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Reversal of Fortune or Continued Misery? Ulbe Bosma's *Making of a Periphery* Reviewed*

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ABSTRACT: With his latest book, *The Making of a Periphery*, Ulbe Bosma makes a successful attempt to “decompress history”. Apart from praising his work, I want to offer two critical comments and a suggestion for global comparison. First, I argue that the role of colonialism/imperialism is somewhat downplayed in the book. Second, although I am impressed by the vast body of literature cited, I believe that at several instances the book might have benefited from its arguments being underpinned by more solid empirical quantitative data. Finally, I raise the question how unique the “plantation economies” of Island South East Asia actually were, which also implies a suggestion for further research along the lines of Bosma’s impressive monograph.

INTRODUCTION

It has been a pleasure to extensively review the latest book by my esteemed colleague Ulbe Bosma. Having worked with Ulbe on multiple occasions over the past twenty years, I know that he expects high quality from academic work – not least from his own. Ulbe’s book will certainly not let his readers down. *The Making of a Periphery*¹ is well written and has a crisp argument. It is based on an impressive body of literature and provides thorough

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1. Ulbe Bosma, *The Making of a Periphery: How Island Southeast Asia Became a Mass Exporter of Labor* (New York, 2019).

comparative analyses, both between the areas in the region of “Island Southeast Asia” he covers and over a long period of time.

As all good things come in threes, I have structured this review article along three points of praise, as well as three points of criticism. Although many more positive things could be said about the book, and I could elaborate on them for a long time, I was explicitly instructed to go into more depth regarding the critical aspects that occurred to me while reading. This is why the points of praise are mentioned only in this introduction, whereas in the remainder of this contribution I will dwell more extensively on some of the issues that seemed to be – to a lesser or greater extent – problematic, or at least that deserve further exploration.

To begin with the praise: Bosma’s book is a successful attempt to “decompress” history and point to the spatially diverse effects of colonialism.² Bosma is highly critical, in my view rightly so, of monocausal, or even simplified, explanations that many other historians and economists have provided for the underdevelopment of the “Global South” and, in this specific case, of Island Southeast Asia. For instance, he opposes proponents of the “dependency” school, who have generally and rather simplistically pointed to *colonial rule* as the sole cause of underdevelopment in Asia.³ Nor is Bosma satisfied with explanations in the realm of “ineffective institutions”, such as those Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson have offered,⁴ or with the “de-industrialization” thesis recently reinvigorated by Jeffrey Williamson.⁵ He formulates his criticism very carefully and convincingly in the book’s introduction.

Alternatively, Bosma offers a very clear general explanatory framework, according to which he highlights the importance of *demographic development*

2. The term “Compression of History” was first used by Gareth Austin in his critique of the “reversal of fortune” thesis proposed by Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson (“AJR”) in a number of publications in the early 2000s. Gareth Austin, “The ‘Reversal of Fortune’ Thesis and the Compression of History: Perspectives from African and Comparative Economic History”, *Journal of International Development*, 20 (2008), pp. 996–1027. Austin argues that, by making broad claims about the outcomes of history based on units of (usually quantitative) analysis of excessively large regional (or too few and overstretched) points in time, authors such as AJR are responsible for “compressing” history, which leads to unnuanced and often false causations regarding economic development.

3. For example, A.O. Hirschman, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA, 1945); Andre Gunder Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment”, *Monthly Review*, 18:4 (1966), pp. 17–31.

4. See, for example, Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson, “The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation”, *American Economic Review*, 91:5 (2001), pp. 1369–1401; *idem*, “Reversal of Fortune: Geography and Institutions in the Making of the Modern World Income Distribution”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 117:4 (2002), pp. 1231–1294.

5. Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Trade and Poverty: When the Third World Fell Behind* (Cambridge, MA, 2011). See also Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, “Challenging the De-industrialization Thesis: Gender and Indigenous Textile Production in Java under Dutch Colonial Rule, c.1830–1920”, *Economic History Review*, 70:4 (2017), pp. 1219–1243.

in combination with the labour systems in place within Island Southeast Asia to account for the persistent problems the region has encountered since the early nineteenth century, up until the present, to remain economically viable. Over the colonial period, Southeast Asia witnessed tremendous demographic growth, as a result of smallpox vaccination programmes and the suppression of violent wars and piracy in the early nineteenth century. Moreover, the region had a long history of particular patterns of bonded labour as well as of patron-client relations. These conditions allowed the region to develop into the major exporter of tropical cash crops that it is today.

Finally, the comparative approach Bosma takes is very sound and well chosen. His study takes a region, at present comprising Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, which, on the one hand, is relatively homogenous, but, on the other, allows for sufficient variation in terms of climate and geography, religion, and identity of its formal colonial rulers. Moreover, his long-term analysis takes into account both the colonial and the postcolonial period, something still rare in the existing historiography.

Apart from these compliments, I also have three points of critique, which I elaborate on below. First, I was slightly confused about the extent to which, according to Bosma, colonialism/imperialism did or did not have a decisive effect on the fortunes of Island Southeast Asia. Second, the narrative would benefit from more substantive quantitative empirical support, as many of Bosma's claims lack solid evidence. The examples I give pertain to colonial Indonesia, as that is where my own expertise lies. In fact, despite his comparison with other regions in Island Southeast Asia, the Netherlands Indies are also the most prominent case in Bosma's analysis throughout the book. Third, and finally, more as an avenue for further research than as a point of critique, I wonder how unique "Island Southeast Asia" is.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPERIALISM

In his introduction, Bosma states, quite provocatively, that: "In the end, colonialism restricted rather than strengthened the extractive powers of the state".⁶ He argues that the patrimonial (labour) relations that had preceded the colonial period continued to exist at the local level, and were key to providing a labour force for the plantations put in place by Western powers. This implies that Western (Dutch, English, or American) imperialist powers were making use of, as well as diminishing, existing extractive institutions, instead of being the cause of underdevelopment themselves. Still, I found this argument to be rather confusing, as Chapters One, Three, and Four show that colonial interventions were crucial to both these explanatory factors.

6. Bosma, *Making of a Periphery*, p. 10.

First, take demography. According to Bosma, demographic growth was an important driver of the underdevelopment of Southeast Asia. As he states: “Growing population pressure was a crucial element in the ‘reversal of fortune,’ which contradicts the standard historical explanation that the peripheralization of the region was the outcome of the brutal colonial conquests by the Spanish conquistadores and the Dutch VOC”.⁷ This seems to suggest that demography was an independent variable, negatively influencing the region’s development. However, it has been estimated that, in the late eighteenth century, when colonial interventions were still rather minimal, Javanese population growth was on average just 0.5 per cent per annum, whereas this was purportedly 1.25 per cent in the first half of the nineteenth century and 1.6 per cent in the second half. Boomgaard suggests that this increase in growth was due largely to a spectacular decline in death rates as a consequence of the smallpox vaccination programmes the Dutch launched in the Netherlands Indies in the early nineteenth century.⁸ Bosma, too, places great emphasis on the impact of smallpox vaccination brought to the colonies by Western powers. He even concludes that, “[n]ot coincidentally, the most thoroughly colonized and densely populated parts of Island Southeast Asia became the earliest adopters of vaccination [...]”.⁹ From this, I would say, it follows that growing population pressure was a direct result of colonial vaccination policies.

Second, the particular structure of the plantation economy, making use of a large pool of (often bonded) migrant labourers, forms another constituent of Bosma’s explanatory framework. He argues that precolonial client-patron relations formed an important factor in the establishment of plantation economies, although this played out in slightly different ways for the different colonies. In the final chapter of his book, he moves into the postcolonial period to indicate just how detrimental the plantation system has been, and continues to be: to the economy (which has become highly dependent on volatile export products), to the environment (which is being depleted by the dominance of certain cash crops), but also for labour conditions for workers (who have, both in past and present, often been migrants vulnerable to exploitation). Nevertheless, one crucial element, or, if you will, counter-factual, is missing in this argumentation. Would the plantation system have developed *without* colonialism? This is, after all, different from the issue of colonialism relying on pre-existing client-patron relations.

