

The colonial official as ethnographer

VOC documents as resources for social history in eastern Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The present article departs from the inherent problems of grasping the voice of the subaltern other in a colonial context. While postcolonial theoreticians have occasionally spoken pessimistically about the possibilities of reconstructing the agency of dominated categories of non-Westerners, recent research on early Southeast Asia has on the contrary envisaged new lines of inquiry through an ingenious use of the extant sources, preferably through interdisciplinary communication. But can we use the colonial archive in order to highlight social history in non-literate societies such as those of eastern Indonesia where the colonial texts do not resonate with the indigenous ones? This article scrutinizes materials from the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) post in Kupang (1653-1800) in order to find data usable for such a history. It is argued that letters, reports, legal minutes, diaries, etcetera. have a good potential due to the regularity and minute detail of the record.

KEYWORDS

colonial archive, ethnography, VOC documents, social history, eastern Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The present study aims to explore the colonial archive as a source not only for our knowledge of colonial encounters and confrontations, but also for mapping social structures of non-Western societies which did not have a literate tradition.¹ Archives in the broad sense of the term, is the information

¹ Research for the present study was made possible through funding by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet). The work has been undertaken within the interdisciplinary

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that has been compiled and systematized to serve as a basis for analysis and applications in all sorts of topics. This is not merely a question about collections of paper documents, but one may encounter archives in a variety of locations and contexts, and with the most diverse content - from local archives to Wiki leaks. The very fact that the contents of the archives have been compiled and systematized draws the attention of the spectator to the principles that collectors used to determine what was important or useful to include. This problem has been recognized for some time. Already in the 1960s, E.H. Carr pointed out that even the driest collection of documents is based on a set of underlying principles for selection, and how it may be biased in spite of the mechanistic belief in their representativeness (Carr 1961). And, more to the point, Michel Foucault also suggested in 1967 that a society would inevitably produce social spaces known as heterotopias, or stylized expressions of the structures of power and culture that pertain to a given society. In his eyes, institutions such as museums and libraries would constitute archetypical examples of such heterotopias. He pointed at "the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive", of "the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place" which belonged to modernity (Prescott 2008: 32-33). In other words, museums, libraries, and, by extension, archives are closely involved in the formation of the social and cultural identities of their time.

As a historian focussed on Southeast Asia in the period up to the 1800s I have reason to take up these critical points in more than one way. Firstly, I work with a material that has largely been taken directly from the colonial archives, which begs the question of applicability in relation to the object of study. To repeat Gayatri Spivak's well known question, "Can the subaltern speak?" - a question for which she found reason to reply in the negative (Spivak 1994: 104).² Secondly, I may scrutinize my role as a researcher in an essentially Western scholarly environment, and whether this allows me to obtain the tools and resources to study other cultural contexts - much of Spivak's critique addresses modern European theoreticians who seemed unable to move beyond their own cultural sphere (Spivak 1994: 86-90). In my case, furthermore, the cultures that I have studied have seldom left behind their own texts, something that leaves plenty of question marks of what the archival sources represent. Issues of this kind are, of course, what postcolonial studies have recently dealt with; in its position not only as a critique of Western or colonial discourses of power, but also as a constructive attempt to identify alternative voices or claims to the past (Gandhi 1998).

In light of this, the present article discusses how the colonial archive can be used with a critical eye in order to elucidate precisely the aspects that Gayatri Spivak spoke so pessimistically about. In other words, what is the potential of

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² With subaltern in this context, I allude to those on the receiving end in the power relationships forged in the colonial situation. They may belong to a wide array of social strata and categories.

the archive for mapping the indigenous social history of a region subjected to colonial supervision?³ Are there colonial categories of sources that allow the voice of the other to be heard? Addressing these issues, I will pay attention to a substantial body of Dutch material found in the archives of the VOC, covering the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The area under scrutiny is Timor and the adjacent islands, an area which is known to have lacked a substantial body of indigenous texts until quite recently.

ARCHIVAL EUROCENTRISM AND BEYOND

The subject of history has a firmly established national tradition. Despite the repeated and now fashionable criticism of the nation-state, much of the academic activities are based precisely on thinking in terms of nations, echoing a discourse that got its defining features during the nineteenth century. This is reinforced by the structure of archives in general, which are nationally organized (although transnational variants are increasingly visible in these net-based times). One consequence of all this is the difficulty of breaking the Euro-centrism that shaped world histories until relatively recently. The European empires, and later nation states, which stood at the head of the colonial expansion from the late 1400s, left a material that is often deafening in its quantity and detail. The issue closely touches an old debate about the autonomy of Southeast Asia begun by J.C. van Leur in the inter-war era. As is well known, Van Leur argued, by using long-known sources in a fresh conceptual framework, that historians generally had overstressed European influence on the history of Southeast Asia (Legge 1999: 25-26). More recently, Jerry Bentley has critically scrutinized modernization and world system theories, with roots back in European nineteenth-century philosophy of history, which stand out as inherently Euro-centric. The West here plays the role of the modernizing agent, and it is more than likely that the well-stocked European archives relating to trading companies and other overseas enterprises have reinforced the discourse. Against this, Bentley points out some newer research trends that downplay the trajectory of Western exceptionalism, and moves away from the tyranny of the archive by looking at other things – linguistic, physiological, medical, geographical, anthropological, and other data (Bentley 2002). Such methodological redirection have inspired a new generation of historians of Southeast Asia, historians who have often worked specifically with VOC material. It has been increasingly argued that good progress will be achieved among historians in the field by extending the lines of inquiry through interdisciplinary conversations (Andaya 2006: 228).

In the postcolonial era, especially since the 1970s, anthropological and historical works have covered the Indonesian past in increasing depth. Historians such as Leonard Andaya, Barbara Andaya, Luc Nagtegaal, Gerrit

³ In this article I use the term "colonial" in a broad sense, as complete or partial foreign domination over a territory in order to extract economic or other advantages for the dominating part. As is well known, a fully implemented colonial rule in Indonesia was only achieved in the early twentieth century.

Knaap, and David Henley, and anthropologists such as James Fox, Robert Barnes, and Stefan Dietrich, have all made ingenious use of the Dutch colonial records, and combined them with other categories of data such as local chronicles, oral tradition, ethnographic data, and so on. Anyone familiar with Anthony Reid's magisterial two-volume work *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce* (1988-1993) realizes the potential of such work. The effort of these scholars has made some impact outside the circle of specialists. A reader of the much-used college textbook *A history of world societies* will notice that Indonesian history occurs in a global context without being reduced to an appendix of European domination (McKay et al. 2012).

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF ARCHIVES

The Indonesian climate has not been kind to textual documents, and comparatively little survives in original up to the eighteenth or nineteenth century unless inscribed on stone or metal. Moreover, indigenous texts from before 1900 are mostly restricted to Bali, Java, parts of Sumatra, the Malay world, and South Sulawesi. Cultural factors cannot be ignored either. For example, there was apparently a lack of incentive in maintaining data on commercial activities by individual Chinese due to a lack of large record-keeping organizations (Blussé 1996: 148).⁴ This leaves enormously large areas in northern and eastern Indonesia where historical material has to be sought elsewhere rather than from indigenous or even other Asian sources. Again, we are confronted with the peculiar problems and possibilities of the colonial archive.

