Ambon 1623/Banda 1621

Dutch and British colonial history revisited

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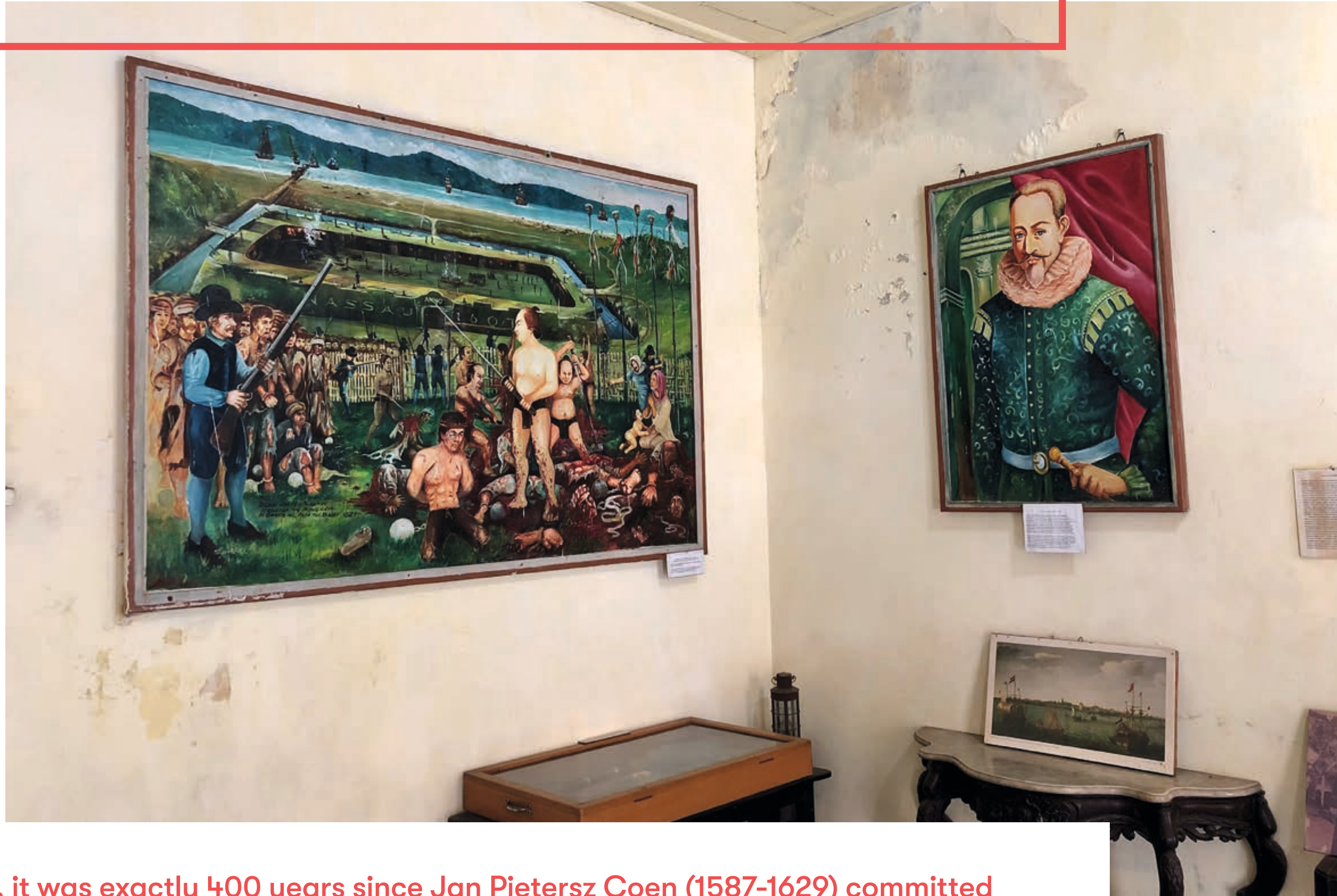

Fig1: Two paintings on display at the Rumah Budaya Banda Neira museum, including one of Jan Pietersz Coen (right) and one depicting a scene of colonial violence (left). Photograph by the author.