I strongly doubt that the plantation system could have developed without colonialism. Extractive as precolonial patronage systems and taxation may have been, they never developed a specific dependence on export commodities. There was indubitably no mass internal demand for these products. In

7. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

8. Peter Boomgaard, *Children of the Colonial State: Population Growth and Economic Development in Java, 1795–1880* (Amsterdam, 1989), pp. 192, 202.

9. Bosma, *Making of a Periphery*, p. 43.

precolonial Java, for example, feudal taxes were usually paid in the form of rice, and, more incidentally, teakwood or coconut oil, for the use of the ruling classes. Another common form of taxation was *corvée* labour. In maritime communities, excises on trade were more customary, and some forms of land tax also existed. The most pervasive taxes on land and agricultural produce, however, were introduced by the VOC in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ Likewise, the plantation system, which focused on export crop commodities and which developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, was unknown in precolonial Southeast Asia.

Certainly, precolonial institutions mattered, and colonial authorities in the various contexts gratefully employed them to recruit labour and levy taxes and labour services. But, all things considered, it was not the precolonial institutions that led to unprecedented demographic booms, nor to large-scale plantations cultivating the export crops such as sugar, coffee, tea, and palm oil that still largely determine the economic structure of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Indonesia today.

EMPIRICAL UNDERPINNING

As skilfully as Bosma builds up and elaborates his main thesis, at times it is more argued than substantiated with solid empirical data. I will highlight two examples, but there are more throughout the book. The first concerns the concept of the “low-wage enclaves” on the island of Sumatra, which are discussed in Chapter Four.

The “low-wage enclaves” in Sumatra are introduced in the chapter that describes the transition to a plantation economy in which wage labour was employed on an increasing scale. This wage labour was not always as free as contemporary colonial administrators and earlier historians have argued. Migrant labourers were often forced to sign contracts, with stringent penal sanctions if they were breached.¹¹ It is not exactly clear what Bosma means with the concept of the low-wage enclave – he refers to the rubber and tobacco plantations in Deli (East Sumatra), which, despite very high demand for labour, would have kept wages down artificially with practices of indentured labour.¹² While this information is not consistent with Bosma’s own contention that colonial labour practices were no more extractive than earlier labour relations, it is also not so clear where this idea of low-wage enclaves in Sumatra

10. Abdel Wahid, “From Revenue Farming to State Monopoly: The Political Economy of Taxation in Colonial Indonesia, Java c.1816–1942” (Ph.D., Utrecht University, 2013), pp. 24–28.

11. For more on these penal sanctions in the Netherlands Indies, see Ulbe Bosma, “Dutch Imperial Anxieties about Free Labour, Penal Sanctions and the Right to Strike”, in A. Stanziani (ed.), *Labour, Coercion, and Economic Growth in Eurasia, 17th–20th Centuries* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 63–85.

