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Exemplary centre and *terra incognita*

Excursions, diplomacy, and appropriation of colonial knowledge in Belu, Timor

HANS HÄGERDAL

**Abstract**

The article analyses early European knowledge about Belu, a historical region in Central Timor which, although “belonging” mostly to the Dutch colonial sphere, still had a position of cultural-ritual centrality on a Timor-wide level. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the region was, from a Dutch point of view, largely unknown in terms of political hierarchies, social structure, and economic opportunities. However, three officially commissioned authors, A.G. Brouwer, W.L. Rogge, and H.J. Grijzen, wrote extensive reports about Belu in 1849, 1865, and 1904, in which they attempted to understand local society and the opportunities they offered the colonial state. The article explores history at the interstices, looking at spaces between colonial realms and the realities which blurred European preconceptions, and the local Belunese agency which can be gleaned through a critical reading of the three authors.

**Keywords**

Timor, Belu, Wehali, coloniality, exemplary centre.

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PROBLEMATIZING COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE

In recent decades, the history of Timor has received attention for several reasons. The rough transition to independence of Timor-Leste in 1999-2002 inevitably evoked interest in the colonial roots of the divided island. The centuries-long division into (often imagined) spheres of interest, and the relatively late and violent enforcement of actual Dutch or Portuguese governance, has also raised questions about colonial motives and mechanisms. Moreover, new methods developed at the intersection between history and anthropology have increasingly revealed the elaborated hierarchical power structures found in the islands, largely autonomously of Christian or Islamic influences but still partly tied to the workings of coloniality. This makes for a fascinating historical case, since few, if any, other places in Asia reveal the pattern of two rivalling colonial powers interacting over more than three centuries.

The need to understand the Timorese power structures in order to subordinate them was realized at an early stage by the Dutch and Portuguese colonizers. Therefore, we have useful but partial accounts by Jean Baptiste Pelon (circa 1778; see Pelon 2002), G. Heijminger (1847), S. Müller (1828; see C.J. Temminck 1839-1844), and Affonso de Castro (1867), among other commentators. As either temporary visitors or long-time residents, their texts were based on information obtained close to the hubs of governance, either Kupang (West Timor) or Dili (East Timor). However, what happened when officials were tasked with approaching areas which were virtually terra incognita in terms of colonial knowledge, but could indeed have been considered exemplary centres in local understandings? What vocabularies did they use, what hopes of profit and success did they entertain, and how did they strive to penetrate the “secrets” of local power and knowledge? In this article, I scrutinize the writings of three nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers who toiled at the intersection between western knowledge production and the subordination of Belu, an imprecise geographical concept usually denoting the central, Tetun-speaking parts of Timor. Belu is a particularly interesting case since it was “marginal” to the horizon of the colonial centres but enjoyed a position of centrality on a Timor-wide level, through references to origin myths and understandings of precedence and cultural diffusion. The names of our three authors are A.G. Brouwer, Willem Leendert Rogge, and Hendrik Jan Grijzen whose activities cover more than half a century. Their selection is straightforward: they are simply the only known non-clerical persons to report extensively on Belu before the implementation of European rule in 1906. In general terms, they represent three generations of colonial agents.

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2 For historical studies since 1999, see Arend de Roever (2002); Frédéric Durand (2006); Ricardo Roque (2010); Hägerdal (2012); Douglas Kammen (2015), among others. For a broader take on eastern maritime Southeast Asia, Heather Sutherland (2021).

3 Useful studies by anthropologists applying historical perspectives include Andrew McWilliam (2002); Tom Therik (2004); Lisa Palmer (2015); Christopher Shepherd (2019).
with parallels to other parts of the Netherlands Indies: scouting, establishing, and implementing.

