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The pearl rush in Aru, 1916

A case study in writing commodity history in Southeast Asia

ADRIAN VICKERS

ABSTRACT¹

While the long history of “commerce” in Southeast Asia is well studied, less examination has been made of the histories of capitalism, particularly in terms of the encounters that took place around commodities. This article provides a translation and analysis of a description of Dobo on Aru in 1911. At the time it was a “Klondike”, on what Julia Martínez and I have termed “the pearl frontier”. The Aru islands were the site for an Australian-led pearl shell consortium that ran from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1940s, which brought in a large number of Japanese divers and other Asian and Pacific workers. Examining relations around the pearling industry provides a number of general methodological points of entry into the ways that commodity relations created encounters with modernity.

KEYWORDS

Commodity history; Aru; pearl shell; materialism; new materialism.

¹ Additional research on this paper was carried out while I was a Visiting Fellow, Magdalene College, and the Joint Centre for Economics and History, The University of Cambridge, and also as a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

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In 1916 the Dutch civil servant A.G.H. van Sluys published a report of his time as *Controleur* or District Officer/Inspector to the Islands of Aru. Aru is an outpost in the east of present-day Indonesia, very close to Indonesian Papua. It has been the subject of various anthropological enquiries, of the kind that see it is a “remote place”, and therefore something of a social laboratory. However, Aru has been a centre for international traffic since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Its role on the frontier of commodity production calls into question some of the ways that commodity histories have been studied in Southeast Asia and invites reflection on how we might write the histories of commodities. In particular, this source deals with tensions in the relationship between capitalism and colonialism.

COMMODITY HISTORY VERSUS HISTORY OF COMMODIFICATION

Despite a long history of studies of trade in Southeast Asia, to date there has been very little reflection on the theory and method of studying what a commodity is, how it is produced, and how it is circulated and consumed, and especially not what is entailed in the human relations around production and consumption. The exceptions, mainly writings in anthropology discussed below, are proof of the rule that Southeast Asian Studies is dominated by empirical research, largely because there are so many unexplored aspects of the region still to describe.

The work of Anthony Reid has long been recognized as a major contribution to the understanding of Southeast Asian history and its role in world history. His two-volume study on Southeast Asia in what he calls “the Age of commerce” (Reid 1988, 1993) posits trade as an engine of change in the period of 1450-1680. Other writers, notably Geoff Wade (2009), have raised the question of whether commerce is equally as important in determining earlier periods of Southeast Asian history.

Reid has singularly defined the Southeast Asian region as a region, and has put the trade in commodities at the centre of that definition, following the mode of Braudel. Critics of Reid have pointed out that the Braudelian project is imperfectly realized in Reid’s work. While Reid’s two-volume study adds depth for Southeast Asia to the picture of the Indian Ocean provided by Chaudhuri (1985), it does not embrace Braudel’s models of the operations of capital and labour, let alone wider idea of “civilization and capitalism”. Rather, Craig Reynolds (1990) and Heather Sutherland (2005) see Reid as “projecting a Western liberal imagination onto Southeast Asia”, that is, he reinterprets Braudel’s model in terms of a paradigm of trade rather than production (Sutherland 2005: 49).

Two things are missing from the picture provided by Reid, the first is the relationship between trade, production, and consumption; the second is the longer history of capitalism in Southeast Asia. He writes histories of commodities, but not histories of commodity relations. Trade and capitalism are obviously inter-connected, and it is unfair to criticize someone for not writing about capitalism in a pre-capitalist age. Nevertheless, Jeyamalar

Kathirithamby-Wells (1990) has shown that the question of what are the pre-conditions for the development of capitalism is a crucial one for explaining the Western presence in Southeast Asia (which dates to 1511). Understanding what did not occur in Southeast Asia helps in understanding the particular forms of colonialism that developed in the region from the eighteenth century onwards.

Given the lack of over-arching histories of capitalism in the region, it is not surprising that we do not have much in the way of early histories of what Marshall Sahlins has called “cosmologies of capitalism” (1994). Such histories would explain the ways that gift and exchange systems mesh with perceptions of the modern world, as mediated by the goods that enable engagement with the modern. It has been left largely to anthropologists to take up this story, and in particular a number of detailed studies of Eastern Indonesia have provided insights into how people see themselves within new patternings of the world, a kind of ontology of modernity (Forth 1990; Erb 1991; Hoskins 1993; Mills 1995).

For the nineteenth century, there have been very good histories of the sugar industry and rubber plantations that have focussed on the use of indentured and other kinds of “unfree” labour (Elson 1984; Stoler 1985; Breman 1990). Current work by Tania Murray-Li on the palm oil industry will provide a twenty-first century version of this work. Of these studies of plantation systems, Knight (2013) has looked at the wider industry context, including the sponsorship of sugar by the colonial state.

Many studies often assume a pre-given modern subjectivity. Stoler’s later work on colonial subjectivities makes her the exception, although her plantation study was caught in a paradigm of “resistance”. Mary Beth Mills’s work on women clothing workers in Thailand provides an ethnographic model for understanding producers as simultaneously consumers (1995, 1999).

Economic history is well-studied, but Heather Sutherland has pioneered the expansion of this field into wider considerations of commodity history. Heather Sutherland (1995) provides one way into the problem of how to write histories: using a site, Makassar as trade emporium, and looking at the social relations created around that site. A book edited by Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang (2011) takes the insights further, particularly by drawing on work on commodification related to the idea of “the social life of things”, to use Arjun Appadurai’s phrase (1986). Sutherland’s chapter on tortoiseshell adds an element of labour that is notably absent from many studies. She also makes good use of the commodity chains approach developed by geographers to examine production, circulation and consumption. As one reviewer observes, however, too much focus on things can diminish the examination of the relationships between people and things (MacGregor 2012).

Boomgaard, Kooiman, and Schulte Nordholt (2008), in a volume dedicated to Sutherland, extend her insights by taking in the ways that commodities acquire different values, or prestige attached to goods, particular cultural forms that have arisen from trade relations, and definitions of descent groups

and family. These issues of labour, social structure, and value are at the heart of an enquiry into what commodity relations tell us about particular forms of capitalism. The document that I translate provides a picture of how these three elements of commodity relations – labour, social structure and value – operated at one site, Aru, in the early twentieth century. Together they made up a mode of production that was distinctive to that time and place, but which invites comparison with other modes.