12. Bosma, *Making of a Periphery*, pp. 124–125.

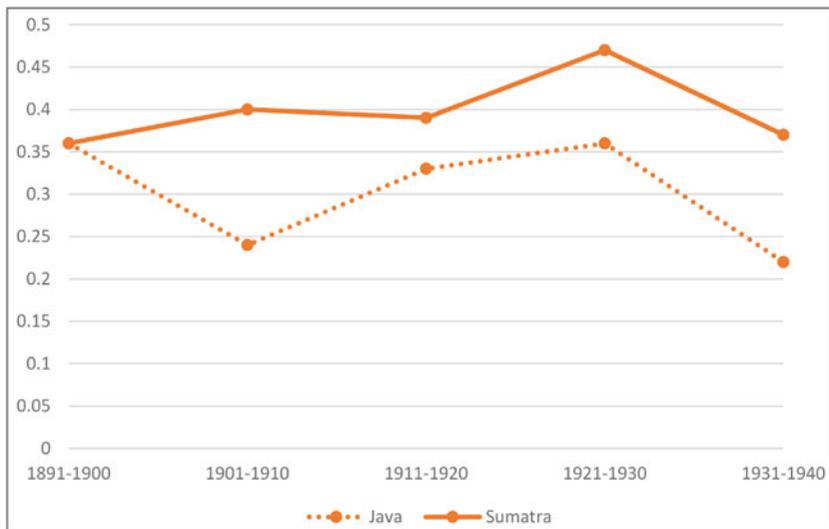


Figure 1. Nominal male day wages in agriculture, Java and Sumatra, 1891–1940. *Wages database Dutch East Indies, August 2017. Creators: Daniëlle Teeuwen and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk.*

originates. Some anecdotal evidence of wages on Sumatran plantations is given in the book,¹³ but it is doubtful whether this is really sufficient to corroborate the existence of a low-wage enclave, particularly if we compare them to average wages paid to male labourers on the island of Java.

For my own research project on women and work in colonial Indonesia, my team and I have collected a lot of data on the wages of agricultural workers, including a lot of plantation wage data, for both men and women, for the period 1891 to 1940.¹⁴ From the database we created, which ultimately contains over 4,000 wage observations, almost 1,500 of which were from Sumatra, it appears that Sumatran wages were higher than Javanese wages, which is consistent with the higher demand for labour in Sumatra (see Figure 1).

Moreover, if we break down these average male wages by type of plantation in Sumatra (Table 1), it appears that workers on tobacco plantations were not paid consistently lower wages than workers on tea or other plantations, contradicting what Bosma suggests. This was the case for both women and men. Interestingly, women received relatively high wages compared to their male

13. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

14. See Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, *Women, Work, and Colonialism in the Netherlands and Java: Comparisons, Contrasts, and Connections, 1830–1940* (London, [etc.], 2019). NB: The database includes 165 observations from the period 1831–1891, as well as 118 observations outside of Java and Sumatra, but we omit those from the current analysis.

Table 1. *Average nominal day wages by type of plantation, Sumatra, 1891–1940.*

	men (n=699)	women (n=440)	f/m wage ratio
Coffee	0.38	0.30	0.79
Palm oil	0.41	0.34	0.83
Rubber	0.41	0.36	0.88
Tobacco	0.44	0.36	0.82
Tea	0.49	0.44	0.90

Source: See [Figure 1](#).

Table 2. *Nominal plantation wages, coolie men, Sumatra, 1901–1940.*

	Deli Company, tobacco	Sumatra other, tobacco	Sumatra, rubber	Sumatra, coffee
1901–1910	0.40	0.38	n.d.	0.40
1911–1920	0.47	0.39	0.39	n.d.
1921–1930	0.54	0.49	0.46	0.44
1931–1940	0.46	0.37	0.33	0.31

Source: See [Figure 1](#).

counterparts, whereas the gender wage gap in agriculture on the island of Java was much wider,¹⁵ again attesting to market mechanisms determining wage levels.

However, the wage rates in [Table 1](#) reflect plantation wages on Sumatra in general, whereas Bosma's low-wage enclave would have existed largely in East Sumatra, most notably Deli. In fact, it appears from [Table 2](#) that in this region, exemplified by the powerful Deli Company, nominal day wages were, on average, even higher than on tobacco plantations elsewhere. In this case, the absence of rigorous and systematic (quantitative) empirical data from Bosma's book may lead to a misreading of the situation in part of the archipelago, perhaps based on a few sporadic cases of severe underpayment mentioned in the literature of the time.