Not all postcolonial critics who have commented on the resources and opportunities of world history might be aware of the quantity of material contained in European archives. The Dutch National Archives in The Hague presently encompasses 93 kilometres of material in total of which 1,330 meters are VOC-related – it is certainly not a coincidence that a current Dutch-led PhD training program for archival research is named *Encompass*.⁵ However, Dutch colonial sources are also available in several places in Asia itself. The Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI) in Jakarta includes ten kilometres of colonial records from the seventeenth century to 1949, of which 1,800 meters are VOC materials.⁶ The examples may suffice to show the quantities with which we are dealing. Of course, such quantifications say nothing about the actual contents of the archives. The European visitors may have met diverse and advanced societies along the Asian coastlands, but how is this diversity reflected in the documents marked for preservation?

The anthropologist and historian Ann Laura Stoler, in her much-debated

⁴ As Leonard Blussé remarked in 1996, it might be important to note that the official ideology of the Ming and Qing periods harboured distrust of overseas commerce and migrant merchants.

⁵ By 1965, the number of document volumes from the VOC period was 12,050 (Irwin 1965: 238). For more information on the Encompass programme, see <http://www.leidenuniv.nl/brochures/298.pdf>.

⁶ [Http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/Memory of the world register](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/Memory%20of%20the%20world%20register), pp. 17-18.

book *Along the archival grain* (2010) pleaded for an ethnography of the colonial archives. Based on her research on the history of the Dutch colonial empire, she pointed out, as many before her had done, that the archives might not only be seen as repositories of privileged information. Rather, they should be explored as a sprawling set of “imperial dispositions” that include both uncertainty and certainty, containing rational and calculating elements as well as doubts and feelings of failure. She argues, referring to the title of the book that the student of the colonial archive may read along it, not against it as postcolonial writers have often done. Only by seriously studying the political vocabulary, the affective knowledge and the racial unrest that is found in the documents, can we give the colonial “heart” a voice (Stoler 2010).

This helps us a bit. In order to evaluate the assertions the material makes about other cultures and societies, we must obviously know something about the colonizers’ own life-world and mindset – the underlying conditions for the colonial encounter they faced. But can we proceed to find the authentic voice of the “other” in the documents? Do the colonial narratives tell us something essential about the other party? I would argue that it is to some extent possible to grasp the dominated other. I deduce this argument from personal experience with colonial archives relating to the eastern parts of the Dutch East Indies. A number of historians and anthropologists, including those mentioned earlier in this article, have worked with similar research aims,⁷ and it is tempting to quote Elsbeth Locher-Scholten’s comment on the possibilities of researching Indonesian family history: “The problem of sources is paramount. Yet, this is not a good reason not to start a new quest: new questions have also resulted in finding new material: as for instance, new research in environmental history and urban history in Indonesia has demonstrated. What is required are creative researchers, who can read against the grain,⁸ in the traditional sources of the historian” (Locher-Scholten 2008: 192). In contrast to Locher-Scholten, and most historians who have worked with VOC sources, I will extend the discussion to a geographical area with very few indigenous textual sources. By giving a number of illustrative examples, I wish to highlight the methodical possibilities that lie ahead in a situation where the VOC constitutes virtually the only textual record.

THE VOC AS AN ASIATIC ADMINISTRATOR

The basic facts may be well known and can be summarized briefly. The Dutch VOC was one of the first share-holding companies in the world and existed from 1602 to 1799. The VOC had a monopoly on Dutch trade east of Cape Town and maintained a large number of trading posts along the coasts of Asia, all the way to Dejima in Japan. In particular, the Company was associated with the dominance over parts of what is now Indonesia. In the course of

⁷ For eastern Indonesia, it is appropriate to mention the brilliant work of James Fox, *Harvest of the palm* (1977) which combines anthropology and ecological history.

⁸ Thus a metaphor opposed to that of Ann Laura Stoler, although I take it that their research aims are largely similar.

the seventeenth century, Dutch naval forces in combination with a relatively efficient organization beat the main political rivals in the East Indies. It gave Westerners a role in the region that extended far beyond the commercial capitalist aspect that was the Company's original *raison d'être*. Some posts were resourceful and handled extensive economic and political affairs among people within their spheres of influence. Others, such as Kupang on Timor, were small and established more for strategic purposes than for profit, and did not interfere more than necessary with the allied polities in the region (compare Hägerdal 2012).

When historians are confronted with the voluminous material that the Company left behind, they will immediately note the regularity with which dutiful colonial officials submitted reports and economic figures. Each item that was bought or sold would be duly listed by the clerks of the VOC posts, and the figures were sent along with other documents of importance to the main post in Batavia. Copies were subsequently dispatched to the VOC board in the Netherlands: The Seventeen Gentlemen. The Governor-General and his Council in Batavia used the reports of the various posts to make decisions on how to allocate the available resources. Merchandise, tributes, and equipment are recorded and valued to the smallest detail. And what is more, so are the contacts with other ethnic groups.

Organizational practice led to relatively detailed reports for each VOC post, with two or more longer reports, known as missives, being dispatched each year. There are documents from Ambon, Banda, Ternate, Makassar, Banjarmasin, Timor, Palembang, Jambi, China, Japan, Malacca, Sumatra's West Coast, Ceylon, Bengal, Coromandel, Malabar, Surat, Persia, various parts of Java, and Batavia, in other words much of the Asian coastlands (Irwin 1965: 239). Concerning the content and style of these vast volumes, it is important to refer to Stoler and pinpoint the position of the transmitters. How did they argue, and what was expected of them? What were the bases of their way of writing? Two keywords are apparently money and careers. The VOC was a commercial company and the issue of possible profits for the organization usually appears as a leading principle in the reports. The Company offered a good chance for advancement for anyone with good ability, regardless of the privilege society that imprinted the contemporary European monarchies. This structure initially lent certain dynamism to the Company, before the onset of serious corruption and inefficiency in the eighteenth century.

