

This research is based on original VOC records housed at the National Dutch Archives in The Hague. Till now there has been a regrettable lack of solid data on the Dutch trade in slaves from around the Bay of Bengal, particularly Arakan. Wil O. Dijk's research, based on original VOC records housed at the National Dutch Archives in The Hague serves as a first step towards opening a window onto what has been in effect a 'protracted history of silence' surrounding this sordid trade.

An end to the history of silence?

The Dutch trade in Asian slaves: Arakan and the Bay of Bengal, 1621 – 1665

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Early in the 17th century, the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) arrived on India's Coromandel Coast in search of cotton piece-goods to barter for spices from the Spice Islands, which were in such great demand in Europe. The Company planted a number of trading settlements along India's Coromandel Coast: in 1605 at Masulipatnam, in 1608 at Tegeneapatnam, and in 1610 at Pulicat, which they turned into the Company Coromandel headquarters. The Dutch had already undertaken their first trading voyage to Arakan in 1605 and in 1610 they established a trading post at Mrauk-U. With intermittent closures it remained operational till 1665.

The first official data on the VOC's Bay of Bengal slave trade dates from 1621. This was also the year in which the Dutch, under Governor-general Jan Pietersz Coen, murdered practically the entire population of the Banda Islands in order to gain access to the nutmeg and mace trees that grew there so profusely and which the islanders were not prepared to simply hand over to foreign intruders. Having summarily dispatched the local population, the Dutch now needed to bring in slaves to take over the nutmeg cultivation. In June of that year, the first batch of 150 boys and girls were shipped from Coromandel to Batavia in the *Schoonhoven*.

It did not take the Dutch long to discover that large numbers of slaves were to be had in Arakan, mainly brought there by Portuguese mercenaries and freebooters operating slave raids to Bengal from Chittagong and nearby Dianga. Dutch shipments from Arakan started in 1624, when 88 slaves were shipped in the *Jager* and the *Muijs* to Batavia by way of Masulipatnam. The final shipment from this region took place in November 1665, when 200 slaves (180 women and 20 children) were sent from Arakan to Masulipatnam in the *Cattenburgh*, the *Mees*, and the *Inckhoorn*. This coincided with the closure of the Company's Arakan factory after the Dutch gave up hope of ever procuring slaves from there again.

There is an intriguing story regarding this entire sordid trade, of course, but solid statistics were sadly lacking. Now, however, newly built statistics tell an intriguing story of their own. Although the overall trade in slaves from the Bay of Bengal area was in reality far greater than the data presented here would indicate, I am only able to offer statistics on the Company's share, since that is what the VOC archives have brought to light. Moreover, I have refrained from generalities such as 'thousands of slaves were captured', or 'hundreds of slaves were purchased'. What is presented here is derived from concrete, verifiable data based solely on slaves that were actually transported on VOC ships within the Bay of Bengal and from there to Batavia. To avoid possible charges that batches of slaves might have been counted more than once, each shipment includes the name of the ship and its departure and/or arrival date. A total of 131 VOC ships (from the *Arent* to the *Zuijlen*) were involved in this trade, which lasted from 1621 to 1665.

Total number of Bay of Bengal slaves:

The 'master list' of slaves transported in VOC ships within and from the Bay of Bengal from June 1621 to November 1665 shows a total of 26,885 men, women, and children of which 1379 died, just over 5 percent. When broken down into decades we arrive at the following table:

Bay of Bengal slaves per decade:	
1620s -	9072
1630s -	2094
1640s -	9091
1650s -	2509
1660s -	4119
Total	26,885 slaves

Bay of Bengal slaves: percentages of men, women, boys, girls, and infants.