The second example of where more nuance and empirical underpinning might have been appropriate concerns Bosma's discussion of rice markets and imports in colonial Java (Chapter Five). In combination with growing population pressure, the plantation economy, with its focus on export cash crops, led to severe problems in the provision of basic foodstuffs. All over

15. On Java, the gender-wage ratio fluctuated between 0.4 and 0.8 in the same period, implying much larger wage inequality. Van Nederveen Meerkerk, *Women, Work, and Colonialism*, p. 171, [Figure 5.2](#).

Island Southeast Asia the concentration on plantations and mines would have led to a neglect of food crop cultivation, and an increasing dependence on imports of subsistence foodstuffs such as rice.¹⁶ This would have applied especially to Java, with its exceptionally high demographic growth rates in the second half of the nineteenth century, which resulted in a growing mass of landless people as well as marginalized peasants barely able to produce sufficient rice for their own subsistence. All this led to low productivity and high imports. Combined with low rice prices, it was a recipe for destitution among many Javanese peasants.¹⁷

Serial quantitative data gathered for the *Changing Economy of Indonesia* volumes shows, however, that more nuance and differentiation is required. Firstly, the argument about low productivity is rather general, and there were clear shifts over time (see [Figure 2](#)).

[Figure 2](#) shows that productivity in rice cultivation, expressed in *output per hectare*, in fact grew during most of the colonial period, most certainly during the Cultivation System (1830–1870) and also at the beginning of the plantation economy on Java after 1870. Admittedly, between 1880 and 1900 productivity declined, but only modestly (less than five per cent). From World War I onwards, productivity slowly rose again, whereas Bosma contends that, after 1917, “the yields per hectare in Java declined by a few percent”.¹⁸ A more severe problem than productivity appears to have been population pressure, as production per head of the population dropped from over 240 kilograms in 1880 to around 180 in the 1920s (the blue line in [Figure 2](#)). Thus, Bosma is clearly right that Java experienced severe Malthusian pressure in the first few decades of the twentieth century, a point also stressed by other historians.¹⁹ However, the productivity of rice production cannot in itself have been the main cause.²⁰

To make things worse, with regard to the living standards of Indonesian people under colonial rule, if the region had become so dependent on rice

16. Bosma, *Making of a Periphery*, pp. 130–134.

17. Boomgaard, *Children of the Colonial State*, p. 134.

18. Bosma, *Making of a Periphery*, p. 134.

19. See, for example, Jan Luiten van Zanden, “Rich and Poor before the Industrial Revolution: A Comparison between Java and the Netherlands at the Beginning of the 19th Century”, *Explorations in Economic History*, 40:1 (2003), pp. 1–23; Anne Booth, “Measuring Living Standards in Different Colonial Systems: Some Evidence from South East Asia, 1900–1942”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 46:5 (2012), pp. 1145–1181.

20. Van der Eng contends that, up until the 1920s, rice production was sufficient to meet the needs of the Javanese population. He argues that consumer habits and preferences shifted towards secondary food crops, such as cassava. Pierre van der Eng, “Food for Growth: Trends in Indonesia’s Food Supply, 1880–1995”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 30:4 (2000), pp. 591–616, 601. It is doubtful, however, to what extent this was a shift due to positive preference, or rather a response to poverty and shortage of rice.