The various outposts grew into small coastal towns and sometimes-larger cities such as Batavia, which had about 8,000 inhabitants in 1624 (Taylor 2009: 10). This meant that the Dutch Company employees also received administrative tasks involving indigenous populations. Inevitably, routines emerged for intercommunication between Europeans and non-whites. This brought with it an element of hybridity, about which more below. The archive pieces from Kupang on Timor, which the present author has studied, display in detail how such cooperative mechanisms were established gradually after the founding of the permanent posts in Solor and Kupang, in 1646 and 1653

respectively.⁹ In the early years the regular Dutch reports from the eastern islands to Batavia are written “from the ship’s deck,” reflecting a Dutch outsider view of local conditions.¹⁰ One may refer to the account of the initial VOC contact with the people of Savu in October 1648:

On 18 [October] in the morning we were about 1/2 [Dutch] mile from the roadstead, before Menia¹¹ and Relettij [...] We sent the sloop ‘den Orangienboom’ to the shore to scout if some of the foremost grandees might be on land, announcing our arrival. The sloop came back on board at noon. The steersman reported to us that, in the *negeri*¹² Menia, the raja Ama Tenga and his brother Ama Landa seemed very amazed when they were informed about our arrival. They asked if we would come ashore to discuss trade. At once I went there together with the book-keeper Barent Hunnius. When I turned up I found that the shore was black with people, each with [...] cutlasses and assegais in their hands, [...] they seemed to be a party of barbarian people, very cruel to behold. I found the aforementioned raja and his brother sitting among the common people, and they could not be distinguished from the others since they wear the same habitat. They are people of a beastly disposition. I can do no better than compare them to the Hottentotts at the Cape of Good Hope, who also all devour any filthy stuff as their food. They have very little speech among them. [...] In the next morning we were to let him [Raja Ama Tenga] see some samples of merchandise on the shore [...] which we promised them. Thus we bade farewell and were transported aboard. The raja Ama Tenga bestowed on us a grilled pig which we gratefully received [...] (Tiele 1895: 24).¹³

This piece reveals a keen sense of observation from the outside, even offering parallels to other peoples of colour with which the Dutch came into contact. Still, the scene is one of almost dehumanizing rejection, which is underlined by adjectives such as “barbarian” and “beastly”. Later, in the 1670s and 1680s, the Timor documents increasingly tend to refer to indigenous informants for data and judgments about local affairs. And towards the end of the seventeenth century, in the 1680s and 1690s, we get a system of regular *vergaderingen*, meetings where indigenous Timorese aristocrats participate on a monthly basis. The minutes of some of these *vergaderingen* have been preserved, which reflect the words of local spokesmen in some detail. From

⁹ In the context of this article I will not delve into the complicated interplay between Dutch and Portuguese establishments in the Timor area. Briefly, the Dutch sphere of allied petty kingdoms was restricted to westernmost Timor from 1653 to 1749, while most of the island was dominated or influenced by the Portuguese. For details on these aspects, see De Roever 2002 and Hägerdal 2012.

¹⁰ The reports up to 1660 have been worked out in considerable detail by Arend de Roever (2002). While De Roever has managed to make very good sense of the material, the limitation of the early reports is apparent.

¹¹ Savu was traditionally divided into five minor princedoms called Seba, Timu, Mesara, Liae and Menia. The small adjacent island Raijua constituted a princedom of its own (Fox 1977). The Savunese rajas were contacted by the VOC in 1648, and a contract was concluded (De Roever 2002: 246-247; Hägerdal 2012: 97).

¹² Negeri, a settlement (VOC-Glossarium 2000: 80).

¹³ All VOC documents quoted in this article have been translated by the present author.

the late seventeenth century onwards, we also have records relating to legal cases where the Company was involved.

Still, only part of the local texts that were once issued by Company employees has been preserved. It is important to remember that the materials that have survived have done so because they were considered to be of more than local significance. Copies were dispatched to Batavia and the Netherlands when they were important for the decision making process of the VOC. From the point of critical history, one of the advantages of the material lies in its secretive character. The reports were not meant for publication, and there was consequently less need to polish the contents. It comes with successes as well as failures. Moreover, the sheer detail of the records that have been handed down over the folio pages is stunning. In the literate parts of Indonesia where we possess chronicles covering the same time and place, they will probably contain less exact data, and are likely to gloss over embarrassing and sensitive aspects (Irwin 1965: 236-238). This, of course, does not detract from their usefulness in a number of respects, especially in mapping the political culture of local elites and highlighting themes that the often-utilitarian Western sources did not find reason to mention. The same thing goes for the strong oral traditions that are found in many places in eastern Indonesia where the written word was rare or unknown.

CONTACT AREAS AND THE VOICE OF THE OTHER

Homi Bhabha (2005) has characterized colonial discourses as dependent on the concept "fixity" when constructing the idea of otherness. That is, fixity is supposedly the sign of cultural, historical or racial difference that marks out colonial discourse, and implies both rigidity and unchanging order on the one hand, and disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repletion on the other. A stereotype is therefore, according to Bhabha, a discursive strategy that vacillates between what is already "known" and something that needs to be repeated time after time in order to confirm the "point" (Bhabha 2005: 94-95). On the other hand, more recent postcolonial scholars have pointed out the disjointed nature of European discourses on the cultural other until at least the mid-eighteenth century. According to Felicity Nussbaum the development of a European racial and cultural chauvinism might be seen in terms of thickening entanglements of ideas rather than the dissemination of a fundamental binary discourse of "us" versus "them" (Nussbaum 2009: 140-142).

The situation in the Dutch in the East Indies highlights this. Their numbers were relatively modest until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, even if one includes people of mixed ancestry with a Dutch identity. Although a binary discourse of sorts was present in the world of the VOC, it tended to be based on religion rather than race (Fasseur 1994: 32). In order to survive in the string of coastal VOC towns, there was simply no other choice than to gain knowledge of political and social processes in order to communicate with the indigenous peoples, and with the Chinese, Indians and Arabs who also operated in the islands. A complete rupture with the local peoples would

have led to the breakdown of the trading capitalist system which the VOC had constructed. Among the detailed records referred above, there is consequently a mass of data on the forging and maintenance of contacts.

In cases where legal documents and records have survived, we have unique opportunities to penetrate the individual level. This is the case with the material from the trading post of Kupang on Timor. When a crime, a serious assault, or some other incident occurred in the hinterland of the trading post, the case was usually regulated by the peoples beyond direct Dutch jurisdiction. But when the locals were unable to handle it through their own institutions, or when the issue involved the VOC area of jurisdiction, the white foreigners could be asked to make justice (Hägerdal 2012: 283-284). Involved locals would be questioned or interrogated, in the first place without torture, and the VOC scribes sometimes recorded long stories about their acts. Here we begin to approach the colonial party's point of view. Although the interrogated people may have said what they thought the Dutch officials wanted to hear, their stories contain much factual information that can be illuminated by comparisons with other materials, such as later ethnographic research findings. At times, the voices of the lowest in the social hierarchy, simple fishers, peasants, and slaves, are heard in the material. One may quote a legal case from 1679 where the VOC made justice in a case where a fisherman called Delle from the island Rote stood accused of manslaughter. According to the witness account:

[...] he [Delle], about three months ago, went out fishing at the shore between Bilba and Diu, when a slave belonging to the regent Liay, called Nauw, came creeping towards his basket. When Delle saw him he called on him, asking what he was up to. He answered: I came in order to see if I could catch some fish. Upon that, Delle gave him a fish and said: Get away with that, and do not come back, since the fishes are not dead, or to put it otherwise, the superstition that they make use of was not yet accomplished. However, shortly afterwards Nauw once again came creeping along the reef to the basket, and as he would not answer the shouts of Delle, he hit him with a stone, without knowing who it was, and he died from that.¹⁴

Delle was sentenced by the VOC authorities to three years of work in chains in Kupang. From an ethnographic point of view, we get an interesting Dutch view of the magic beliefs of a non-literate society. From the story, it appears that Delle used magic, known in an all-Indonesian context as *guna-guna* to supposedly stun the fishes, and that the performance was disturbed by the sneaking slave. The story also highlights the fact that slaves were valuable property in the local society, and that the killing of one was considered a serious enough crime to render the perpetrator a significant punishment.