I employ the idea of writing history at the interstices developed by Thongchai Winichakul (2003) and Vincent Houben (2021: 100). That is, new perspectives on the colonial processes can be achieved by looking at spaces between realms, or on their edges, where the ambitions of boundary production were met with realities which blurred the process. It becomes interesting to see how the processes were reflected in the individual outlooks of the protagonists. One might also refer to the theoretical concept of concurrences (Diana Brydon, Peter Forslund, and Gunlöf Fur 2017), looking into the ambivalent positions of both colonizer and colonized, and ask how western protagonists managed the concurrent demands of colonial surveillance, diplomacy, and order on one hand, and the need to understand and accommodate local Asian societies on the other. Here I ask, albeit tentatively, how, despite their Eurocentric outlook, their writings reflect how locals reconciled their attachment to custom and older political structures with the demands of the colonial authorities. While acknowledging the strongly hierarchical imperial process of domination, a focus on such concurrences goes beyond the usual impact-response model, which focuses on colonial policy per se. Instead, it enables us to ask how the concerns of the individual colonialists point both to their strategies of domination and to the ways adaptation and avoidance were employed by local populations and elites in the colonial contact zones. This will be achieved through a critical reading of the reports produced by the three above-mentioned Dutch figures, two of them formal officials, whose intimate and sometimes informal interactions with Belunese men and women enabled them to discern certain social processes. To throw the endeavour of the writers of the archival sources into relief, I compare their imaginations with twentieth- and twenty-first-century anthropological literature and traditions. The purpose of the study is to broaden our knowledge of a historical Southeast Asian society at a time of political and economic transition, particularly since the area studied has preserved few, if any, preserved indigenous textual sources before the early 1900s.

BACKGROUND

The geographical expression Belu occurs in various Portuguese and Dutch texts from the seventeenth century, but its exact meaning is not easy to grasp (Hägerdal 2006). Portuguese descriptions often imagine a division of Timor into two “provinces” called Servião and Belu, in which Servião is thought of as the Dawan (Vaiqueno)-speaking western part, whereas Belu constitutes the rest (Alberto Faria de Morais 1934: 22-26). However, this division was entirely unstable and did not entirely overlap with linguistic or cultural borders. Instead, the division often seems to have followed political

These strategies of avoidance have been discussed for another part of Southeast Asia in James C. Scott (2009). However, unlike the highland societies of the mainland (Zomia) described by Scott, Belu entailed a hierarchy of dynastic realms.
alignments. Therefore, a Portuguese report from circa 1769 expressly places the kingdoms Wewiku, Wehali, Dirma, Haitimu, Manlea, and Naitimu in the Vaiqeno sphere of Servião, although they constituted the core of Belu in later Dutch accounts. Another witness, an ex-governor writing in 1797, asserts that Wehali and the Dawan-speaking territories Amanatun, Nenometan, and Amanuban “already belong to the province of Servião”, apparently since the Dutch had become dominant in the mid-eighteenth century (Artur Teodoro de Matos 2015: 168). To add to the confusion, the lands of Belu were sometimes said to speak Belunese, in other words Tetun. In fact, Tetun is only the most important among the twenty or so languages spoken in Central and Eastern Timor. The absence of early local texts makes it difficult to pinpoint the original geographical meaning of Belu, which literally means “friend” in Tetun. However, ethnographic data from the nineteenth century and later indicate that it was a much more limited area consisting of the central, mainly Tetun-speaking areas in the centre of the island, mostly in what is today Indonesian Timor. An indigenous term for this area is Rai Tetun (Land of the Tetun) and the people are called Ema Tetun. Conforming to the authors discussed in this article, I shall nevertheless use the terms Belu and Belunese. As was Timor in general, the land was characterized by subsistence agriculture in which rice and maize were important crops and trading was left to outsiders. In the cultural outlook of the Belunese, an extremely strong interdependence can be discerned between the cosmological, symbolic, and social orders. This can be seen in oral literature, the architecture and placement of the houses, the ordering of the descent groups, the agricultural cycle, and relations between humans in general (Herman Joseph Seran 2007: 27). Hence, the natural world of humans (raiklaran) is always oriented towards the sacral macro-cosmos (lalean) which is inhabited by spirits and ancestors and ultimately ruled by the supreme being, known at least in the nineteenth century, as the Nai Maromak (Luminous Lord) (Seran 2007: 52, 210). Society was based on kinship units (fukun) and had features of both a patri- and matrilinear social structure, combined with elaborate hierarchical systems of social estates. Politically it was divided into numerous small kingdoms and sub-kingdoms with a dual structure of governance, with a symbolic “male” executive ruler and a “female” ritual and passive one. The traditional centre, Wehali, on the fertile southern plain, was the perceived place of origin of many of the dynastic houses all over Timor. Moreover, the Belunese Mount Lakan was believed to be the centre of the world and the place of origin of divine royalty (Seran 2007: 62). This brief survey omits the complicated system of power relations which regulated life on all levels in Belu and was inevitably insufficiently understood by casual western visitors. What is important to bear in mind is that, in their relations

