

The Trade of Sago in Ambon Island Central Maluku, 1880-1900

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Abstract

During the late 19th century, sago in Ambon turned out not only to be a subsistence crop used as a staple food, but also as a commercial crop. Historical sources shown that sago became one of the important commodities in trade in the 19th century, as one of the commodities that affected the economy of the Ambonese people and the colonial government. Sago became a prominent commodity when the spices trade decreased. So, there is commercialization process of sago as an important trade commodity. In this connection, this article examines several issues, the sago became a strategic commodity and the role of sago in the Ambonese economy during 1880-1900. It is analyzed by using the historical method, which emphasized on primary sources based on official reports in the form of colonial publications. According to the study, between 1880 -1900 it was known that the local community and colonial government traded the sago. One interesting thing is that aside from being a staple food, sago is also used as a currency that is bartered with other commodities that have the same value. For the colonial government, sago became a commercial commodity that was quite productive, even having become an export commodity to various countries, such as Singapore and Europe. The colonial government sold sago in various forms such as bundles, basketry, slabs, flour, and grains. In addition, the government also rents sago lands to Christians and Muslims merchants for a specified period and cost.

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Introduction

The focus of this article is trade of sago in Ambon Island in the last two decades of the 19th century. During this time, the economic studies in Ambon Island were indivisible of the triumph of clove trade and the social dynamics brought about by the trade in these commodities. The study can be seen in the work of historians, for example Leirissa (1982), Amal (2010), and Susilowati (1988). Trading on Ambon Island was not only exclusive about clove, but also there were many other interests. Commodity trading was usually a merchandise to meet the daily needs of the local community. For example, copra, sea cucumbers, coconut oil, eucalyptus oil, arrack, mace, and also the main food ingredients such as rice and sago. Especially for sago, not only as a trading commodity, but also as a means of payment. Quoting from Susilowati's thesis, it is said that sago was used as a medium of exchange of merchandise brought by

traders from Java, Bugis, Makassar, and other traders who stop at Ambon port and its surroundings. Examples of commodities that were often exchanged for sago from Seram were flax cloth. In addition, Susilowati also revealed that the existence of sago which was a subsistence crop for the population continued to develop during the colonial government (Susilowati, 1988, p. 31-35).

The sago commodity is a main food for people in eastern Indonesia, especially in Ambon Island, Central Maluku. Therefore, this plant has an important value for local communities especially on Ambon Island, Central Maluku. It can be said that sago is a major need for the people of Ambon Island. This is because the source of carbohydrate such as rice cannot grow on Ambon Island due to infertile soils. So that sago is a mainstay in terms of meeting the needs of Ambonese carbohydrates. It is unknown where this plant came from, but before the Western came to Maluku, sago was existed as a main food for people in Maluku.

Sago plants were not only popular among the local people in Ambon but also among the Colonial government. Even though, the Colonial government consumed sago as a secondary meal however, they played an important role on sago's trade. At least this sago trade gave economic value to the colonial government. Entering the 19th century, the cultivation of sago began to be carried out by the Colonial Government. In 1859, the Dutch government cultivated 200.518 sago palms. Plant cultivation significantly higher every year. Until its peak, in 1869 the Colonial Government cultivated around 3 million sago trees. This shows that sago was not only a subsistence crop for local people but also a commercial crop for the colonial government.

The sago cultivation increased drastically since the Ambonese community consumed as a primary food. According to Susilowati (1988), it is said that in the mid of-19th century the need for sago increased. This is based on the paper of T.J. Willer who is a commissioner for areas in the Maluku Islands, a family of 5 people or more requires at least 250 pounds (125 kilograms) of sago flour for a period of one month. In fact, each person spends an average of about 2 pounds of sago per day. Apart from sago being a staple food, it is also because sago is a type of food that is easily digested by the stomach, so that in a day people can eat more than three times (Susilowati, 1988, p. 32).