ARU AS RESEARCH SITE

Aru is an island that has been the subject of anthropological studies. Patricia Spyer (2000) and Manon Osseweijer (2001) have looked at Aru in terms of its marine industries, as well as other aspects of Aruese society and culture. Spyer has studied indigenous beliefs around recent forms of pearl-diving (1997), and has provided a longer-term perspective on the role of trade and outside traders, including Chinese shop-keepers, on the island (2000). Neither author provides much information on the historical depth of Aru's engagement with forms of capitalism, and a very different picture of Aru emerges once the picture is deepened out.

Aru's late twentieth-century pearling was a revival of an earlier search for pearls and pearl shell. The region around Aru was known as a source of pearls at least in the seventeenth century, when the first Dutch sources make detailed reference to it. Aru is part of the complex of islands known as the Moluccas, Maluku, the fabled Spice Islands. The region itself has been the focus of international trade in cloves, mace, and nutmeg for millennia, and the European presence in the region began quite soon after the first Portuguese and Dutch ships reached there. By the middle of the nineteenth century, visitors such as Alfred Russel Wallace make it clear that Aru was home to all kinds of commerce, including in the bird-of-paradise feathers that interested him.

The trade of Arru is very considerable, and is all carried on with the port of Macassar and with the islands of Goram and Ceram. In the present year (1857) fourteen large prows, of from fifty to one hundred tons, and one brig arrived at Dobbo from Macassar. The owners are Bugis, Chinese, or Dutch, and the gross value of their cargoes about 20,000 *l*. Besides these, not much short of two hundred boats and prows of small size arrived from Ké, Goram, and Ceram, the whole value of whose cargoes may be 7000 *l*. or 8000 *l*. more. The Macassar traders bring rice, tobacco, gambir, muskets, brass cannon, gunpowder, gongs, swords, knives, choppers, axes, English and Chinese crockery, calicoes and cottons, Bugis cloth and arrack. The prows from Goram and Ceram bring principally sago-cakes, which are there manufactured for the supply of all the eastern part of the archipelago. The Ké islanders bring boats and prows for sale, wooden bowls, native earthen vessels, cocoa-nuts, and plantains. The produce obtained consists of pearl-shell, pearls, tripang, tortoiseshell, edible birds'-nests, and birds of paradise. Of these, the tripang, birds'-nests, and I believe most of the pearls and tortoiseshell find their way to China, the mother-of-pearl shell principally to Europe. (Alfred Russell Wallace, *Diary*, 1858).

Other naturalists such as the Italian d'Albertis and the Russian Macleay also passed through Aru, and it seems to have been regularly visited by traders in the region, including those from the British colonies of Australia. From the 1870s Australian ships were regularly part of the sea traffic in the area, and firms were importing workers from the eastern islands via the port of Kupang, largely for the pearling industry that had developed in the Torres Strait and Broome. Workers were recruited for two-year terms, although the pearling work was seasonal, and involved a long lay-off period.

What is notable in the description above is the connection between mobility, trade, and forms of capital accumulation. Some of this is what Marx called "primitive accumulation", and belonged to the world of gift exchange, but other aspects of what is occurring was part of the international capitalism in which Europe and the United States was coming to dominate.

In 1905 James Clark, in partnership with Reg Hockings and E.E. Monro, moved 115 pearling vessels from Thursday Island, in the Torres Strait to Dobo. Their consortium, the Celebes Trading Company or CTC, was joined by the Banda-based businessman Said Baadilla, whose parentage joined together powerful Arab and Chinese families in the east of what is now Indonesia (Mullins 2002). Although Clark himself retired from the industry in 1915, his nephew Victor remained active in Aru, linking it to pearling beds north of Darwin. The CTC had Australian managers in Aru until 1942.

What follows is a detailed description of Dobo published in the journal of the Netherlands East Indies Colonial Civil Service in 1916. It has been attributed by G. Telkamp to A.G.H. van Sluys.² Van Sluys had a long history in the Indies. His success in Ambon, which included his time in Aru, and Makassar led him to become the first civilian governor of Aceh in 1918 (Kloos 2014: 40), and he wrote the foreword for a book on economic governance of Aceh.³ A 1930 photograph of leading figures from the Colonial Administration (Binnenlands Bestuur) shows him as Chair of the pension body of Indigenous Civil Service (Indische Ambtenaren).⁴ As well as economics, he was very much concerned with violence in Aceh (Kloos 2014: 40-41). The period in Aru that he describes was likely 1911, as by 1915 he was already in Makassar.⁵

The description of Aru is worth considering in detail because it provides

² [Sluys, A.G.H. van]. 1916. "Dobo-ervaringen", *Koloniaal Tijdschrift* 5 (2): 299-317, see Clarence-Smith 1998.

³ Joh. Langhout with H.N.A. Swart and A.G.H. van Sluys, *Vijftig jaren economische staatkunde in Atjeh*. Geschreven naar aanleiding van de herinneringsdata 26 Maart 1873 - 26 Maart 1923. Den Haag: Van Stockum, 1923, also translated into English.

⁴ "Receptie in hotel-restaurant 'De Twee Steden' te Den Haag ter gelegenheid van het 25-jarig jubileum van de Vereniging van Ambtenaren bij het Binnenlands Bestuur in Nederlands-Indië", <<http://media-kitlv.nl/image/f08fef42-fe3a-4661-8db6-f675eaabcaa2>>, and "Gecombineerde vergadering van de Pensioenbond van Indische Ambtenaren, de Vereniging van Indische Verlofgangers en de Vereniging van Ambtenaren bij het Binnenlands Bestuur in Nederlands-Indië", <<http://media-kitlv.nl/image/602694da-e5d1-4313-b9e0-fbf7975ce87c>>; accessed on 23-10-2014.

⁵ See "Neerlandia 1915", at <https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_nee003191101_01/_nee003191101_01_0081.php>; accessed on 16-6-2019; *De Sumatra Post* 18 January 1915.

a very grounded picture of commodity relations in operation. The author is sensitive to both domestic and regional economics, but depicts them as social in their implications. Coming from a civil servant, the depiction is a state-focussed view of the problems of free trade, particularly the inability of the Dutch colonial system to manage other nationalities.

Dobo experiences⁶
(From a private manuscript)

Dear friend,

I would like to satisfy your request to acquaint you with something of my Dobo experiences. My memories of this period are by no means unmixed – mostly for monetary reasons –, yet they do not detract from my well-held belief that our post there is the most beautiful that I can think of in the Indies.