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5 Memorandum about the Province of Servião, circa 1769. Arquivo Historico Ultramarino, Lisbon.
6 See especially B.A.G. Vroklage 1953; G. Francillon 1967; Therik 2004; Daniel Tifa and Hans Itta 2007; Seran 2007. The Belu society studied by modern anthropologists had obviously altered by the colonial and post-colonial ordering, not least since local violence and warfare were replaced by the “slow violence” of the modern bureaucratic state. Nevertheless, there is
with the approaching colonial powers, the Belunese outlook was basically incompatible with European governmentality. The Belunese social-cosmic relationships which ordered life were considered harmonious and mutually complementary, and any intrusion or political reshuffling disturbed them (Seran 2007: 184-190, 209-210). All this helps to explain the indigenous response which met the early colonial representatives discussed here.

The history of Belu, in its more limited geographical sense, is known only fragmentarily, but revolves around two themes: the claimed authority of the Liurai or ruler of Wehali in southern Belu, and the Dutch and Portuguese attempts to dominate the north coast. The Wehali ruler, likened to an island-wide emperor in old missionary writings, was soundly defeated by a Portuguese incursion in 1642 and formally subordinated in the second half of the seventeenth century (Hägerdal 2012: 87-88, 162-164). However, while there are some references to activities on the north coast in the early European texts, the sources are strangely reticent about southern Belu. It is very seldom mentioned in connection with the political struggles involving the Dutch, Portuguese, and various Timorese kingdoms in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early-twentieth centuries, or the commerce in the famous sandalwood, the reason for the island’s economic role. In fact, it displays an interesting paradox of powerlessness at the same time as being an exemplary centre for Timor and even beyond (James J. Fox 1982). \(^7\) What is known is that the Wehali ruler formally submitted to the Dutch East India Company by signing the well-known Paravicini Contract in 1756. To the Dutch understanding, the contract seemed to place large parts of Timor under their suzerainty, since Wehali was supposed to be the overlord of a large number of kingdoms (Hägerdal 2012: 378-379). However, the act failed to secure any real Dutch influence in the area, which seems to have balanced between the two European powers. In 1778, a French visitor noted that the rulers on the south coast of Timor favoured either Dutch or Portuguese merchants, depending on the circumstances, but cleverly avoided a steady attachment to either power (Pelon 2002: 8-9). The inlet and trading place, Atapupu, in the north was acquired by the Dutch in 1818 despite Portuguese protests and was dominated by Chinese merchants. Belu was otherwise still terra incognita when the Dutch Colonial State launched a process to define the border with Portuguese Timor in the 1840s, triggered by the intervention of the “Black Portuguese” ruler of Oecussi in the supposedly Dutch Alor Islands in 1846. This would finally result in two treaties in, 1851 and 1859, which secured most of Belu for the Dutch sphere (H.E.K. Ezerman 1917: 872-889). It was, however, only very loosely monitored from Atapupu, where a Dutch official resided with a minuscule troop of armed Indonesians. The first treaty the Dutch made with a Belunese prince was in fact not with

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\(^7\) Stories of the centrality of Wehali are known in the surrounding islands, such as Flores (F.C. Heynen 1876). A huge number of references to Wehali (Wewiku-Wehali) are found in oral accounts collected by Peter Spillett (1999) in all parts of Timor.
the exemplary centre of Wehali, but with the raja of small Jenilu, where Atapupu is situated, in 1853. This was followed by a treaty with nearby Lidak, a mountainous realm which had recently clashed with the Dutch, in 1858. These contracts were of a standardized type in which the rajas promised to encourage trade and shipping, fight piracy, and refuse gifts or envoys from foreign nations. The Paravicini Contract of 1756 was explicitly mentioned as a forerunner to invoke a sense of continuity in Dutch suzerainty.\footnote{Ministerie van Koloniën, Supplement, Kontrakten: Timor, 2.10.03. National Archives, The Hague.} What these treaties did not mention were internal laws, customs, and governance – these concerns came much later. Meanwhile, South Belu largely lived its own life under the nominal suzerainty of the Dutch Colonial State, and few Europeans went there.