On 8 May 2021, it was exactly 400 years since Jan Pietersz Coen (1587-1629) committed a massacre on the Banda Islands in the Moluccas (Maluku Province), the only place where nutmeg grew at the time. In anticipation of this commemoration, the 1893 statue of Coen in the Dutch city of Hoorn, which dominates the town's central square (*Roode Steen*/Red Stone), was again the focus of much anger. In the nationalist-tinged late 19th century, people were looking for heroes from the past. The Aceh War had been raging hopelessly for years. The so-called "glory days" of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) were more than a century behind. As an exemplary figure who spearheaded Dutch entry into Asia, Coen was equated with his robust and determined gaze East. He was deemed to have paved the way for Dutch successes in the Spice Trade, and thus seemed ideally suited to fortify the continued belief in the Dutch colonial enterprise. Even when Coen's statue was placed on its pedestal, many criticized the glorification of a man with such a blood-soaked legacy. During a large protest near Hoorn's train station in June 2020, speakers drew attention to persistent discrimination and racism in the Netherlands in a broader sense. Recent events in the United States – in particular, the increasingly prominent Black Lives Matter movement and the public's reaction to the murder of George Floyd – were a source of inspiration.

The actions surrounding the image of JP Coen occur at a moment in which the Dutch colonial past and its disastrously brutal activities in the slave trade are increasingly under review. The Rijksmuseum recently opened a large-scale exhibition on slavery. A well-curated book that pays specific attention to the many slave-related objects in its collection has also been published.[2] Related publications often draw a direct line between this violent past and the institutionalized presence of racism in Dutch society. These sorts of historical reckonings can count on strong opposing sentiments: the same day as the aforementioned protest in Hoorn, a pro-Coen counter-demonstration was also held. Clad in Dutch flags with the VOC logo embroidered on them, a limited group of sympathizers gathered nearby, claiming an emotional bond with 'their Coen' and other Dutch colonial figures of an imaginary glorious past. The way in which Dutch colonial history is appropriated and employed in such protests is characterized by rather broad generalizations. Among the pro-Coen protesters, it seemed mainly about the idea that the Netherlands was built on the acquired riches of the Dutch Golden Age. Heroes of yesteryear (e.g., Michiel de Ruijter (1607-1676), Piet Hein (1577-1629), JP Coen) were not to be dismissed as violent conquerors and slave traders. They should continue to be respected for the riches they brought home, the riches that continue to make the Netherlands one of the wealthiest nations on earth. On the other hand, 'four hundred years of Dutch imperialist rule' – as Gloria Wekker calls it in *White Innocence* (2016: 2) – cannot simply be erased. The consequences of such imperialism are still felt.

A number of recently published books offer new perspectives on Dutch colonialism and how it developed. Two of these studies – Adam Clulow's *Amboina, 1623*[3] and Alison Games' *Inventing the English Massacre*[4] – are about a relatively small event that would have far-reaching consequences for the Dutch Republic's relationship with England: the execution of 21 British East India Company (BEIC) employees and Japanese mercenaries by Dutch authorities on Ambon in 1623. Both books do more than describe the macabre events that unfolded on Ambon; they also try to explain how this massacre, as the English referred to the incident, should be viewed from both a regional and European perspective. Together with two other books – the first dealing with the Anglo-Dutch conflicts of 1652-1689, the second with how the different companies related to one another – a complex, nuanced picture emerges of the early colonial period. Such works encourage reflection about the violent and uncompromising way colonial stakeholders sought to carve out a piece of the spice trade for themselves. Indirectly, however, these studies also caution against an over-emphasis on the might and supremacy of early colonizers.

Ambon, 1623

Two years after JP Coen 'punished' the Banda islanders, a tragedy took place on Ambon that received far more attention in Europe. In 1623, Dutch authorities arrested a Japanese mercenary in service with the VOC for asking 'suspicious' questions about the local fort's defense capabilities. When he could not explain why this was of interest to him, he was tortured at length. Ultimately, he admitted to being part of a plan organized by English traders to conquer the fort in question. Two weeks later, 21 men were executed on suspicion of involvement in the plot. Ten of these were traders employed by the British East India Company. When news reached London a year later, the 'massacre' not only became a symbol of Dutch aggressive, rude, and cruel behaviour, but also one explanation for why the English eventually began focusing on India as an alternative to present-day Indonesia.

