CROSS-COLONIAL COOPERATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY JAVA:
EXAMINING THE SEPOY CONSPIRACY OF 1815
IN A WORLD HISTORY CONTEXT

In the latter months of 1815, during the brief British occupation of Java (1811-1816), Bengali sepoys Captain Dhaugkul Singh and his men readied themselves to murder all of the British, Dutch, and Chinese residents in central Java, and to proclaim Singh as governor of the island. Over the preceding months they had convened several secret meetings, encouraging fellow Bengali sepoys and a number of Javanese aristocrats to take part in the proposed mutiny. Notable among the list of Javanese co-conspirators was Pakubuwana IV, Sunan (Emperor) of Java and ruler of the central Surakarta court. But unbeknownst to the Bengali sepoys, Pakubuwana IV developed a scheme of his own. He agreed to Singh’s intrigue, but planned only to utilize the military power of the sepoys in his attempt to oust the British from their colonial rule. Once the British were defeated, Pakubuwana IV planned to reclaim his hereditary authority over the central Javanese kingdoms. Concomitant with this was the hoped for departure of the sepoys and their return to Bengal. In the end neither Singh’s nor Pakubuwana IV’s plan came to fruition. During the planning stages, word was leaked to a British officer, and the plot unraveled. The sepoy leaders of the planned overthrow were summarily executed or exiled, as were a few high-ranking Javanese nobles. Ultimately, British officials regarded this joint colonial resistance of the two different ethnic/religious groups as nothing more than a “conspiracy” and a failed attempt at rebellion.

This article explores the cross-colonial cooperation employed by two subjugated groups to resist imperial authority in early nineteenth-century Java. Specifically, I focus on the role played by Bengali sepoys and Javanese aristocrats in their attempt to expel British colonial
power from the island in 1815. Although the cooperative rebellion of these two groups was never realized, it nevertheless illustrates the growing resentment of those deemed “inferior” by the British. It also illustrates the ways that subject peoples sought to use religion to position themselves in opposition to colonizers; for instance, how the sepoys and Javanese believed that non-Muslims and/or non-Hindus should not rule over them. Further, it demonstrates cooperation between diverse ethnic and religious groups at least one hundred years before most historical studies recognize this type of collaborative resistance.¹

Exploration of this topic not only ensures a greater understanding of Indonesian history, but also serves as a model for exploring the importance of other, seemingly unremarkable instances of cooperative resistance across colonial boundaries, and the ways that a shared identity of subjugation was marshaled to fuel the fires of that resistance. Indeed, further research into nineteenth-century protest movements of “non-Western peoples against European-dominated colonial regimes” such as the Sepoy Conspiracy of 1815 in Java, the Ghost Dance of the 1890s in the western United States, or the Maji Maji Rebellion of 1905-06 in German East Africa, can contribute to a greater understanding of modes of cooperation and resistance.² Whether these forms of resistance were active or passive, public or hidden, they equally illustrate the feelings of discontent and resentment among colonized peoples, in national or “transnational” contexts.³ This study of the Sepoy Conspiracy, then, is also relevant to the field of World History because it provides a new perspective on colonial resistance that transcends the boundaries normally drawn between imperial territories and between the religions and ethnicities of colonized subjects.⁴

To date, there has been only one academic study of the Sepoy Conspiracy. The work in question was written by former Oxford University professor Peter Carey in 1977. Though Carey
noted the significance of the Sepoy Conspiracy in both “the history of the Indian army and for internal developments at the Central Javanese courts,” he did not frame the impact of this event in terms of connections in World History. In this regard, my article builds from the base of Carey’s work, but emphasizes its larger importance in terms of its significance in the context of World History and postcolonialism as an example of both colonial resistance and cross-colonial cooperation.

Several scholars have written about resistance in Java, primarily against Dutch forces, and many have chosen to focus on the role of Prince Diapanagara in leading a united Javanese peasantry and nobility against the Dutch in the Java War of 1825-30. Noted works on this topic include Ann Kumar’s “Dipanagara (1787?-1855),” Merle C. Ricklefs’ “Dipanagara’s Early Inspirational Experience,” and Peter Carey’s voluminous The Power of Prophecy. Religious protest movements in Java are deeply interconnected with colonial resistance, and scholars on Javanese history have also highlighted this connection, with works such as Justus M. van der Kroef’s “Javanese Messianic Expectations” and Sartono Kartodirdjo’s Peasant Protest in Rural Java. Common to all of these works is a focus solely on Java, with little reference to the outside world. An exception is Michael Adas’ Prophets of Rebellion that examines several millenarian protest movements in a comparative world setting. However, Adas, like the other scholars here listed, focuses only on individual ethnic group reactions to colonial encroachment. Building on these works, my project intervenes in the standard history of Javanese resistance to show that extra-Javanese forces were important as well.