Dobo – capital of the Aru Islands section (*afdeeling*) – lies on a sand plate north of the swamp Island Wammer and separated from it by a deep boggy trench. The principal part of the sand bank is a triangle, the base of which lies next to the Island of Wammer and the tip sticks into the strait between Wokam and Wammer. In the Western Monsoon (season) the tip is shifted to the east by heavy waves, and it returns to its previous place in the Eastern Monsoon. The side of this triangle is around 200 metres long.

In previous years Dobo was the base for a “Postholder” [a type of official], and there were only a few traders established there. They provided for about 25,000 souls that made up the population of this group of islands through the exchange of pearl shells and pearls with the local population. With the government’s failure to provide leases for the right to fish for pearl shells, suddenly a substantial change took place. A tenant from Thursday Island, The Celebes Trading Company – in association with the Baadilla brothers from Banda, started to exploit the fishing beds on the east side of the Aru Islands (the so-called “Backwall” or Beach), using 150 luggers and eight schooners, and immediately attracted a few thousand adventurers from the most diverse lands of the earth to Dobo, which they considered like a Klondike [referring to the gold rush area in the United States]. The most fantastically coloured stories went around, so that Japanese, Manilamen [Filipinos], natives from all parts of the archipelago, and Europeans of various nationalities hastened to Dobo to gather – as they thought – treasure that lay scattered close to hand. Many went back disappointed, but most stayed and found work at relatively high wages with this tenant or in providing for its upkeep, through keeping shops or boarding houses, or through practising a craft.

In Dobo there were significant sources of income, no more so than the sale by divers of pearls they had stolen, which fetched them a lot of money. Such money was gambled for high stakes in the various boarding houses, and that attracted various people of dubious reputations to Dobo as well.

The town of Dobo, which had no products of its own, had no indigenous inhabitants, since it was only a trading establishment. In no way could it cater for the needs of its many inhabitants, and was outrageously expensive. A banana cost 5 cents; an egg – almost certainly rotten – 10 cents, or otherwise 15 cents; a small sour bread sandwich cost 25 cents; a chicken at least *f*1.50.-; a duck *f*2.50.-;

⁶ I have attempted to preserve something of the style and tone of the report, with apologies to anyone who may find the language of the time insulting or discriminatory.

washing at 25 cents per piece on average; and so on. And then you have to consider that these food items just listed are only on sale for a few days after the arrival of the coastal boat that comes once every four weeks from Ambon to Dobo.

In the meantime, the Government had replaced the postholder with a controller (district officer or inspector), and provided this civil servant with a clerk. By the way, the controller had access to the same staff as the former postholder, namely two orderlies who were recompensed at f10.- per month. The controller's office was part of the postholder's house, and the clerk was provided with a room in it. Further, an auxiliary post office was set up and provided with a room in the postholder's house. There was one other room in the postholder's house which was the "controller's dwelling", which was provided for this official. As the total population of Dobo increased, so dwellings made of raw Singapore planks with galvanized iron roofs spring up like mushrooms, the government took the building of a proper house "into consideration", but ... considered against it.

The above very short description may be enough to give you an image of the place to which I was assigned as base after I returned from my 12-years' service overseas leave.

My wife and my two children of 6 and 7 years old had to remain in Ambon so that my children could go to school, but also I did not really intend to bring my wife with me to Dobo, something that later proved to be the correct thing to do.

I should first bore you with a glimpse into my financial matters at this time. As a good husband, I had set aside in a bank in Batavia the proceeds of the auction of my things when I went on leave to Holland, so that I could use them to purchase new furnishings. After deducting living expenses in Batavia, and the purchase of a few simple bits of furniture – at a cost of f350.- – there remained for Dobo a sum of around f1000.-, with which we arrived at Ambon. After 12 years of married service my salary was f400.- which after deduction of 7% left a nett amount of f372.-. We decided to divide the f1,000.- between my wife and children and I, each taking f500.-. Since I was in the non-active-service salary category, my next month's salary would be 1/3 of f400.-, we decided to allow f250.-, which I left to my wife to pay for rent of a house and furniture in Ambon and expenses for 3 people. Thus I took f122.- per month and my official emoluments, namely:

1st, Free lodgings consisting of a room in the postholder's house. This had unmistakable advantages! With an income of f350.- including the rather high freight, I was amply provided for. My apologies, that I cannot tell you how the Resident's question from my briefing could be answered: "Does the domain have a pleasant interior?" Another stroke of luck was that I was free from paying income tax, because after deduction of the rooms in the house necessary for the exercise of my duties I was in the category of those suffering from minimal incomes, who were free of that tax.

2nd, I had the "right of declaration" of f6.-, a daily pole fee (if I may call it an emolument). There was almost no means of communicating over land, so travel had to be by water, but there were no guest facilities on the shore, or even opportunities to buy anything, and so we had to take our own drinking water and everything with us, which did not come to f6.-.

3rd, the income as acting notary. This part-time role came at my expense of a copper stamp of f12.50.-, I believe, and when I leave I will have to pay another fee of f2.- to make a declaration that I had not neglected any acts.

4th, an allowance in advance of f50.- per month as f^d (?) collector of tolls, but after I had been at Dobo for a year this went back to ... f2.50.-, which would not cover the cost of stationery. Luckily I had no other "emoluments", since I was already wholly ruined.

After this overview of my income you will understand that there could be no talk of paying a premium for a life insurance policy or scholarship for my children. That must also be stopped.

After organizing this and that at Ambon I left – accompanied by a married couple who were my servants, that for f30.- a month served me in my new place, to which I arrived after three days' journey.

The introduction to Dobo was disappointing, despite having few high expectations.

The room which would serve as my dwelling had already been vacated for a couple of months following my predecessor's departure for overseas. It was full of cockroaches and it took some considerable time before my place could be successfully cleared of these unsavoury creatures in order to make it habitable.

The house was inadequately set up on ground near the road, and had a well with undrinkable water – as was the case with all the water-wells in Dobo – and so rainwater had to be hauled by people who were lucky enough to have a tank in which they could collect and store it.

The postholder, who had taken over the administration of the region (*afdeeling*), had temporarily left with the boat that brought me to Dobo, and the clerk had also gone to Ambon to receive medical treatment, since there was no such treatment in Dobo.

A few hours after my arrival I remained without any assistance in solving the puzzle as to what work I should immediately perform.

Wandering around the place, – a walk that did not take much time – I only saw a few men and Japanese prostitutes on the street. There were almost no children and women. I quickly worked out that the rough morals that govern Dobo meant that this place was uninhabitable for a woman who set a price on her good name. The number of prostitutes who were registered anyway was around 120. Moreover, it was the case that almost all the natives were dressed in European style, wearing shoes and hats.