The significance of this type of material must be evaluated in light of the very uneven distribution of material that we have to describe social-historical conditions in Asian civilizations. In large parts of Asia, it is generally difficult

¹⁴ VOC 1346, p. 10, sub 13, February 1679.

to find first-hand materials that elucidate social customs at the grassroots level. In recent decades, new ways have been explored. This is the case in Chinese and Japanese studies, where literary, religious and local texts, archaeology, art, and so on, have been applied in new and unorthodox ways to map the life of the commoner.¹⁵ Often, though, the problems are intractable. For example, we have a large amount of material from pre-modern Vietnam, but to obtain an idea of what occurred in the broader strata of society the Catholic missionary sources offer the most detailed subject matter.¹⁶ In this way, we often possess more specific documented information on how poor groups, including slaves and prostitutes, lived their lives in the vicinity of Dutch colonial centres, than we have on similar social conditions in areas little affected by the Europeans (Jones 2003). For a truly global history since 1500, the Western material is indispensable whether we like it or not.

Another factor that paradoxically magnified the voice of the colonized was the enormous mortality among VOC personnel, often caused by malaria in combination with unhealthy lifestyles. The headmen or *opperhoofden* of the Dutch trading posts enjoyed their positions for brief periods. For example, during the period 1657 to 1687 the Timor post had 13 *opperhoofden* of whom seven died at their post (Hägerdal 2012: 425). The constant turnover in the European staff made it difficult to work up long-term procedures. Under these circumstances, trusted local people of high status frequently stood for continuity. The pattern may be found at various VOC posts, including Taiwan, but the situation in Timor was pronounced. In the vicinity of the Dutch centre in Kupang were five small principalities, and further away lay the allied islands Rote, Savu and Solor. The rajas and regents were often in position for two, three or even four decades, as documented by the scrupulous VOC records.¹⁷ Naturally, they were able to protect themselves in a way that newcomers were unable to do. They monitored the maintenance of the routines of the VOC complex, a sense of continuity that the Europeans themselves would not have.

The administrators would summon these local aristocrats for advice and information. We know the content of this information in quite some detail. The headmen of the trading posts were always expected to keep a diary, *Daghregister*. Not all the headmen were great writers, but sometimes the *Daghregisters* are vast in scope, with a myriad of details about everything that commanders heard of, day by day. In some cases, the headmen were not unlike ethnographers, describing ritual uses, legends, elements of material culture, and so on. The *opperhoofd* or headman of the fort in Kupang, Jacob van Wijckersloot, heard of Timorese allies who drove 600 wild buffalos from the grazing areas in the inland towards the west, and made the following annotation on 3 December 1678:

¹⁵ The new approaches to writing history from below have been taken use of by Valerie Hansen in her textbook on pre-modern China, *The open empire* (Hansen 2000).

¹⁶ Le 1987: 405-407; information provided by Nola Cooke, ICAS 6, Honolulu, April 2011.

¹⁷ See the regnal tables in Hägerdal 2012: 417-422.

Unbelievable wonder tales have been told to us at various times which we have never dared to render until now since they partly correspond with the aforementioned, and have been related by the under-surgeon Isaacq van Doorne who is married with [the regent] Ama Tomnanu's daughter. Concerning the capture and taming of these wild animals it is related that the natives bring with them a bewitched, almost white or yellow buffalo. They apply on it some green herbs that have been pounded. And as many wild animals as are sensing the smell of the bewitched buffalo they follow him wherever he goes with his bewitcher. They came from the land of Sonba'i which is more than 30 Dutch miles [150 kilometres] from here, to Ledomata. There, our people came with an old Sonba'i woman. She went muttering among these wild beasts, having a large container or basket in her hand with pulverized *kolsur* and ash. Having strewn it on them all, she led the bewitched buffalo and the herd to the water or to a small river in the vicinity, where all drank except the bewitched one. Only then did the Sonba'is and Amabis dare come forward to share up these buffalos which had been tamed through the drinking, and it was done. But the most wondrous of all is that a buffalo bewitcher and the Sonba'i woman spoke to the bewitched buffalo in their language, since about 400 buffalos had gone astray or run away. He immediately went searching for the remainder, running here and there in the forests. Until now we do not know if he has come back with the lost cattle.¹⁸

Among a variety of practicalities in the Dutch establishment noted down by Van Wijckersloot in his *Daghregister*, we suddenly gain an insight into magic beliefs framing the Timorese use of livestock. The account can be compared with similar information found in geographical descriptions and is therefore important for establishing the persistence of certain local traditions (Pelon 2002: 26). One of the informants is married to a highborn Timorese lady who lends the situation an element of hybridity, of which more later. Apart from the ethnographic interest of these notes, we see in the daily annotations how Company employees depended on the native aristocrats who lived near the Dutch fort. A typical entry in the *Daghregister* may announce that a few aristocrats present themselves in the fort and tell the headman about a current event, such as a skirmish with the hostile feudatories of Portugal, which occurred along the border, followed by more specific information about what was going on in the Timorese inland. We thus obtain a picture of local conditions which, although highly biased and reinterpreted in Dutch, is still indirectly domestic.

INDIGENOUS VOICES

As mentioned, vast areas of the Southeast Asian archipelago consisted of societies which were non-literate or had very limited knowledge of the written word. In the organization constructed by the VOC, it was however vital to keep a degree of correspondence with indigenous chiefs. The practice therefore emerged among these chiefs to dictate letters which were written down by VOC clerks or other literate persons and sent to the Company authorities. A

¹⁸ VOC 1346, sub 3, December 1678.

large part of these texts is quite stereotyped and essentially polite letters of homage that ensure the Governor-General in Batavia the good disposition of the sender. But there are also letters that were sent to discuss particular issues, sometimes in a rather frank style.

These letters can also be goldmines of cultural history since they hint at social relations, customs and images that the Dutch themselves were normally not aware of. A good illustration of this is a piece from 14 May 1687, which is a relation by Messakh, the *manek* or ruler of Thie, a princedom on Rote.¹⁹ Messakh lodged a complaint to the *opperhoofd* or Company headman in Kupang about another lord called Lusi of Dengka who tried to seduce his wife:

Lusi [...] asserted that Messakh was ugly and black, and besides that had a fat belly. He kissed and held her hands, saying that he was on the contrary a white person with dashing looks. He was well provided with cattle, gold, and slaves. On the contrary, Messakh possessed nothing. Two years ago, when Lusi was to visit Landu, he approached Messakh's wife by way of his sister – although she already had two children with Raja Messakh. He presented her with two containers of potatoes and *pinang*. However, Messakh's wife never accepted it. A second sister of Lusi, who was living on Ndao, approached her once more, that she should leave Messakh and rather give her love to Lusi.