Primary sources utilized for this article consist of original documents and court-martial records available in the Bengal Secret and Political Consultations of the British Library in London. Other primary sources include Lieutenant-Governor Raffles’ version of the Sepoy
Conspiracy which was published in 1817 in his two-volume work *The History of Java*, as well as personal recollections, correspondence, and descriptions of Java and the Sepoy Conspiracy published by other British officers of the time, including George Augustus Addison, John Crawfurd, William Thorn, and Thomas Otho Travers. Building on primary source documents of British and French military officers, as well as British and Dutch citizens in Java, this article incorporates the studies of British, American, and Dutch scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Peter Carey, M.C. Ricklefs, and M.L. van Deventer. The primary sources are many and varied in this collection, and present a thorough recollection (from the colonizers’ perspective) of the events which led up to the Sepoy Conspiracy. However, the abundance of British primary source material paradoxically illustrates a weakness in the historical record – a lack of non-European, specifically Javanese and/or Bengali, primary source material. Thus, my primary sources, consisting almost entirely of British diplomatic correspondence, present the perceptions, motives, activities, and behaviors of the subjugated groups through a limited or skewed lens, leaving little voice or agency to the colonized. To remedy this problem, I borrow from the theoretical works of scholars of postcolonialism and subaltern studies to present the agency of the subjugated groups largely neglected by their Western contemporaries. Their monumental works on “modes of perception” and the construction of identity aid in the development of my argument that Western constructions were used to keep colonized peoples subservient to colonial rule. Thus, my methodology draws from several theoretical works (resistance studies, postcolonialism, subaltern studies, and World History), and forms a qualitative analysis of predominantly British primary and secondary texts. Further, I also draw upon non-history fields including Anthropology and Religious Studies in evaluating this primary and secondary evidence.
The primary theoretical basis of my article relies on central themes of World History, namely “connections, linkages and interrelationships.” I primarily utilize the term “connections” as it has been argued by scholars such as Jerry Bentley, Marshall Hodgson, Patrick Manning, and Eric R. Wolf. Though studies on connections are common in World History, very few relate specifically to the type of cross-colonial and religiously-interconnected work that is apparent in the case of the Sepoy Conspiracy, or for that matter, that deal with Java or Indonesia. Thus, although I rely on the theories and historiography of World History, my article adds a new and unique dimension to the field by concentrating on connections that have not received their due attention.

This article is divided into three sections, each of which portrays the Sepoy Conspiracy from the lens of the cultural group involved: Javanese aristocrats, European imperialists, and Bengali sepoys. The central argument of this work focuses on the importance of the Sepoy Conspiracy, and its illustration of emerging national and inter-national identities and colonial resistance. More specifically, my argument deals with colonial subjects perceiving a world that stretches beyond their borders, and identifying a common cause with other colonial subjects. Further, it illustrates the emergence of cross-colonial cooperation between colonized peoples over one hundred years before it was thought to arise.

Finally, I argue that the importance of studying the Sepoy Conspiracy does not rest on its uniqueness. The cross-colonial cooperation demonstrated by Bengali sepoys and Javanese aristocrats in 1815 Java is an example of colonial resistance which undoubtedly occurred in numerous regions and periods throughout the imperial era, such as the Denmark Vesey plot of the 1820s in Virginia. Both the Denmark Vesey slave plot and the Sepoy Conspiracy in Java illustrate a broader, heretofore largely unrecognized movement of subjugated peoples hailing
from distant lands, who chose to battle together against Western colonial domination. Thus, it illustrates anticolonial cooperation across social, cultural, and geographic boundaries, while also seeking to lower or eliminate the temporal/chronological boundaries that scholars have placed on this subject. Overall, by focusing on the specific encounters of these disparate groups and how they worked together, scholars can make broader theories about protest movements and imperial resistance, as well as gain a greater understanding of the complex dynamics between colonial and colonized groups globally throughout the nineteenth century.

**JAVANESE ARISTOCRATS**

To understand the role that Javanese aristocrats played in the abortive Sepoy Conspiracy of 1815 in Java, it is essential to understand the history of the Javanese aristocracy. Specifically, it is necessary to appreciate first how the loss of authority to European colonial governments affected the mindset of the Javanese nobles, and secondly, to understand the existing deep tradition of religious syncretism among the nobility. It is the combination of these two factors which eventually led to a ruling Javanese noble, Pakubuwana IV, Sunan of Surakarta, to align himself with disgruntled Bengali sepoys, most notably Captain Dhaugkul Singh, and their cooperative attempt to overthrow European rule on the island of Java in the closing months of 1815.

The primary factor necessary for an understanding of Pakubuwana IV’s complicity in the Sepoy Conspiracy was the loss of authority of the Javanese aristocracy under the imperial rule of the Dutch, and later British, governments. This loss of hereditary control and aristocratic authority instilled resentment and anti-European sentiment among the upper classes. Indeed, this growing resentment and concomitant loss of authority was not new to the nobility of Java, as
European encroachment into Javanese lands and over the lucrative Indian Ocean trade markets began with the first arrival of Portuguese sailing ships well back in the early-sixteenth century.

Portuguese ships first berthed in Calicut in India in the late-fifteenth century, and as early as 1505 entered the region of the Indonesian islands, focusing primarily on the Straits of Melaka.\textsuperscript{xviii} Further, by 1619, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, Governor-General of the Dutch empire in Indonesia, had established a settlement at Batavia (Jakarta), on the northwest coast of Java.\textsuperscript{xix} Within half a century the Dutch dislodged the Portuguese from their outposts and replaced them as the dominant European power in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{x} With trade as their major goal, the Dutch left administration of Java to the Dutch East India Company, placing the VOC (\textit{Vereenigde Oost-Indische Companie}), as the leading military and economic force throughout Indonesia and the Spice Island trade for the next two centuries.\textsuperscript{xxi}

The majority of the actions of the Dutch did not have a significant, direct effect on the authority of the ruling nobility in central Java, however. It was not until the VOC partitioned the powerful kingdom of Mataram in 1755 that the power of these rulers was seriously weakened. Prior to this takeover, approximately since the early-seventeenth century, the kingdom of Mataram controlled most of the island from its base in the southern part of central Java.\textsuperscript{xxii} Over time, the court of Mataram became one of the most commercially active parts of the island, principally serving to unify the numerous Islamic trading states in the area. It was due to the lucrative nature of this trade in central Java that the Dutch first began their invasion of these lands.