Taking a look into the numerous boarding-houses, I saw the Japanese crammed on either sides of the aisles of the wooden pavilion platforms, lying like spoons in a box. The streets were no less crowded than the Spui Street in The Hague – naturally with pedestrians. I will not make any more of that comparison.

Shoppers pressed into the various stores, of which there was a great number – and well organized for somewhere like Dobo – kicking up an outrageous din and behaving in the coarsest manner. If I had not seen it, I would not have believed that a native could be like this.

I came home from the small excitements of these provocative wanders to find my goods there, and it seemed that, except for various bits of furniture that were broken, something which is guaranteed with the KPM, an underpart of my bed had not been unloaded, meaning that for no less than 2 months I would have to sleep on the ground – since that's how long it would take for the boat with the missing piece on board to return. Keeping the cockroaches in mind, that was not a pleasant prospect.

My furniture unpacked and my house decorated, I was quickly ready, and my children would tell of that work, taking from shop and stall a high pile of fabulous prizes such as men dare to ask for. Amounts of 35 cents, 65 cents, f1.30.- etcetera are unknown in these shops. Anything that otherwise would cost 25 cents, 50 cents, 75 cents or a guilder going up by half-guilders in cost, was immediately charged only in *rijksdaalders* (f2.50.- coins). The usual currency was an English pound, estimated as f12.50.-, which the Australian pearl fishers put into circulation. In the stalls (*warongs*) the same principle applied on a smaller scale, so that betel leaves, areca nuts, little cakes etcetera were outrageously expensive.

My daily menu had to be adapted to these conditions, and was as put together as follows.

Breakfast: rice porridge (*boeboer*) with dried fish, dried meat (*deng-deng*) or salted egg, sometimes with syrup. Naturally you could not get a bread roll for 25 cents. The dried fish, dried meat and salted ducks' eggs I had sent from Ambon through the good offices of my wife.

Lunch: rice, sometimes with vegetable (*sajoer*) and fried fish, since the purchase of fish was occasionally within my means, and therewith little red fish with chilli (*lombok*) in vinegar, as well as dried fish etcetera.

Dinner: see lunch.

A few times my wife had sent chickens from Ambon, but some of these died while they were on board the ship, and what arrived on Dobo couldn't survive the hot beach. You don't have to ask what kind of place Dobo is, that even an Oriental chicken can't endure it.

In the meantime, one afternoon I was sitting in my office with my work around me when I was startled by the hellish screams of a riot. With my revolver in hand I went out to be told by my orderlies that the Butonese were going to fight with the Makasarese. Accompanied by both men, I attended to the place from which the unbearable shrieking came, and discovered that all the windows and doors of all the houses had been closed or were closing, so that the streets were lit only by occasional lamps that made up the public street lighting, and so it was very dark. The mob arrived armed with knives, krisses, and cleavers and there was nothing else to do but let the two opposing sides, each a few hundred men strong, go at each other. Under the circumstances, there could be no prospect of persuading or examining the grievances of such a jeering and raging mass. I immediately, and with the necessary audacity, found a position between the antagonists, telling them to go back to their dwellings. After a few threats the Butonese went back to their place on the east side of Dobo, while the Makasarese went back to the so-called Kampong Bugis on the South Coast.

Later that night the Makasarese tried to leave Kampong Bugis, but the adjutants quickly made me aware of this so that I could prevent it in time.

This fight ended well, but I later went through several that had less positive outcomes, including death and wounding. These were always brawls between different ethnic groups or nationalities, and usually the fights followed a feud between a few people, which all the relatives thought to resolve.

The most dangerous seemed to be the Japanese, who showed solidarity and were very closed, so that one could never find out what their motives were and what the background was of the affair.

It would take me too long to tell you of all these brawls and their consequences, and all my Dobo experiences. I believe that it will be clear from the above what a shambles Dobo was, and how the Government representatives had insufficient

resources at hand to assert themselves. It's better that I tell of a few assorted memories of my Dobo-period, that perhaps will not be un-entertaining, and will also serve to illustrate the situations reported above, as much my own as of the region.

As soon as I had arrived in Dobo (in May), I had noticed that there was as good as no stationery left. This was not surprising, because the inspector had indeed taken all decisions concerning everything to do with the postholders, and the postholders had the advantage of needing to write little or nothing (at the least, nothing) and so they only received a small indemnity for stationery. I would have had numerous proposals to present to the Resident on how to improve the position of Dobo, had I the requisite stationery. My pecuniary position was such that I could not (and did not wish to) provide this from my own resources, and so early on I asked the Resident for funds or to send writing materials. That request, which seemed to me to be a fair one in all respects, was not met. In the meantime I fulfilled my correspondence on the blank half of archival documents. This was communicated to the Resident so that he would know why my outgoing correspondence lacked in neatness, and at the same time to repeat my request for writing paper. I do not remember receiving any written response. When, after some time, the aforementioned half sheets began to run out, I explained that my following letters would contain little or nothing on paper, and look, I at once received a delivery.

One of the many proposals I made [to the Resident] was that the police be reinforced. So I had already made him aware of the great lack of security in the capital, the fights, the frequent murders, the heterogeneous nature of the population of Dobo etcetera, but nothing helped. We were then in grip of Austerity. I was lucky to be able to keep my two orderlies. But things worked out well. The Resident visited Dobo on one of his tours of duty, and after discussing service matters, sat on the verandah of my office while I was busy in the office. At once a fight started in the house opposite the office, and after an uproar and screaming in the house, two Manilamen armed with revolvers came out of the house and, right in front of the Resident, began to shoot at each other. On hearing the shots I came out of the office and with the orderly on duty (during the day there was one orderly, at night both were on watch) managed to bundle both Manilamen into the gaol.

The Resident went back to Ambon via Banda and sent me 10 native fusiliers from the garrison in Banda, and a native corporal and a European Sergeant *to reinforce the Police*.

The manner in which our customs support post benefitted from the confusion in the shops can be seen from the following. A young man had his left leg shattered in the '98 earthquake of Ambon, resulting in it being amputated above the knee. In Dobo he was jokingly known as "*Kaki Sariboe*" (Thousand Foot). Now, for such unfortunates it is highly disadvantageous to buy a pair of shoes, because they can only use one of the pair. Not so "*Kaki Sariboe*". He looked at each pair of shoes in the shops (*toko*) for two right shoes of the same size, paid for this pair and these lasted twice as long as a pair would last for the rest of us, which was only what he deserved.

