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Between resistance and co-operation

Contact zones in the Aru Islands in the VOC period

HANS HÄGERDAL

ABSTRACT

The article is focused on early colonial interaction with the Aru Islands, geographically located in southern Maluku, at the easternmost end of the Indian Ocean world. The study examines how relationships were constructed in the course of the seventeenth century, how they were institutionalized and how this engendered forms of hybridity. Moreover, it discusses forms of resistance and avoidance in relation to the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Aru constitutes an interesting case as it is was one of the easternmost places in the world in which Islam and Christianity gained a (limited) foothold in the early-modern period, and it also marked the outer limit of Dutch authority. Aru differed from most geographical areas approached by the VOC because of its lack of any large-scale political structures and its relatively non-hierarchical society. The article discusses the forging of Dutch-Arunese political ties after the Banda massacre in 1621, as well as the role of Asian competitors of the VOC such as the Makassarese and Ceramese, the increasing adaptation to world religions in an Arunese setting, conditions in the European-indigenous contact zones and, finally, the conflicts arising from the imbalances between western and eastern Aru, in which the VOC repeatedly intervened to suppress the villages of the Backshore (east coast).

KEYWORDS

Aru Islands; Maluku; VOC; colonialism; seventeenth century.

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THE MIRRORED PAST

About five centuries ago, the first building-blocks were laid in a colonial system that would reshape much of what we call the Malay Archipelago. The arrival in Maluku, the fabled Spice Islands, of ships from distant Portugal in 1512 speedily altered the political balance in the region fundamentally. The basic idea was simple enough: force the local populations to deliver valuable goods on carefully stipulated terms. This pattern was reinforced by the construction of fortresses, the manipulation of local rulers and attempts at Christianization. Although the Portuguese were soon to be rivalled by Spanish, English, and Dutch seafarers, these ingredients would mark Western-Malukan relations for centuries to come (Andaya 1993). The enormous potential profits to be made from nutmeg, mace and cloves ensured that geographical names such as Ternate, Tidore, Ambon, and Banda earned a common currency, even in Europe. Titles such as *Conquista de las islas Molucas* and *A true declaration of the conspiracy in Amboyna* testify to European curiosity about the spices and how they were procured.

Among the islands explored by the Portuguese was the Aru group far to the southeast in the Arafura Sea. What they knew, or cared to write down, about it was rudimentary. Its bonding with the important centre of nutmeg production, the Banda Islands, was noted, as were the natural curiosities to be obtained from there. Birds of paradise and loris (parrots) were attractive luxury articles, either dead or alive (Pires 1944: 209). Nevertheless compared to Ternate, Tidore, Ambon, and Banda, the islands in Southern Maluku were relegated to a second rank. Many of the luxury products that would later make Aru worth fighting and killing for were still under the European radar: pearls, trepang, birds' nests, turtle-shell. It is ethnographic studies from the nineteenth and twentieth century that have provided a detailed picture of the social structure and economic bases of the tightly clustered, low-lying islands.¹ While such accounts from the late colonial and post-colonial eras might give a false impression of immutability, obviously there were strong historical continuities. Whatever accounts of Aru that we have from the early-modern period suggest that certain features have continued to be recognizable over the centuries: a racially mixed and fairly non-hierarchical society, illiterate and relatively low-technological, fragmented into a large number of autonomous settlements but adapted to the common Malukan ritual division in an Ulisiwa and an Ulilima bond (Riedel 1886: 248-270). It was this insular world that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) broached in 1623, eighteen years after its first establishment in Maluku and two years after the infamous genocide on Banda. This event inaugurated 326 years of sometimes uneasy Dutch-Arunese relations (Spyer 2000: 19).

How these relations were built up and institutionalized, and how the relationship engendered hybridity, is the theme of this article. Although this

¹ For an overview of the history and culture of Southern Maluku, see De Jonge and Van Dijk 1995. The now classical treatment of Aru civilization is Spyer 2000. Early notable ethnographic and naturalist accounts can be found in Wallace (1869), Riedel (1886), and Merton (1910).

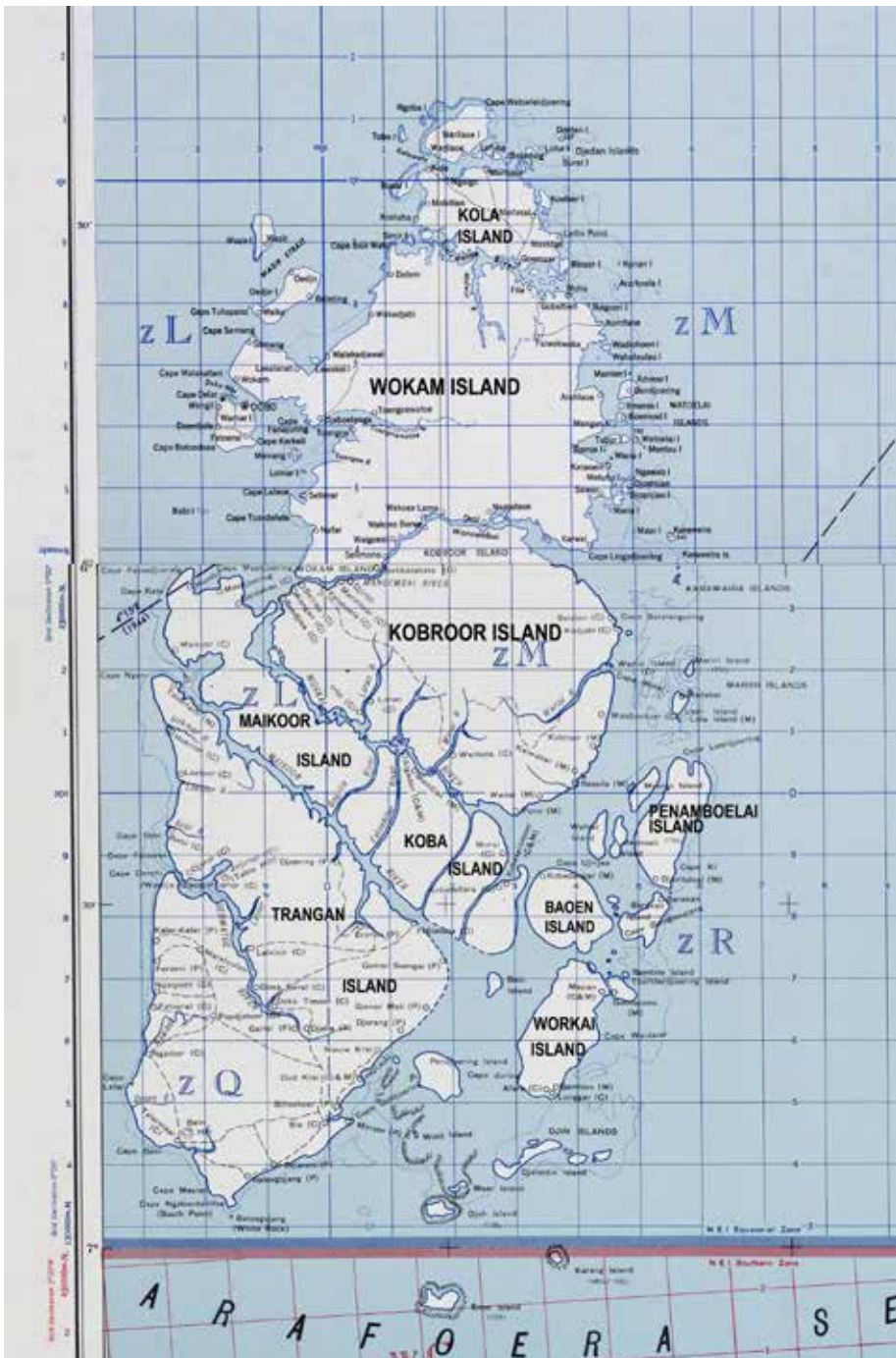
study is limited to the seventeenth century, the long period of engagement and the relatively verbose sources make Aru a telling case for the workings of early colonialism. It is particularly interesting since it was the easternmost post of the VOC. The situation in Aru also ties in with two issues in recent historiography. Firstly, the question to what extent the European trade networks were restructuring Asian markets previously operated by peddlers, or were instead built on existing sophisticated trading structures (Andrade 2018: 245-248). And secondly, whether European foreigners could win acceptance in small-scale Asian societies as “stranger kings”, holding a fragmented system in place through a number of institutionalized relationships (Henley 2002). The role of hybridity has been discussed intensively in post-colonial research, notably by Homi Bhabha (1994). In Bhabha’s version, it implies that hegemonic discourses in a milieu imprinted by colonial dominance are in fact fractured and unstable. Although highly contested, the concept could be useful in understanding the pattern of the formation of the colonial subject. Hence, the subordinated and partly Christianized groups of Aru were defined through a process of iteration and translation that made them either commendable or abjectly barbarian depending on the situation, especially contingent on their adaptation to European norms. But there is also an active side to this hybridity, as local strategies played a role in co-opting the white strangers. This applies not least to the economic opportunities on the islands, opportunities that were not merely appropriated by the VOC but also developed locally under its aegis.