According to the objectives, this article discusses a number of issues, such as the sago trade on Ambon island in the last twenty years of the 19th century? Was there a role for the sago trade in the economy for the local population and for the colonial government? And what are the roles of the colonial government in increasing sago trade on Ambon Island?

Method

The scope of this article is limited to the last twenty years of the 19th century. The temporal restriction in 1869 when the sago cultivation achieved high number by the Colonial Government. The sago can be harvested and traded after 10 years later in

1879. Therefore, between 1880-1900 sago trade in Ambon increased due to inexhaustible resources. Meanwhile, this study refers to the central part of Maluku, namely Ambon Island and its surroundings as the administrative centre as well as the centre of clove trade during the Colonial Government.

This study uses historical research methods. According to Kuntowidjojo (1997) after determining the topic, there are four stages in historical research namely heuristics (sources collection), verification (sources criticism), interpretation (reasoning), and historiography (writing) (Kuntowidjojo, 1997, p. 89). The researcher obtained those data sources from doing research on National Library of Indonesia, online searching and any other credible online websites. The main sources that used in this journal is *Koloniaal Verslag* (colonial report) and *Algemene Verslag* (general report). Both of these reports contain information about economy, politics and population in Maluku. After collecting the sources, the researcher externally and internally critiqued with imagination, interpretation, and theories at the synthesizing phase. At last phase, the results of synthesizing were written in standard Indonesian language (Garragham, 1957, p. 33)

The Geographical of Ambon Island

In the 19th century the island of Ambon was in the territory of Central Maluku. To explain its geographical attributes, this area is divided into five different categories, namely as: (1) the name of the island; (2) an administrative sub-division of southern Maluku; (3) a residency in Central Maluku; (4) a port city; and (5) a native of the residency (Leirissa, 2009, p. 320). Therefore, in this study it will be explained about Ambon as an island of sago trade in the 19th century.

Geographically, the boundaries of Ambon in the north, are bordered by Huamual, which is meant by the West Seram region. The southern part of the island is bordered by the Banda Sea which is a link between Ambon Island and Kei Island. The western part of Ambon Island is bordered by the southern part of Buru Island and the east is bordered by Haruku Island. Ambon Island is one of the ten thousand islands that make up the present Maluku Province. The island consists of two peninsulas, the north is called Leihitu (in short Hitu), while in the south it is called Leitimur which is also divided into two parts, namely west of Leilahat and east of Laitimur. The island is meant in the Ambon Residency area which consists entirely of the islands of Ambon, Seram Besar (for instant western and central parts of Seram Island), Buru, Boana, Manipa, Kelong, Ambelau, Banda Islands, Molana, Haruku, Saparua, and Nusa Laut (De Jong, 2012, p. 5). The two peninsulas are separated by the sea which is called Ambon Bay (Abdurachman, 1984, p. 56-78). With Teluk Dalam that started at two points that pierced into the sea at Poka (next to Leihitu) to Galala (next to Leitimur) extending all the way to Baguala and Passo.

Ambon Island has two climates consist of tropical climate and seasonal climate. Hence, the Ambon Island climate is strongly influenced by the ocean and takes place simultaneously with the seasonal climate, namely the West or North season and the East or Southeast season. Season changes are always interspersed with

transition season which is the transition of the two seasons. The west season generally takes place when the west wind blows from December to March, where April is the transition to the East Season. While the Eastern Season lasts from October, where November is a transition to the Western season. The west wind brings good weather and the sea is calm. The east wind carries thick fog and clouds which cause rain, typhoons and large waves (Abdurachman, 1984, p. 57).

