignity, not only showing appropriate character and attitude, but in the material field, he is also always ready to help. This in itself has broad consequences, as large households also bear many needs of relatives and others. Moreover, it was hoped that the lifestyle in the house was a “grand style” so that their identity was clearly visible, accentuating the high status with decorum that was in harmony with everyday life. Here, it must be established that lifestyle is inherent in maintaining status.

For the regents and all their subordinates, the structure placed them in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they were subject to showing full loyalty to their superiors, and on the other hand, there was a need to maintain and show authority and “greatness” to their subordinates and the people. Here, the “priyayi-ness” made them feel that there was a need to make compensation, acting as a catalyst in channeling the power of colonial influence downward. The attitude taken toward subordinates became authoritarian as well, not only toward subordinates but also toward their families and relatives. Such an attitude had a wide-ranging impact on daily life in the environment and cultivated authoritarianism in the priyayi lifestyle. Combined with the strict hierarchical pattern mentioned above, there arose a fervent feudalistic ethos [26].

From this point of view, it is clear that colonial power was inclined to preserve—if not strengthen—the feudal social structure, while at the same time using the existing system and also obstructing the growth of a strong middle class. Indeed, it cannot be denied that it was the traditional bureaucracy that had the potential to become a connector between the indigenous peoples and the colonial rulers, thus making the transition much easier [8]. Herein lies the strategic position of the “priyayi-ness” so that they could be exploited as far as possible given the strong bargaining position.

IV. WHEN REPUTATION IS AT STAKE: THE MISUSE OF MOSQUE FUNDS

It is undeniable that money often leads to change. The priyayi paradox position in the middle of the colonial
transformation made things even more complicated. This study shows that mosque cash was often used for private purposes rather than the interests of mosque maintenance. Of the 203 cases studied, at least 27% showed the priyayi using the mosque cash for charity activities. This activity was most frequent because it could enhance the reputation of the priyayi in public spaces. They channeled these funds to poor people, such as widows and salespeople. However, charity was mostly directed to help the poor people of Europe. The reason is unknown, but it is very possible that this could have occurred because of the initiation of the assistant resident or resident. In Madura, for example, mosque cash was used by resident assistants to help the poor.

In Figure 1, lifestyle is shown in a narrow sense, unlike the previous explanation. Here, lifestyle is defined as expenses related to the appearance of the priyayi and their family. Some examples include the use of mosque cash for tomb renovations, office renovations, purchasing flags, and Chinese card gambling. In addition, sometimes the mosque cash expenditure items were in the form of fixed allowances, such as benefits for fired priyayis or increased income for priyayis, so it is not surprising that 10% of cases of abuse went into the realm of salaries.

**Figure 1: Mosque Cash Misuses in Java from 203 Cases.**

(Source: Generated from Delpher.nl and Digital Archives of National Library of Indonesia by Tabulating Moskeekas Cases Exposure in Dutch and Local Newspapers from 1890-1942)

Even so, this does not rule out the possibility that the use of mosque cash was also intended for public interest. Some of the mosque cash disbursement was posted to eradicate rats, distribute seeds, help unsuccessful rice harvesters and people who were burned, build hospitals, light public roads, and even repair bridges. Loans were also the third largest use sector. This is obvious because the high collegiality among the priyayis made them willing to help each other, especially if their priyayi colleagues struggled with debt, either from the Chinese or loan sharks from other groups.

For the priyayis, the abovementioned activities are clearly symbols that show their sociocultural identity in public spaces. Reputation was vital for the priyayis because it facilitated their social communication, both to the general public and the colonial government. In addition, regardless of whether there was a process of colonial transformation or not, efforts to maintain reputation can also be read as an effort to preserve the social order that was maintained for a long time [26]. This was not all merely ornamentation but rather a mechanism that functions in symbolizing the meaning of life, strength, wealth, and authority because each factor could be a sociocultural resource that led to their respective potential in the future [26].

However, using the mosque cash did not mean that the priyayis had no risk at all. In defending their reputation, the regents always had fears of being punished in the justice court. For instance, this can be seen in a report by Director Binnenlandsch Bestuur 26.6.1873 [111], in which the Tuban Regent had taken f 20,000 from the mosque cash. He could not clearly explain the mosque cash money that he used to the assistant resident. Therefore, he was summoned by the court, especially after the case became the main concern of the governor-general of the Dutch East Indies at the time.

Posted in national, local, and even Netherlands newspapers, it should have made everyone think repeatedly before using the mosque funds outside the rules because, if discovered, this kind of exposure would clearly threaten the priyayis' reputation. It is very likely that priyayis directed this money to the faces of society, especially among the educated anti-colonial societies. It was a significant gamble. Moreover, the mosque cash was one of the social funds of the Muslim community, and it would be real trouble for anyone who was messed with it. The unreasonable use of mosque cash can lead to mistrust. For example, this happened when Sarekat Islam created mosque cash issues several times in their national congress. The reason is that the priyayis did not use the money for the welfare of the Muslim community in Java.

Nevertheless, court sentences as applied to the regent of Tuban and exposure to the news and debate in a congress of large community organizations are not frequent events. So hypothetically, this made the priyayis less worried about conducting fraudulent deeds. Moreover, acts of using mosque cash outside the rules often involved residents and assistant residents. In fact, the Surabaya resident suggested to the priyayis to donate all of the money in the mosque to the Christian hospital in Mojowarno led by the Zending figure, J-Kruyt [2]. According to the resident, this donation was necessary because Muslims are also treated at the hospital. He had never heard complaints or protests from the regent or penghulu because alms were very strongly recommended in Islamic law [3]. Moreover, according to the existing rules in the Dutch colonial government, the residents were asked to supervise the mosque funds, but they were also involved.

**V. Conclusions**

Corruption has indeed been a scourge in Indonesia for a long time. However, apparently, after tracing the historical trajectory, corruption took root in the past of this country. This study shows that the effort to maintain a lifestyle is one reason corruption continues to occur. To keep a good reputation, lifestyle should be blatantly exhibited by the priyayi so that their position as the elite in the community endures for a long time. In addition, the ambivalence of the colonial government—by implementing an indirect system of government in the Dutch East Indies—made their modernization efforts lead to the strengthening of the traditional governmental powers guarded by the priyayi. In
fact, there was a tendency for their traditional authority to become increasingly widespread and to scale up.

In the case of the mosque fund, the priyayi assumed that the mosque was under their authority. Thus, the rules imposed by the Netherlands regarding restrictions on the priyayi’s access to mosque funds were violated. Instead of using the funds of the mosque to create steady power, the priyayi actually risked their reputation in the public sphere. There is the potential for the dismissal of their position because they violated existing regulations. However, the colonial government did not apply this punishment as a consistent effort to implement the transparency of the government system in the Dutch East Indies. Hence, the priyayi were constantly fiddling with cash in the mosque funds without fear.

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