A note on the sources is appropriate here. As are its counterparts in most of Eastern Indonesia, Aru society was generally illiterate until the twentieth century. The European sources occasionally mention letters from seafarers and chiefs that were probably written in Malay using Jawi script. However, the only Malay letters that have survived from the period in question are a few specimens from the Christian centre in Wokam written by non-Arunese teachers. Apart from these, what we have are the reports and *dagregisters* (daily logs) from VOC employees, the majority originating from the post in Banda. Although sometimes very detailed, these employees naturally wrote what was expected of them. Consequently the Arunese past is mirrored through colonial aspirations and perceptions. Bearing these reservations in mind, it might still be possible to trace the discursive existence of local people by observing their responses to the Dutch impact. This might entail a strategic mimicry of the colonial culture, but also evoke situations that contradict the Dutch image of order and caused colonial anxiety.

FIRST CONTACT

The name Aru occurs from time to time on maps and in travel descriptions from the sixteenth century, unfortunately without much detail (see Map 1). A map from about 1540 mentions the island group using the present standard spelling Aru (Pires 1944: 209). Another map from 1537 indicates an island approximately in this location called Ilha de Gomes de Sequeira, apparently after a Portuguese visitor. Later, a number of maps from ca 1560 and 1571

show Aru with the comment: "*aqui invernou Martim Afonso de Melo*" – Martim Afonso de Melo overwintered here (Thomaz 2001, plates IX, XIV, XV, XVII).



Map 1. The Aru Islands. Army Map Service, U.S. Army, 1942; source: public domain (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aru_Islands_Regency#/media/File:Aru_txu-oclc-6558822-sb53-2+5.jpg).

In other words, the Portuguese sailors had a nodding acquaintance with Aru, meaning that their Dutch successors did not encounter any *terra incognita* from a European point of view. In fact, in her well-known study of Aru society, Patricia Spyer has recorded legends that refer to the early Portuguese visitors (Spyer 2000: 81-87). Unrecorded activities by Portuguese people in this part of the Archipelago might also be hinted at in a story that a Dutch expedition picked up in 1602, namely: that “white” people were living on the southern side of New Guinea, opposite Aru (Heeres 1899: 3).

For details about the islands, from the early seventeenth century onward we must turn to Dutch sources. The well-known VOC expedition led by Willem Jansz in 1605-1606 touched the Kei and Aru Islands on its way to Papua and Queensland, but little is known in detail about the voyage or any contacts with the local populations (Heeres 1899: 5-6). At this time, the Company was fighting a war against its Portuguese rivals (in its extended sense, the Spanish empire) who were expelled from Ambon, giving the Dutch their first permanent position in Southeast Asia. From this base they began interfering in the affairs of the nutmeg- and mace-producing Banda Islands, that were governed by local *orangkayas* (chiefs, lit. rich men), but found they had to contend with redoubtable rivals in the English East India Company (EIC). As the tension between the VOC and EIC built up, in 1616 the Dutch launched a violent intervention on one of the Banda Islands, and began to think of subordinating Kei and Aru by either peaceful or coercive means. The reason for their interest in the distant and poorly known islands was logistical: Kei and Aru were allied to the pro-English Bandanese, who used to take on provisions there. Importantly the Bandanese ships were constructed on these forested islands. The anxious Dutch believed that a Bandanese fleet with six months’ worth of provisions was skulking just beyond the horizon, and once it appeared the locals would fall on the whites, “[...] since we think that this devilish band has a nature like that of tigers (as they write of them) who never forget their cruelty, but sometimes hide it in order to be the more cruel when one is least attentive [...]” (Tiele 1886: 154). The distrust was not a complete figment of their imagination, since a Dutch commander had been ambushed there in 1609, opening the door for future conflicts. As it happened, the massacre never eventuated, but Banda remained a contested area for the next five years. These brief remarks suggest that at this time the relatively small but commercially active Banda Islands had developed a working relationship with Kei and Aru, the latter providing timber and foodstuffs that were not available in sufficient quantities on Banda itself. As a consequence of this alliance, the ecological balance of Banda was to some extent sustained, and the Arunese probably accrued advantages in the form of external trading goods.

Direct contact with the Arunese followed in 1619, but was far from peaceful. The Company-allied raja of Kilang on Ambon saw his *negeri* (settlement) visited by one junk and two large sampans from Aru. Judging from other sources, the majority of their crews seem to have come from Ujir, a small but prominent island on the western side of Aru. These vessels were

loaded with sago and on their way to Banda, but had been blown off course. When the suspicious Dutch in the fort in Ambon heard about the unwanted guests, they sent a *korakora* (outrigger) with nine soldiers to demand that they pay their respects to the Company. However, the Arunese were 150 strong and not in a mood to acquiesce. They tied their three ships to each other and resisted the Dutch and their allies, "being a very obstinate nation". The seamen shot at their adversaries with bows and arrows that they handled with expertise. After a fierce contest, the Arunese were eventually killed or captured. The Dutch secured the sago cargo of the junk that formed a welcome addition to their supplies since all the rice at the VOC fort had been used up in the last three months. Those Arunese who remained alive were clapped in irons and imprisoned in the fort, from which a few managed to escape. Of the others, so many died the Dutch commander found that his best option was to sell the survivors as slaves, since the Arunese were considered to be the subjects of the hostile Bandanese (Tiele 1886: 264). The selling of prisoners-of-war as slaves was a common practice in Southeast Asian societies, a custom unhesitatingly emulated by the Company (Reid 1983: 157-158). The remark that Aru was subject to Banda is intriguing because there was no state as such on Banda, just a hierarchy of *orangkayas*; a situation that suggests a strong alliance rather than Bandanese "rule". It is known from later history that alliances known as *pela* were formed between villages in Aru and other parts of Maluku. These alliances could be quite efficacious and were cemented by marriage relations.

CONTRACTS AND THEIR LIMITATION

The fate of Aru was contingent on that of Banda. The forces of the VOC defeated the small EIC garrison on Banda in 1620-1621 and proceeded to exterminate or enslave the islanders (Milton 1999: 271-308, 312-318). Some Bandanese were able to escape to other parts of Maluku, a fact that would later have consequences for Aru. Banda was transformed into a complex of nutmeg plantations (*perken*) that were worked by slaves from various parts of maritime Asia – a rare counterpart to the plantation system of the West Indies in the same era (Hanna 1978; Winn 2010). Despite all its violent actions, from its inception the VOC took care to conclude contracts with Asian rulers and chiefs, thereby securing a political network conducive to the comprehensive trading system that it was attempting to construct. Although the contracts concluded with the minor polities in the Malay Archipelago transformed the latter into allies, the arrangement usually had a more covert coercive side and was not intended to be a treaty between equals (Van Ittersum 2018: 155). In their most basic form, these contracts entailed a promise of Company protection, an obligation to keep other "white" and "black" nations away from the coasts and restrictions on trade. Given the fragmentation in Maluku, the Dutch were forced to seek out the main *negeris* on the many islands and conclude contracts with the principal *orangkayas*. Therefore we have separate contracts from the seventeenth century for Wetar, Kisar, Babar, Marsela, Damar, Leti, Kei, and so on. In general terms, we can discern an increasing Dutch power over the

sprawling island world of Maluku in the decades after the 1660s, when the spice sultanates Ternate and Tidore were being increasingly subordinated, peace was restored with Portugal and the Spanish retreated from North Maluku (Andaya 1993: 170-173).