Sago Trade in the 19th Century

Before explaining about the port of Ambon, it will first be explained the meaning of the port itself. The port is a place consisting of land and waters with certain boundaries, where economic activity takes place. Activities involving ships that lean, berth, up and down passengers, loading and unloading goods, shipping safety facilities, and as a place of movement between intra and intermodal transportation. The port has another function, namely as interface namely the provision of care facilities to move goods from ship to shore and vice versa, as *link* that port as the connecting link between the other transportation as well as gateways is as a trade gateway to a region or country. The port was not only a place to rely on ships, but also a place to anchor the ship safely, safely from pirates, protected from big waves, strong winds and currents.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, a safe place to anchor was a river that was some distance deep. However, because of the small size, it will hamper the growth of a port. Eventually the port was moved to a larger estuary or bay, although security was lacking. Ambon Port is located in the city of Ambon. This port is a natural harbor with a good level of depth so that large ships can dock safely. In the 16th century traders who wanted to sail to Maluku had to stop by this port (Widjojo, 2013, p.21). According to Pieter Bleeker (Notji, 2005, p. 18-19) in the Leirissa's paper said when visiting the city of Ambon around 1854 the city was getting wider. The eastern boundary of the city is the Batu Merah River, while the western boundary is the Batu Gantung River. The Chinese occupy the coast to the north of the fort, while Europeans inhabit the southwest of the fort. While the other part is inhabited by indigenous wages which are increasing from year to year (Leirissa, 2009, p. 329).

Ambon Port's activities have become increasingly crowded since it was established as a free port by the colonial government around 1853. Commodities traded are even more diverse. Especially for foodstuffs other than sago, the government also occasionally imports rice. The 1879 Colonial Report recorded that the government imported 19. 494 *pikul* rice. Then, in the following year, 1751 a *pikul* of rice were imported again, but the importer's area was not mentioned in *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1880). According to data in the Colony Report al Celebes region (Makassar), in 1892 the Makassar regional government exported rice to Ambon region as mentioned in *Koloniaal Verslag van Celebes* (1892). This rice import was carried out because not all foreigners residing in Ambon consumed sago as their staple food.

Regarding the transportation of merchandise, traders certainly use ships. The ships used by each trader are different. For instance, traders from Makassar use

traditional boats called *Paduakkang* (*Padewakkang*), while the people of Central Maluku, especially Ambon, use traditional ships named *Lakafunu*, *Kora-kora*, *Kalukus* and small boats for inter-island trade around Ambon. While Chinese traders used to use Chinese sailing ships or often called Jung. Then the Dutch traders usually used ships which were under the command of the Colonial government themselves.

Sago Trade in Ambon-Central Maluku in 1880-1900

Central Maluku considerably produce sago beside spices. When the spice trade began and attracted many outside traders who formed a trading network under the colonial government's policy, the sago trade was drawn into it. These two trade commodities are interrelated. If spice is the most important trade commodity, then sago is the main source for carbohydrates. Sago described as a staple food that is abundant, available to the population, easily grown and processed. Most of sago grows in wild area and no need much treatment. Processing a sago required less energy and time, the local people devote their time and energy to the produce a clove which were profitable for the colonial government. Even though, sago processing requires extra energy, one sago processing can meet the needs of one family for the next few months.

Although sago and clove production are different activities, they still have one thing in common, which is involved in a wider system. Here is illustrated how a local system is influenced by external, international markets and government policies. The pattern of trade in spices and sago is referred into a local, regional and international networks. This shows the involvement of the local system with a wider external system. The production of spices is a Maluku local economic system controlled by world markets and Colonial government policies. On the other hand, sago plays a role at a more local level, although production, consumption and value are also influenced by the intervention of the colonial government. So, it is prove that sago became a trade item of the Colonial Government in the 19th century.

Since the 19th century, the Colonial Government began to cultivate these plants because it can provide big benefit. Sago is not only flour that can be traded, but also others. Starting from the forest that is leased, the trees that are sold per bundles, the piths that are sold by basket or *perikul*, to the processed preparations namely sago plates and sago pearls are also traded. For the people of Ambon, sago is a natural product as a source of life because it is a staple food in the area.