Following quickly on the Dutch usurpation of Javanese authority in the second half of the eighteenth century was the arrival of French forces, occupiers of Dutch domestic and overseas territories. Indeed, Javanese aristocrats’ loss of authority increased decidedly with the advent of
the Franco-Dutch government under the command of Marshal Herman Willem Daendels in 1808. Daendels was a Dutch-born admirer of, and proponent for, the Napoleonic regime in power in Europe at the time. As the Netherlands had been under French domination since 1795, and with Napoleon’s younger brother Louis on the Dutch throne, Daendels was chosen to be sent to oversee affairs in Java. He served as Governor-General in Batavia with the mission of fortifying “Java as a base against the British in the Indian Ocean.”xxiii With his admiration of revolutionary principles of government, Daendels brought to Java “a combination of reforming zeal and dictatorial methods which achieved little but offended many.”xxiv Overall, Daendels’ attempts to clean up the pervasive corruption and inefficiency of the existing European administration ultimately had little real effect, other than to encourage opposition from Javanese elites.xxv

At the same time that Daendels’ Franco-Dutch government was absorbing the land and power of the central Javanese courts, the British government was planning an invasion of all lands under the rule of France throughout the Indian Ocean. Of particular interest to the British was the expulsion of French forces from the island of Java. These events were intricately connected to the wars and the political ambitions that were playing out on the European continent, which had enormous repercussions throughout the globe, including on the distant island of Java. Ricklefs notes that “the Napoleonic wars in Europe now spilled over into Indonesia,” in effect uniting actions that were truly world-wide.xxvi The British government, with the blessing of exiled Netherlands ruler William V, led a campaign to systematically destroy French power in the southern hemisphere, and by 1811 blockaded and defeated the Franco-Dutch base in Java.
With the arrival of the British came the installation of Thomas Stamford Raffles as Lieutenant-Governor of the island, but in the eyes of the Javanese he was simply another European imperialist, little different from Daendels before him. With increasing interference from Raffles’ colonial government, however, the power structure in Java changed drastically. Ostensibly the rulers of the central Javanese courts, the Sultan of Yogyakarta and the Sunan of Surakarta, retained their positions; in actuality, however, they were forced to serve as vassals to European demands. This form of indirect rule, in which “colonial powers claimed sovereignty but left existing structures more or less intact, and then imposed their own authority over those structures,” was a common policy of imperial powers of the time. The primary change that occurred with the British takeover was the reforming policies instituted under the direction of Raffles.

Raffles drew up treaties with the “Native Princes,” (the Sunan of Surakarta and the Sultan of Yogyakarta) for the annexation of more Javanese land to the British East India Company. These treaties display the massive amount of direct control the British Government exercised in Javanese court affairs, more than had ever been the case under Dutch or later Franco-Dutch rule. Animosity towards foreign, particularly British, rule increased as more land and authority were taken from the Javanese aristocrats. For the rulers of the central Javanese Courts, the treaties were a total humiliation, representing both a loss of power and prestige.

Another factor that led to Pakubuwana IV’s involvement in the Sepoy Conspiracy was his role as a member of the complex religious system peculiar to Java. Religion in Java was fundamentally syncretic in its blending together of different belief systems over centuries of culture contact. The particular syncretism that existed in Java at the beginning of the nineteenth century (and continues to the present day) represents a combination of elements: traditional
Javanese animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, as well as elements of Christianity and
mysticism.xxx

Essentially, this flexible attitude toward religious belief and practice laid the foundation
for an environment of religious tolerance from the Javanese aristocrats towards the Bengali
sepoys. Cultural familiarity with Hinduism allowed the Javanese to be more receptive toward the
Bengali Sepoys and their Hindu religion, and ultimately led to greater social interaction between
these two colonized groups. In contrast, the absence of cultural familiarity with Christianity
among the Javanese nobility allowed for an equal intolerance or, at the least, less common
ground between the Javanese and the European colonizers. This religious tolerance for the
Bengali Sepoys was not the only important factor in facilitating social interaction between the
two groups. Equally important was a recognition of shared subjugation among both groups. I
argue that as the Javanese aristocrats and Bengali Sepoys discovered a common Indic past, so too
did they discover a common role as colonized peoples of the British Empire, thus different from
the Europeans.

In sum, the two most important factors that led to Javanese aristocratic involvement in
the Sepoy Conspiracy were, primarily, a loss of authority to the indigenous nobility brought on
by European imperial encroachment, and secondarily, a foundation of religious syncretism that
allowed for cross-colonial cooperation. Both of these factors were illustrated in the life and
character of the Sunan of Surakarta, Pakubuwana IV. Therefore, to understand Pakubuwana IV’s
later involvement in the conspiracy, it is necessary to chronicle his acts as the ruler of a powerful
central Javanese court for over a thirty-year period, particularly his views and the views of his
court-circle towards Dutch and later British colonial power in Java.
In 1788, at the age of 19, Pakubuwana IV assumed the throne as the Sunan of Surakarta on the death of his father, Pakubuwana III. According to contemporary British and Dutch descriptions, Pakubuwana IV was reputedly a “mercurial man” and a “devious and intriguing ruler.” Many European historians argue that due to his inabilities and incompetence as a ruler, Pakubuwana IV relied to a large degree on the advice of the views of members of his court, particularly his Muslim religious counselors, which brought him into increased tension and conflict with rival Javanese rulers as well as European colonial authorities. As early as 1789, “under the influence of some santri (religious) advisers,” he had attempted to bring about a change in the balance of power in Central Java by forcing Dutch recognition of Surakarta as the senior court over that of Yogyakarta.