Less than two years after the bloody events on Banda, the VOC authorities dispatched a new exploratory expedition under the command of Jan Carstensz, who reached Queensland and Arnhem Land in 1623. One of its stated aims was to bond with the island groups to the south of Banda, Kei, Aru, and Tanimbar. Carstensz visited Aru on his way to and from Australia and left a detailed account of his experiences with the islanders. The text is of considerable ethnographic interest since it is the first to give an idea of the local culture, especially in Ujir that was the first place to be visited. As he writes, the land had no kings but only *orangkayas* whose hands would be tied unless they deliberated with the local population (Van Dijk 1859: 9-10). The inhabitants seemed suspicious at first, but the local *orangkayas* soon engaged in deliberations with Carstensz and his officers. The Dutch offered the Ujirese permission to bring their trading goods to Ambon and Banda. Furthermore, they promised that the surviving prisoners from the 1619 incident would be returned, a pledge that particularly gladdened the latter's hearts. For their part, the Ujirese had to promise not to collude with the Bandanese refugees or the Seramese who were intrepid long-distance traders and seafarers. To seal the matter, the chiefs swore an oath or *mattacauw* by pouring water over their heads and calling on the sun to be their witness. On the return voyage from Australia, Carstensz arranged a formal contract with the *orangkayas* of Ujir and a number of other settlements on the western side of Aru: Tutafaning, Salguadingh, Wokam, Wamar, Fangabel, Maekor, Ratu, and Trangan. Apart from the mysterious Salguadingh, the names are still found on modern maps. The contract reiterated the stipulations agreed with the Ujirese chiefs, and, for want of a stone slab, an inscribed wooden pillar was erected in Ujir (Heeres 1907: 179-182). A similar contract was also concluded with chiefs in the Kei Islands, who had likewise been dependent on the Bandanese up to 1621. Kei and Aru are often mentioned in tandem in the seventeenth-century documents, although the societies differ in many respects. In the eyes of the Company, the contract was decisive, as it included Aru in a perceived colonial order and could be wielded in diplomatic arguments with rivals. Although it was basically a commercial enterprise, the VOC quickly assumed colonial traits, and the first paragraph in the contract explicitly states that the Arunese acknowledged the Company as their sovereign lord. The second paragraph says that their land, fortifications, places, and the fruits of the land will be handed over to the Company by them and their descendants (Heeres 1907: 179-182). Nevertheless the contract remains silent about the settlements of the so-called Backshore (*Agterwal*) in the east, that delivered many natural products to the west via the system of natural canals (*sungai*) that still divide the main islands from each other. The Backshore peoples have a stronger Papuan heritage, are difficult to reach in larger ships and have been slower

to adapt traits of foreign culture than the west. This begs the question of the implications of the contract for the local populations. As a basically non-literate people, the wording of the five paragraphs of the contract was presumably less important to the Arunese than the performance of the ritual *mattakauw*. Many locals might have seen the Dutch as the successors to the Bandanese, that is, as the principal counterparts in economic redistribution. However, any such view would soon be dispersed by the relatively patchy contacts with the Dutch in the following decades. Moreover, the event did little or nothing to bridge the contradiction between the ritual bonds of Ursia and Urlima, although settlements from both “signed” the contract.

In fact, there is no question that the Dutch had to renew diplomatic contacts again and again. An exploratory expedition to parts of Maluku, under the command of Adriaan Dortsman, was carried out in 1646. Accompanying Dortsman was the preacher J. Vertrecht who made a separate trip to Kei and Aru and left a very detailed diary that is an important source for contemporary conditions. Unlike many Company employees, Vertrecht took the locals seriously and tried to grasp their mindsets. As he found out, there was little unity even within the *negeris*, that consisted of several sub-units designated by the Maluku-wide word *soa*. Hence the principal *orangkaya* in Ujir declared to the Dutch that he had very little say in the other section of the *negeri*. Likewise, two *orangkayas* in Wokam received Vertrecht in a friendly manner, while two others, who headed a different *soa*, kept away. The two amicable headmen admitted their lack of executive power when Vertrecht offered to take up residence among them, learn their tongue and instruct their children in a Christian school. The chiefs responded that this would only be possible if one of the “blacks” was the chief over the others; however, at present they were a disunited flock in which the one liked to participate in this and the other in that. Vertrecht comments that he was surprised that they had such shrewd political insights. It was obvious that politics had a life of their own in Aru, where the western *negeris* were on bad terms with each other and enticed the Backshore peoples into their game; Ujir feared attacks from the Krei people but allied with those of Batuley who raided the villagers of Wokam.²

Vertrecht’s attempts to establish a Christian mission in the islands were rapidly thwarted by the deep suspicion elicited by the Dutch presence. As the preacher relates in detail in his account, a Javanese vessel suddenly arrived in western Aru, piloted by two Bandanese refugees who wasted no time telling the islanders about real or imagined European misdeeds. According to Vertrecht, they had recently played the same game in the Kei Islands, so graphically the inhabitants had fled at the sight of the Dutch ships, “so that the slave trade was greatly impeded, nay, was mostly frustrated”. Vertrecht went ashore on Ujir with only the interpreter as company. Arriving in the *negeri*, he saw a large circle of people armed with swords, arrows and bows, engaged in a *bicara* (deliberation). He asked the old, previously amicable

² VOC 1159, Diary, J. Vertrecht, sub 2-3-1646. This and all following references to VOC archival numbers are to VOC Archief, 1.04.02, Nationaal Archief, The Hague.

orangkaya Wocan Amma why he had asked the Dutch to leave so abruptly. The *orangkaya* referred to the rumour emanating from the Javanese and Malays from Kei, namely: that Dutch people in Elat planned to build a fort. They feared such prospect, saying that Kei was as a *kakak* (senior brother) and Aru as an *adik* (junior brother). If Kei was conquered, it meant that Aru could offer little resistance. The preacher tried to refute the accusations, but to little avail. After meeting up with the fleet of Adriaan Dortsman some days later, the Dutch left Aru for the time being.³

While we have only the European version, we can trace the discursive existence of the Arunese in the troubled communication between the missionary and the chiefs. Certain details in the account seem to have been misunderstood by Vertrecht, for instance, the idea that Kei and Aru, in their entirety, were symbolically *kakak* and *adik*.⁴ Whatever the real situation was, the violent actions in and coercive regulations imposed on the region created a deep sense of distrust and suspicion, maybe strengthened by the Dutch demand that the locals deliver slaves. However, this suspicion was offset by a policy pursued by some groups of actively inviting the Dutch. In particular, the important *negeri* Wokam, on the island of the same name, was keen to welcome Christian teachers. Some Arunese addressed the Banda authorities in 1645 and again in 1657, as revealed in a missive from that year:

Those of Aru, an island situated about 65 miles to the east of Banda, that is heathen, have, because of a special intuition for the Holy Ghost, [...] grown much inclined to be delivered from their heathen blindness into the true Christian light. Therefore they asked the governor [of Banda] most persistently for teachers. His Honour has deliberated on this matter with the church council. His Honour had found it good to send a *krankbezoeker* there on the yacht the *Coutchin* and the sloop the *Batavia* in February, [a man] who is knowledgeable in the Malay language, which tongue is known among these people. He returned from there to Banda on 10 May, and related that he found the people very disposed to Christian education, and that several *orangkayas* had learnt, among other things, the most common daily prayers by heart and with satisfactory zeal, with the wish that they should be further educated as time passes. (Coolhaas 1968: 152).⁵

Shortly afterwards, in 1658, a new contract was concluded with several *orangkayas*, followed in 1659 by the establishment of a permanent missionary post in Wokam, whose population was deemed to be well disposed and susceptible to the creed.⁶ After a spate of local warfare in 1661-1663, it was developed into a fortified site with a small token garrison. This was in line with contemporary developments in Maluku. In 1645 and 1652, the VOC issued resolutions ordering forts to be built on various islands to protect trade

³ VOC 1159, Diary, J. Vertrecht, sub 21-3-1646.

