The 18th century was a turbulent period in Javanese history, when local kingdoms, Dutch traders and a mysterious Turk became embroiled in a series of bloody conflicts. M.C. Ricklefs
The Dutch side of the story
The Dutch East India Company, the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), was entangled in a bloody Javanese civil war in the 1750s. The kingdom of Mataram, with its series of capital cities in south-central Java, had been embroiled in major wars since the late 17th century. The VOC blundered into this volatile situation in the hope of winning trade concessions. It made an initial and cautious military intervention at the end of 1676 at Surabaya, on Java’s north-east coast, hoping to mediate some sort of settlement. Not everyone in the Company’s hierarchy thought this a sensible move. Some expressed the view that the VOC could only subdue Java at the cost of ruining the island and to the detriment of the Company’s finances. The logic of intervention would, nevertheless, lead the VOC deep into the interior, with consequences even worse than sceptics had feared.

In early 1677 the Company renewed a treaty, signed 30 years before with the Mataram dynasty. The Company promised to assist the dynasty in return for the king repaying all VOC costs and granting economic concessions, such as freedom from tolls. The warfare in Java thereby gained another layer. It became not only a civil war among indigenous forces, but one in which the Javanese court was supported by non-Muslim infidels. The fighting became in part a dynastic struggle as well as a religio-cultural one and enmities grew more entrenched. In 1677 the court fell to the rebels and Amangkurat I died while fleeing his burning palace. His son – with no court, treasury or army – sought the Company’s assistance in return for still more concessions. He thus became Susuhunan Amangkurat II. Some in the Company saw this as a golden opportunity and were anxious to march into Java’s interior to put down the rebellion and place its client king on the throne. But it did not work out that way.

The Company came to realise that agreements to repay its costs were unlikely ever to be met and that once one conflict was resolved, or a battle won, another one would need to be fought. The costs in materiel and manpower were to lead to the Company’s decline – and eventual bankruptcy – during the 18th century. Conflicts which historians know as the First and Second Javanese Wars of Succession (1704–8, 1719–23), the Surabaya War (1717–19) and the Chinese War (1740–3) sucked the Company into bitter, costly fighting.

There was no prospect of the Company winning control over the entire Javanese kingdom. The dominance won by the Netherlands colonial government lay in the future, in the 19th century. The Company faced Javanese enemies who were as well armed and trained as its own troops, more familiar with the terrain and far greater in number. In 1761, after the last of the series of wars ended in 1757, one of the main Dutch participants, Nicolaas Hartingh, recalled events and wrote: ‘Ach, if only the Company had remained a merchant! … what has the Company [gained] for all the treasure it has expended?’

The Javanese side of the story
For the Javanese who fought, died and suffered in these civil wars, the period from the 1670s to 1750s was one of almost uninterrupted violence and bloodshed. In 1746 the last of the wars broke out when a senior prince of the Mataram
dynasty, Mangkubumi (c.1717-92), rebelled against the court of Surakarta. His nephew Raden Mas Said, also known as Mangkunagara (b.1726), had preceded him in rebellion. These two men became the dominant figures of Java's dramatic 18th century.

Mangkunagara was just 14 when he joined the anti-court and anti-VOC rebels in 1740. In the early years of this 'Chinese War', the charismatic prince found much support, but there were many other princes in rebellion and little or no coordination among them. His enemies at this time included his uncle Mangkubumi, whose actions were often obscure – was he supporting the rebels, was he supporting the court? All became clear when Mangkubumi rebelled against Surakarta in 1746 in what became known as the 'Third Javanese War of Succession' (1746-57).

Mangkubumi and Mangkunagara now joined forces: Mangkubumi was the senior leader, Mangkunagara his commanding general. Mangkubumi gave his eldest daughter to Mangkunagara in marriage, sealing their alliance.

Several other princely rebels acknowledged Mangkubumi's leadership and his combined forces grew. By late 1746, his main army was estimated by the Dutch to number around 13,000, including 2,500 cavalry. In 1750 the cavalry force led by Mangkunagara was estimated at 13,000 by itself. These figures may be compared with the VOC position in Central and East Java as of late January 1753. The VOC governor of the north-east coast, Joan Andries Baron van Hohendorff, reported that his total force consisted of 5,791 men, a loss of nearly 700 since his last report. Most had died from disease, others had fallen in combat.

