

The Development of Cash-crop Production in Colonial Minahasa: Non-Plantation Cultivation of Coffee and Copra

Atsushi OTA, Hiroshima University

Minahasa on Java was known as one of the most important copra-producing places in the world from the 1890s to the 1930s. The striking characteristic of Minahasa was that more than 90 per cent of copra was produced in local smallholding cultivation. This differed markedly from other export crops, such as sugar and tobacco, which was produced on large-scale plantations with Western investments. Full-scale cash-crop cultivation in Minahasa started with coffee in the 1820s. However, previous studies have shown coffee production in Minahasa in a negative light. This is partly related to the fact that it was produced in the Cultivation System, which was rarely attempted outside Java. These studies have emphasized the unsuccessful results, pointing out the heavy burden on cultivators and low levels of production in spite of strong pressure from the government.

This research, however, underestimated the role of “free cultivation” promoted by local smallholders on their own lands, which surpassed the dwindling regular coffee cultivation conducted under government control. Local cultivators were keen to expand their production in the easier way, namely through “free cultivation,” encouraged by the rising price of coffee in the 1850s and 1860s. They also developed businesses to transport commercial goods from the coastal port on the way back after the transportation of their produce from their villages to the port. In this way, local cultivators were becoming more market-oriented, responding to the shifts in the global economy. After the expansion of the “free cultivation” of coffee, Chinese and other Asian traders started their trade in copra with local cultivators in Minahasa; some of them even provided money advances, which contributed to the rapid expansion in production in the following decades. This paper argues that through their experience with coffee cultivation the local cultivators in Minahasa learned how to benefit from cash-crop cultivation and how to react to the shifting global market. This experience was important for the remarkable production increase in the smallholding cultivation in Minahasa.