The Colonial Government began cultivating sago around 1869. This sago could be harvested and traded 10 years later in 1879. Therefore, in the period 1880-1900 sago trade in Ambon was very busy and had inexhaustible resources. At the end of 1885 and beginning of 1886 sago production had decreased. This is due to the burning of government sago forests. The cause of the fire was not explained in *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina*. However, the sago trade in Ambon Island remains busy because Ambon still gets supplies of sago from Seram Island and Buru Island. For more details about the export and import of sago will be discussed further as follows:

It has been explained before that the sago trade in Ambon-central Maluku has always been going on. The trade began took place is not yet known with

certainty. According to Tome Pieres, sago is important because it functions as a currency that is used to exchange with other merchandise (Lapian, 2008, p.81). The tradition of the sago trade also occurred in other regions in the Dutch East Indies. But the presence of rice as a staple food substitute for traditional staple foods is expanding rapidly and it is able to shift the role of sago. Besides that, the land in the area is also suitable for cultivating rice so that even more neglected. For example, in Riau, exports of sago production had begun in the form of dirty sago in 1879 (Haryanto & Pangloli, 1992), but it was not explained where this sago was exported. Up to 1892, it was recorded in *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1892) that Riau exported sago to Singapore totaling 121.800 pikuls worth f 438.000.

Unlike the Ambon region, the land in this area is not suitable for cultivating rice, sago remains as a priority for local people even though rice is actually imported from rice-producing regions such as South Sulawesi. This rice is only consumed by the elite, while ordinary people still consume sago as a staple food. In De Jong's book entitled *Sources on the History of the Protestant Church in Central Maluku 1803-1900 Volume I* revealed, in the mid-19th century namely in 1853 a sago factory was opened by an elder, ship owner and trader. The man named George Alexander Hoedt (1821-1876) opened a sago factory for export to Europe (De Jong, 2012, p. 298). In addition to these sources, based on the analysis of sources from *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1882) it was mentioned that the government built a steam-fired sago factory called European Firma. This sago factory is used to process sago into flour in preparation for export to Singapore. According to *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1883) in every year it processes ± 4000 kg of sago at a price of f 20,000. In 1883, sago was exported to Singapore, but the amount was not explained. This factory had its own trading company in Singapore. However, in 1885 it was dissolved, what the cause was not explained in the *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1885). Besides that, the sago factory in Ambon is also being prepared to be able to export sago to the European market. In 1886, exports were made to Europe and in 1887 it was noted that the European market received 618 kg sago worth f 8330. However, this sago factory had to stop production since October 1887 because the price of sago was too low.

In addition to the *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina*, in summary of trade and shipping in Ambon in 1860, 1867 and 1869, it was reported that sago became the export commodity which needed the community. According to *Beknopt Overzicht van den Handel en de Scheepvaart te Amboina* (1860) sago exports for f 6,420 in 1860. Meanwhile, *Beknopt Overzicht van den Handel en de Scheepvaart te Amboina* (1867) the exported sago was about f 4,181 in 1867. From these data, it can be seen that sago exports from Ambon have decreased. However, the data does not mention the amount of sago being exported and where the sago was exported.

Sago Became a Prominent Trade Commodity

As explained earlier, even though Ambon produced its own sago, the island continued to import sago from other islands to provide their needs. This is because sago production on this island is insufficient for both the consumption needs of its people

and the need for exports abroad. In addition, since the Colonial Government moved the spice centre to Ambon Island in the 19th century, population growth in Ambon has also increased. Especially the *Burgers* (native citizens). The burgers are required to help the government manage the clove land owned by the Colonial Government. Hence, they are rarely pay attention on process sago plants which are the main food sources. Finally, they rely on direct imports from neighbouring islands such as Seram and Buru. In 1881, Ambon imported sago from Seram and Buru Islands at a price per basket (*toemang*) *f* 50, if directly purchased from the forest and *f* 90, if bought in the market while the price of the trees was around *f* 5 - *f* 20. In 1882, Seram Island and Buru Island were not only export sago to Ambon Island but also to Lease Island (Haruku, Saparua, and Nusa Laut). In 1882, Ambon imported 4.500 piculs of sago. Then the number of imports increased in 1883 at 6. 140 *pikul*. Then in 1892 and 1893, it was reported that Ambon imported sago from Seram Island and Halmahera Island. But the report did not mention the amount or price. Details on the analysis of the export and import