Much the same would occur in the collaborative conspiracy between the Bengali sepoys and the court of Pakubuwana IV, in which the Sunan took advantage of a disaffected spirit amongst the Bengali sepoys stationed in Java. Thus it was that by late 1815, “Susuhunan Pakubuwana IV conspired with British Indian sepoy troops garrisoned in his city to mutiny against their officers” and destroy the power of “both the European government and Yogyakarta,” culminating in Pakubuwana IV “taking over sole control” of Java.

The proposed plot of Pakubuwana IV and the Bengali sepoys included the execution of all who could conceivably oppose them. This included those British officers and soldiers who were their direct superiors, as well as their aristocratic rivals at the court of Yogyakarta. The sepoys planned then to proceed to kill all other British, Dutch, and Chinese inhabitants of Java, effectively eliminating all opposition throughout the entire island. Thomas Otho Travers, aide-de-camp to Lieutenant-Governor Raffles, later recorded in his journal that the sepoys’ “first determination was to murder their own officers, European and such native officers as would not
join their cause. They were then to murder the Sultan of Yogyakarta and his Prime Minister . . . after which they were to proceed on the conquest of the island.”

In November 1815, word was leaked to British officers in Surakarta of the conspiracy of the Bengali sepoys. Over the following weeks and months, it was further revealed that several Javanese aristocrats, including most notably Pakubuwana IV and his brother Mangkubumi, were implicated in the conspiracy as well. The colonial government summarily arrested the conspiracy’s ringleaders and sent them under armed guard to a British military post until the convening of a general court-martial in January 1816. At the conclusion of the court-martial, the British court doled out sentences to the conspirators - 17 were executed, and the remainder sent back to India in irons.

As for Pakubuwana IV, “Raffles decided not to depose the Susuhunan but to exile the Susuhunan’s brother making him the scapegoat.” Carey notes that “although Mangkubumi was later made the scapegoat and exiled for six years . . . it is almost certain that the Sunan was throughout directly involved in the affair.” However, due to the precariousness of British military power in Java at the time, and the knowledge that the transfer of the island to the Dutch was imminent, Raffles resolved to officially rebuke Pakubuwana IV for his complicity in the affair and force him to “retire” from the “day-to-day” running of the court, effectively transferring power to the heir apparent, Pakubuwana V. Surprisingly though, in light of Pakubuwana IV’s complicity in the Sepoy Conspiracy, Raffles allowed him to remain in Java, and to continue his nominal rule as Sunan, reigning until 1820.

The Sepoy Conspiracy of 1815 marked a major turning point in British colonial rule in Java. It illustrated the effective end of British power, and simultaneously the end of Javanese control as well. The two most important factors that resulted in the acquiescence of Javanese
aristocrats to the designs of the sepoys in 1815 were long-rooted in Javanese history. The primary cause that led to Javanese complicity in the Sepoy Conspiracy was the loss of authority experienced by the nobility under Dutch, Franco-Dutch, and British colonial governments. This loss of authority included the loss of land, wealth, status and, not least of all, honor. As sovereign rulers who had governed their lands for centuries, the demotion to the status of vassals to foreign imperial powers was something which the Javanese aristocrats were no longer willing to tolerate. The secondary factor was the religious syncretism practiced by the Javanese that created a cultural familiarity with the Bengali sepoys’ Hindu rituals. This syncretic nature of the Javanese religious system was centuries-old and heavily interconnected with Javanese court-life. The final contributing factor, a notion of commonality between themselves and others marginalized by the British forces, emerged soon after the arrival of the Bengali sepoys in Java.

**EUROPEAN IMPERIALISTS**

European imperial control in Java was a central factor in the events that eventually led to the Sepoy Conspiracy of 1815. The encroachment of the Dutch, Franco-Dutch, and later British imperial governments into the interior of Java essentially eliminated the authority of the landed Javanese gentry. European imperial governments accomplished this power shift from local Javanese to European rule primarily through military force, as well as edicts, reforms, and treaties that eliminated the authority of the indigenous aristocracy. Concomitant with this power shift was an ideology of superiority promoted by European colonial officials that created a system of exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer. This ideology of superiority rested on the notion that Europeans were superior to non-Europeans in nearly every imaginable way, including mentally, physically, and spiritually. This sense of superiority did not exist solely with
the people of one particular imperial power, whether Dutch, French, Spanish, or British. Rather, the notion of physical and mental dominance over others was characteristic of all of the European imperial powers in the eighteenth century, but would become even more pronounced during the mid-nineteenth century with the advent of Social Darwinism and scientific racism. Comparing other cultures against their own, many Europeans utilized these constructions and modes of perception to justify their place of dominance in the hierarchy of civilizations.\textsuperscript{xiii}

The crucial ingredients which led to cross-colonial and inter-ethnic cooperation against an imperial enemy resulted from a combination of three leading factors. First, for the Javanese aristocrats, resentment towards the European invaders grew over a period of two hundred years, as the nobility continued to experience a massive loss of authority throughout the island. Second, resentment and dissatisfaction also grew among the Bengali sepoys stationed in Java as they suffered from long service, inadequate pay, and absence from their families and loved ones in a foreign land. Finally, a grievance common to both subjugated groups was resentment towards the European imposed ideology of superiority, which viewed all non-Europeans as inherently inferior. The combination of these factors eventually led to the Sepoy Conspiracy of 1815.

Although colonial territories commonly changed hands from one European power to another throughout the imperial era, this ideology of superiority remained constant. Throughout the two hundred year period under review, power shifted from the VOC (1602-1800) to Dutch (1800-1808) to Franco-Dutch (1808-1811) to British (1811-1816) colonial control. As noted, each successive government further chipped away at the power of the Javanese nobility. These notions of European superiority are most evident in the usurpation of sovereignty and administrative control from local Javanese elites through the policies enacted under the governorships of both Herman Willem Daendels and Thomas Stamford Raffles between 1808
Eventually the numerous reforms, mismanagement, and neglect of Javanese opinion, combined with resentment about European colonial officials’ notion of innate superiority, became too much for the local ruling elites to bear. Consequently the Javanese aristocrats began to plan, with their subjugated Bengali compatriots, to overthrow British power on the island.