Now, some days ago, Messakh's wife became [ill]. As the reason for her sickness, she thought that it was the approach by Lusi, which she had hitherto kept hidden from her husband. Being seized by this perception, she revealed all to her husband Messakh.

Furthermore, eight days ago Lusi visited Thie. Messakh spoke with him about the issue of his wife, and said that if he, Messakh, had such unfinished business with another man's wife, he would gladly give [even] his slave some gold and slaves as compensation. Then Lusi replied that he gave a buffalo or two but never gold or slaves. With this, he left Thie for Dengka.

Two days ago, being 12 May, Ronde, minor regent in Thie, and 60 or 70 Thienese followers, went to Dengka to settle Lusi's debt. When they arrived, Lusi slaughtered a buffalo and on the following day another two. However, at the *bicara* at Lusi's house it was forwarded that the slaughtering of buffaloes was not a recompensation for such a debt, but that it must consist of gold. Then Lusi and his two brothers Patola and Tounarik rose and – [illegible] (however without weapons) against the people of Thie, who did the same. Then the Thienese unexpectedly withdrew.

Complaint is also made about Lusi by Raja Messakh concerning his brother Keleham's wife. Lusi seduced Keleham's wife, although a long time ago. He has denied that and never brought any fine, although the woman herself announced

¹⁹ Rote was divided into a large number of *nusak* or princedoms at the time: Thie, Dengka, Landu, Diu, and so on. The VOC had considerable trouble in welding authority over the island, and intervened from time to time (Fox 1977).

it to Lusi in the presence of others.²⁰

This letter acquaints us with a maybe unexpected discourse of skin colour in an eastern Indonesian context: fair skin is preferable to dark skin, and obesity is claimed to be unattractive – not self-evident in pre-modern societies where signs of sumptuous living often indicated status. In modern Rotenese society, where ideals of physical beauty play a role, dark skin is associated with monkeys. The story also speaks of adultery issues even at the highest level of society, and the codes of honour that accompanied sexual transgressions. Rotenese tradition regards adultery as a personal as much as a moral offence and it is liable to heavy fines.²¹ In general, traditions from eastern Indonesia often refer to adultery and the desire for other men's women as a cause of conflict among the small-scale polities. The indigenous voices that meet us in the colonial archive therefore expand our knowledge of the persistence or alteration of the customs and regulations known as *adat*.

HYBRIDITY

The routinization of an interface between the colonial overlords and the subordinate party is accentuated by an element of hybridity. In a postcolonial context, the term hybridity represents the fusion of elements from the domestic and the dominant colonial culture as reflected in literary texts and other cultural expression (Gandhi 1998: 131-132). But hybridity has a broader significance than the literary. Hybridity has basically existed since the beginnings of European expansion, more than half a millennium ago. In places where there is a colonial presence, there will always be such an element, for the colonizing and colonized can obviously never live in hermetically sealed worlds.

An obvious factor here is the basic unit of social life, family. Until the Suez Canal was opened, concurrent with the improvement of shipping and medical conditions, relatively few women went along on the perilous journey from Europe to Asia (Taylor 2009: 12-15). On the Dutch ships in the 1600s and 1700s, mortality often reached catastrophic proportions. In the Asian coastal cities there waited malaria and other microbes that quickly put an end to a further host of newcomers (Boxer 1990: 87, 274-275). None of this attracted white female travellers – the contrast with the relatively feasible migration route to the Americas is apparent. Those who were recruited for travel with the VOC ships were mainly single men, mostly of low social status. Quite often people from the poorer strata of other European countries, such as Germans and Scandinavians, were enlisted (Taylor 2009: 6-7).

Europeans who were employed at a trading post and survived their contractual term would often settle as burghers. Either as employees or burghers they would look for female company and eventually marry. From what has just been said, it follows that the marriage candidates who came

²⁰ VOC 8310, pp. 16-17.

²¹ Professor James J. Fox, ANU, personal communication, May 2012.

into question were domestic or Eurasian women. In the Timorese case studied by the present writer, a baptismal book from Kupang has been preserved containing entries ranging from the 1660s to the 1730s. Through the baptismal book and various VOC documents, it is possible to reconstruct aspects of the marriage pattern.²² The baptismal entries often mention specifically where the mothers of the baptized children come from. It turns out that a large part of the wives of Dutchmen came from a small island off the coast of Timor, Rote. From the island, many slaves arrived as a result of the unsettled political conditions there. As a “bonus”, women from Rote were considered more beautiful than those from Timor itself, with lighter skin and Malay features (Olivier 1829-33 II: 261). Apparently, many wives were freed slaves who were baptized before marriage as a social routine. The very fact that they were baptized and legally married implied they had legal rights on par with whites (Taylor 2009: 16-17). The European administrations in Asia were quite pragmatic to issues of race during the early modern period, before ideological racism emerged in the late colonial era (Jones 2003: 7, 38-39, 69-70).

This meant that the second generation Dutchmen in the East Indies was almost always half Asian. In the case of Kupang it meant that the burgher group turned increasingly Rotenese rather than Dutch. What this may have implied in terms of culture is not easy to tell from the official documents, but preserved travel stories suggest an effective fusion. The missionaries, who came to Timor in the early 1800s, complained that it was impossible to distinguish between Christians and non-Christian people (Nagedachtenis 1830: 57-58). What is essential for our discussion is that the colonial apparatus was not only European but had a strong streak of hybridity. The resulting knowledge and experience can be seen in the official reports. Some commanders who we know were born in Europe are using domestic concepts in their letters and reports that show that they must have had an initiated fund of local knowledge.²³

Interestingly there were dynastic aspects of this hybridity. In the second half of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there were a number of aristocratic Timorese women, daughters of rajas and regents, who actually married Dutch VOC employees. Such matrimonial ties were hardly cases of spontaneous love affairs. In many cultures in eastern Indonesia, marriage relationships between lineages or clans are extremely important for the stability of the community and the clan's authority. A particular clan will normally function as the bride-giver to another clan which plays the role of bride-receiver. The arrangement puts the bride-receiver in a ceremonially subordinate position, implying that he has a duty to support the family of the bride. This is sealed by a bride price, known on Timor as *belis*.²⁴ In this way, the Dutch were included in a traditional pattern, perhaps something

²² ANRI VOC 209, “Doopboek Timor”, 1669-1732.

²³ The often quite pragmatic way of the VOC port city authorities in allocating tasks to various ethnic groups, has been elucidated by Nordin Hussin (2007).