Figure 1. The Dutch-Portuguese border area in Timor, 1904 (Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Coll. Schuller). The highly irregular border between the colonial spheres, the result of political maneuvering with roots far back in time, should be noted.
Dutch and Portuguese delegations established the border between the two colonial spheres as late as in 1898-1899 (see Figure 1), which still left some issues hanging (Grijzen 1924). Only in 1906 did a military expedition suppress anti-colonial resistance in South Belu and a permanent Dutch post was established. This coincided with numerous similar interventions in the Netherlands Indies and Portuguese Timor, as colonial rule was implemented with violence and old forms of governance suppressed. This intervention was followed by a restructuring of local governance in 1915 to suit the interests of the colonizers (Francillon 1980; Fox 1982; Steven Farram 2003). Resistance to the new demands for taxes and unpaid corvée service assumed millenary forms but was swiftly suppressed, and Belu remained subordinated until the Japanese onslaught in 1942.9

Three colonial connoisseurs of Belu

This brings us to our three writers. While, from a European point of view, precious little was known about Belu society before the definitive Dutch advances, there were in fact two categories of people able to document social and political conditions from close by. The first were the Roman Catholic missionaires who were stationed in or near the north coast after 1883. Their extensive writings, however fascinating, will not be the focus here, since they did not represent coloniality in the same way as the lay authors.10 The second were persons working for the colonial government, who were active in tying the region to Dutch interests and travelled extensively in the Belunese petty kingdoms. Three persons who left extensive texts were Brouwer (1849), Rogge (1865), and Grijzen (1904). Other early memoranda might have been written but do not seem to be preserved in the archives. The circumstances of the authors diverge quite widely from each other.

Brouwer was an investigator who accompanied the German mining expert, Ferdinand von Sommer, on a reconnaissance of Belu in 1849 as part of Dutch efforts to gather information about valuable minerals. This happened the year after a Dutch mission to Dili under the diplomat Steyn Parvé had failed to come to a border agreement, making him an informant of some importance. Brouwer’s principal aim was to secure mining concessions, but after Von Sommer’s sudden demise in the field, Brouwer had difficulties continuing the expedition, since he was not really a mineralogist. Two manuscripts, a secret report for the Dutch government about the political situation followed by a section about Timor’s geography, and another with a similar but briefer content, ended up at the KITLV Archive (Figure 2). His manuscripts were later used by the prolific metropolitan Orientalist P.J. Veth (1855). After the Timor mission, Brouwer was embroiled in a scholarly feud with another Timor traveller, the well-known Salomon Müller, who accused Brouwer of incompetence and untruths in his

9 For the anti-tax movement of 1919, see Mailrapporten 1895/20, National Archives, The Hague.
10 An amalgamation of these Roman Catholic records can be found in the KITLV Archive/Leiden University Library: Petrus Laan, Missiewerk op Timor, H1475. For the intersection between Christian mission and coloniality in Timorese context, see Hägerdal (2013b).
assessment of minerals in Timor. However, he managed to persuade the Dutch Resident of Kupang, Baron van Lijnden, round to the idea that profitable copper mining was possible, and was granted a heavily conditioned concession. The enterprise ended abruptly when Brouwer passed away.

Rogge (1828-1884), by contrast, was enlisted in the army at sixteen and served as a First Lieutenant in the infantry for some time. He ended his military service with a pension. Afterwards, he was permanently stationed at the trading post of Atapupu on the north coast, as the civiel gezaghebber (civil commander) of Belu in 1863-1866. It was a rather delicate position since the government had recently (1852-1857) fought a war with the Belunese kingdom of Lidak, and only few years had passed since the definitive border agreement had been concluded with Portugal in 1859-1860 (Hägerdal 2013a). At the end of his term, he was promoted to controleur in Manado in North Sulawesi.

Much more is known about the personal history of our third author Grijzen (1870-1961), since he published essays about his experiences as a colonial official, and as a functionary in the border delimitation (Figure 3).

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13 “Nederlandsche kolonien, per overland-mail”, Nieuw Amsterdamsch Handels- en Effectenblad, 7-8-1863.
Originally from Zwolle, he had a long and eventful career in the East Indies and was the first official in Timor to hold the title of controleur in 1893. He was also member of a six-person Dutch-Portuguese commission with the task of redefining the border between the two colonial spheres. This commission was active in 1898-1899, though it did not lead to an agreement until years later, the borderline was only finalized in 1916. Grijzen’s work, Mededeelingen omtrent Beloe of Midden-Timor (1904), was considered an important effort to disclose a hitherto unknown society.\textsuperscript{15} A talented official, reputed to be both outspoken and honest, he later became governor of Sumatra’s East Coast (1917-1921) and was among the few nineteenth-century officials to witness the eventual demise of the global colonial system.\textsuperscript{16}