⁴ In these terms, the idea seems to be unknown in modern Aru and only applicable to certain settlements.

⁵ This and subsequent translations from VOC sources are by the author.

⁶ VOC 1229, Report, Banda, 1659, f. 541. The 1658 contract is quoted in ANRI Banda 45:1, Arsip Nasional, Jakarta, Letter, Banda to Batavia, 1796.

interests (Bleeker 1858: 263). At this point it should be recalled that the position of the Company in the 1650s was strengthened by the suppression of resistance in Ambon and the fostering of closer ties with the North Malukan spice sultanates (Knaap 2004: 29-34; Andaya 1993: 164-175). The same decade saw a strong Dutch expansion in such diverse parts of the Indian Ocean world as South Africa, Sri Lanka and West Timor, spurred on by mercantile ambitions to regulate trade routes and production centres. But there is also an Arunese side to the establishment. Without denying that interest in the new religion might have been serious, the repeated invitations by west coast villagers were most probably strategically motivated. The Dutch were foreign and in some respects frightening, but they might also have offered the best possibilities for stability among the fragmented communities. A missive from Batavia to the VOC board in Amsterdam in 1681, retrospectively gives an idea about what was at stake.

Aru has since ancient times been divided into two mutually fighting peoples from the general eastern factions of Ulisiwa and Ulilima, one living in the east and the other on the west side; which last-mentioned, finding itself too weak against the first-mentioned, sought the protection of and submission to the Noble Company in the years 1646, 1653, and 1659, whereby those of Wokam accepted Christianity. (Coolhaas 1971: 432).

The Siwa-Lima division, found in many places of Maluku, was therefore also present on Aru, where the two bonds were called Urlima and Ursia, names that were popularly explained as "shark" and "whale". According to a tradition mentioned by a later visitor Brumund (1845: 289), the division is derived from the rivalry between the sultanates Ternate and Tidore, whose rulers had privy councils consisting of five and nine members, respectively. This is questioned by Van Fraassen (1987: 510-511), who believes that the idea of the division was disseminated from one or two centres in the Maluku region, over which Banda could have exercised a considerable influence. Hence it was also applied to the socio-political situation in various Malukan sub-regions. Leaving this aside, it is clear that the local settlements were deeply involved in power structures, of which the Dutch might have been dimly aware, whose fluctuations required persistent invitations. A large number of cases from maritime Southeast Asia have shown that Europeans could be accepted as "stranger kings" by fragmented or vulnerable societies (Henley 2002). We shall come back to this syndrome.

ALTERNATIVE OUTSIDERS

As so few alternative textual records have been preserved for southern Maluku, the bulky nature of the VOC records is deceptive in any attempt to form a framework of understanding. Unlike contemporary Dai Viet, Ayudhya, Java, and Bali, there are no indigenous textual narratives, leaving the Company by default the main referent for economic and political order in the region. With this in mind, it would nevertheless be misleading to see the colonial

archive as an expression of an order of power. As Ann Laura Stoler (2009) and others have pointed out, the archive expresses colonial uncertainties and failures as well as successes, and it is through these we can trace alternative sources of authority. In fact, a closer look at the VOC reports and *dagregisters* indicates an array of Asian groups that, far from being mere smugglers and troublemakers (as frustrated Company servants would have it), explored sea routes and established commercial routines that were beyond the competence of the Company to eradicate.

The presence of Bandanese refugees, noted by Vertrecht, was in fact a principal theme that the Dutch tried to map as they expanded their authority in Maluku. Interviews with *orangkayas* on small, inaccessible islands such as Marsela (beyond Babar) would routinely include the question if any "Old Bandanese" had been spotted.⁷ It has even been suggested that the Bandanese diaspora stimulated trade in the region, naturally beyond the back of the Company. These fears proved warranted in the case of Kei, where the villagers of Eli and Elat speak Bandanese to this day (Kaartinen 2010: 19-53). The German Company employee Saar published a travel account in which he alleged that Vertrecht's little expedition to Aru in 1646 was attacked by Bandanese archers wielding poisonous arrows, their women shooting at the hapless Europeans from the tree tops (Saar 1930: 51-55). As Vertrecht's diary shows the story is completely untrue, but points to an awareness of the Bandanese as dangerous and prone to seize every opportunity to avenge the 1621 massacre.

Another group of alternative outsiders was the band of enterprising seafarers from East Seram and Seram Laut who had maintained an extensive trade system since at least the sixteenth century. This has been analysed in detail by Roy Ellen (2003: 54-118). Certain villages on Gorom Island in particular entertained relations with counterparts in Aru. In 1660, shortly after their establishment in Wokam, the Dutch received unwelcome company as a few respected *orangkayas* from Gorom moved over and settled on Aru, and "played the master among these gullible people". The reason was economic; Gorom was "breadless", meaning that this commercially oriented island did not produce sufficient foodstuffs, and hence recruited Aru into its economic network as a component so as to fill the deficiency. This is actually similar to the use made of Arunese resources by pre-Dutch Banda. The Dutch, wary of the unreliable Goromese, took steps to expel them (Coolhaas 1968: 315-316; Van der Chijs 1889: 19-20). The relations nevertheless persisted over the following centuries in the form of *pela* alliances. As Tom Goodman found during fieldwork in the region, the important Goromese *negeri* Amar maintained alliances in the Watubela, Kei and Aru Archipelagos, and there is even a myth about a powerful Muslim imam who "civilized" Kei and Aru. Imam Tatakora taught the islanders to deliver babies properly, and the grateful Keiese and Arunese villages pledged a *pela* in return. Moreover, a peculiar division of labour evolved, in which a group of Goromese families manufactured knives

⁷ VOC 1281, Interview with the *orangkayas* of Marsela, 1671, f. 634.

on an atoll in Kei, selling them to Gorom, Kei and Aru (Goodman 2006: 83-84, 111). These stories are, naturally, de-temporalized and set in a vague past, but the Amar alliance with the Muslim island Ujir is well documented from the second half of the eighteenth century, when it was a factor in a violent uprising against colonial rule.⁸ In Aru the Seramese were seen as a potentially powerful anti-Dutch force, as can be seen from a rumour in 1663 to the effect that Banda had been conquered by a coalition of Makassarese, Seramese, and English (Van der Chijs 1891: 476). The English had kept a few islands in Banda until 1621, and stories about their tenacious struggle had perhaps been disseminated by the Bandanese refugees (compare Milton 1999). However, the major nuisance from the Dutch point of view was the Makassarese. The Makassar empire (Gowa and Tallo') covered a huge stretch of lands and sea lanes from East Kalimantan to Maluku, but there was also an informal realm that has so far been poorly studied. The term Makassarese is frequently found in VOC records from eastern Indonesia and could, in this context, denote all kinds of seafaring people from South Sulawesi. One could assume that individual skippers from Sulawesi organized expeditions that took advantage of the political supremacy of the Gowa court, but ventured even farther. While their basic aim was to establish contacts in order to acquire locally produced goods, religion was also seen a means to cement such contacts. The ink on the VOC contract with the Arunese villages had hardly dried before two Makassarese vessels appeared in Aru around 1624 – an interesting concurrence that was hardly coincidental. The newcomers persuaded a few *orangkayas* to convert to Islam and constructed seven mosques in which the *salat* was performed on a daily basis (Coolhaas 1960: 166-167). Understandably, the Company servants were not amused. While the VOC pursued a live-and-let-live policy in religious matters, and lorded over numerous Muslim subjects, it also fostered plans to bind its allies and subjects through religious conversion (Knaap 2004: 99). As so-called heathens, the Arunese were potential converts, but Islamization would effectively block such efforts.