I also put in a claim that there should be a medical man stationed at Dobo, and truly, approval was given to my suggestion so that a *doctor djawa* (indigenous doctor) from, I think, Wahaai was transferred to Dobo. The pleasure of having medical treatment in Dobo did not last long, because the Director of Education, Religion and Industry did not extend his approval, on the basis that Dobo was

not a natural base for Native Medicine. The doctor djawa thus departed. In the meantime Dobo gained a Japanese doctor, who did not have a licence to practise in the Netherlands Indies, but who practised as a doctor nevertheless. It is difficult for a layman to judge his ability as an internist, but as a surgeon the Japanese was certainly better than anyone else in Dobo at repairing victims of the many brawls. He came in very handy. Then an immediate order came from Ambon that a charge should be laid against the Japanese for unauthorised medical practice, and that he should step aside from practising as a doctor. My answer was that as soon as a qualified health practitioner was sent to Dobo, I would do so, and the Japanese would be forbidden to practice as a doctor. Only then would I take legal action to prosecute him. They authorities were silent thereafter.

The crews of the pearl-fishing fleet consisted of people of all nations, and this gave rise to all kinds of difficulties not only in terms of the levying of taxes, but also led to the greatest inequities in terms of legal prescriptions and division of tax payments according to race and religion. Everyone grumbled about these. Europeans paid income tax, Foreign Orientals paid business tax, natives paid poll tax. This seemed simple enough, but the difficulty lay in making out who Europeans, Foreign Orientals and Natives were. Manilamen, inhabitants of the Fiji-islands etcetera, as Christians, grouped themselves with Europeans, who since they had an income below f900.- were free of tax. Japanese are Europeans, that I knew⁷, but how could I tell if a Samoan was a Christian? And there was much more. Whereas now tax levies on the pearl fishing fleet were only exercised on certain companies, and there were many natives (who paid f5.- per annum poll tax) conducting themselves as sailors, I had the idea to put a business tax on the fleet without regard to nationality or religion, and thus, amongst other things, to remove the unfairness under which a Japanese or Christian Manilaman who works alongside a native as a sailor, was free of tax, while the native must pay f5.-. In a meeting with the managers of the pearl fishing fleet and a few leaders of the various ethnic groups, I presented a single tax rate for the different companies, and that was met with general acclaim. The registers were prepared following the muster, so that what was due in income tax for each schooner was calculated following the European estate. Each paid immediately, and so the tax declarations and registers could be sent to Ambon along with the total amount collected, which was ... three times as much as before.

I must admit that my action in this matter was very Russian⁸, since the situation in Dobo was Siberian and I was forced to act. The many foreigners, who had not the least notion of our caste divisions with regard to tax, complained about the great inequality of its assessment, and the number of defaulters was legion. The scheme that I had designed was perfectly satisfactory to them, any complaints would certainly have reached me given the situation in Dobo.

The assessment and collection of income tax was modified in the Dobo situation. All the houses were provided with numbers, from which the office made a list of the tax dutiable for differential rental values. (There were no horses or bicycles on Dobo). I went along the house numbers with blank invoices, taking two experts. We determined the rental value and calculated the amount of tax due, and then filled in the invoice and issued it, noting the necessities on a list

⁷ A reference to the international treaties giving Japanese equal status to Europeans, as referred to below.

⁸ Reference unclear, perhaps something to do with Czarist tax reforms.

so as to fill in the tax return. The declarations were made at the office and sent to Ambon with the amount collected.

In Dobo one had to repeatedly go outside one's powers as a magistrate to preserve good order. A brawl between two people of different nationalities required an immediate trial of the guilty part, because a delay would lead to terrible consequences. If Japanese or other Europeans and people so classed (*gelijkgestelden*) involved in the brawl – as was repeatedly the case – then the case belonged mostly to the jurisdiction of the Resident Judge at Ambon. However it usually took about six months before the case could be tried. In the meantime the parties had found their hangers-on and murder or manslaughter were the results of what had initially been a small dispute.

I remember a matter in which a Manilaman had beaten a small, short Japanese prostitute. The Manilaman was brought into the office by the orderly, and the Japanese thronged to the office to see and hear what would be decided. As representative of the Resident Judge in Ambon, I had already had to make a police statement against the Filipino for wilful damage to a different property, and the woman requested a civil case for damages be made in the same court. I was certain that it would be difficult to protect the culprit from the wrath of the Japanese on leaving the office. Inevitably an affray between the Japanese and the Manilamen would follow. I handled it differently. The manager of that section of the fleet to which the Manilaman belonged was asked to come to the office, and he was asked to pay a deposit, that would be monetarily binding on my decision. Then a committee was appointed to report on the damages and nominate an equitable amount for them. It was understood that the case had been meticulously researched and that compensation would be made to the woman and to a decent amount. The case was recorded in the Magistrate's Roll, and within half-an-hour everything was done and paid. Immediately after hearing the decision the Japanese took themselves back home. In another case, I sentenced a Japanese to a fine for wilful assault, and also to pay what, following research, was found to be the payment due the Japanese doctor for patching up the victim. Thus there were more. I told you the first case in detail, because the Resident was not wholly at ease with the outcome as I was at the time, given that I was familiar with such matters. It is amusing to analyse the position of the Resident in this. He could not officially approve of my action, but neither could he disapprove, so he held himself aloof.

The inspector is now the resident magistrate of Dobo.

I was then busy with a legal case which I will tell you something about, it was a Japanese manslaughter case which sheds light on the difficulties experienced in investigating such matters.

One afternoon around ± 3 it was reported to me that the Japanese Yamamoto had been murdered in a bordello. I went there with the European Sergeant, Reints, where I found that the body of the slain man had already been brought to his house. I left guarded the place where the crime had been committed, and went to examine the murder victim and also to ensure that the scene remained intact. I instructed the Sergeant to try to find out who the killer was and where they lived. After around 10 minutes back at the crime scene, Reints had already found out that the murder, the Japanese Moerakami, had fled over the roof-tops to his house on the east side of Dobo. Reints went there and found Moerakami's house closed, with door and windows barricaded. The killer armed himself with a Japanese sword and held out on the top floor of his house, refusing to surrender.

Moerakami only spoke Japanese. I took myself to the office to try to find someone who would be willing to act as interpreter in order to get the murderer to submit. As I was doing this, Moerakami came to the office with sword in hand, followed by Reints, ready to fire his revolver. I ordered Reints to disarm the murderer, which he did, and brought Moerakami to gaol, to remove him from the sight of the people who had come there. Reints told me that Moerakami had jumped from a roof on the top floor of his house onto the road, and had walked immediately to the office, so that he had previously had no opportunity to disarm him.