By the mid-eighteenth century the power of the Javanese rulers was being eroded by expansionist policies of the Dutch East India Company. This was true for those Javanese elites not just along the coast, but also for those who inhabited the interior of Java. By the final decade of the 1700s it was apparent that “rampant inefficiency” and corruption, combined with mounting costs of running a land-based empire, brought the powerful Dutch East India Trading Company to the point of bankruptcy. After nearly two centuries of autonomy in Southeast Asia, the Dutch States-General allowed the Company’s charter to lapse, effectively ending VOC rule on December 31, 1799. The government of the Dutch Republic quickly declared itself the ruling authority in Java and kept all Dutch claims to the lucrative Indian Ocean and Spice Islands trade. Further, the newly-installed Government of the Batavian Republic also maintained the existing power structure and social hierarchy of their imperial forbears, retaining the subjected and inferior status placed on the Javanese.

At the same time in Europe, the French Grande Armée rapidly grew in power and expanded throughout much of Western Europe. By 1795 the Dutch Republic fell under the power of the French Empire, and Prince William V of Orange fled into exile. The Netherlands, like Switzerland and parts of northern Italy, were turned into a French satellite state in the final years of the eighteenth century. By 1806 much of Europe was in the grip of Napoleon Bonaparte, and in that year he placed his younger brother Louis on the throne as king of the
Louis’ reign brought with it massive change not only for the Netherlands, but for the Dutch and Franco-Dutch overseas colonies as well.

The year 1808 marked a turning point in the European administration of Java and ushered in a rapid decrease in the authority of the Javanese nobility. That year, Marshal Herman Willem Daendels arrived on the coast of Java to serve as Governor-General of Franco-Dutch rule on the island, having been elevated to that position by Napoleon’s younger brother Louis, ruler of the French controlled Netherlands from 1806 to 1810. The edicts issued and reforms undertaken by Daendels in the early years of his governorship of Java “effectively destroyed the finely balanced political structure whereby Dutch rule in Java had been sanctioned at the courts.” By 1811, three years into Daendels’ Franco-Dutch rule, the tentative separation of power between the western portion of the island under European control and the eastern portion under Javanese control, had largely disintegrated. The courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta in the east had largely come under the jurisdiction of Franco-Dutch authority headquartered at Batavia in the west. However, distant actions taking place on the European continent disrupted the recently created power structure in Java, and a new European power vied for control of French territories in Southeast Asia.

During the Napoleonic Wars and the French campaign for dominance in Europe, the Dutch ruler in exile, Prince William V of Orange, asked the British government for its support in protecting Dutch overseas territories from French imperial conquest. His request, which came to be known as the “Kew Letters,” ordered “VOC officials to place the Company’s possessions in Asia in British hands in order to prevent them falling to the French.” British government officials needed no convincing, as they too desired an end to French expansion, particularly when it concerned control of the lucrative Spice Islands trade. Though William V issued his
request in 1795, the British East India Company was unable to attempt its invasion of Java and other French-held territories until 1810-1811 due to numerous conflicts on the Continent.ii

By 1810 Sir George Elliot, better known as Lord Minto, commander of the British East India Company forces, began formulating his plan to conquer Java and other French-held territories in Southeast Asia.iii C.A. Bayly has convincingly shown that the aim of Lord Minto was “to purge the eastern side of the globe of every hostile or rival European establishment.”iv After the landing of the British on Java in August 1811, a series of brief skirmishes occurred between Franco-Dutch and Javanese troops on one side, and British and Indian sepoys on the other. By early September, Lord Minto and the British East India Company forces proved victorious in their effort to oust the Franco-Dutch administration from power. The military confrontation between these two European nations and the resulting loss of the island of Java was of little consequence to Napoleon and his officials in the French metropole. Indeed, in 1834 a contemporary French aristocrat complained that the French military annals did not even mention the Java War of 1811 or that this represented the loss of the last French territory in the Pacific.iv

The quick transfer of authority in Java from Dutch to Franco-Dutch to British rule allows the historian to trace the changing perspectives and social hierarchies constructed under the various imperial powers. Beginning with Dutch perspectives of the Javanese in the early-seventeenth century and continuing until the aborted Sepoy Conspiracy of 1815, the widespread assumption by colonial agents that the Javanese were inferior to Europeans remained unchallenged. Evidence of these forms of knowledge about the “other” included supposedly objective works such as Raffles’ The History of Java, and John Crawfurd’s History of the Indian Archipelago, both published in the second decade of the nineteenth-century by well-known
“Orientalists.” Other contemporary constructions of identity produced by Europeans included sketches, illustrations, and engravings of indigenous peoples that betrayed a “clearly defined colonialist agenda,” and portrayed a “degenerate image of the Orient.”

Although most Western imperial officials, both in the metropole and in the colonies, viewed non-Europeans as inferior, they nevertheless believed them worthy of “saving” or being “civilized.” Lord Minto, for instance, desired not only to expel French power in Southeast Asia and provide protection to Dutch inhabitants on Java; he also desired to “bring wisdom and reason to Asia’s people, ‘with patriot zeal’” and certainty in the correctness of his actions. Many British East India Company officials were of the same mind as Lord Minto. They felt that it was their duty to free the Javanese peasants from the “despotism” of monarchical rule. British diplomat John Crawfurd went so far as to consider many Asian nations as “civilised,” though still examples of “pure despotisms” as their governmental policies lagged far behind those of the British Crown. He remarked on the plight of the poor, claiming that “the sovereign is the arbitrary lord of all, including, in theory at least, the religion and the property of his subjects.”