As it turned out, this first effort petered out, and it was only after 1650 that Islam took root on small but significant Ujir, the very place that had first been approached by the Dutch. As a report of 1670 says, "Previously the Makassarese conducted substantial shipping here, because the Moorish creed was planted among them, as they had persuaded the Arunese and sometimes brought them to Makassar for that purpose".⁹ Even more worrying for the Dutch was the loss of economic opportunities. Makassar was the point of departure of an extensive trade in textiles that were taken to Borneo, Mindanao, North Maluku, Ambon, Seram, Kei-Aru, Tanimbar, Solor, Timor, Ende, Bima, Bali, Java et cetera, and that posed an obvious rival to Company efforts to regulate this important commerce (Van der Chijs 1896: 124). In 1635 the Governor-General in Batavia made noises to the effect that the expansive ambitions of Makassar must be stopped from gaining foothold in the Ambon

⁸ See the article by Hägerdal and Wellfelt in this issue.

⁹ VOC 1275, Report on Aru, Banda, 20-3-1670, f. 380.

area, so as not to trouble Kei and Aru, acquire Buton or destroy the nutmeg plantations in Banda. In the following year we hear of new Makassarese initiatives. Via Seram's north coast they sailed to Seram Laut-Gorom, "Nay, even to Kei and Aru, this is the most considerable secret reason we have tried to guard against their expansion, hinder their progress and clip their wings" (Coolhaas 1960: 494, 534). In 1639 "those of Makassar declare that they have brought some 100 *kati* or a *picul* ambergris from Kei and Aru this year. We have purchased a small amount of that which is sent to Your Excellences [the Seventeen Gentlemen in Amsterdam] with this [dispatch]" (Coolhaas 1964: 29).

Furthermore, a missive from December 1658 complains that twenty-five or twenty-six ships had come to the eastern islands from Makassar in this year alone. Some of them arrived in the anti-Dutch villages on Gorom and the rest appear to have sailed to Aru, Kei and Tanimbar,"to which aforementioned islands they are used to travel of old". In eastern Indonesia the Dutch feared that the Makassarese "would try to expand their dominion over the islands more and more, and bring those still heathen to the Mohammedan religion, to which the Makassarese court seems very devoted in its own way" (Coolhaas 1968: 216). As we see from the quotations, the position of Aru was part of a larger strategic scheme to keep the dangerous rivals from Sulawesi away. Hence, no doubt this was a contributing factor to the Dutch establishment in Wokam after 1659.

The defeat of Gowa at the hands of the VOC-led alliance in 1667, and again in 1669, formally barred Makassarese seafarers from frequenting the waters of Maluku without explicit permission. However, this was soon offset by grim realities. Continuing warfare in South Sulawesi drove large numbers of Bugis-Makassar to seek their fortune overseas (Andaya 1995). While their activities in Sumatra, Java and Sumbawa have been reasonably well documented, their presence in eastern Indonesia is more shadowy. This once again underlines the need to take a critical look at the extant sources, since it is quite clear that these activities were not without their consequences economically for the local societies; for example, much of the external trade with Portuguese Timor was in their hands in the eighteenth century (Lombard-Jourdan 1982: 97-98). In the case of Aru, there is sufficient evidence of intermittent visits, favoured by the geography of the archipelago. The craggy islands and shallow waters of the Backshore still make visits by larger vessels a hazardous undertaking, but can be navigated by smaller crafts. This contrasts with the Dutch practice of making for the safer western side and then navigating the natural canals or *sungai* that divide the islands, or simply waiting there for the products to be delivered by Arunese boats.

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM: THE EASTERN END

Being situated at the eastern end of the Indian Ocean world, and in the vicinity of the Melanesian Pacific world, Aru is a borderland in many respects. The western villages on Ujir, Wokam, Wamar, and Maekor have been exposed to cultural influences from and migrations by Austronesian groups, while the

easterners of the Backshore, although still speakers of Austronesian languages, have a stronger Papuan heritage, underlined by the different geographical features. The VOC documents make a very clear distinction between the western and eastern settlements: the former were susceptible to Christian societal norms, while the latter were placed at the very bottom of human civilization: "The most barbaric people in the world, devoid of any respect or fear, fiercely trusting their impenetrable rocks and mountains, that are inaccessible to Europeans" (De Klerk 1894: 30). But Aru is also a borderland in the sense that it is about as far as Islam and Christianity reached in easterly direction, before the first British settlement of Australia. A 1670 report provides a rare glimpse of the protracted process of Islamization in Ujir and a few adjacent settlements:

Ujir has two *negeris*. There is a freshwater river. One can enter there on a sloop until one moors them by the poles of the houses. Of the two *negeris*, the lower one has the most of the Moors. Apart from a few *mu'ezzin*, there is a priest or *qadi* there, who is a Malay. However, the higher situated *negeri* is mostly heathen. Because of this there is often dispute between the two *negeris*, since the higher-situated one does not want to be Moorish. Nevertheless, as time passes there are some who become Moors on account of dogged persistence [...]. Ujir is well furnished with provisions, more so than Wokam, because of the island Wasir that lies opposite it and delivers a lot of rice. There is a *negeri* that is also mostly Moorish and a dependency of the *negeri* Ujir. Fish is very abundant there, since they can always place *ceris* [fish traps] there in the east and west monsoon. Behind Ujir is the roadstead for large ships in the west monsoon. In the east monsoon the shore is higher up all around, and therefore one can anchor anywhere.¹⁰

The advantageous situation and access to foodstuffs combined with the networks with foreign Muslim traders to make Ujir a little commercial centre in which Islam engendered a strong sense of identity that set it somewhat apart from the rest of Aru. A word of warning, the notion of religious distinctions should not be taken too far, since alliances easily crossed religious and ethnic lines, and the Ujirese did not actually oppose the Dutch until much later, in the 1780s.¹¹ Nevertheless, the walls and buildings of stone in the old village of Ujir, that can be partly glimpsed even to this day, testify to contacts with other Muslim archipelagic civilizations in the early colonial era. These include what was probably the easternmost mosque in the world in the early-modern era.¹²

Christianity spread to more villages, although the actual number of baptized might not have exceeded the Muslims by much; at any rate, later data from 1787 indicates 380 able-bodied men in Ujir and its dependent villages Wasir, Samang, and Fangabel.¹³ The current situation, in which the majority

¹⁰ VOC 1275, Banda, Report on Aru, 20-3-1670, f. 380.

¹¹ VOC 8034, Report, Banda, 30-7-1787.

¹² Research into these ruins is currently being conducted by Joss Whittaker, University of Washington; see also O'Connor, Spriggs, and Veth (2006). A photo of the still intact mosque is found in Merton 1910: Tafel 8.

¹³ VOC 8034, Witness report by Nicolaas Harmansz, 1787.

of the Arunese are Christians, is therefore the result of developments in the late-colonial and post-colonial periods. When Pieter van Dam wrote his bulky survey, *Description of the East India Company*, in 1701, after four decades of proselytizing there were still not more than 257 Christians in the four *negeris* Wokam, Wamar, Maekor, and Rumawa (Van Dam 1931: 210). The number did not change much during the following century, although the *orangkayas* and their families were usually quick to accept the new creed. In 1759 the preacher Gerardus Verbeet counted 287 Christians in the islands (Verbeet 1762: 30). The pattern is similar to several other parts of eastern Indonesia in which the Dutch or Portuguese held a hegemonic position and Islam had not been widely disseminated: Wetar, Kisar, Leti, Larantuka, Timor. The tiny number of Christian preachers and teachers could only minister to small congregations that included a modest minority of the overall population (Lampers n.y.). Apart from the possible attraction of the Christian message, the religion might have been seen as a convenient platform for interaction with the foreign suzerains, ensuring that it did not vanish over time.