Previous studies of the so-called 'Amboyna Massacre' mainly focus on the underlying cause—that is, the truth (or falsity) of the alleged conspiracy. In this, perspectives were rather divided along national lines. Dutch authors insisted that the English were scheming to take over the fort. In contrast, English authors were invariably convinced that, even if there *had* been a plot against the Dutch, the Amboyna Massacre was nevertheless a miscarriage of justice. Both publications rather pleasingly avoid this question altogether. Clulow's *Amboina, 1623* emphasizes the Asian regional context in which the Dutch operated at the time. This produces a history that counteracts narratives of the VOC reigning supreme from the start. Following in the footsteps of pathbreaking studies like J.C. Sharman's *Empires of the Weak*,[5] Clulow shows how the Dutch actually began in a much weaker position than previously assumed. Fear and paranoia prevailed, fueled by a lack of regional knowledge, ambiguity about previous agreements, and the imminent presence of potential competitors (such as the English). One could, therefore, interpret the torture and subsequent executions of 1623 as the result of a collective Dutch panic attack (though this should by no means be read as an excuse or explanation for other atrocities committed locally).

Japanese mercenaries

In the first part of his book, Adam Clulow returns to the period of JP Coen to show how the history of the Banda Islands and Ambon are intertwined. After discussing why the spices of the so-called Spice Islands were so sought-after in Europe, Clulow explores how the Dutch started to interfere in the trade of nutmeg.

A variety of treaties were supposed to guarantee the VOC's monopoly position, but whether the local elite actually understood what was in those treaties is another matter. This signals an issue of communication and translation that we will more often encounter in Clulow's masterful account. The Dutch often had a rather limited overview of their situation. The example of Japanese mercenaries employed by the VOC further underscores this point.

How did twelve Japanese mercenaries end up working for the VOC on Ambon? According to Clulow, these Japanese mercenaries were part of an experiment to make convenient use of surplus manpower in Asia. After the bloody Sengkoku period (1467-1568), there were plenty of unemployed men in southern Japan. Stationed in Hirado, the VOC saw an opportunity to replenish its short supply of men defending their enterprises. Japanese mercenaries, for example, played a central role in the beheadings of the *orangkaya* on Banda Neira. Upon entering Neira's only museum today, one is immediately greeted by a horrific depiction of these men decapitating locals, all under the stern gaze of VOC staff.

It is here that *Amboina, 1623* reads like a sequel to Clulow's earlier *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*,[6] in which he presents a detailed analysis of that Dutch period in Hirado (1609-1641). The book leaves an indelible impression of the way the Japanese themselves determined the contours of the relationship and how limited the influence of the VOC was in this. Particularly striking are the descriptions of the complex 'pilgrimages' that the VOC undertook annually from the deep south all the way to Edo (present-day Tokyo) from 1633 onwards. The journey of about two thousand kilometers lasted three months and resulted in a mere two- to three-week stay in the capital. The shogun himself would never reveal himself to the men, instead remaining invisible behind a screen. After endless waiting in the palace, the VOC representative was ordered to pay respect to the shogun by prostrating himself on the floor. Countless gifts were exchanged, which made the trip home considerably lighter but for the thirty kimonos that they usually received in exchange. The only way of knowing how well the gifts were appreciated by the court was by where the representative was asked to prostrate himself the following year. When he was once asked to do so outside the palace itself, it was clear there that there was work to be done.

