

# Sailing in dangerous waters: piracy and raiding in historical context

Theme >  
Eastern Indonesia

Piracy and raiding in Southeast Asian waters has a long pedigree that time has done little to diminish. As late as 1994, memories of nineteenth century Tobelo raiders were used to frighten children into obedience in parts of central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Tobelo, portrayed as merciless predators, were active in the nineteenth century, were one of many groups for whom piracy was an important source of livelihood in eastern Indonesia's 'geography of coasts'. This article examines how such groups functioned as part of the political system in eastern Indonesia and how this came to a temporary end with the maritime expansion of the colonial state in the nineteenth century.

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## State-condoned raiding

Wandering groups of armed men were a common sight in the eastern archipelago in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were active not only during periods of regional warfare but in relatively peaceful times. Raiders were one part of a mobile population engaged in a combination of raiding, political pursuits, trading and fishing. Such groups were often associated with larger regional centres and were especially active in the peripheries where they often formed alliances with local elites and settled for longer periods.

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The two main political centres in eastern Indonesia were Ternate and Bone. Their spheres of influence were based on alliances with tributaries and on ill-defined flows of traders, aristocrats, fisher-folk and raiders. In contrast to the Dutch East India Company's (VOC) ideal of a centrally managed system of political relations where peace-keeping and mediation were instrumental, this tributary system resembled a series of separately negotiated non-aggression pacts between a centre and its tributaries. Centres were unable to control the movements and actions of their subjects but were able to mount military campaigns to revenge affronts or discipline wayward tributaries, campaigns in which both raiding groups and tributaries participated.

Bone and Ternate differed in some important respects. Diasporas in both cases were instrumental to the expansion of their spheres. In the case of Ternate, aristocrats settled in eastern Sulawesi to represent the Sultan and to keep a close eye on local elites. In the case of Bone, the expansive diaspora of aristocrats and traders was not as closely linked to the main centre of power, and was accompanied by a dissemination of the Bugis language and customs beyond the area of Bone's political influence.

For regional centres, it was essential to 'manage' affairs in ways that ensured potential violence would not be directed

against themselves, and that tributaries and raiding chiefs did not form alliances against the centre. For this reason, it was necessary to direct violence outwards towards the periphery, by allowing tributaries and aristocrats with their armed followers to conduct their activities away from the centre. Eastern Sulawesi with its three small maritime polities of Buton, Tobungku and Banggai was situated between Bone and Ternate's spheres; it consequently felt the effects of raiding/trading groups from both centres and had to look to them for protection - with fluctuating success.

In 1743, a treaty was negotiated by Ternate to resolve a conflict between the two tributaries Banggai and Tobungku, so both could participate in a punitive expedition led by Ternate.

The final clause of this treaty, stipulating that the Sultan receive a share of any booty acquired, is clear evidence that he condoned such activities. Raiding was not a sporadic, random activity but was closely related to the formation and functioning of regional spheres of influence and polities.

## Taming pirates

With the advent and expansion of the colonial state in the early nineteenth century, raiding was branded a criminal activity to be eliminated. The Dutch had to deal not only with piracy but with a political and economic system which included raiders and other mobile populations. Raiding was a way of levying tribute, increasing wealth and waging war that occurred on a large scale in the eastern archipelago during the last decades of the eighteenth century, at the time of Prince Nuku's war against the VOC.

In the 1820s and 1830s, several unsuccessful attempts were made to transform semi-nomadic raiding groups into sedentary fisher-folk and peasants through negotiation and the provision of land. The largest was that of Nuku's successor, Raja Jailolo, who was given land on the north coast of Seram. Here thousands of his subjects who had taken up a roaming existence during the Nuku War were to settle on a permanent basis. Lack of food and suspicion of continuing contact with active raiding chiefs brought the experiment to an abrupt end.

Two similar projects on a smaller scale were undertaken by the colonial government to resettle and pacify the Tobelo around Flores, also descendants of Nuku's followers. The first was carried out by Daeng Magassing, an aristocrat from Bonerate, a small island to the south of Sulawesi with longstanding connections to maritime raiders. He used his 'local' knowledge and status to form alliances with raiding groups and resettle them on Tanah Jampea. This tiny island to the south of Selayar had become depopulated due to frequent attacks. Here the resettled raiders were to engage in agriculture and live in peace under the protection of the Dutch. In 1830, fifteen Tobelo chiefs signed a peace treaty, reinforced by oath, with Daeng Magassing. Only three years later, however, it was evident to the colonial authorities that the project had failed and that Daeng Magassing himself was engaging in acts of piracy with supplies the Dutch had subsidised.