The Dutch *krankbezoeker* (visitor of the sick; an almoner/lay-preacher) worked in the islands in tandem with four Indonesian schoolmasters, his stipend paid by the Banda authorities (Van Dam 1931: 210). One of his duties was to make a detailed progress report to Banda, therefore we have fairly abundant data about the mission. A *dagregister* from 1688 provides a picture of the Wokam post that at first sight appears idyllic:

The church service and schooling are ably managed by the *krankbezoeker* and schoolmaster, and continue in good order. On Sundays the open church service is held, attended by old and young learners. In the morning around six o'clock, after the beating of the gong, the pupils come to school, and again in the afternoon at two o'clock, when a prayer is said before and after, and there is singing just as is customary in Banda.¹⁴

However, the reports rattle with all sorts of complaints about the progress of Christianization. "That the good work does not progress any better is attributable only to the old Arunese Christians who can only be brought to adherence to the word of God by numerous punishments and great effort, since it is enough for them to have the name of Christian; and although they are baptized they will still always [...] resort to their heathen evil customs".¹⁵ The Banda authorities tried to enforce Christianization by punishing tardiness to pray with 50 units of sago, consented to by the *orangkayas*.¹⁶ Various local customs, such as the loud shouting at burials and the keeping of concubines, were assiduously maintained by the converted Arunese, and this enraged the clerics. Particularly vile in the eyes of the Dutch was the belief in witchcraft. Persons accused of being sorcerers lived in grave danger, as noted by a VOC servant visiting the western *negeris* in 1686. The largely Christian *orangkayas*

¹⁴ VOC 8051, *Dagregister Banda*, sub 3-4-1688, f. 259.

¹⁵ VOC 8051, *Dagregister Banda*, sub 3-4-1688, f. 260.

¹⁶ VOC 1287, *Dagregister Banda*, sub 28-11-1671.

readily asserted that, "There are many sorcerers among their nation [people], hence they requested to be able to kill them, or else be allowed to send them to the Company in Banda as slaves". The Dutchman replied, "that they must erase this and similar superstitions from their heads, and that this upset the Noble Company". However, the *orangkayas* persisted, and in the end the Dutch took the supposed sorcerers on board to spare them from a worse fate.¹⁷ It is of course impossible to say if there was more to the story in terms of Arunese or Dutch motivations about taking these people to work on plantations.

Relations between Christians and Muslims oscillated between peaceful co-existence and the threat of violence. The two religions were established simultaneously in the 1650s, and their respective build-up phases already engendered a few conflicts. The Dutch school in Wokam was matched by a Muslim school under an imam in Ujir.¹⁸ In the 1670s there were repeated complaints about the behaviour of Muslim leaders who tried to stop parents (at least in the Muslim settlements) from sending their children to the Christian school. The VOC authorities, for their part, attempted to force the Muslims to halt propagating their religion, threatening them with expulsion by force if they did not comply.¹⁹ The VOC records abound with Islamophobia; while Islam was tolerated in places under VOC jurisdiction in which it had gained steady ground and become established, Muslim conversion was frowned upon in areas earmarked for Christianization (Niemeijer 2001). In the end, however, a balance was struck under which the Ujirese-speaking villages of Ujir, Wasir, Samang and Fangabel – the last two situated on Wokam – marked the limits of Islam.

A COLONIAL CONTACT ZONE

Various places in coastal Asia in which the VOC had established itself were characterized by a fragmented political situation, endemic low-scale warfare and occasional raiding by outsiders. Examples of these are Minahasa and West Timor. Even areas that had once been dominated by extensive kingdoms, such as the Malay Peninsula and South Sulawesi, were often plagued by local warfare. As pointed out by scholars such as David Henley (2002), foreign suzerains, "stranger kings", could therefore be effective under some circumstances. In the best of worlds, they could act as mediators in local conflicts and keep the system of minor polities or settlements in balance. Their foreignness could even be an advantage since these suzerains were not tied to particular clan interests. A colonial lord was therefore sometimes actively endorsed by local communities in spite of the brutality and exploitation that also accompanied the system. To some extent, the roots of colonialism can be sought in African and Asian agency, and not merely in preconditions in Europe.

¹⁷ VOC 8050, Dagregister Banda, sub 16-4-1686, f. 186.

¹⁸ VOC 1301, Report, May 1674.

¹⁹ VOC 1281, Report, 9-12-1670.

Aru, and in particular its western *negeris*, present a good case of this. Their readiness to accept a contract, the active invitation they extended to Christian missionaries and their endorsement of the building of a VOC fort, suggest that the west coast chiefs knew perfectly well what they were doing, and that a limited Dutch presence was in their interest. This relationship was accentuated by the routines that evolved after 1659. When a Company servant appeared off Wokam on official business, usually once a year, he would summon the various *orangkayas* of Ujir, Wokam, Wamar, and so on, for a deliberation in order to settle any disputes that had arisen since the last visit. These disputes could be of several kinds: between the various western *negeris*, between people within a *negeri*, between these and the Backshore people, between Arunese and Dutch people and between individual Dutch residents. At the meetings arrack was handed out “to make some of these known hypocrites somewhat more liberal”.²⁰ An account from 1688 gives an idea of the sometimes frustrating attempts to come to grips with the conflicts arising in a relatively non-hierarchical and fragmented society:

On the island Aru, we have discerned some unrest and disturbances among the inhabitants, and some complaints have reached us, of the majority hinging on the following points. 1. Those of Wokam say that the inhabitants of Wamar have taken away three of their people, and made them into slaves and 2. that they have deprived them of an *orembay* [boat], and do not want to return it without payment. 3. The *orangkaya* Tavoury made it known that a slave of his has escaped, and arrived in the *negeri* Batuley, in which he has been kept by the inhabitants. 4. The *orangkaya* of Fangabel complained that a certain person called Egbert had slept with his sister, for which he requested two slaves and the same number of gongs.

After a detailed investigation of such matters, it seems to us and has been decided by us, as follows. The first and second points, the accusations against those of Wamar, have been rejected by us; we do not have the least proof of it. On the third point, those of Batuley have replied to us that the slave is once again a refugee and has since long gone into the forest; however, the parties have come to an accord. On the fourth point, about the fornication with the *orangkaya*'s sister, this has not been proven and hence is an allegation pure and simple without any proof; therefore, we could not do anything about it.

About the customs and mores of the Arunese, we can only report that very few offences among them, however gross they are, are punished by death, but only by paying the offended party a monetary fine. This fine is often so high and heavy that the delinquent and all his friends cannot pay, which unnatural custom frequently evokes great dissension and hostilities among them.²¹

In spite of the low level of social stratification, slaves were omnipresent in Arunese society, a consequence of internecine warfare. As valuable property, they were often at the root of disputes, as seen above. The Arunese were

²⁰ VOC 1401, Dagregister Banda, sub 9-4-1684, f. 869.

²¹ VOC 8051, Dagregister Banda, sub 3-4-1688, f. 261-262.

not hard taskmasters and often let their slaves live in other *negeris*. If a slave happened to be murdered, the owner asked the culprit for compensation. If the latter refused to pay, the matter could easily escalate into fighting. A quarrel of this sort erupted between the *negeris* Fangabel and Reriala in about 1670. When the latter did not pay for a slave of whom they had disposed, the archers of Fangabel attacked. It might have ended in full-scale warfare if the local Company employees had not intervened. As it was, they managed to calm Fangabel down until orders arrived from Banda.²²

Another common cause of turbulence was sexual transgression. A report from 1671 relates that the *negeri* of Ujir had split into three parts because of the loss of a *perahu*, and a case involving an unfaithful woman. The factions prepared to attack one another but were once again reconciled by the Company.²³ In 1686, the *orangkayas* of Wamar, the Christian Barent Adamsz and the Muslim Likketouw, picked a fight because Likketouw had seduced Barent's wife. However, the Dutch garrison acted quickly and collected all the firearms in the *negeri*, and made the villagers promise to await a full investigation, after which the Company would "punish the guilty person after blame had been apportioned".²⁴ This also shows that muskets had been disseminated in the western villages, meaning the Dutch had to walk on eggshells in their efforts to mediate. During peace deliberations supervised by the Dutch, the versions of the Arunese are sometimes quoted in detail, allowing us a glimpse of the volatile political landscape of a stateless society. When Captain Heysselbergh investigated local conflicts in 1684, he was supplied with some intricate details that also inform us about local customs of peace- and war-making:

We stressed that we had come to enquire about the issues and disputes between [the Koproor people] and the Wamarese, whose *orangkaya* was also present. The Koproorese, who were instructed to answer first, said that some time ago the *orangkayas* of Koproor, Mariri, Batuley and Wamar had gathered together in *negeri* Batuley when all old and recent scores had been settled. The mother of the *orangkaya* of *negeri* Wamar let the blood from the arms of everyone, and they drank it together, mixed with *sagueer*, under pain that the first one who broke the bond should be attacked by all in unison and ruined. Now, soon after the confirmation of this bond, it happened that a ship from *negeri* Mariri went out looking for food. A *sabir* from *negeri* Batuley hid behind a cape of a certain island to which those from Mariri and other *negeris* went for fishing each day, intending to attack the *orembay* [boat]. This is what happened. In this attack, an *orangkaya* of Mariri fell. The Wamarese assisted the Batuleyese, who were the first bond-breakers, by supplying four men. They said that this was the only reason they had destroyed the *negeri* and killed some of its people.²⁵

²² VOC 1287, Dagregister Banda, sub 28-11-1671.