The analysis that Clulow offers in *The Company and the Shogun* underlines how relatively weak the VOC's position was in Japan. The situation on Ambon reverberates with this. The presence of the English on Ambon was a painful reminder of their precarious position in the region. The playing field in which they found themselves was characterised by a jumble of regional alliances and conflicts that brought uncertainty as well as the potential for violence. For the Dutch, the English undermined the VOC and took advantage of the hard work the Dutch had put in to secure their local position. Prior to the massacre, the Dutch appeared to perceive the English as profiteers. After 1623, the reporting in England would mainly focus on the inhumane behaviour of the Dutch. It is here that Alison Games' *Inventing the English Massacre* offers a wealth of additional insight.

A massacre invented

Already before 1621, the relationship between the Dutch Republic and England had known ups and downs. The conflict between the Habsburg ('Spanish') Empire and the Republic played a prominent role in this. During the Twelve Years' Truce (1609-1621) there were significant concerns about a possible Anglo-Spanish alliance. This contrasted with the perspective of the English, who relied firmly on the assumption that the Republic owed England gratitude for the military support it had received under Elizabeth I (1533-1603). This was compounded by a certain disdain toward this new European state sans royal family. As Games argues, the positions of both countries were incompatible at heart. The VOC was of the opinion that the English held no claim to a stake in the spice trade; the English were adamant that the Dutch owed them gratitude.

Inventing the English Massacre particularly excels in its analysis of the countless pamphlets and other texts produced on the English side about the conflict. The effects of such representations could color the relationship between the two countries for centuries to come. In particular, the use of the term 'massacre' has Games' special attention. In the 17th century, the term mainly referred to a violent death in which the deceased was attributed martyrdom. By drawing attention to the torture endured by the English men at the hands of the Dutch (and the miscarriage of justice that characterized the trial), it was possible to apply the 'massacre' label to the happenings as a whole. Strikingly, the British East India Company seemed well aware that the torture and executions did not actually have the character of a massacre like the Jamestown/Indian Massacre of 1622, in which a quarter (347) of the inhabitants perished at the hands of a local tribe. Nor was it comparable to the carnage associated with religious wars. Labeling the events as the 'Amboyna Massacre' not only made the men in question martyrs, but also illustrated how much the English and Dutch differed from each other as a people. While recent books such as Shashi Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire*,[7] William Dalrymple's *The Anarchy*,[8] and Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland*[9] have all fiercely argued against the idea of a civilized English colonial power (and one from which former colonies actually benefited), Clulow and Games show how complicated and entangled the relationships truly were. Alison Games' elegant approach to the concept of massacre, and how it enabled the British to paint an extremely negative picture of the Dutch, helps develop a better understanding of the often sketchy representation of Dutch colonial history itself. For one, it is still common to encounter the argument that, under Coen's reign, the Banda Islands were not just depopulated, but that their fifteen thousand inhabitants were in fact murdered. While there is no doubt that thousands of Bandanese died as a result of the violence meted out by the Dutch, some escaped to the eastern Kei Islands, at least temporarily. This does not detract from Coen's extremely bloody legacy, but rather underlines the normative way colonial history is employed to make a point. As a result, Coen becomes someone who paved the way for a 400-year colonial empire, which has never quite existed as such.

The negative image the English had of the Dutch would persist for centuries, not least because of the regularly updated pamphlets which were circulated.

How to outsource an empire

Here, the two other recent publications provide a necessary framework to understand this early (Dutch) colonial period. In *Outsourcing Empire*,[10] co-authors Andrew Phillips and J.C. Sharman present an intriguing overview of the various companies that embarked on journeys of conquest and colonization. In particular, they address the underlying institutional logic of these companies in order to gain a deeper perspective of how they functioned in practice. Clearly, the VOC contrasts with other companies in terms of its approach. The co-authors argue that the company states, as they refer to them, could arise out of a context characterized by an amalgamation of sovereignty relationships in which the power of rulers was often shared with a whole plethora of actors, ranging from churches to city administrations. This power was not territorially bound or separated on the basis of public and private domains as would become de rigueur later. Where Clulow and Games are concerned with the relations between the VOC/Republic and BEIC/England, *Outsourcing Empire* enables the reader to reflect on a much broader context. Through the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), the Portuguese and Spaniards had tried to divide the world among themselves hundreds of years earlier. Where the Spaniards would largely ignore Asia, Portugal with its base in Goa played a dominant role in the spice trade in the Indian ocean for a long time. Before the Dutch and English set foot on Moluccan shores, the Portuguese had preceded them. Such a *longue durée* view of history makes it possible to draw connections between, on the one hand, shifts in (territorial) power in Europe itself, and, on the other, the way various companies operated under the mandates with which they had been bestowed.