John Joseph Stockdale, another nineteenth-century observer of Java, agreed with Crawfurd’s depiction of the native government as “despotic,” arguing that it “arbitrarily deprived” the common people of their property.

According to later government documents, British East India Company forces in Java first learned of the Sepoy Conspiracy in late October 1815 when word was leaked to a British diplomat serving at the Court of Surakarta, who promptly forwarded this information along to Lieutenant-Governor Raffles. In a letter to Lord Moira, Governor-General of India, Raffles detailed the particulars of the plot.

A conspiracy was a foot in the [Bengal Light Infantry Volunteer] Battalion . . . to unite with some Native Chieftains about the Court of the Susuhunan [Sunan
Pakubuwana IV], and establish a Native Government . . . It appears further that the plan projected was to . . . get rid . . . of the young Sultan [of Yogyakarta], and to restore to the Susuhunan Family the Kingdom of Mataram [Yogyakarta] . . . The Court of Djocjocarta appears to have had no share in the plot or intrigues of the Sepoys.\textsuperscript{lx}

Contemporary documents of British East India Company officials detail British perceptions of why the Sepoy Conspiracy happened. Raffles’ aide-de-camp, Thomas Otho Travers, speculated in his journal that the plot originated because of a belief amongst the sepoys that they were to be transferred to Dutch control along with the transfer of the island.\textsuperscript{lxii} Further, John Adam, Secretary to the British East India Company Government Political Department, argued that due to their lengthy stint in Java, the fidelity of the men and attachment to their own government was weakened.\textsuperscript{lxiii} Thus, from the perspective of the British colonial officials, the Sepoy Conspiracy was caused by a combination of long tours of duty and the rumor of transfer to Dutch control; no mention is made in these records of the imposed ideology of superiority and the resentment it caused among the colonized and subjugated groups.

Within only a few months of uncovering the Sepoy Conspiracy, Raffles learned in March 1816 that he was to be “relieved from the charge of the government.”\textsuperscript{lxiv} Well before being aware of either the Sepoy Conspiracy or his dismissal from governorship however, Raffles already knew of the anticipated transfer of the island of Java to the government of the newly formed United Kingdom of the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{lxv} This caused him much consternation and concern. For Raffles, the transfer of the colony was ludicrous. Not only did its loss prevent the British from access to the lucrative Indian Ocean trade, it also made everything he had accomplished over the past five years of his life virtually meaningless, including his attempt to “allow” the Javanese the enjoyment of liberty and independence.
Nevertheless, Raffles’ many pleas and attempts to bargain for the maintenance of Java went unheeded by the British government. He departed Batavia in late March 1816, and arrived home in London that July. At the same time in Java the newly instituted Lieutenant-Governor John Fendall sent a letter to the Governor-General in India, signifying his consent “for the immediate restitution of this Colony . . . to His Majesty the King of the Netherlands [William I].” The official ceremony took place in Batavia on August 19, 1816, ending the brief period of British rule in Java, and opening up Dutch control which would continue for the next one hundred and thirty years.

Sadly, neither the Dutch nor the British apparently learned much from the events surrounding the Sepoy Conspiracy, as similar resistance movements would occur again under both the Dutch occupation of Java during the Java War of 1820-1825 and the British occupation of India during the Indian Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-1859. In each case, subjugated and colonized peoples illustrated their willingness to work together for liberation from the European imperial system that controlled their daily lives, and Europeans demonstrated their thick-headedness over the fact that their ideologies of superiority continually inspired resistance and rebellion.

BENGALI SEPOYS

The most prominent players in planning the Sepoy Conspiracy were the Bengali sepoys stationed at the courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Through a combination of inadequate pay, long service, and resentment against the professed superiority of their British colonial “masters,” the Bengali sepoys hatched a plot to gain their freedom from colonial oppression, and chose to work in co-operation with the Javanese aristocrats to achieve this end. I argue that there were three important factors regarding the make-up of the British colonial army in India which led to this potentially explosive and ultimately unsuccessful event. One needs first to understand the
formation of the Bengali sepoy army, second, the religious character of its soldiers, and third, how these men came to find themselves so discontented with the British colonial system in Java.

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the British East India Company instituted the creation of a paid army consisting of the conquered peoples of South Asia to maintain order and supplement the small British fighting force already stationed there. By the 1760s, the British were well on their way to producing a large “European-style native army,” composed of Indian soldiers. These men were known in Hindi as sepoys, a term the British East India Company chose to maintain when referring to native soldiers. Several factors led to the British East India Company’s use of local peoples to fill the ranks of their military, including the enormous expense of transporting men and supplies from the metropole, and the large numbers of unemployed soldiers in India willing to fight for low wages. Further, indigenous peoples’ resistance to local diseases made them more “useful” than British soldiers in debilitating climates. Indeed, for millions of Indian soldiers and their dependents, service in the British colonial army was a source of “employment, pride and identity.”

As army structure and organization was unique to each presidency or regional division of the British colonial army in India, so too was recruitment. The Bengal presidency’s commanders recruited “especially diligently from among the highest castes of Indians,” particularly Hindus, as they were believed to be “responsible and sober in their habits.” Thus religion played a central role in the recruitment of soldiers in the Bengal army, as commanders preferred the use of Hindus over Muslim sepoys. British officers and commanders, wary of what they described as the “fanaticism” common among Muslims, relied on the more predictable nature of Hindu soldiers to make up their colonial army. One British official summarized the Bengal presidency’s preference for Hindu sepoys by stating that “the Mahomedans are good soldiers, though they
seldom become so attached to service as the Hindoo.”