The Company had fought many bitter battles over the previous seven decades, losing men and a great deal of treasure in Java and ruining its prospects of trade profits as it did so, yet it still faced a formidable enemy. What, as Hartingh asked, had the Company gained for all its efforts in Java?

Nor was all well on the rebel side. Some of the princes refused to acknowledge Mangkubumi's leadership. Building and keeping a rebel alliance together was a tricky enterprise. Most ominously, in 1752, the alliance between Mangkubumi and his son-in-law Mangkunagara began to crumble. There were several reasons for this, including a conflict over women. Mangkunagara had become besotted with a young dancer taken as war booty, so much so that he neglected his wife, Mangkubumi's daughter, just as she was bearing him a child. Mangkubumi was furious at this neglect of his daughter and, to complicate matters, he too fell for the young dancer. There was also a profound difference in military tactics. Mangkubumi favoured frontal assaults, even on fortified VOC positions, whereas Mangkunagara preferred to protect his regiments and to force or entice the enemy out of fortifications for battle on open ground. Mangkubumi suspected Mangkunagara of cowardice and the latter regarded Mangkubumi as irresponsible. In other matters, too, Mangkubumi appeared to behave with an arbitrariness that concerned many of his supporters. It is also possible that Mangkunagara was beginning to think that he should be the senior figure, the man who should be king. In 1749 Mangkubumi had been declared king by his fellow rebels, so a whiff of lèse-majesté on Mangkunagara's part added to the poisoning of the central alliance of the rebellion.

Van Hohendorff, the VOC's senior officer on Java's north coast from 1748 to 1754, opened tentative negotiations with Mangkunagara in late 1752 to see if he could be separated from Mangkubumi and brought to collaborate with the Company. There seems to have been little or no genuine good will on either side. Letters were exchanged, but attempts to coordinate
military actions against Mangkubumi came to nothing. Nevertheless, the estrangement between the two leading rebels clearly opened opportunities just when the Dutch and the Javanese court it supported most needed them. Hartingh, who succeeded van Hohendorff, later described the growing estrangement between the two as the intervention of ‘Divine Providence’, just ‘when the enemy seemed at his most powerful’. In March 1753 Mangkunagara and his closest followers resolved to break openly with Mangkubumi. Internecine warfare soon followed.

Enter the Turk

In January 1753 a Turk, Ibrahim, arrived unannounced in Batavia (now Jakarta), the VOC’s capital, as reported by both Dutch and Javanese sources. Their accounts of his background rest on what he told people about himself. He was evidently a wealthy trader who bore the titles of Sheikh and Sharif, indicating noble ancestry leading back to the Prophet Muhammad himself. He also had two documents of some sort, which, in the Javanese understanding, amounted to authority from the Ottoman sultan to mediate in the warfare going on in Java.

These documents are lost and the Dutch sources do not refer to them. Their signatories as named in the Javanese chronicle Babad Giyanti are not identifiable with Ottoman dignitaries or the sultan of the time. It is possible, however, that one of these – called Mustafa Rumi (Mustafa of Rum, i.e. Istanbul) – did refer to the contemporary grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire, Çorlulu Köse Bahir Mustafa Pasha (1752–5). Perhaps the Javanese confused the term pasha, which was used for dignitaries such as the grand vizier or the governor of an Ottoman territory, with the term padshah employed by the Ottoman sultans themselves. If Ibrahim presented himself as having the authority of a pasha behind him, his Javanese interlocutors might have misunderstood this pasha to be the padshah, the sultan himself. It was important that Ibrahim was thought to be an emissary of the Ottoman sultan – known as Sultan Rum in Javanese – for Sultan Rum was a major figure in Javanese myths about the ancient past of the island. With claimed descent from the Prophet himself and authorisation from the Ottoman sultan, Ibrahim quickly achieved standing and authority in Javanese circles.

Ibrahim addressed himself in the first place to the VOC’s governor-general in Batavia, Jacob Mossel (1750–61), and offered to mediate between the Company and Mangkubumi. He never showed any interest in, nor made any contact with, Mangkunagara. Whatever the prospects of reconciliation and alliance between Mangkunagara and the Company – and we may suspect that they were always slight – they now came to a definitive end.