²⁴ The theme of bride-giving and -receiving in eastern Indonesia is a much-discussed anthropological theme; for Timor, see Usfinit 2008: 190; Schulte Nordholt 1971: 112-120.

they themselves were not fully aware of. For local groups, it must have been important to tie the white newcomers to themselves to ensure their support. Through the archival entries, one can occasionally follow these women in the intersection between gender, ethnicity, and colonial hierarchy. A pertinent case is the sometimes-turbulent life of Pieterrella, a daughter of the King of Kupang who was the original lord of the land at the Dutch arrival to westernmost Timor. She married the Dutchmen Thomas Jacobsz and Floris Jansz in turns, and was therefore in herself a symbol of the bond between the foreign and indigenous lords. This created problems when she did not conform to the Calvinist standards that the Company authorities wished to forge, nor to the standards of her native elite culture. As a *Daghregister* entry from 27 September 1677 has it:

The wife of the sergeant Thomas Jacobsz came to a slave hut and asked the slave woman who lived there, Sinda, for water to drink. She gave her this. Meanwhile the assistant Isaack Pouttin came by jumping over a fence and joined Pieterrella, the wife of the sergeant, who told the slave woman to go out and not to tell anyone that they were alone there together. But she was upset and frightened, the more since the door of the hut was closed and she was left outside. She told her husband (or the one she considered such), and they subsequently informed the *opperhoofd*. The latter was accompanied by the honourable preacher Jacobus Rheyndijck and the under-merchant Joannes van den Broeck, and the *opperhoofd* ordered Van den Broeck to dispatch two or three attendants to the slave hut. If they found Pouttin there (who, on the 15th of this month, had been expressly forbidden by Mr. van den Hoefve to come near the sergeant's wife or speak to her) they should bring both of them before the *opperhoofd*. This was done. He then questioned Pouttin and Pieterrella what they did together in that slave hut. Pouttin replied to the *opperhoofd* and the others that he waited there to go to the fort. But Pieterrella said that she came in order to speak with the wife of the *opperhoofd*, although the latter was outside the Company area this day, and had said to Pieterrella that she did not want to talk with her since she was not accustomed to hold conversations. Due to this great and impertinent audacity, the *opperhoofd* let the attendants bring both of them to the fort with orders that Pieterrella should be allowed to her house since she was the daughter of one of the Kupangese kings, and to leave Isaack Pouttin to the sergeant on duty, to be kept in the dark hole.²⁵

The colonial documents give many details about these marriages, and the above indicates that they were not always harmonious. Pieterrella's husband died shortly after the incident, and the self-willed princess married another Dutchman, Floris Jansz from Katwijk. In 1699, a Kupangese nobleman and cleric called Paulus van Coupang, one of the few Timorese who mastered the art of reading and writing, drew up a letter to the VOC authorities in Batavia where he accused Floris and Pieterrella of meddling in the convoluted issues of the Kupang Kingdom:

²⁵ VOC 1335, *Daghregister*, sub 27, September 1677.

After a few days, [the *opperhoofd*] Captain Moerman summoned AmaTanu [rival pretender for the position of regent], and the child of Prince Ponokoi [heir to the Kupangese kingship], with Sonba'i, Amabi, Taebenu and Amfo'an²⁶ but did not ask any of us. He delivered the letter and the gifts graciously sent by His Excellency [the Governor-General]. The letter and the gifts, sent by His Excellency to the Kupangese with a gracious heart, were brought to the house of one Floris Jansz, being no place of the King of Kupang. In the morning we had a meeting at the reception place of the kings in order to deliberate about this matter. We were summoned through a decree of Pieterella, the wife of Floris Jansz, to appear before her, so that the gifts by His Excellency would be shared up. This was not to our inclination. We said: "Let it be brought to a place of the king, so that it can be shared up there. For it is not proper that the sharing of the gifts and the reading of the letter from His Excellency should take place in the house of a free commoner." Upon that, Pieterella, Ama Tanu, Ama Koko, and three *temukungs* [chiefs] shared it up in the house of Floris Jansz (without our knowledge and not giving anything to us). Until now, we do not know anything of the content of the letter sent by His Excellency. [...]

During the time when [the old regent] Ama Susang lived, or when he lay sick, we never heard him saying concerning Pieterella, that after his demise, this Pieterella would become the governess of the child [the heir to the Kupang throne]. However, after his death, she brought the child and his goods into her house, without our knowledge; and the child, too, had truly no idea about her dispositions. We held many meetings and requested the child to be taken to us from Floris Jansz' house. But Pieterella never allowed it to come to us. She said: "You may search for him in the neighbourhood until you find him; I do not know where he is." And truly we saw him daily, being considered a castaway, playing with a *perahu*²⁷ in the river, or fishing, or going around with a spit in the wilderness. The child was lucky not to suffer an accident.

The deceased prince Barend owed Floris Jansz 70 rijksdaalders, for what reason we do not know. All the grandees and *temukungs* were told that they must pay Floris Jansz for this debt; and as long as this money had not been paid, he went around in all our *negeri* and houses, treating us very rudely, so that we eventually paid the debt. We are also not inclined to let the child stay in his house anymore, since he cannot claim any pretension to raise the child.²⁸

Pieterella died sometime after 1714, deeply unpopular among her Kupangese peers.²⁹ It makes no sense, of course, to assert that her behaviour was "typical"

²⁶ In brief, the political situation was as follows. The VOC built Fort Concordia in 1653 on the land of the King of Kupang, their close ally. Most of Timor remained under Portuguese influence. Later on, a number of Timorese groups fled from the Portuguese sphere of authority and settled in the vicinity of Kupang: Sonba'i, Amabi, Amfo'an, and Taebenu. Within each of these principedoms a "king" would hold ritual power, while the day-to-day governance would be carried out by an executive regent. For a detailed account of the five VOC allies on Timor, see Hägerdal 2010: 199-220.

²⁷ A boat, especially a smaller craft. In this case it is presumably a canoe.

²⁸ VOC 1623 (1699), pp. 67-70.

²⁹ She is mentioned in disapproving terms by the female ruler of Sonba'i, in a letter from 1714 (VOC 1841, p. 4).

of local conduct, and there are also examples of highly functional marriages between aristocratic ladies and Company employees. But the circumstances of her Dutch marriages also reveal how the contact zones might work. In the first quoted case, we have an “Indonesian” acting in a “Western” context, violating the moral order that the Company authorities wish to maintain. In the second case, on the contrary, she and her new European husband break into the political affairs of the small Kupangese kingdom. They violate the norms of the redistribution of wealth among the elite, try to control the infant heir, and act brutally to harvest perceived debts. In both cases, we have an interesting case of female agency; Pieterella uses her position within the hybrid or contact zone to assert herself in the “Indonesian” as well as the “Western” cultural worlds. All in all, the hybrid voices of the colonial archive destabilize the traditionally imagined boundaries between colonizers and colonized, and indicate how cultural encounters created a plethora of groups and layers in the border zone between the two – not always in a positive direction.