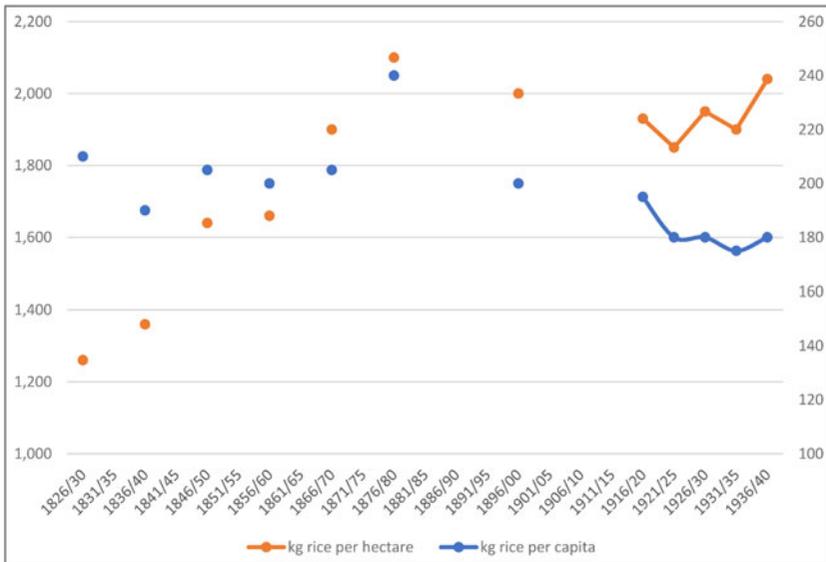


Figure 2. Rice production in Java, per hectare (orange) and per capita (blue), 1826–1940. Peter Boomgaard and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Changing Economy in Indonesia, Vol. 10. Food Crops and Arable Lands, Java 1815–1942* (Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 41, 44.

imports, these were, at best, highly volatile and, in terms of imports per capita, far from overwhelmingly large throughout the period (see Figure 3).

As the graph shows, total volumes of imported rice did indeed increase rapidly after the turn of the century. The per capita figures indicate, however, that imports overall remained overwhelmingly less important than domestic production (compare Figure 2). Considering average rice consumption per person in early twentieth-century Java (estimated at 153 kg per year),²¹ imported rice was only a fraction of what was needed per head of the population (no more than 17 kg in 1921).

In sum, the claim that the Javanese economy depended on rice imports is questionable, although the figures do indeed suggest that Java found itself increasingly unable to produce enough rice for itself in the last two decades of the colonial period (Figure 2). Without a doubt, the Javanese population was impoverished in the beginning of the twentieth century, but the underlying causes seem to lie rather in the more general inadequacy of the colonial government to deal with the consequences of the impressive demographic growth of the indigenous population than in the existence of the plantation economy as such.²²

21. Booth, “Measuring Living Standards”, pp. 1159–1160.

22. On such inadequacy, see for example Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten. Vijf studies over koloniaal denken en doen van Nederlanders in de Indonesische archipel 1877–1942*

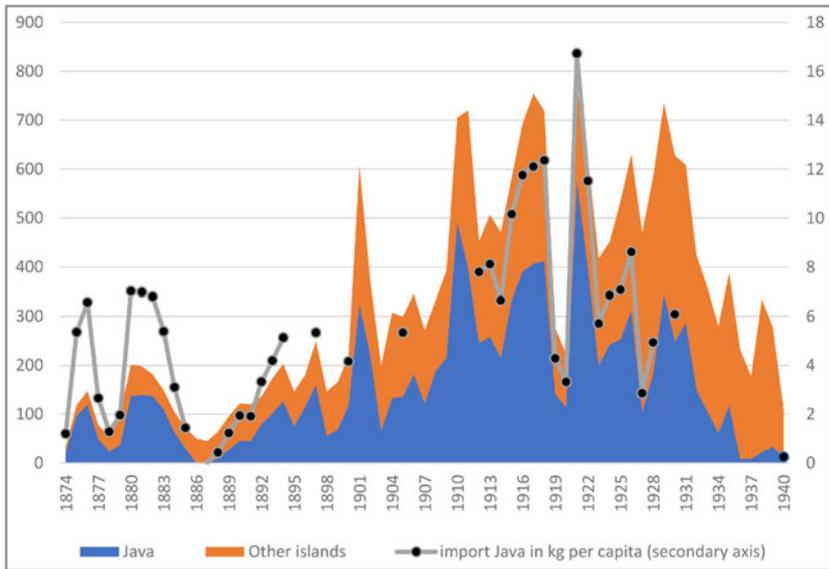


Figure 3. Rice imports, Java (blue) and Other islands (orange), in 1,000 metric tons. W.M.F. Mansvelt, *Changing Economy in Indonesia, Vol. 4. Rice Prices* (Amsterdam, 1978), p. 63, Table 6.