Very few shipping lists give details on gender and ages (children reached their majority at the age of 12). The lists that do provide such details show the following percentages:

Men	63.0%
Women	30.6%
Boys	2.7%
Girls	2.6%
Infants	1.0%
Total	99.9%

Arakan slaves

Arakan slaves were in fact slaves captured in Bengal (raided by the Portuguese and the Arakanese) and brought to Arakan. There they were purchased by VOC factors and subsequently shipped to Batavia. Arakan statistics, distilled from the overall Bay of Bengal data, show that from 1624 to 1665 a total of 11,556 men, women, and children were involved. Broken down into decades:

Arakan slaves per decade:

1620s -	2005
1630s -	1566
1640s -	3555
1650s -	2385
1660s -	2045
Total	11,556 slaves

Arakan slaves: percentages of men, women, boys, girls, and infants:

Men	66.0%
Women	28.5%
Boys	2.0%
Girls	2.5%
Infants	1.0%
Total	100%

General prices of slaves

The price of slaves fluctuated greatly per region and from year to year, depending on the availability of slaves, which in turn was closely related to the local food supply. With a bountiful harvest resulting in generous supplies of cheap rice, the availability of slaves diminished. Conversely, in times of famine with sky rocketing rice prices, slaves were plentiful and cheap. For the slave trader it was vital to find the right balance. It made little sense to purchase cheap slaves only to have to feed him with very expensive rice. And during a famine, it was not advisable to wait too long with the procurement of slaves, in the hope that prices might drop even lower, since the longer the people starved, the weaker they became and the smaller the chance they would recover and survive the journey.

In order to present a clear and balanced overview, all prices are quoted in Dutch guilders (*f*), converted from a variety of local currencies.

Price of Pipli (Bengal) slaves:

Men	<i>f</i> 17 to <i>f</i> 20 each
Women	<i>f</i> 14 to <i>f</i> 25 each
Boys	<i>f</i> 17 to <i>f</i> 19 each
Girls	<i>f</i> 14 to <i>f</i> 17 each

In Bengal a poll tax of just over a guilder was levied on each slave.

Price of Pulicat slaves:

In 'expensive' years, the price of a slave in Pulicat ranged from 27 to 40 guilders, while in 'cheap' years it could drop to as little as 4 guilders. Most of these slaves had been brought from Bengal or from places further south such as Carcal and Tegeneapatnam. In Pulicat, slaves were occasionally categorised as Muslim, Hindu or even 'caffer'.

Price of Arakan slaves from Dianga:

Men	<i>f</i> 16 to <i>f</i> 18 each
Women	<i>f</i> 9 to <i>f</i> 16 each
Boys	<i>f</i> 12 to <i>f</i> 16 each
Girls	<i>f</i> 9 to <i>f</i> 14 each

The slaves the Portuguese sold to the Dutch were comparatively expensive and the age groups more precisely defined:

Men	20-36 years	<i>f</i> 29 each
Women	12-25 years	<i>f</i> 20 "
Boys	8-19 years	<i>f</i> 18 "
Girls	7-12 years	<i>f</i> 14 "
Children	3-6 years	<i>f</i> 6 "
Infants	<3 years - *	

* Infants cost a pittance. However, the Dutch insisted on healthy robust toddlers since, as they were at pains to point out, it took an infant some years to acquire the physique and stamina required to perform any sort of labour.

If the Portuguese had to transport slaves from Dianga to Arakan, they added about three and a half guilders (*f*3:12:00) to the purchasing price of each.

The cost of clothing a slave

Slaves were commonly clothed in dungarees (*dongrys*), a simple coarse cotton cloth, much like a loincloth. Sometimes it was dyed red with a black stripe running through the middle. Dungarees were also used for sails of proas and for packing material, especially for wrapping textiles. The price of a piece of dungarees fluctuated from as little as *f*0:15:00 to as much as *f*1:10:00.

Guinea cloth (*guinees lywaet* or *negros kleden*) for slaves is also mentioned often. This was a coarse, cheap striped or chequered cotton cloth woven from yarn dyed in bright colours and cost around *f*0:11:00 per piece. It was often exported to the Gulf of Guinea, which gave it its name.

The cost of feeding a slave

Each slave had a daily ration of 1.13 lbs of rice costing on average about *f*0:00:07 per pound. The total daily cost of feeding a single slave (rice, dried fish, sesame oil, etc.) was about *f* 0:05:05. Shipping lists regularly mention singly or sesame seed oil which the slaves consumed and also put on their bodies. It cost from *f*0:09:00 to *f*0:16:00 per litre.

These then are the sad statistics of the VOC's sordid trade in 'human flesh'. It is not an uplifting story but finally needs to be told. As mentioned, there is an intriguing story about all aspects of the Dutch 17th century trade in slaves from Arakan and the Bay of Bengal, but that will have to wait a bit longer since this is still very much 'work in progress'.

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