ECONOMIC STRUCTURES AND SHIPPING

We have already had occasion to mention the detailed economic data that has been preserved in the documents. Cargos and ship movements between the various Dutch trading posts are recorded in a way that appears to be very conscientious, even if the corruption and abuses that soared during the eighteenth century may put a question mark to some of the numbers. It is important that not only European and Eurasian activities are noted down. In some sectors and geographical areas, other groups than the Dutch dominated. The VOC tried to establish monopolies of major commodities, and dispatched fast-sailing cruising ships to ensure that monopolies were respected. But they also realized from the start that it was impossible to handle trading and shipping on their own.

The main archipelago traders were Chinese people who emigrated from Ming or Qing Dynasty China to make a living (Reid 1996: 40-46; Wang 1996). They received passes from the Company authorities in order to handle certain goods on certain routes. The material relating to Timor clearly shows the crucial role of the Chinese. The records of financial transactions include lists of ships that arrived in the West Timorese main port Kupang, noting down who is the captain and owner, what they brought with them, when they left port, and for what destination. A list of 1714 mentions, for example, five ships, four of which were Chinese.³⁰ A rich material of letters on trade issues has been preserved. Some letters were written or dictated by Chinese or domestic traders. They were usually in Malay, which was the general language of contact in the Archipelago even on the easternmost islands. The Malay texts were then translated into Dutch by professional interpreters who seem to have done a fairly good job.³¹ In other cases, the version of the

³⁰ VOC 1853 (1714), pp. 13-14.

³¹ It is occasionally possible to compare the Malay and Dutch versions, when the former has survived; see in first place the letters in LOr 2238 and LOr 2242. In a few cases studied by

Asian trader is heard through interviews or interrogations by VOC officials. Although the traders were playing at the Dutch terms and thus included in the range of VOC activities, the material nonetheless provides important indicators of the perspectives and opportunities of non-Europeans. This is the more significant since, as mentioned above, the correspondence of Chinese traders has otherwise rarely been preserved for this period. An unexpected “discovery” of a part of Australia’s north-western coast was described in an interview with a Chinese by the *opperhoofd* Daniel van der Burgh. The passage may be worth quoting since it illustrates the audacious yet smooth way in which a Chinese merchant may carry out a trying enterprise.

A certain Chinese trader and his ship were dispatched by the undersigned in the month of March in order to explore if one may sail over the large sand bank beyond Rote, with the aim to obtain a load of turtle-shell which used to be found there in abundance. From the cape of Amanuban, around the middle of the south coast of Timor, the Chinese set the course to the south. After having forcefully sailed before the wind for five days, and drifted for two days, he sighted a low-lying but in the distance hilly land. When they came closer they saw people standing on the shore, who asked them to come ashore by signs. When the crew went ashore they saw that the men as well as the women were naked and unarmed, being people of an unusual stature and robustness. They were quite black and their hair was curly though rather long. The Chinese offered them *parangs*³² and knives, but they did not accept them although the others showed them how to use it. Also, no textiles apart from a handkerchief from the [Coromandel] coast, which they tore in many parts and shared up between them. They rewarded the gift with two dried fishes. With signs, they bade our people to accompany them to the inland. However, the Chinese wished to continue the journey. He sailed away after two days. For a further three days he went along the shore, which was usually found to be good with a slowly rising bottom. And although the Chinese considered it a large island, we do not doubt that it is the mainland of the southern land.³³

Although the *opperhoofd* claims to be the actual initiator of the expedition, this brief account gives us an idea of the agency of the Chinese traders who ventured to sail distant waters where the Dutch normally did not go – although the Company had already gained certain knowledge of the northern coastline of Australia by this time. The geographical scope is indicated by the ship being stocked with textiles from India and cutlasses probably made in Java or Sulawesi. In the European text, the Chinese crew becomes a potential bringer of higher material culture, although in a soft way, which is underlined by the peaceful and rather genial nature of the encounter between the Chinese and Aborigines.

The colonial archive does not merely tell us about successes. It is indeed a fascinating blend of dreams, hopes, triumphs, disappointments, and failures.

the present writer, the VOC scribe has omitted minor obscure passages.

³² Cutlasses.

³³ VOC 2780 (1751), p. 101.

Interesting for our purposes is the material that goes against the order which the VOC tried to establish. Through alliances with the insular microstates to the north of Timor, the Company hoped to create a sense of order. A letter written by the employees on Solor, from November 1679, suggests the problems of surveillance:

About the *kacang* [grams]³⁴ of the princess [of Solor], Milord will not acquire a grain, since she, in the presence of us and the steersman Bommer, has complained about the *sengaji* Dasi³⁵ who let his people purchase all the *kacang* in order to sell to the Bandanese lieutenant, whereby he received a large quantity of goods.

Furthermore, the princess complains about her subordinate *sengajis* [princes] that they do not care about her, but that each does what he wants without asking her. Thus, on the 27th of the last month [October], the *sengaji* Bakar of Terong and *sengaji* Kraeng of Lamakera, the first with three and the other with two *perahu berkelahi* [fighting vessels], quietly went to the land of Kawela³⁶ with the intention to ravage the *negeri* Lerrogan which is subject to the Portuguese. There, the *sengaji* Bakar with his son Bulang and one of his grandees called Helingamma fell, and they had 20 to 23 wounded. *Sengaji* Kraeng and part of his people were also wounded. If his people had not assisted him loyally, he would have gone the same way as *sengaji* Bakar. We apprehended on 30 October that *sengaji* Bakar had fallen.

On 23 November we and steersman Bommer were at Larantuka on the orders of Your Excellency, asking the [Portuguese] *capitãomor* António Hornay³⁷ about the burning and plundering of the *negeri* Adonara.³⁸ He replied that he had heard that this was done by his rebellious settlers. In the night they set the *negeri* on fire with a bundle of straw. But he could not punish them since the settlers from Serbite stole and abducted his slaves on a daily basis, amounting to more than 1,000. And the settlers were meaner than forest dogs or wild monkeys, so that he could not catch them or get them into his hands.

But concerning the trade on Timor's outer [south] coast, he kept it for himself, just like the Noble Company kept Ambon and Banda; "However, if the [Dutch] commander gives me a pass to go and trade there, I will do the same for him",

³⁴ In modern usage, peanuts, beans or peas. In seventeenth-century eastern Indonesia probably alluding to green grams (VOC-Glossarium 2000: 60).

³⁵ A *sengaji* was a ruling prince in the Solor Islands. At this time the female ruler of Lohayong, on the north coast of Solor, held the paramount position among the five princedoms on the islands that were allied to the VOC. The *sengaji* of Lamakera, a whaling village at the eastern end of Solor, was her rival in terms of power. The other three princedoms were situated on Adonara island: Lamahala, Terong and Adonara (proper). Still other parts of the Solor Islands, including western Solor and sections of Adonara and Lembata, were affiliated to the Portuguese in Larantuka on East Flores (Hägerdal 2012: 173-180, 233-242).

³⁶ There are several places in the area called Kawela, including two on Lembata and one on Adonara.