We then discussed preparation for an investigation and the making of an official autopsy report (with a doctor).

To do that I needed an interpreter, so it is as good to say that the Japanese don't understand either Malay or Pidgin English. Three days passed before I could work out with the Japanese notables (?) that a Japanese boarding house owner who spoke a bit of Pidgin English could act as interpreter. The witnesses were unwilling to say anything, probably out of fear of retaliation, and the questions which were asked of them were rendered into broken language and further posed to them in Japanese by the interpreter, so that they were imperfectly answered. It seemed to me that I could not hold a proper investigation, so I did what I could and sent the accused with the documents to the District Prosecutor in Makassar by first boat. I passed on to this authority the difficulties that I had encountered in the investigation. To illustrate my point, I added that no one was willing to supply Moerakami with sustenance, since they were afraid of revenge attacks. After a few days I succeeded in finding a European who would deliver food to the prison every day for f5.-, provided that it was brought from my house from the gaol. I gave the Official an undertaking to carry out a further investigation with an interpreter from Makassar in any case, as long as the Council of Justice guaranteed to send a member of the Council of Justice with him as legal commissioner.

Imagine my surprise when, about two months later, I received a letter from the District Prosecutor, explaining that the Council of Justice had instituted manslaughter proceedings against Moerkami, and that my investigation was so good that they had no hesitation in appointing me as delegated legal commissioner. So I was assigned to hear the witnesses, but now under oath. I have never had such a high position than when I had the feeling that I was acting in an official manner ... stuck in the middle.

Finally I will give you a report of a trip that I made to Ambon on a Dobo lugger.

As I have already written, in September, as the East Monsoon hits, the pearl fleet go to the back beach to start fishing, and this brings a time of relative peace to Dobo. The resident had granted me permission to come to Ambon, if I could reconcile it with my work. I therefore seized the opportunity at the end of October to come to Ambon on a sailing lugger, to see my wife and children. I could not afford the high cost of passage on a KPM boat trip, and so ended up on the *Petrel*, a 16-ton ketch, where I was one of two Europeans that would be shipped to Ambon, with 7 natives as crew. My companion was a 20-year-old clerk from the schooner *Wanetta* [which belonged to Reg Hockings], a young Australian, Broadbent, who knew less about seamanship than I did.

... [what follows is a long description of the perils of travelling to Ambon, via Kei].

There you have it, dear friend, a little about my time in Dobo.

I was well charged with the work in Dobo and I chose a region such as the

Aru-Islands above a frowzy, lazy region, where everything goes like clockwork and is numbed by the straightjacket of state regulatory determinations. It is proper that the Government nevertheless take great care that her civil servants are appropriately remunerated, so that they do not have material cares and are not forced to eat prison food, as was my situation on Dobo.

v.S.

STATE AND CAPITAL IN ARU

Here is frontier capitalism, although most other enterprises such as the plantations are also examples of a frontier mode of economic expansion, even a two-hundred-year-old industry like sugar (Knight 2013: 8). Van Sluys's description tells us only a little about the workings of the pearling industry, but a lot about its impact. The instant creation of a dysfunctional masculine society was an obvious problem for such a civil servant. His encounters with violence here in Dobo no doubt affected Van Sluys' later attempts to find the roots of violence in Aceh. His experiences with solving problems of tax revenue would probably have been a major factor in his promotion through the colonial service.

In this description, Dobo's status as part of a Dutch colony is very loose. The dominance there of English pounds as currency brought by the Australians is as much a symbolic factor as an economic one, like the way that United Nations administrations made the US dollar the (parallel) currencies of Cambodia and East Timor. It was only really in the early twentieth century that economies and currencies more clearly became identified with national boundaries. Even in the late nineteenth century, Spanish dollars, English pounds, and Dutch guilders were only loosely demarcated by the various territories of the region.

In some ways Dobo was a typical boomtown, as Wallace's description showed. From the account by Spyer (2000), the end of that boom in the mid-twentieth century returned it to being a quiet provincial town, with little memory of the "Klondike" days. It is hard to get an accurate estimate of what the total population of the town must have been. The CTC employed "over 1,000 coloured men" in 1906.⁹ Pearling luggers were usually had a crew of five to eight, with larger vessels of 12 to 20, so 125 vessels alongside 500 Japanese divers would have meant a population of thousands in the town, once shop keepers, the 80-120 registered *karayuki-san* and other sex workers were taken into account (Shimizu 1992). These must have made up the majority of what Dutch sources estimated to be the total population of the Aru islands, approximately 10,000.¹⁰ The issue of language must have been more confusing than that of currency, as Van Sluys indicates. As with currency, a form of English came to dominate.

⁹ "Northern Territory," *The Register*, 9 April 1906.

¹⁰ *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch-Indië* Vol. 1, p. 62, consulted at <<https://www.delpher.nl/nl/boeken/view?identificatie=MMKB02A%3A000031443%3A00080&query=bevolkingsstatistiek+Aroe&c>>; accessed on 14-8-2019.

Race relations were tricky at all levels. We do not know a lot about relations within the CTC consortium, and how the Clarks got on with the Baadilla brothers, especially Said "Tjong" Baadilla. Baadilla, a descendant of the Prophet and also of an important Chinese family, commanded respect. He travelled to the Netherlands twice, the second time to receive the order of Oranje-Nassau. The small number of Chinese shopkeepers in Dobo remained after the boom was over, so their Chinese networks were a constant in the fluctuating fortunes of the region. The Baadilla family connection would have been important for the movement of goods and for managing risk.

The Clarks, their managers, and Baadilla were involved in multiple economic activities. They all had plantations, either on the smaller Aru islands, or in other parts of Maluku. CTC founder James Clark's nephew Victor became the main player in the industry after 1915. He was known for a case at his plantation on Seram in which he was accused of abusing a Javanese coolie, and later for his exploitation of Indonesian workers in Darwin. On the other hand, Reg Hockings was reputed to have looked after his Indonesian workers and defended them from Australian authorities (Martínez and Vickers 2015). The pearlers understood the need for primary produce, and also economic diversity.