![Hendrik Jan Grijzen, photograph from 1918.\textsuperscript{17}](image)

Therefore, all three were personally engaged in the events which led to a defined status for Belu in a world of colonial restructuring and subordination. Their careers spanned over a half-century, one which saw the increasing tide of global western expansion, which apparently coloured their own ideas of cultural hierarchies and the moral right to subordinate “primitive” lands. However, we also need to understand how they were formed by a series of specific events and developments in Timor and the Netherlands Indies. In the early nineteenth century, a new bureaucratic structure evolved in the colonies, with properly salaried officials and a slowly improving infrastructure. A refurbished, racialized hierarchy took hold, legally sanctioned through the division into Europeans, foreign easterners, and natives (1854). Although the room to manoeuvre of the indigenous states was steadily squeezed, the process was still far from concluded at the time when Brouwer and Rogge took up their pens. The careers of Brouwer and Rogge, and partly that of

\textsuperscript{15} “Het een en ander over Midden-Timor”, Soerabajasch Handelsblad, 4-8-1904.

\textsuperscript{16} “Telegrammen, Nederlandsch-Indië”, Bataviasch Nieuwsblad, 3-2-1921.

\textsuperscript{17} Https://geheugen.delpher.nl/nl/geheugen/view/minimap?identifier=CBG01:25831&pc=.
Grijzen, fall within a period known as the *Onthoudingspolitiek*, a policy of non-intervention, which regulated the Dutch colonial approach from the 1830s to the late-nineteenth century. The Java War (1825-1830) had shown the great cost of major military confrontations. In the outer possessions in the Indies, vassal rulers should preferably be left in peace if they remained reasonably loyal to Batavia (Wim van den Doel 2011: 96). This did not stop a succession of petty wars and expeditions in the Archipelago, but there was very little effort to alter institutions or infrastructure in faraway places like Timor, as openly confessed by Grijzen himself in his above-mentioned essay:

> [...] the interior was still almost “terra incognita”, the encounters which we had with the inhabitants were only sporadic and superficial, and did not always leave the most pleasant memories. And in the 5 percent [of the territory] where we had a say, we did almost nothing. There was no question of roads and bridges, corvée labour, taxes, cultivation, and so on; we preserved the order as well or badly as could be, and that was that. (Grijzen 1923: 466).

In fact, the *Onthoudingspolitiek* came to an end around 1894 after the cumbersome Dutch experiences in the Aceh and Lombok Wars and fear of foreign interference. During the next years, many expeditions were undertaken in Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Bali, Maluku, and eventually Timor. All this coincided with a new “Ethical Policy” which seemed to give the Dutch authorities the right to intervene for the ostensible good of the native society (Van den Doel 2011: 126-127, 150-161). Hence, Grijzen worked at a time of startling changes in the Archipelago.

Two further points should be made. The first concerns the status of self-governing territories (*zelfbesturende landschappen*; see Figure 4). Most of present-day Indonesia was not governed directly by the colonial state, but headed by rajas and sultans, or sometimes by village chiefs. Dutch suzerainty was established through a system of contracts which left the *landschappen* almost entirely autonomous until rather late (late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries). Legal practices, administration, and political hierarchies were usually the concerns of the local leaders in the period studied here (Karel E.M. Bongenaar 2005). Secondly, the formal education of colonial officials, *bestuursambtenaren*, only took off in the mid-nineteenth century, inspired in part by British models and the failures of uneducated officials revealed during the Java War (Cees Fasseur 1993). Of our three writers, Brouwer, who was strictly speaking not an official, appears to have had a legal background. Rogge was a former military officer, while Grijzen was probably the only one who had really been trained for his job. These different backgrounds also explain some of their ways of approaching Belu society.
ANXIETY AND RIVALRY

Under these circumstances, we might begin by asking what anxieties beset the three writers in their reports. What difficulties did they see for colonial governance, perhaps even enough to threaten the very presence of the Dutch Colonial State? What were the unpredictable powers counteracting their efforts which envisaged the juxtaposition of chaos and order?