Mossel and his colleagues on the Council of the Indies were uncertain what to make of Ibrahim, not least since he asked no remuneration for his services. Babad Giyanti also describes him declining payment: ‘If I can bring a halt to the people’s conflicts, my reward will already be great in the eyes of God.’ The Dutch had a generally favourable view of
Turks, believing them less hostile than the Javanese towards Europeans. It was decided to send Ibrahim to Semarang to meet the Company’s governor of the north-east coast, van Hohendorff, who was ordered to receive Ibrahim and see what might be achieved. In April 1753 van Hohendorff responded, expressing doubt that the ‘Turkish priest recently sent here by your Excellencies’ would be able to contribute anything through his ‘spiritual authority’, but saying that he would follow Batavia’s orders.

Only a few months later, in August 1753, Mangkunagara suffered a crushing defeat at Mangkunagara’s hands at Kasatriyan, near Ponorogo in eastern Java. Mangkunagara force-marched his army for three days and nights, while Mangkunagara rested his men and horses and waited to receive his father-in-law – now his principal enemy – in battle. Mangkunagara’s autobiographical chronicle of the war years, Serat Babad Pakunegaran, tells us that he consulted his senior officers and asked his soldiers whether they loved him and, if so, he asked God that they should stand together, whether in life or in death. Then came a gentle rain and the stream at Kasatriyan flooded so that it would be difficult for enemies to cross. Mangkunagara awaited Mangkubumi in this secure position.

When Mangkubumi’s troops appeared across the river, Mangkunagara shouted to his men – according to his babad – ‘Let us all submit to God and die together!’ His well-rested soldiers then launched into fierce hand-to-hand combat, putting Mangkubumi’s exhausted regiments to flight at the cost of many dead. Furious at this turn of events, Mangkubumi himself entered the fray, but his soldiers were tired from the march. Their shots missed and many were killed. Mangkubumi watched on, speechless.

As Mangkubumi’s soldiers fell, the lip of his own horse was grazed by a musket shot.

‘It was clear that van Hohendorff was himself a barrier to the negotiated peace’

He decided to flee the field, followed by his surviving cavalry. As his men tried to cross the flooding river, many died in its waters. Babad Giyanti observes that Mangkubumi’s soldiers ‘reached the river bank exhausted. Having just marched night and day for three nights, without food, then they plunged into the river ... exhausted men who died when only lightly wounded. More and more were easily killed’.

In the end, Mangkubumi lost 600 dead, with more surrendering to Mangkunagara, according to the latter’s account. Mangkunagara did not, however, pursue the fleeing Mangkubumi, wishing no more battle with his father-in-law. What, after all, would he do with Mangkubumi if he were to be captured? Mangkubumi was allowed to escape across the flooding river, which was nearly choked with the bodies of the dead. With him went surviving senior figures, a mere 200 cavalry and 100 infantry.

In the wake of this devastating defeat, Mangkubumi wrote to Governor-General Mossel, saying that he had confidence in Ibrahim as a negotiator. He criticised van Hohendorff for preventing a personal meeting between himself and Ibrahim. Mangkubumi’s hatred of van Hohendorff, which rested on a decade of animosity and war, was obvious in several letters. It was clear that van Hohendorff was himself a barrier to the negotiated peace that Batavia sought. He would not allow Ibrahim to return to Batavia until early 1754, when the Turk took with him a beautiful gilded dagger (kris) and four horses as gifts to Mossel.

Dutch VOC employee, Nagasaki, Japan, colour woodblock print, c.1700.
from Mangkubumi. The latter’s letter to the governor-general, however, was a problem. Unsurprisingly, it was written in Javanese, but within the chaotic and barely competent bureaucracy of Company headquarters, no officer could be found who could read the language. Therefore, Ibrahim conveyed Mangkubumi’s message orally; only in March were translations received in Batavia.

In early 1754 van Hohendorff asked to be relieved of his position as governor of Java’s north-east coast: ‘To conserve my reputation’, he said. His replacement was Hartingh, who was born in Amsterdam and had been sent to Java as a youth to learn Javanese. He was thus one of the few VOC officers who could communicate in that language. Moreover, claimed his Company colleagues, he was ‘not only knowledgeable in the land and the language’, but had the ‘talent to get on well with the native’. That rather contrasted with Babad Giyanti’s description of Hartingh as ‘big and tall but not good looking, with a face roundly bulbous and squinting eyes, his belly bulging out everywhere, folded over itself, big and dishevelled’. According to the Babad, those who saw him said: ‘This is a pig that’s been replaced by a demon’, comparing him with the giant ogre Buta Terong from the wayang (shadow-puppet) theatre. However negative the Javanese view of Hartingh’s appearance, he carried no prior baggage of bad relations with Mangkubumi. This enhanced the prospects of success in the peace negotiations under Ibrahim’s mediation.