Table 1. Analysis on the Region which Export and Import Sago According to *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* 1880-1895.

| Year | Export Regions | Export Amount | Import Regions | Import Ammount |
|------|----------------|------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1880 | | | Seram | No mentioned |
| 1881 | | | Seram and Buru | No mentioned |
| 1882 | | | Seram and Buru | 4500 <i>pikul</i> |
| 1883 | Singapore | Not mentioned | Seram and Buru | 6140 <i>pikul</i> |
| 1884 | Singapore | Not mentioned | | |
| 1885 | - | - | - | - |
| 1886 | Eropa | | Seram and Buru | No mentioned |
| 1887 | Eropa | 618 <i>pikul</i> | | |
| 1888 | - | - | - | - |
| 1890 | - | - | - | - |
| 1891 | - | - | - | - |
| 1892 | - | - | Seram and Halmahera | No mentioned |
| 1893 | - | - | Seram and Halmahera | No mentioned |
| 1895 | - | - | - | - |

Sago was exported from Ambon to Singapore in 1882 (the sago company was established the government of the Netherlands East Indies), 1883, 1886 and 1887. However, only four years of export to Europe in 1887, the so-called export amount is 618 *pikul* at the price of *f* 8.330. While other years are not explained (the ex The *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* does not explain in detail the use of sago for the people of Singapore and Europe. However, it can be estimated that the possibility of Singaporeans consuming sago as a complementary food ingredient, for example made

into sago porridge or other processed products. Unlike the Europeans, sago is used as a mixture in the manufacture of glue and building materials.

In contrast to exports, sago imports occur almost every year. Sago import areas are as shown in the Table 1, namely Seram Island, Buru Island and Halmahera Island. These three islands are the largest sago producers in Central Maluku because they have extensive sago forests. According to *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1882 & 1883), the import data also explains about the amount of sago imported only in 1882 were 4.500 *pikuls* at *f* 3.1/*pikul* and in 1883 were 6.140 *pikuls* at *f* 7.5/*pikul*.

The Actor of Sago Trade

Regarding the sago trade, Ambonese people played an important role in terms of traditional trade because sago is their main food. In contrast, the Colonial government, sold sago to get more profit, local people traded sago not as a permanent livelihood but rather if they were pressured for money. This trade is also conducted on a non-permanent basis. If the Colonial government traded sago by way of sale, the local people traded sago not only for sale but also by barter. This method is often carried out by Ambonese, Saparua or others who go to trade on Seram Island. They trade and exchange their wares for sago trees which they buy from the people of Seram Island, then they will process the sago to make flour.

The price of sago among natives can be said to be relatively cheap. If it is expensive, the price of this sago is only 60-70 cents per 45 Pounds (De Jong, 2012, p. 105). But if the price is cheap it could be half of that price. Even if the community does not have money to buy sago, they will cut down and process a sago tree in their own *dusung*. If they do not have their own sago *dusung*, they will cut down and process sago in other people's sago *dusung* with the agreement of the owner of the sago *dusung*. For services, they will get half of the proceeds, while the rest will be handed over to the owner of the sago *dusung*. Besides sold and bartered, sago trade networks also done through social alliances such a relation *pela*. *Pela* is a kinship organization consisting of two or more countries that aim to help one another. The relationship between *pela* is not limited by religious factors, so that countries with different religions can still have *pela* relations. *Pela* ties that are interwoven between Ambon-Lease, Seram and other islands have a very important role, especially in terms of meeting the need for sago. It has been mentioned before that Seram Island is one of the largest sago producers in central Maluku. If Ambon lacks sago, the Seram people who have *pela* relations with the Ambonese will give their sago production to a *negeri* that lacks sago (Susilowati, 1988, p. 29). The price of sago on Ambon Island varies every year depends on the form sago. As explained before, sago is traded in various forms, such as in the form of sprouts, *pikul*, flour, plates, pearls (per bottle of wine) and even sold per tree. According to *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1881) when sago purchased in the forest for *f* 0.50 and if purchased on the market the price rises to *f* 0.90. Then in 1887 the price rose, ranging between *f* 0.30 - *f* 0.70. In 1888, the price became *f* 0.25 - *f* 0.75 (*Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* 1888). Whereas in 1891 according to *Koloniaal*

Verslag van Amboina (1891), the market price increased to f 1 but the following year dropped to f 0.80 while prices in the forest remained f 0.25.