Two factors loom large here: the unreliability of the Portuguese and the complicated and almost intransigent power hierarchy in Belu. Portugal was especially an issue for Brouwer, at a time when there was still no border agreement, but only a rather loose attachment of the kingdoms to this or that European power (Sartono Kartodirdjo 1973: 430-433). The Dutch position in their toehold Atapupu was in fact not at all secure according to Brouwer, since the kampong master, Man Brok, has obvious leanings towards the Portuguese rivals. The affairs of the little Jenilu kingdom, in which Atapupu was situated, are of particular concern here, since the ruler of Oecussi, seat of the renowned Eurasian “Black Portuguese” community, meddled in them. Brouwer relates a story of how, earlier in the nineteenth century, the elite of Jenilu had brought in a daughter of the ruler of Balibo in the Portuguese

sphere of influence as Raja Perempuan (female ruler) when the old raja died. Moreover, there were advanced plans to have her marry the son of the ruler of Oecussi, going completely over the head of the Dutch. As fate would have it, the Raja Perempuan engaged in a sexual relationship with the commanding officer of the Portuguese fortress Batugade, Foio. When news of the scandal leaked out, the marriage deal was abrogated, and the lady promptly sent back to her father in Balibo.

Therefore, says Brouwer, Jenilu is now (1849) without a raja, which was not necessarily to the advantage of the Dutch since the influential Man Brok was unwilling to follow the commands of the local Dutch commander. The feeling of not being in control was strengthened by an incident Brouwer witnessed. Some chiefs in the vicinity of Batugade had risen against the Portuguese, and the governor of Dili could find no better solution than to ask Raja Da Costa of Oecussi to mediate. Da Costa and his entourage went to Jenilu where the all-too hospitable Man Brok assisted him with accommodation. Actually, the Black Portuguese leader was quite successful in talking the rebellious chiefs to their senses, and not enough emphasis was given to the fact he had the authority to get things done, something beyond the scope of the Europeans. Brouwer repeatedly warned the Dutch authorities of the possibility that the north coast might be lost to the Netherlands East Indies if a stronger force was not garrisoned in Atapupu.

Sixteen eventful years later, the civil commander, Rogge, was not beset by the worries which Brouwer had to deal with, as the border with Portuguese Timor had been laid down by a bilateral treaty. In the true spirit of the Onthoudingspolitiek, Rogge pointed out two “cardinal points” in the Dutch Belu policy: to take command in the management of public order, and to leave the internal affairs in the hands of the local regents and chiefs. Like Brouwer, Rogge referred to the grand contract which Johannes Andreas Paravicini concluded with the rajas of the Timor Islands in 1756, of which the ruler of Wehali was one of the signatories. For both writers, this VOC document formed the basis for later Dutch claims to the territory, and is the backdrop to the suggestions made by Rogge about a renewed contract. However, Rogge had gained enough insight into local political conditions to realize that the contract meant very different things to a Dutchman and a Belunese.

The regents and chiefs do not accord the value to that contract which we assign to such documents. Their way of thinking in these matters can be likened thus: they regard a written contract (and, in general, acts of appointment, etc.) as a proof that they can keep our flag, and that is all; their “lawbook of the Mai-Bapa” (the government). By accepting our flag, they regard the government as Lord of the Land (Belunese = Nain-Rai, Malay = Tuwan-Tanah) in the loftiest sense: they regard themselves as lawful cultivators, so that, according to their understanding, they cannot transfer land as property to other than the indigenous population without our approval. (Rogge 1865: 3).
Here, Rogge was making the important observation, repeated by some modern historians of Southeast Asia, that the physical existence of the contracts could be more important than the words contained in them (Hägerdal 2012: 95, 283). The Portuguese letters which were sometimes kept in Timorese communities as heirlooms, long after people had stopped being able to read them, are another case in point (Andreas Tefa Sa’u 2013: 118-123).

No similar concern about the Portuguese or colonial diplomacy beset H.J. Grijzen in his extensive wanderings through the customary rights of the Belunese. Despite all the details about local life, ritual, political divisions, and mytho-historical traditions, the Portuguese figure only vaguely as one-time overlords, or at least influencers. Grijzen speaks of the tantalizing traces of Roman Catholicism, long before Dutch priests ventured to the north coast in 1883.

Previously, the Roman Catholic creed was preached in various places by Portuguese men of religion; however, of this preaching perhaps the only remnant is the belief in the power of the Cross to avert evil powers. It is only among the Timorese in Insana that a kind of service is observed at a particular place around Easter time when, among other items candles are used, however of their own making, whereby more ceremonies which suggest a small remnant of the previous attempts at Christianization take place. (Grijzen 1904: 111).