A contemporary Japanese description provides more detail on that community. By 1915 there were around 500 Japanese living in Aru, the majority of whom were the divers who could make between 500-600 Yen (Netherlands 400-800 Guilders) a season. Japanese sex workers were paid twice as much there as they received anywhere else in the eastern islands (*f*20.- for Japanese and Westerners, *f*15.- for Chinese and Natives). The lay-off season saw an increase in the number of working women. In 1913, there were ten inns/boarding houses, three general shops, two barbers, one bath-house, eight eating places, and nine brothels employing 22 women during the regular season, but as many as 120 at other times. According to this Japanese report on the island, there were also nine Japanese "concubines", two of mixed descent who were attached to Europeans - Clark being one of them (Shimitsu 1992). In this case it is likely that the Europeans followed the Southeast Asian tradition of taking temporary wives, that is wives for the duration of their time on the island. Van Sluys made no evaluation of the inflated price of sex in Dobo, despite the details he provides on other daily staples.

The Japanese men and women came largely from poor fishing villages, mainly in the present Mie and Wakayama Prefectures (Shimitsu 1992). They came both to Eastern Indonesia and Northern Australia, although in the former case Singapore was an important recruitment and staging post. Post's work shows that the Japanese presence was an important element in the Netherlands East Indies' integration into the world economy. It particularly facilitated a broader trade relationship by which northern Asia remained a key part of the colonial economy (Post 1991), a link that went back to the time of the Dutch United East India Company.

The Philipinos ("Manilamen") who came to Dobo may largely have come via Australia. Anna Shnukal has documented the rush in recruitment to the

pearl beds of Broome and the Torres Strait in the 1880s (2011). She observes that many of these Philippinos then followed the Clarks when they moved north.

That there were large populations from the major Sulawesi ethnic groups, the Mandarese and Makasarese, is not surprising, although it is interesting that the rival Bugis and Makassar people are conflated into a single group. Given Van Sluys's experiences in the Indies (more than twelve years), it is intriguing that he found the behaviour of these involved in the riots, and in day-to-day matters, to be so extreme. His comment comes soon after his observation that "the natives" wore shoes and hats, something that was deeply shocking to the colonial order of things (Hulsbosch 2014). While the peoples of South Sulawesi have a reputation for feuding, the kinds of brawls described here not very different from what occurred in the northern Australian pearl fields, where notable riots included a conflict between the Eastern Indonesians (Kupangers) and Japanese in 1920.

The indigenous Alorese seem to have avoided Dobo. They were, however, very much a part of the industry. The CTC's license allowed them to dive for pearl shell at a depth of more than five fathoms (or three nautical miles in some accounts). This required diving suits, and was a field in which the Japanese divers became specialized, with Philippinos and Indonesians mainly serving as "tenders" or hands who assisted the divers.

Diving of less than five fathoms was done by Aruese, who were suitless. The Australians bought pearl shell and pearls from the Aruese, usually paying them in kind, notably in alcohol (otherwise in tobacco, cloth and gunpowder). In response, the Dutch attempted in 1918 to regulate sales of *arak*, making it illegal for "natives". Alcohol was legal for Australians, while the Japanese formed a social club which enabled them to get around the prohibition (Post 1991: 233). Various other forms of exchange occurred around the Aruese pearl diving. Divers had to bring gifts, which included metonymic white plates, purchased at the shops, to give to their spirit wives under the sea, who would in turn give them shells and keep them safe (Spyer 1997). Money thus entered a very different economy. Money was also the point of entry into the capitalist system for Aruese and the other Indonesians involved, both in terms of wages and taxation.

"Race" was the basis of taxation and law in the Netherlands East Indies, as Van Sluys makes clear. Japanese had European status, and others could be granted European-"like" status (*gelijkgestelden*). That Van Sluys had to bend the rules of both in order to levy what he considered to be an "equitable" tax demonstrates the absence of real control that was meant to come from colonial policing and taxation. Just as the Dutch colonial authorities divided by "race" for their own purposes, so too the pearling masters could use such forms of difference to play off one ethnic group against another. Communal violence was in their interest if it kept wages down through ethnic competition.

Violence and ethnic division were built into the masculinity of the pearling workforce. Our civil servant, Van Sluys, says very little about the nature and conditions of work. It is not clear whether the indenture contracts that were

integral to moving people from Singapore and Kupang to Broome, Darwin, and TI were in place here. More likely, Aru's labour was "free", and reasonably highly priced. The work was seasonal, based on the monsoons, so it was at once easy, in the lay-off period, and very hard, during the pearl fishing season. During the latter season men could spend up to three months at sea. James Clark had invented a system by which mother ships could maintain the luggers without the need to go to land (Mullins 2002, 2005).

A sense of the advantages of work in the industry can be gained from a later description of the arrival of the Australian recruitment ships in Kupang. A Dutch newspaper report of 1938 describes how servants all tried to leave their employers and get on the ships, since a returning diver could bring back *f*4,000.- to *f*6,000.- for two years' work.¹¹ This in turn affected the value of labour in Kupang, just as costs were pushed up in Dobo, and the value of food and sex inflated. Indents to Broome were paid an advance, but had a portion of their wages put aside for savings. The same report observed that there was a surge in spending by the arrivals from Broome, who put *f*20,000.- in circulation over a two-week period. This was the kind of lavish spending that the Dutch, so used to fiscal restraint, could not understand. Besides spending the new cash quickly, returning workers into parts of Indonesia probably brought their new wealth into gift economies, using the incomes from pearling for the expensive cloths and animals that made up dowry and bride price in traditional forms of circulation. In Australia, relations with Aboriginal women involved exchange of goods.

Conditions in Dobo during the lay-off period should be considered as part of the conditions of labour, given that people could hardly have afforded to go back to Japan or the Philippines in this time. The "stealing" of pearls mentioned at the beginning of the chapter was one of the issues of the conditions of labour, since ownership of the harvest was open to various kinds of interpretation by owners as opposed to divers. Originally divers had claims to ownership of pearls as a side-benefit, but the Clarks were amongst the first masters to change that principle to their advantage.

A shell or pearl acquired value in its finding, from sea wives for instance, and the labour of the divers who risk sharks and other perils to get it. It further acquired the value as it enters into sets of social relations creating unusual forms of living, for example, in Aru and Broome. It then acquired other values as it enters the world market.

STATE AND CAPITAL

In the context of Aru, colonialism and capitalism did not sit easily together. Limiting violence and minimizing tax avoidance was as much as the colonial authorities could do. The pearling industry operated in a form of frontier capitalism, but it still shared features with other forms of capitalism. Others have discussed the close ties between those in charge of the colony of the

¹¹ "De Parelvischers van Broome. Goede Betaling maakt Dienst-neming Zeer Populair", *Nieuws van den Dag*, 5 February 1938.