²³ VOC 1287, Dagregister Banda, sub 28-11-1671.

²⁴ VOC 8050, Dagregister Banda, sub 16-4-1686, f. 185-186.

²⁵ VOC 1401, Dagregister, Heysselbergh expedition, sub 11-4-1684, f. 901-902.

If they were to strike a balance in the islands, the Dutch needed trustworthy interlocutors who stood in high enough regard in local society to implement Company policies. All over maritime Asia, local kings and sultans co-operated with European stranger lords in a system of dependencies anchored by contracts and agreements. In eastern Indonesia, even minor rajas upheld such accords (Hägerdal 2012). However, there were no rajas in Aru, only headmen or *guli*, in the VOC documents translated by the Malay term *orangkaya*. In the nineteenth century, the scholar and civil servant Riedel wrote the first comprehensive ethnography of southern Maluku and provided a picture that is strikingly reminiscent of the 1623 expedition referred earlier. The *orangkayas* were chosen by the villagers and their status was confirmed by the Dutch authorities if possible (although many headmen did not bother about this). However, the latter realized that they could only conduct their affairs in deliberation with the descendants of the village founders, the elders, the rich and the heads of the households. There were also groups of forest people, the Gorngai and Tungu, on the islands of Kola and Kobroor, who had no leaders at all and did not construct houses (Riedel 1886: 258, 270). Despite the apparent timelessness of this pattern, the Aru Islands were far from unchanging. Riedel refers to a tradition by which contacts with foreigners from Ternate, Tidore, Seram, and Gorom had led to the introduction of Malay and European titles such as *raja*, *orangkaya*, *kapitan* and *mayor* (Riedel 1886: 251). While this claim is poorly documented, individual *orangkayas* had certainly had ceremonial staffs with knobs bearing the VOC *cap* (emblem) bestowed on them since the seventeenth century. They were also given status symbols, such as pistols, coats and hats, by the Dutch.²⁶ By the solemn bestowal of authority and the objects that symbolized it, the headmen were upgraded to an increasingly institutionalized position. Consequently the position of *orangkaya* tended to be inherited by certain families, such as the Harmensz in Wokam, the Barentsz in Durjela (Wamar), and the Tamalola and Bolbol lineages in Ujir – in the last case perhaps also attributable to the influence exerted by other Muslim Indonesian groups. The Dutch surnames demonstrate the willingness of the lineages to adapt to elements of Dutch culture in order to profile themselves within the internal order.²⁷ Some of these lineages have retained their importance up to the present day.²⁸ The persistence of such dynastic dynamics over hundreds of years suggests that the alliance between the foreigners and locally created elites worked. It was only in the 1780s that the by then corrupt VOC encountered serious resistance from some western villages, and then as a result of influences from Tidore and Gorom.²⁹

²⁶ VOC 1401, Orders and instructions to Jan Jacobsz Heysselbergh, 1684, f. 740. For Tidore's role in the archipelago, see Widjojo 2009.

²⁷ This can be compared to the ruling lineages of the local East Timorese kingdoms that adopted Portuguese dynastic names in and after the seventeenth century (Belu 2011).

²⁸ For example, the *orangkaya* Barent of Wamar, mentioned in the late seventeenth-century sources, seems to have been the ancestor of the Barentsz lineage who were acknowledged as rajas with authority over the Ursia bond in the late colonial era. The last representative, Bastian Barentsz, was reportedly murdered in 1983 (interview, Johan Kobrua, Durjela, 11-4- 2016).

²⁹ See the article by Hägerdal and Wellfelt, in this issue.

AT WAR WITH THE VILLAGES

In spite of the successful bonding of the western *negeris*, the early phase of VOC suzerainty was subjected to a few periods of turbulence and violence. Much of this had to do with the uneasy relations between the western villagers and the so-called Alfurs, the allegedly primitive peoples of the interior and east coast.³⁰ The islanders of Batuley, Mariri, Barakai et cetera were protected by the shallow and dangerous sea to the east, and often lived in villages situated on rocky bluffs that could only be reached by means of ladders. The Batuley people especially were frequently at odds with the westerners and mounted raids in their *sabir* (boats) via the *sungai* (canals) that divide the major islands. This violence, however, alternated with periods of economic exchange. Aru in the seventeenth century was economically interesting for both “luxury” (non-essential) products and items in daily use. The former included turtle-shell, parrots, birds-of-paradise and subsequently pearls; while the latter included sago, livestock, timber and slaves. The majority of the products for luxury consumption were found in the interior or Backshore, where they were gathered by the Alfurs and traded to the west via the *sungais*. The goods were then bartered by the VOC employees and licensed traders from Banda for Indian textiles, gongs, elephant tusks, iron tools, ceramics, and the like. The well-known encyclopaedic writer François Valentijn outlines Aru’s economic place in the VOC domain by the early eighteenth century:

These people come to Amboina now and then, which was ratified by Their Excellencies [the Supreme Government] on 26 January 1670. However, in the following year it was ordered that they be kept out of Amboina and Java.

There are no rivers there, so that one must be content with very bad water from wells or still water, which is probably the reason why many [visitors] die, and that those who come back from there look very unhealthy.

On the islands of Aru, Kei, etc. only the [VOC] Bandanese, to whom they are actually subordinate, may go there, and no Ambonese without the permission of Their Excellencies. This was expressly ordered on 6 March 1691, when Jacob van Cordan who was then staying on Amboina was excused. Also, Their Excellencies forbade the Ambonese, by order issued on 14 March 1681, to buy slaves from the Southeast Islands there, but [buy them] only on Banda.

Also, on 22 February 1704 they ordered those of Banda, that they should be careful who they sent to the Southeast Islands in order if possible to prevent that any calamity befall the islanders.

Just as the Bandanese now go to these islands, and send people thither annually on behalf of the Noble Company, the Southeast Islanders annually arrive in their ships, and stay on Banda in September or at the end of the easterly monsoon to trade.

³⁰ The term Alfurs is not ethnic as such, but was used for various non-Christian and non-Muslim groups in parts of Maluku who were considered to be uncivilized people (*woeste volckeren*).

In the main these goods consist of slaves [and] sago that Banda does not have but must obtain for its slaves, *toetombos* (beautiful boxes of leaves and sea shells, fitting into each other), birds-of-paradise, king's birds, *kacang* (a kind of pulse), wood to build ships etc., *pinang*, dried fish, ripe *kelapa*, large batatas and other edible comestibles, and also somewhat rice and paddy which however is of little importance, plus other small items for the fort (Valentijn 1726: 43).³¹

Generally speaking, Aru was more important to the Banda post as a trading partner than the other islands in southern Maluku, since Banda needed supplies of slaves and foodstuffs on a regular basis. Complete lists of slaves on the Banda plantations for the late seventeenth century have been found, showing that a very considerable part of the unfree labour originated from Aru, mostly probably taken in warfare and raiding among the Alfurs.³² The slaves were fed on Arunese sago. Bird-of-paradise plumage, turtle-shells and pearls had a global market, although their limited quantities reduced them to a secondary role in the VOC economy. To ensure the continuation of this economic flow, a degree of stability was necessary, not only in the western *negeris* but also on an Aru-wide level.