Thus, from the perspective of the British military officers and recruiters, the stability of the Bengal Army rested on the dependable nature, loyalty, and predictability of its high-caste Hindu sepoys.

In early August 1811, British and Bengali forces invaded Java and engaged with the armies of Franco-Dutch Governor-General J.W. Janssens, the successor to Herman Willem Daendels. Within a matter of weeks the British emerged victorious and by the end of September 1811 Janssens relinquished control of the island to the British. Those Bengali sepoys involved in the invasion and conquest of Java reportedly fought with alacrity and courage, and “acquitted themselves with considerable bravery.”

Not all of the Bengali sepoys employed in the conquest of Java returned to India at the conclusion of hostilities there. Three battalions, consisting of the 3rd, 4th, and Light Infantry, remained in Java an additional five years for the purpose of restoring and maintaining order. Many of these men did not finally depart Java and thus end their extended overseas duties until the eventual transfer of the island to the Dutch in 1816. Indeed, some never left the island alive.

Although military service under the British colonial government carried with it obvious benefits including spoils of war, employment, and a sense of pride, for its mercenary fighting force army life also meant a long list of grievances. Some of the most common complaints of overseas service with the British East India Company included separation from family, lengthy tours of duty, inadequate pay, and long periods of inactivity. Finally, all of these grievances were further compounded by the unmitigated rhetoric of British soldiers expounding the innate superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans. The culmination of all of these factors eventually led to the plotting of the Sepoy Conspiracy in the autumn of 1815.
By the end of that year, various schemes emerged amongst the sepoys stationed throughout central Java. Tensions arose as Bengali soldiers brooded over their status in the British East India Company. For over four years they suffered from insufficient pay, long delayed promotions, tiring civil duties, and hardly any incentive or opportunity to show their “valour.” However, it was with the rumor of transferred service and subjugation to the Dutch that the Bengali sepoys’ resentment finally reached its boiling point. With the financial resources of the Javanese aristocrats behind them, the sepoys chose to rebel. Almost overnight placards appeared in the courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Although records do not inform us of the exact words on the placards, contemporary sources indicate that phrases written in both Hindustani and Bengali urged fellow Indian soldiers to join in the mutiny, and make common cause with the conspirators.

The objectives of the Bengali sepoys and the Javanese aristocrats in their joint conspiracy were divergent and varied. Indeed, the desired aims of the insurrection differed even amongst the sepoys “ringleaders” and “conspirators.” For some, the goal was simply to return home to Bengal with their families. A few hoped for possible aid from the French. The majority of the sepoys, however, wished for revenge, and subsequently formulated a plan to murder their British superiors and all sepoys officers who remained loyal to the British government. The massacre of those loyal to the British was set to begin in Surakarta. Once their opposition was eliminated, the assembled sepoys and Javanese troops loyal to Sunan Pakubuwana IV were to attack the court of Yogyakarta, murder the ruling Sultan, and place the son of Pakubuwana IV on the throne, thus reuniting the ancient kingdom of Mataram. The plan was then to proceed to a conquest of the entire island, “driving every European” from the shores of Java. In addition to the expulsion of all Dutch and British residents, the Chinese inhabiting the island were also to
be executed. Sources relate that the sepoys planned to murder them in order to get their money and to prevent them from raising a hostile force against the mutineers.\textsuperscript{lxxxiii}

Eventually however, all of the planning of the sepoys and Javanese led to nothing. In late October 1815 as members of the Bengali Light Infantry Battalion met secretly to discuss their plot, a European Sergeant-Major learned from his orderly that there was a “mutinous spirit amongst the men.”\textsuperscript{lxxxiv} He quickly investigated these rumors, and the Javanese-sepoy conspiracy became frustrated as the whole plot was exposed to the British command.\textsuperscript{lxxxv} The Bengali sepoy ringleaders, most notably Captain Dhaugkul Singh, were summarily tried and shot, with seventeen of them executed and over fifty sent home to Bengal.\textsuperscript{lxxxvi} As for the Javanese aristocrats, Lieutenant-Governor Raffles chose not to discipline Sunan Pakubuwana IV, but to make an example of his brother instead; Mangkubumi was swiftly exiled for his role in the “mutinous” plot. Thus ended the brief period of cross-colonial cooperation between two subjugated groups, the Bengali sepoys and Javanese aristocrats. Although different in their ethnic and religious make-up, each party found common ground in their shared hatred of the colonial British government which was charged with the responsibility of bringing “civilization” to the “barbarous peoples” of Asia.

CONCLUSION

Overall, scholarly study of the 1815 Sepoy Conspiracy of Java is important for four reasons. First, the failed plot illustrates the emergence of cross-colonial cooperation between colonized peoples at a point in time much earlier than most historians believe, thus challenging current historiographical thought. This cooperative effort to cast off the yoke of imperial oppression in Java, though never fully realized, emerged over one hundred years before it was thought to arise as a result of the First and Second World Wars in the twentieth century. The
importance of this cross-colonial cooperation between disparate ethnic and religious groups at such an early date is noteworthy, even though it was unsuccessful, as it illustrates the existence of a latent and growing resentment among subjugated peoples towards Western imperialism. lxxxvii

Second, study of the Sepoy Conspiracy also displays a willingness on the part of the oppressed to disregard different cultural and religious beliefs, and to work cooperatively across colonial borders towards a common goal. This eschewing of differences was not unique to those involved in the Sepoy Conspiracy, but rather was common among anticolonial movements throughout the globe. In this regard, I relate the actions of the Javanese aristocrats and Bengali sepoys to those of free and enslaved Africans, African-Americans, and European immigrants engaged in the Denmark Vesey plot in the United States at approximately the same time. By providing a comparative framework which views the Sepoy Conspiracy in Southeast Asia with the Denmark Vesey plot in the southern United States, I demonstrate the existence of this type of cross-colonial and cross-religious cooperation occurring on a much broader scale and more frequently than formerly thought.