Netherlands East Indies and the big capitalist concerns (Taselaar 1998). Knight (2013: 97) observes that there was a “revolving door between big business and colonial administration”. While Knight’s example was of a retired governor general sitting on the board of a major sugar combine, it was nothing to find sitting Ministers of the Colonies or other high colonial officials on the boards of the major companies which they were making decisions about. Usually the same figures sat on the boards of a series of conglomerates (Taselaar 1998: Appendix 2).

The Netherlands East Indies (NEI) had a number of large concerns that were foreign- or jointly-owned (for example, Billiton, Shell). NEI also was populated by managers who were not Dutch, particularly obvious in the rubber and tobacco plantations. The presence of foreign interests makes it difficult to talk about colonialism as simply an economic link between the colony and the metropolis. It needs to be seen as a series of networks.

The pearl frontier was also one that crossed government jurisdictions, which no doubt made it easier for the pearling masters to avoid taxes and tariffs. Kupang was linked to Broome, initially as a recruiting area. Thursday Island and Aru were closely linked, but Victor Clark was also able to make Broome his base in the early twentieth century, and then shift his interests to Darwin in the late 1920s. From Darwin he could keep operating in Aru, while other Australians, such as the Hilliard family, were based in Kupang and Flores, as well as having important interests in Makassar.

Past discussions of colonialism have either looked at the metropolis or at specific colonies, and occasionally relations between the two, but not at intercolonial relations to any great degree. Thus, the argument has been produced in imperial historiography that the metropolis was expending more than it gained (Lindblad 1989), that a colony was a “drain” that beneficent colonizers maintained (Havinden and Merideth 1993). The idea of “drain” of Dutch capital to Indies is rebuffed by the nature of investments, and in any case is based only on government deficits, not on the operations of private capital (Taselaar 1998: 49; Lindblad 1989). Even the “opportunity cost” view that capital was missing out by investing in the colonies requires a realistic assessment of where else capital could have been invested at the time (Dick et al. 2002). The answer seems largely to have been other colonies, not to mention China and Japan.

Knight, however, like Breman (1990) notes that there were many points of conflict between civil servants and industry, conflicts that usually resulted in suppression of adverse reports and demotion of troublesome field officers. One of the chief arguments between pro- and anti-business civil servants was over the proletarianisation of the population in Java (Knight 2013: 116). Civil servants professed a concern for “native welfare”, and instituted reports to examine it.

The relationship between capital and the state was one important factor governing the pearling industry and making decisions about it. Knight shows that it was the cartels and their political agents who made key decisions about

sugar, but they were subject to markets operating under different principles. For pearling, James Clark tried unsuccessfully to form a larger cartel to break control of the market in London, which was in turn dominated by a cartel of three firms (Mullins 1997, 2005). He did not succeed, and the buyers maintained control at that level of the market.

There were many variables. Pearl shell was so lucrative because of its many uses, notably as buttons. Buttons were part of a value chain, one based not just on price, but on variables such as the cultural prestige values of fashion. Changes in fashion, the use of larger or smaller buttons, or more or less, could mean a jump or fall in prices. Warfare affected sources of supply and the trade, and ultimately changes in technology changed the industry forever, as happened when artificial replacements (bakelite) could be produced on a large scale from the late 1920s onwards.

MATERIAL HISTORY

There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things *quâ* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

This Fetishism of commodities has its origin, as the foregoing analysis has already shown, in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them.

Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1

When we look at objects like pearl shell and pearls, these are not things in themselves. They have a history of their production, but at times the material objects are not all that there is. Their value has little relationship to the labour that produces them, but is the product of a complex set of relationships involving levels of exchange, including violence. The relationship between the stages of production and consumption is mysterious, and physical. This is strange flesh indeed.

While it is difficult to see how the labour theory of value operates in the scenario set out above, there is certainly a set of actions and reactions that add value to the pearl shell that was at the centre of this way of life. There were a lot of things in circulation in Dobo, not limited to forms of money, and values of exchanges were slippery.

Robert Foster's discussion of gifts, exchange and commodities in New Guinea (2008) draws together the literature on commodities in globalization, that on value chains, and the anthropological literature on gifts.¹² Foster criticizes the Geographers' notion of value chains as limited value to its monetary dimension. Foster focuses on "use value" as heterogeneous, something that fits the many uses on Aru of money and things, whether as gifts to undersea spirits or in exchange for temporary or permanent wives on land.

In summary, the insights of *Capital* lead to studies of value as theories of social relationships. The cultural values of objects are inseparable from relations defined around production, circulation and consumption. In this set of values, representation operates in terms of forms of fetishism.

Just as the studies of "the social life of things" seemed to be reaching a theoretical climax at the end of the 1990s, along came a new theoretical narrative in cultural studies, the "new materialisms". A book under that title edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost advances the study of "ontology, agency, and politics", as it claims in its subtitle (2011). The important insight of the new materialisms is that science has shown that the boundaries between the material and immaterial are not as great as we might think, namely that objects are not physical things, but loose processes of ever-smaller-in-definition particles. These terms of immateriality speak to the "spookier" aspects of commodities, that is how commodities' intangibility might be as essential to aspects of being as the taken-for-grantedness of their physical form.

Can the "new materialisms" do what Foucault, and Gayatri Spivak only partially succeeded in doing, reconcile phenomenology with hermeneutics, within a framework of political economy? The book partly succeeds in doing this, but by claiming too strongly to be "new", the authors have left behind the insights of old materialisms found in Marx's original writings. There is scant reference to commodity fetishism in the various contributions, or to how the old and new forms of Marxist materialism might be reconciled. The removal of Marxism from Materialism is suitable for the American academy, where liberalism underpins the structural imperatives of neo-liberalism

An alternative to the "new materialisms" is the continuation of studies of the commodity form, which is quite different from the studies of commodities as objects of trade. We might consider this unfashionable old materialism, since it relies on the study of the structure of industry, the doings of managers, the working conditions of those who labour in the industry, and larger pictures of the state. Study of the commodity form is not national history, it is the history of movements of goods, capital and people, and the ways that values are manipulated on each level of movement. As the example of Aru shows, national boundaries and colonial governments struggled to control the complexities of commodities. The new hierarchies of the "pearl frontier" challenged pre-existing categories.

At the same time this is a spiritual history, in that values, as fetishism, can actually be spiritual, or at least spectral forms can inhabit objects (Vickers 2012).

¹² See Appadurai 1996; Gereffi, Humphrey, and Sturgeon 2005.

In the case of Aru, local beliefs intersected with multi-ethnic emotional and embodied investments in pearl shell diving. The commodity form governed gender and sexual relations, showing that the definitions of the material sphere do need to be flexible.

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