All these events realigned Central Javanese politics. In Batavia, the Council of the Indies debated at length what steps to take next. It decided in March 1754 to explore Mangkubumi’s demands, with Ibrahim as intermediary. Mangkubumi quickly recovered his position as the most powerful military force in Central and East Java. As the negotiations proceeded, two main losers emerged:

Pakubuwana III of Surakarta, who was about to lose half his kingdom without anyone suggesting that he might hold a veto over the outcome; and Prince Mangkunagara, who was sidelined by Ibrahim’s insistence that only Mangkubumi was an appropriate negotiating partner for the VOC.

Peace negotiations succeed
Indirect negotiations between Hartingh and Mangkubumi began in April 1754. In June, the Company sent Ibrahim to meet Mangkubumi in person. He returned to Semarang accompanied by Mangkubumi’s brother as emissary, living token of good faith – and, frankly, as hostage. Mangkubumi demanded that the VOC should recognise him as ruler over half of the Javanese kingdom, bearing the title Sultan, and should commit itself to killing Mangkunagara. The latter was still marauding at will in the countryside, with forces which Babad Giyanti puts at 10,000 cavalry and 20,000 infantry.

With the VOC-Mangkubumi negotiations well under way, Ibrahim travelled to Batavia in June 1754. From there, he informed Mangkubumi that he was going on pilgrimage to Mecca and would return within seven months. He may never have returned to Java.

Meanwhile, Hartingh met Mangkubumi in September 1754 at the village Pedagangan, where the main issues were settled to mutual satisfaction. It was agreed that the kingdom would be divided between equal monarchs, Pakubuwana III in Surakarta, bearing the title Susuhunan, and Mangkubumi to be known as Sultan. The latter insisted that his domain must be in the centre of the kingdom and Hartingh had no option but to concede. Mangkubumi relinquished his claim to some of the coastal areas under VOC control, but insisted on half of the annual rent the Company paid for that area. Hartingh and Mangkubumi swore oaths of friendship and loyalty between
The ogre Buta Terong, from Sejarah Wayang Purwa by Hardjowirogo, 1952.
the VOC and Mangkubumi and they promised to join in destroying Mangkunagara. At the end of the meeting, a Captain Donkel and 20 dragoons stayed with Mangkubumi as a token of the new alliance and as a practical step towards military cooperation. Batavia began to use the formal title and name by which Mangkubumi and his successors have been known down to the present: Sultan Hamengkubuwana.

Mangkunagara learned of these negotiations. With a force of around 2,000 cavalry, he marched towards Pedagangan, presumably intending to disrupt the meeting. By the time he arrived, however, it was over and Hartingh had departed. Mangkubumi and Donkel fled to an area of inaccessible caves, safe from Mangkunagara’s attack.

The war changed character as the Mangkubumi-VOC alliance solidified. This was principally because of Ibrahim’s intervention, but the Turk was no longer present to see the fruits of his efforts. In October 1754, Mangkunagara – whose army the VOC still estimated to be 16,000 strong – suffered a devastating defeat in a decisive clash of arms. His forces broke and fled, leaving several hundred dead. In the remaining months of 1754, Mangkunagara lost almost every engagement with his enemies, albeit not without cost to them.

In January 1755 Hartingh travelled from Semarang to a village called Giyanti, the temporary capital of Mangkubumi’s new sultanate. On the way, he paused at Surakarta, where Pakubuwana III confirmed his acceptance of the partition of his kingdom, with half of it going to Mangkubumi. On 9 February, Hartingh and Mangkubumi met privately with only a translator and Mangkubumi’s chief administrator (Patih) present. They discussed the treaty drafted by the Company, which was altered when Mangkubumi objected to a provision that would have restricted his power over subordinates.