The equilibrium was threatened fairly soon after the arrival of the Dutch. It appears that the presence of foreigners accentuated economic imbalances and this built up tension between the VOC-allied western villages and the Backshore. In 1661 the Alfurs, headed by *negeri* Balatan, on the east side of Kobroor Island, successfully raided the staunchly pro-VOC Maekor and ruined the pearl-fishing village Woor, "saying that they did not ask for the Dutch, or any others" (Van der Chijs 1889: 302). The people of Wokam tried to worst Balatan, but to no avail. They then took the logical step of calling in the VOC. Captain Gabriel Nakken, who visited Wokam at the time, agreed to contribute some eight to ten armed Dutchmen. The number seems ridiculously small, but apparently made a difference in this world of low-scale warfare, in which firearms were still a rarity. The official account points to the peculiarities of warfare in the Backshore:

A power consisting of 5-600 men with forty-four *korakor*s was summoned from the surrounding *negeris*. With these he arrived on the eastern side of the land of Aru on 11 June. Close to land lay the foremost *negeri*, called Balatan. It is a very lofty, steep, impenetrable rock in the sea, rough all around. One climbs up and down on a long ladder, that is pulled up when the enemy approaches, so that it is impossible to climb [up to it]. The inhabitants of this *negeri* are the princes among robbers, and are those who are most responsible for the ruin of the aforementioned *negeri* Woor. When they saw that our people were approaching, they acted very defiantly, spoke many villainous words, danced and beat the *tijf* [drum], but did not mount an attack. Our people

³¹ A description of commerce in Dobo on Wamar Island can be found in the work of the well-known naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace (1869: 361-6; compare Spyer 2000: 10-2). Nevertheless, Dobo only evolved as a centre in the nineteenth century. Trade normally seems to have been conducted near the Dutch post in Wokam.

³² For such slave list, see VOC 1622, List dated 19-9-1699, f. 82-119.

landed the next day when it was ebb-tide and fiercely attacked the rock, so that a good part of the enemy were killed, but none of our men. However, since there was no chance to scale the rock, they made a ladder in order to take it by storm. The former second mate Cornelis Jansz van Flensburg was the first who to ascend the ladder but received a small wound on his forehead. Gabriel Nakken summoned him back since he did not want to waste any men. Opposite this rock, on the island lies another rock which has a flat top. These two rocks are of the same height and the last-mentioned is suitable for placing a piece of artillery in order to fire upon the *negeri* on the rock. Our people had taken note of this. The people of the *negeri* saw what we were about and fled the island during night when the tide was high. Our people were not aware of this before they had broken through, and bravely pursued them in the night. After a hard fight they took four women, five children and four men, mortally wounded, whom they beheaded as revenge. They then entered the *negeri*, annihilated it and set it on fire. Thirteen dead were found in there. (Van der Chijs 1889: 302-303).

The expedition was followed by a new round of inconclusive fighting in 1663. However, new tensions were built up in the following two decades, culminating in a bloody incident in 1680. At first sight the event seemed to confirm European ideas about the Alfurs as bloodthirsty thugs. A merchant vessel sailing up the *sungai* Serwatu in the interior was approached by locals from Barakai and Mariri who invited the Dutch to a meal. Against the advice of the others, two merchants accepted and went ashore with the Alfurs. Shortly afterwards, the crew heard shots and presumed the two Dutchman had been murdered, returning in haste after beating off an attack by Alfurs in canoes (De Haan 1912: 359). Later, new information revealed a less one-sided affair. After a first, friendly meeting, the Dutch had fired a salute that frightened the locals; a canoe had capsized in the water and a child was drowned (Coolhaas 1971: 605-606). Although this was an unhappy accident, the Dutch used this and some other incidents as an excuse to send a substantial expedition to Aru in order to settle the score with the Backshore villages once and for all. Captain Jan Heysselbergh arrived there with sixty-nine men in April 1684. Joining forces with a fleet of *sabir* from the western *negeris*, the following month the Company undertook three forays to the eastern and northern regions, that are described in gruesome detail in a lengthy *dagregister*. The only actual battle was fought in waist-deep water and mud off Barakai Island, whose inhabitants tried in vain to fight off the intruders with arrows, spears and cutlasses. The raids tended to follow a monotonous pattern. The VOC and its allies would approach a village whose inhabitants escaped in good time and hence could not be caught. The fear of the locals was interpreted as resistance, the empty village was burnt and the fleet proceeded to launch an assault on its next target. In Kobroor the Dutch actually managed to arrange a conference with the local headmen and a settlement seemed to be within reach. Then the Dutch asked for a gift for the Noble Company in order to cement the truce. The Kobroor headmen offered a slave and two gongs. This was politely refused by Heysselbergh who suggested twenty-four slaves would be a proper gift.

The Kobroorese replied that there were not that many slaves in their territory. Although Heysselbergh decreased the demand to eighteen slaves to be paid in three instalments, the frightened population soon evaporated into the forest, whereupon the Dutch reduced Kobroor to ashes.³³

The raids were not really decisive since the perceived enemies generally remained invisible. It was a type of conflict that did not tally with European ideas of warfare. As did many tribal societies around the world, the small, low-technology populations pursued a strategy of avoidance to minimize losses, and might not have understood why the Dutch were confronting them.³⁴ Later Heysselbergh's behaviour was sharply criticized by the Supreme Government in Batavia that questioned his burning of Kobroor, a deed that was not according to the instructions (Coolhaas 1971: 712). This was the last Dutch military expedition to Aru of any consequence for more than a century. The ravaging of the Backshore probably strengthened the preponderance of the VOC-allied western *negeris* in the economic redistribution system. The rise in the demand for two luxury items stabilized this system in the eighteenth century. The increasing Chinese demand for trepang in the mid-Qing era encouraged the regular harvesting and preparation of these sea creatures.³⁵ Meanwhile, Barakai, that had been ruined in the warfare of 1684, became a centre of pearl-fishing, that yielded limited but not inconsequential profits (Valentijn 1726: 41-42).

CONCLUSIONS

Seventeenth-century Aru provides an interesting study of economic redistribution, precisely because its marginal geographical position in the system of Asian commercial routes and early European colonialism. Situated at the end of the world frequented by Europeans in the early-modern period, the islands offered the VOC a challenge, forcing it to apply the methods used in supposedly "civilized" parts of maritime Asia to its interaction with low-technology groups without a trace of statehood. To an extent it was building on a pre-colonial Banda-Aru redistribution system. The signing of contracts, the implementation of monopoly regulations and the establishment of a Christian mission plus the construction of a fort, were common devices used to tie local Asian populations to the colonial apparatus, fomenting a partial hybridity. However, the cultural and geographical features of Aru nudged interaction in a peculiar direction, one in which deference to the "Noble Company" was entwined with strategies of avoidance, somewhat reminiscent of the state-avoiding strategies of the mainland Southeast Asian hill peoples

³³ VOC 1401, Dagregister, Heysselberg expedition, 1684, f. 871-913.

³⁴ For the strategy of avoiding pitched battles, common in small-scale societies, see Keegan 1993.

³⁵ For the methods of preparing trepang in the early nineteenth century, see Bik (1928: 69-72). Hundreds of Barakai women and children would walk across the reefs with baskets on their backs, catching trepang with iron-tipped sticks, while specially equipped ships went to less accessible waters. The trepang had to be boiled, dried and again boiled with sugar cane before being suitable for consumption.

studied by Scott (2009). The VOC system overlay a traditional ritual division, the Siwa-Lima bonds entrenched throughout much of Maluku, and a certain contradiction between the more Austronesian-imprinted western *negeris* and the more Papuan-descended Backshore settlements. To this must be added the ambivalent relationship between the global forces of Islam and Christianity that even here, at the very margin of their respective spheres, displayed a characteristic oscillation between co-existence and occasional hostility. The friction and fissures resulting from all these layers stirred up a great deal of turbulence and required Dutch armed intervention before the system was stabilized after 1684. Even after that point in time, the tiny Dutch presence was unable to prevent Aru's inclusion in alternative archipelagic systems, especially the commercial networks of the Bugis-Makassar and Seramese peoples. Nevertheless, the Dutch were functional in the eyes of many Arunese, as mediating "stranger kings" who kept the fragmented communities in place. While this function must not be allowed to detract from the brutal and exploitative aspects of early colonialism (cum-merchant-capitalism), it emphasizes the need to analyse the constitutive roles of colonizer and colonized and highlight the viewpoint of the latter, even if it has to be traced via European texts.

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