³⁷ The leader of the local Portuguese mestizo group on Flores and Timor held the title *capitãomor*, captain major. He resided in Larantuka for the most of the time, making occasional tours to Timor.

³⁸ Referring to the main settlement of the princedom Adonara, on the north coast of the island of the same name.

[etcetera]. He used pointed words but friendly gestures. We furthermore asked if the *capitãomor* would not like to write about this, whereupon he replied that the steersman could leave an oral report [to the Dutch headman in Kupang].

Milord, on the 26th of this month October, the *sengaji* of Alor called Salasa arrived here with three *perahu*. We and steersman Bommer asked him in the house of the princess what goods the Maluku captain had taken from them. Sengaji Salasa replied that he delivered two *bahar* of beeswax to him, and those of Malua delivered 2 ½ picol beeswax with yet a *perahu* that was worth five-six slaves. But of the other *negeri*, namely Belagar, Pandai and Barnusa, the *sengaji* could not tell since they were at war with each other. The value that the Maluku captain had paid in the name of the Noble Company was as follows:

1 salempuri³⁹

2 sail cloths

5 Butonese cloths

And the *sengaji* said that the Maluku captain had left Alor three months ago.⁴⁰

The various subject matters treated in the letter indicate the problems the Company had to keep their economic and political system intact. The female ruler of Solor, on whom the Dutch tried to prop up their authority, did not have the prerogative of a reigning monarch in the European sense and was not obeyed by the subordinate chiefs. The same was true for some of the subjects of the local Portuguese leader, who was otherwise known as an authoritarian type.⁴¹ Local leaders started little wars on their own initiative, and sold their products to the “wrong” representatives of the Company. A merchant from Maluku pressed the locals to deliver lots of beeswax for small pay, stoutly pretending to do so in the name of the Company. The entire letter has a despondent ring to it – a catalogue of bad news that the few Dutchmen in the Solor Islands were unable to remedy.

Alternative economic structures appear even more pointedly in an entry in the *Daghregister* of 1737. The *opperhoofd* expresses his worries about the presence of 60 Makassarese ships on the coast of East Timor, and provides us with the following notice:

They use to travel to the Papuan Islands and also those around Banda every third or fourth year in order to find and boil *trepang* and obtain *massoi*. Not so long ago, the Bandanese submitted several complaints about the Makassarese to the government. However, the Makassarese of old used this [pursuit] for their profit. They now arrive in such force in order not to be attacked and captured by the cruising *pancalangs*⁴² and sloops of the Company in these eastern regions. In the time of the eastern winds they stay below the east coast of Timor where

³⁹ Textile from Serampore in India (VOC-Glossarium 2000: 100).

⁴⁰ VOC 1358, sub 26, November 1679.

⁴¹ An extensive discussion about the Black Portuguese leader António Hornay (circa 1630-1693) can be found in Hägerdal 2012: 140-197.

⁴² A *pancalang* (scouting one) is a large Malay-type sailing craft with one or two masts. Since it was a fast vessel, it was often used against pirates and smugglers (VOC-Glossarium 2000: 86).

sometimes *trepang* may be found, staying until they are ready to deal with the further region. However, how much [i.e., little] these Makassarese should be trusted, and how they commit great robberies of humans on various islands under the pretext of looking for *trepang*, is seen from time to time, and therefore carefulness is a good thing.⁴³

The purpose of the passage is to complain about the Makassarese, whose seaborne enterprises were harmful to VOC business activities. Nevertheless, we obtain a broad cultural and historical vignette of what was going on beyond the control of the Company. The Makassarese were known as good ship-builders who explored the wide waters of eastern Indonesia (and even northern Australia) where the Dutch were rarely seen, carrying on extensive activities without Company passes. In the passage, we are told that strong fleets visited the islands to the east with intervals. *Trepang*, or sea cucumber, is considered a delicacy in China and fetches good prices. The Makassarese obtained the *trepang* by diving in the shallow waters where they thrived; they prepared them carefully and sold them to ships bound for China. The bark of the *massoi* tree was likewise a valuable trade object due to its fragrant qualities of its oil and was used for pharmacist purposes.⁴⁴ The robberies of humans that are spoken of are nothing but slave hunting. There was a large demand for slave labour in Southeast Asian coastal cities, and the Dutch themselves had nothing in principle or practice against the slavery institution, quite to the contrary.⁴⁵ Since there were hardly any strong domestic states in eastern Indonesia, and society was politically fragmented, it was comparatively easy for a well-equipped fleet to capture manpower and then sell it on the western or central parts of Indonesia. The passage also reveals the VOC's inability to keep its trading capitalist and political systems intact. A large accumulation of ships could roam the waters without much risk of detection. Economic networks beyond European control are revealed through the frustrated remarks of a colonial official.

CONCLUSION

The categories discussed above highlight the resources that the colonial archive, critically assessed, offers for the study of the early modern period. The documents were drafted for a utilitarian purpose, preserved because they contained information that was useful to the trading capitalist and political organization that the VOC stood for. But its scope and detail allows us in certain cases to hear the voice of the subaltern, albeit in a low-key fashion. It goes without saying that dominated overseas groups were the cultural other for the European ruling strata of the early-modern period – but so were the lower classes of the highly stratified European society at the time. Class/estate

⁴³ VOC 8330, *Daghregister*, sub 24, June 1737.

⁴⁴ VOC-Glossarium 2000, pp. 65-66. The fragrant qualities of the oil subsequently made it useful for various European products including soap.

⁴⁵ Knaap 1995; for slavery in an eastern Indonesian context, see also Hägerdal 2010.

may have been just as important as ethnicity when it came to representations. Racist ideas were current in various forms during the early-modern era, but a thoroughly ideological racism only emerged after the transformation of the old European society, more or less after the French Revolution (Fasseur 1994: 32-33; Nussbaum 2009: 142-145).

What is the significance of VOC and similar European materials for the main currents of global history, to which we have referred? My opinion is that they are excellent resources to qualify, and at times criticize, modernization and world system theories. A close reading of the material from eastern Indonesia points at the still limited resources for early colonial exploitation. While some areas fared badly under the heavy-handed VOC dispositions, it is also apparent in the documents how other groups, such as the Chinese and various Indonesian peoples, engaged in commercial activities on a larger scale and with greater agility than the Europeans. Some of these groups were able to collaborate with the colonial power, as the Chinese usually did, but others operated outside the VOC auspices to the great indignation of Company employees. Despite the overall political influence that the VOC acquired in the Southeast Asian archipelago during the seventeenth century, there were alternative groups who were quite simply more relevant to local communities, until well into the late colonial period.

The colonial archive, however, also brings to life the meetings and encounters that occurred between European and non-European groups. It demonstrates how European influence changed the living conditions of Asian groups, but also that the opposite was true: how an extended trading capitalist organization was rapidly adapted to the conditions and became an Asian power apparatus as well as a European one. It can also nourish the ongoing debate about the way the early colonial apparatus appeared in Asian coastal regions: was it just as much a matter of different networks that intervened with each other, as a system of economic exploitation?

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