On 13 February, Mangkubumi (using the title Sultan Hamengkubuwana) and Hartingh agreed to the terms of this Giyanti treaty. They and other dignitaries signed and sealed the document. Two days later the sultan, Hartingh and their entourages went to the village of Jatisari, mid-way between Giyanti and Surakarta. There, uncle and nephew met in person: Sultan Mangkubumi – the most powerful leader in Java by far, now 38 years old – and Pakubuwana III, who was just turning 23, had no experience of military leadership and was yet of little consequence. In theory they were equal sovereigns; in practice there was little equality. There was no Javanese protocol to cover such an odd occasion. The two monarchs sat staring at each other in silence, so Hartingh took their hands and led them to greet one another. They promised to stand together against Mangkunagara and, to seal the solemn occasion, a glass of beer was drunk. Pakubuwana III and Sultan Mangkubumi never again met in person.

Mangkunagara fought on alone until being reconciled with Pakubuwana III in early 1757. Finally, the war was finished. Java enjoyed the longest period of peace since the 15th century, down to the outbreak of the Java War in 1825.

Ibrahim’s further adventures
In late 1755 or early 1756, Ibrahim called upon the French ambassador in Istanbul. He claimed to have lived in Java and Sumatra for 25 years. ‘He sought no payment beyond “reward in the eyes of God”’

Further reading
G.W. van der Meiden ‘A Turkish mediator between Mangkubumi and the Dutch East India Company (1753-1754)’, Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs, vol. 15 (1981), no. 2, pp. 92-8
M.C. Ricklefs A History of Modern Indonesia Since c.1200 (MacMillan, 2008)
and to have been employed as an agent on behalf of the VOC to negotiate with local princes. Now he claimed to have been sent as emissary on behalf of the sultan (meaning either Pakubuwana III or Mangkubumi) and other princes from Java, Sumatra, Malaya and Malabar to seek French support to free them from the Dutch presence. Ibrahim sought assistance to travel to Paris to pursue the princes’ cause with Louis XV – again, asking for no money. The ambassador doubted this tale and said that travel to Paris would be dangerous in the midst of the Seven Years’ War (1756-63). In Paris, no one was inclined to take Ibrahim’s information seriously. In March 1757, the French rejected his proposition. By this time, Ibrahim had left Istanbul for a trading trip to the Black Sea.

**Decisive contribution**

In 1771 we get our last sighting of this extraordinary man. Ibrahim pops up in Istanbul, this time to contact the Dutch Chargé d’affaires. He claimed that he had lived for more than 16 years in Java and to have acted as the VOC’s agent in negotiating trade matters. He was now in Istanbul seeking further orders. Though he said he had a letter of recommendation from Batavia, he refused to show it. He spoke at length about how the princes of Java, Malaya and Sumatra distrusted the government in Batavia. They were unwilling to make any more agreements with Batavia without a guarantee from the Company’s headquarters in the Netherlands. When this material was sent on to the Dutch government (the States-General), it sought the advice of the VOC. The latter replied that it knew nothing of such a person, reflecting the chaotic state of Company archives, where Ibrahim’s role in 1753-4 was buried in many metres of files. Ibrahim’s *demarche* ended in nothing. That is the last that is known of him.

Ibrahim thus seems to have been a wealthy and pious Turkish merchant, a descendant of the Prophet, whose background brought him superior standing in the Muslim societies of South-east Asia, particularly in Java at a crucial time in its history. It is possible that in 1753–4 he bore documents upon which his authority to mediate in the Third Javanese War of Succession rested, one of which might have been in the name of the contemporary Ottoman Grand Vizier Mustafa Pasha. We do not, however, have sufficient evidence to pursue that possibility.

Yet Ibrahim’s contribution to the Mangkubumi-VOC reconciliation was decisive. It put an end to Mangkunagara’s negotiations with the VOC and contributed to the suspension of hostilities between Mangkubumi and the VOC and thus to the peace settlement of 1755. Hartingh later claimed the success for himself and dismissed Ibrahim’s role, but Batavia held Ibrahim in higher regard. His later proposals presented in Istanbul in 1755-7 and 1771, however, came to nothing.

Thus it was that this extraordinary Turk, with his high standing in Islamic circles and possible authority of high Ottoman potentates behind him, arrived in propitious circumstances for a peace initiative in Java. He intervened in the turbulent, bloody war then under way and evidently sought only to bring peace, expecting no payment beyond ‘reward … in the eyes of God’. Ibrahim’s intervention in the Javanese civil wars should also alert historians to the ever-present possibility that, while we cheerfully work to make the past seem logical, a *deus ex machina* can appear at any time to surprise us, as Ibrahim surprised his contemporaries in Java and later Istanbul.

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