Table 2. Sago Prices between 1880 and 1900 in Gulden (f)

| Year/Per | 1881 | 1882 | 1883 | 1887 | 1888 | 1891 | 1892 |
|--------------------|------------------|---------|--------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| <i>Pikul</i> | - | f 3,215 | f 7,50 | - | - | - | - |
| <i>Tumang</i> | f 0,50-f 0,90 | - | - | f 0,30 - f 0,70 | f 0,25 - f 0,75 | f 0,25 - f 1 | f 0,25 - f 0,80 |
| 100 <i>Lempeng</i> | - | - | - | f 0,75 - f 1 | f 0,50 - f 1 | f 0,75 - f 1 | f 0,40 - f 1 |

Source. Based on the analysis of the *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* from 1880 to 1892.

In contrast to sales of *toemang*, sales of sago in *pikul* between 1880-1900 only occurred twice, namely in 1882 amounting to f 3.125 which then rose to f 7.50 in 1883 as stated in the *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1882 & 1883). Whereas in the form of slabs, sago was sold per 100 plates at prices which varies every year. As the compilation, according to *Koloniaal Verslag van Amboina* (1887, 1888, 1891, 1892), In 1887, the price ranged from f 0.75- f 1, in 1888 the price became f 0.50-f 1, in 1891 for f 0.75 - f 1 and in 1892 for f 0.40 - f 1.

Conclusion

The situation of the sago trade between 1880-1900 in Ambon was active. Exports and imports were often carried out by the Colonial government through the Ambon Port. Sago is not only produced by Ambon Island, but also other neighbouring islands. Sago is widely imported from other islands that have wider sago forests, Seram Island and Buru Island. Both of these islands have vast areas of sago, so the Colonial government has dubbed them as sago warehouses. According to treatments, sago plants on Seram and Buru Islands did not require special treatment. This plant grows and develops naturally with very large numbers, especially in swampy areas that have abundant water. In contrast, sago's growing small in Ambon Island, although, an inadequate for the needs of the local population. However, some sago trees are growing on the beach and forests. This commodity is not only used for the staple food of the population but also *supplied* to small surrounding islands such as Haruku, Saparua and Nusa Laut and also exported to other countries such as Singapore and Europe.

Sago trade has increased with increasing population, although migrants prefer to consume rice. In addition, an increase also occurred at the start of the opening of the sago factory by the Colonial government. The price of sago itself fluctuates with the comparison of the amount of demand and availability of sago. Sago trade began to decline when the government closed sago factory because the price of sago is getting cheaper. Sago has an important role for the natives and *Mestizo* in Ambon, because it is their staple food. But in terms of trade, sago is not a commercial commodity that has

high economic value for them. They sell sago only if they really experience economic hardship and are sold at a low price. Sago sales are also done by bartering with other goods that have the same economic value. For the Colonial government, the opposite was true.

Sago has a role and a high economic value, namely as a guarantor of the availability of staple foods for the Ambonese population so that residents can focus more on processing high-value trading commodity estates such as spices, coffee, tobacco and cocoa. Besides that, sago also became a trade commodity that was quite productive for the Colonial government, and even had become an export commodity. Therefore, the Colonial government has an important role in increasing the sago trade, namely; firstly, since Ambon Port was made a free port in 1853; secondly, it opened a sago factory in Ambon around 1882 to be exported to Singapore and Europe; thirdly, sago fields were leased to Christians and Arabs with a predetermined time and cost; fourth, selling sago in various forms such as sold peratang, basket, in the form of slabs, flour, and grains sold per bottle of wine.

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