The third reason for the importance of studying the Sepoy Conspiracy is that it illustrates the interconnected history of the world, or what anthropologist Eric R. Wolf referred to as the “connections, linkages and interrelationships” of the globe. lxxxviii Long before the term globalization appeared in modern parlance, actions across vast distances connected disparate peoples. These actions were common everywhere throughout global history, and can easily be told through the life of Pakubuwana IV, Thomas Stamford Raffles, or Dhaugkul Singh. lxxxix Study of the interrelated actions of historical actors and events from bygone centuries illustrates how the legacy of imperialism continues to affect the shape of current affairs in our interconnected world.
Finally, the Sepoy Conspiracy encourages us to ask why British colonial officials in South and Southeast Asia did not learn from events such as the Sepoy Conspiracy. The continuation of their colonial policies, even in the face of this warning, led to the culmination of bloodshed in the Indian Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-1859. The example of the Sepoy Conspiracy suggests that this later revolt was not just the result of events of the mid-century, but was the product of a much longer tradition of colonial policies that were guided by a European ideology of superiority from at least the late-eighteenth century.

Although the cooperative sepoy-Javanese plot was ultimately unsuccessful, it nevertheless illustrates the interconnected nature of the globe and its peoples. It shows that some of those deemed “inferior” by imperial powers chose to work together, to eschew their religious, ethnic, and cultural differences in order to fight for their freedom, thus illustrating the agency usually denied to them in Western histories. Further, it challenges current historiographical thought by pushing back the temporal starting point for this type of cooperation by more than one hundred years. To tell the tale of the Sepoy Conspiracy from only one perspective, that of the British for instance, does not do justice to the other players involved, nor does it adequately represent the multi-faceted and interconnected events that led to the attempted rebellion. Although a thorough analysis of the lives and struggles of those involved in the Sepoy Conspiracy is not detailed in this article, it has at least begun the process of giving agency and voice to those whose history has largely been obscured or neglected in the European record.

1 A recent text on Modern Imperialism states that colonized peoples’ “service in regional or cross-colonial regiments [during the two World Wars] helped to break down the ethnic divisions instilled by colonialism.” While this statement is undoubtedly true, and cross-colonial cooperation did break down ethnic divisions, the Sepoy Conspiracy and other examples like it challenge the commonly held belief of historians that cross-colonial cooperation was solely a twentieth-century occurrence; see Trevor R. Getz and Heather Streets-Salter, Modern Imperialism and Colonialism: A Global Perspective (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2011), 294; examples of twentieth-century cooperation that scholars commonly point to include cooperation between colonial troops under French control in areas as disparate as French controlled West Africa, and French controlled Southeast Asia/Indo-China.
I define “cross-colonial cooperation” as cooperation between different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups, from distant lands, that chose to work together in spite of their differences, to fight against a common imperial enemy.


This echoes Dipesh Chakrabarty’s contention that as a result of colonialism, all “other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe,’” in Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

I borrow theoretical models from scholars of resistance, subaltern studies, and postcolonialism, including Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Richard King, Edward W. Said, James C. Scott, and Gayatri Spivak, among others.


Regarding the “voice” of the subjugated, I argue against the contention of Gayatri Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak; what is required is a proper interpretation of the evidence by scholars; see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 66-111.


An exception to this in terms of cross-colonial cooperation is the Denmark Vesey 1822 slave conspiracy in Virginia, examined in greater detail in the conclusion.

I chose to organize the structure of these differing perspectives based on a combination of both chronology and on the action of those involved. The Javanese aristocrats were acted on by the European imperialists, so I begin with historical context of the Javanese and the emergence and encroachment of European imperialists into their territory; finally, I placed the perspective of the Bengali sepoys last, as they were brought along by the European imperialists and involved later in the actions of the other two groups.


Craig A. Lockard, Southeast Asia in World History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86.

Ibid., 85.

Ibid., 87.


Ricklefs, History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200, 135.
Sita Ram, From Sepoy to Subedar; being the Life and Adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, a Native Officer of the Bengal Army written and related by himself, (1873, reprint, James Lunt, ed. London: MacMillan, 1970), xxii.


Ibid., 85.


F.G. Cardew, A Sketch of the Services of the Bengal Native Army to 1895 (Calcutta, 1903), 109.

Barat, The Bengal Native Infantry, 180.


Ibid., 78-79.

Ibid., 61-62, 78-79.


Taylor, Indonesia, 228.

Mention is made earlier to other resistance movements that relied on the cooperation of disparate peoples (such as the Ghost Dance or the Maji Maji Revolt), but none of these focuses on the type of “cross-colonial” or trans-ethnic encounters that are here depicted among the subjugated peoples involved in either the Sepoy Conspiracy or the Demark Vesey plot. Further, the latter events both occurred at approximately the same time in the early decades of the nineteenth century, representing what I argue was a larger, heretofore largely unrecognized, movement of cooperation among subjugated, ethnically-distinct peoples.

Wolf, Europe and the People Without History, 4.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Archival Documents


Books

Addison, George Augustus. Original Familiar Correspondence Between Residents in India, including Sketches of Java. Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1846.


Secondary Sources

Books


Cardew, F.G. *A Sketch of the Services of the Bengal Native Army to 1895*. Calcutta, 1903.


**Articles**


**Theses and Dissertations**