Reframing 'empire'

The negative image the English had of the Dutch would persist for centuries, not least because of the regularly updated pamphlets which were circulated. Gradually, the martyrdom and horrors that the English endured on Ambon cemented the idea of an extremely brutal VOC that contrasted markedly with the far more civilized dealings of the BEIC. The three Anglo-Dutch wars, fought by the two countries between 1652-1674, reinforced this image. The collection *War, Trade and the State*,[11] edited by David Ormrod and Gijs Rommelse, stretches its analysis till 1689, the year in which the Glorious Revolution took place. At the invitation of a number of Protestant leaders, that year William III of Orange-Nassau and his wife Maria Stuart were appointed king-couple of England, Ireland, and Scotland.

War, Trade and the State is especially interesting for anyone who wants to better understand how the first three Anglo-Dutch wars shaped relationships to come. The first half of the book discusses how these wars took place in the North Sea. The various chapters deal with the European context in which the conflict unfolded, the role that the English royal family played in this, the way politics developed in the Republic, and how the two armies related to each other. The focus then turns to the Atlantic Ocean and Asia, with specific contributions detailing the way the wars impacted the Caribbean Islands, North America, and the Bandas. Although the 'massacre' of 1623 took place a few decades before the first Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654), it is nevertheless important to understand these three wars in terms of a historical continuum which contributed to the way the world would take shape in geopolitical terms. The famous Treaty of Breda (1667) shows what was at stake territorially after the Dutch had won the second war. The possession of the small nutmeg-rich Banda island of Run was used to regulate the status of a whole series of territories, including New Amsterdam (which became New York) and Suriname.

Conclusion

Of the Bandas, the islet of Run is still the hardest to reach. Although there continue to be nutmeg plantations on the island, they no longer play any role of significance in trade of the spice. The Bandas long ago lost their status as the only place where nutmeg grew. Run plays a central role in Giles Milton's bestseller *Nathaniel's Nutmeg*,[12] which narrates the story of the heroic Nathaniel Goldthorpe (1585-1620) fighting a lonely battle against the Dutch to retake the island. Both Clulow's and Games' analyses of the Amboyna Massacre show how much this negative stereotyping of the Dutch continues to speak to the imagination. Such stereotypes imagine an enlightened English colonizer who, with its honesty and humility, sharply contrasts with the ill-mannered and violent Dutch. Reading Milton's account, one cannot but hope for the Bandanese that they will soon enjoy the many benefits of their benign British overlords.

Both *Outsourcing Empire* and *War, Trade and the State* underline the importance of analyzing the events that took place on Ambon in 1623 within a broader framework of (European) geopolitical change. Together with Adam Clulow and Alison Games's detailed and insightful studies, they also function as an important caution against all too easy simplifications about the colonial period itself. When we speak of four hundred years of imperialist rule, like Gloria Wekker does, what is it that we mean? While her seminal book *White Innocence* underlines the length and impact of Dutch colonialism, it fails to capture the complexity of this enterprise itself and runs the risk of contributing to inaccurate ideas about Dutch colonial 'might.' Now that movements such as those defending the continued presence of the statue of JP Coen in Hoorn increasingly draw upon a discourse of national pride associated with Dutch colonialism, it is important that we continue to be critical about the assumptions this builds on.

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Fig2: The statue of Jan Pietersz Coen in Hoorn. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons licence courtesy of a WikiCommons user.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Tristan Mostert for important input on this article. An earlier version of this article appeared in *De Nederlandse Boekengids*, issue 3 (June-July), 2021.
2. Rijksmuseum. 2021. Slavery. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum/Atlas Contact.
3. Clulow, A. 2019. *Amboina, 1623: Fear Conspiracy on the Edge of Empire*. New York: Columbia University Press.
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