A second attempt to 'tame' the Tobelo was undertaken by a Dutch adventurer, Jan Nicholas Vosmaer, who opened a trading post on Sulawesi's east coast in the 1830s. He was supported by the colonial government and enjoyed the patronage of a powerful chief, Tuanna-

I-Dondang, closely linked to Magindanao raiders in northern and eastern Sulawesi. Vosmaer's trading post was to serve both as a base to draw Tobelo away from piracy, and to attract indigenous traders hitherto beyond Dutch control. Vosmaer negotiated a treaty with many of the same Tobelo chiefs as had Daeng Magassing, but his untimely death prevented this venture from succeeding. Had Vosmaer lived, it is doubtful whether he would have been able to 'tame' the pirates, since his own safety depended on his alliance with a chief who was involved in raiding networks. These early attempts to transform and settle raiders were destined to fail so long as the Dutch had only limited control over the seas and lacked the forces needed to prevent alliances between raiders and political elites.

## Anti-piracy campaigns

The presence of 'pirates' was one of the main justifications cited for the maritime expansion of the colonial state that occurred in eastern Indonesia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The resettlement plans for raiders were abandoned and naval campaigns were launched against the Magindanao and Balangingi in particular, whose large seasonal fleets struck terror in coastal populations across maritime Southeast Asia. But the Dutch did not rely on the use of force alone, since it proved ineffective in

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areas such as eastern Sulawesi where raiding was, like its polities, small-scale and diffuse. Also, the links between local aristocracies and raiders persisted.

An unexpected side-effect of the anti-piracy campaigns in the Flores area was an increase in small-scale raiding in eastern Sulawesi. The destroyed settlements belonged to the Tobelo who provided the Magindanao with shelter and supplies on their long journeys. Now that the Magindanao were a source of danger rather than economic patronage, several Tobelo chiefs left the area in search of new overlords who could protect them against Dutch warships. Eastern Sulawesi, with its Ternaten tributaries provided such a safe-haven. These waters remained unpatrolled; the indirect link with the Dutch through Ternate provided, at least in theory, immunity against Dutch warships.

In 1846, three Tobelo chiefs and their followers arrived in Banggai where they were welcomed as allies to the Ternaten aristocrats in the midst of armed conflict with the local ruler. After the Ternatens emerged victorious, the

Tobelo chiefs raided nearby coastlines, sharing the booty with their new patrons. The pattern of alliance between political elites and raiders thus continued in a new context as a result of Dutch anti-piracy campaigns in the eastern archipelago.

The Dutch realised that suppressing small scale raiding entailed working through their existing alliances. In 1853, the Sultan of Ternate issued a decree calling all Tobelo to return to Ternate within a year or else be treated as pirates by the Dutch. More Tobelo started to drift to eastern Sulawesi to report to Ternaten representatives, but were intercepted by Dutch warships and returned to Ternate directly. In the 1870s and 1880s, anti-piracy campaigns in eastern Sulawesi were no longer conducted with European ships but with Ternaten *korak-korak* that could enter shallow coves and creeks and had the necessary flexibility to chase small craft. Local rulers and aristocrats were heavily fined if caught maintaining connections with Tobelo or other raiders. The last Tobelo raiders were transported back to Ternate from eastern Sulawesi in 1880. A direct result was the repopulation of the coasts, the revival of local trade and a boom in copra production. The waters had finally been secured for the colonial state.

Incidences of piracy abated after the 1880s. Interestingly, the next resurgence of piracy occurred in the 1950s as part of a regional rebellion against the central government that controlled most of southern Sulawesi. Many hilltop

fortresses used in defence against the Tobelo were once again re-occupied, while island populations in particular became vulnerable to tribute demands by rebel forces. The Indonesian state, just as the colonial state had done half a century earlier, established control anew over the seas through an adroit use of force and negotiation with rebel leaders. Given this history, it may be appropriate to question whether there is any connection between the present resurgence of piracy and the weakening of the centralised state with the fall of Suharto and, more to the point, if the reassertion of historical patterns requires the state to abandon its over-reliance on strong-arm tactics to negotiate anew with regional power holders? ◀

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Tobelo and Magindanao routes, bases and settlements affecting the east coast of Sulawesi in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century