HOW UNIQUE IS “ISLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA”?

My final comment is not so much a criticism as a suggestion for further food for thought. While reading *The Making of a Periphery*, I was frequently struck by the question to what extent Island Southeast Asia constituted a unique combination of features in terms of demography, patron-client relations, and a plantation economy. If one aims to engage in theory formation on the role of labour relations in historical and present-day economic development, as Bosma intends to do, the issue of to what extent the outcomes of his case study can be generalized and applied to other parts of the global periphery is crucial. To what extent, for instance, do the conditions of debt bondage and “internal slavery” in the precolonial period apply to sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa? Were existing patron-client relations in Southeast Asia in any way peculiar, leading to particular labour relations extending into and even co-determining the colonial and postcolonial period? Or, can similar practices be observed in other contexts, as the historical literature on Africa for instance suggests?²³

(Utrecht, 1981), p. 106; Anne Booth, *The Indonesian Economy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A History of Missed Opportunities* (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 142–144.

23. For the history of internal slavery in sub-Saharan Africa, see for instance Paul E. Lovejoy, “The Internal Trade of West Africa to 1800”, in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds),

A second question pertains to the resilience of smallholder farming, which Bosma raises in Chapter Four. He argues that many cash crops, such as pepper, rubber, and coffee, could be combined very well with (swidden) food crop cultivation, and he provides many examples of successful smallholder production for the global market.²⁴ The wide prevalence of smallholder export agriculture is important for assessing the history of rural living standards, not only in Southeast Asia, but also in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.²⁵ From studies on these as well as other regions it appears that, despite attempts to organize cash crop production through a plantation system, under particular conditions smallholders were able to resist competition from large-scale farms and plantations; this was the case, for instance, with cotton farmers in colonial Uganda. Often, smallholders diversifying their portfolio of agricultural products were more successful in safeguarding their subsistence. Both for enriching our historical knowledge, and in order to draw sensible conclusions for present-day policies, it is imperative to find out which constellations of institutions, agricultural systems, and labour relations led to more favourable situations of food security.

Finally, it is worth paying attention to geographical and environmental conditions in a more globally comparative perspective. In his introduction, Bosma states: “Ecology was a limiting factor, but it is equally true that landscapes can be the result of labor systems”. This is particularly the case for plantation economies, which, due to their large-scale, often monocultural, exploitation of the soil tend to have a detrimental effect on the environment and ecosystems. Given that not only Island Southeast Asia, but also a substantial part of the “global periphery” is located in the tropical equatorial belt, which is the natural habitat for specific crops such as oil-palm trees, a more systematic comparison of the interactions between ecology and local institutions would be highly desired.²⁶

To conclude, *The Making of a Periphery* leaves us with plenty of intriguing questions for Ulbe Bosma – and others – to answer.

History of West Africa, vol. I (3rd edn, Harlow, 1985), pp. 648–690; Gareth Austin, “Factor Markets in Nieboer Conditions: Pre-Colonial West Africa, c.1500–c.1900”, *Continuity and Change*, 24:1 (2009), pp. 23–53.

24. Bosma, *Making of a Periphery*, pp. 105–108.

25. For example: Lowell Gudmundson, “Peasant, Farmer, Proletarian: Class Formation in a Smallholder Coffee Economy, 1850–1950”, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 69:2 (1989), pp. 221–257; William Gervase Clarence-Smith (ed.), *Cocoa Pioneer Fronts since 1800: The Role of Smallholders, Planters and Merchants* (London, 1996); Michiel de Haas, “Measuring Rural Welfare in Colonial Africa: Did Uganda’s Smallholders Thrive?”, *Economic History Review*, 70:2 (2017), pp. 605–631.

26. For an excellent recent example for the colonial period, see Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford, 2017).