Grijzen’s text suggests a pristine though barbaric society which appears barely touched by external forces; the Portuguese colonizers had little impact on adat, and other Indonesian groups are seldom mentioned. Any societal change was left to Dutch colonialism to carry out. Grijzen’s reminiscences of his professional activities in Timor (1923, 1924), on the other hand, show that he had his hands full with Portuguese officials, notably the bellicose governor, José Celestino da Silva, who oversaw the detailed border delimitation in 1898. These texts abound in sarcastic remarks about the ramshackle state of the Portuguese colony and the vainglorious, pretentious stance of its colonial servants.

His Excellency [the governor] spoke with southern emphasis about “mon escadre de guerre”; in reality, they were just decrepit nutshells which, at their birth, would not for one second have presumed that they would be promoted to warships [...] Indeed, at other times, it has sometimes happened that our Portuguese neighbours have elided ‘prahlerie’ in similar words. Hence, during a good time, the Governor asked the Acting-Resident, “Combien de palais avez-vous?” [How many residences do you have?]. “Un” [One] was the answer, naturally. “Moi, j’en ai trois” [I have three of them],” continued His Excellency with a certain compassionate condescension. Of the “trois palais”, I knew the two best ones; together all three had about half the value of the only residential house in Kupang! But in numbers, we were bested, that is sure. (Grijzen 1924: 500).
The traditional hierarchical structures of Belu have puzzled Europeans since the inception of colonial expansion in the seventeenth century. The Dominican Chronicle famously recorded how “Wehale, in this island, was treated like an Emperor” (A.B. de Sá 1958: 422), while later European accounts were much more circumspect. How much actual power did the central lord of Wehali truly wield? How far did his influence extend in or even outside Belu? Could he even be reckoned a monarch in the western sense? And who was he anyway – how did the nebulous ruler called the Maromak Oan (Son of the Luminous) relate to the Liurai (Surpassing the Earth), who variously stood out as “emperor” or executive ruler in the sources? What were the prerogatives of the innumerable rajas of Jenilu, Lidak, Fialaran, Naitimu, Lakekun, and others who dotted the terrain from the north to the south coast? Early writers of things Timorese, such as Freycinet, Heijmering, and Castro, made little attempt to unravel the layers of political relations and precedence in Belu, presumably for lack of systematic information.

In this respect, in 1849 Brouwer was a pioneer, for a very concrete reason: the complicated power hierarchy could help the Dutch to establish a decent border with their Lusitanian rivals. His report commences with an overview of the various kingdoms which he believed constituted Belu.

The Emperor or Liurai of Wewiku and Wehali who, as a Dutch ally, keeps the flag, holds particularly [bijzonder] great political power in the middle part of Timor. Subordinate to him are (ada en dia punya perintah) the following lands [followed by an extensive list of twenty-two kingdoms]. (Brouwer 1849: 1).

However, Brouwer was puzzled when the hierarchical relations did not follow conventional diplomatic logic. When discussing Maubara, a Belu kingdom on the north coast which acknowledged the Dutch, he remarks about its vassals, Deribate, Atsabe, and Leimean: “Strangely enough, all three keep the Portuguese flag”.

The government therefore has a truly powerful ally in this Emperor. He is the head of the Dutch party, whose influence over the subordinate rajas can be used fruitfully in the beginning stages, if the government’s powers fall short. According to all the accounts I heard in the land itself and from sea captains who have been there, the Emperor must be an old, respected man who is not only very trustworthy, but also receives visiting Europeans with great amity and feels honoured by their visits. (Brouwer 1849: 3).

From Brouwer’s point of view, this was decisive. The status of Wehali in the preceding decades had been unclear to say the least. Portuguese reports say that Wehali rebelled against Dili in 1817 but was eventually forced to submit (Castro 1867: 281-284). On the 1818 list of the Timorese domains compiled by the French visitor Louis de Freycinet (1827: 554), Wehali is included among the Portuguese allies, as distinguished from tributaries. Instead, other, Dutch,
reports refer to the Paravicini Contract of 1756, claiming a continuous, if theoretical suzerainty, over the lands of Wewiku-Wehali. All these conflicting reports indicate an indigenous structure of power which lived its own life, practically autonomous from European diplomatic arrangements, but where the symbolical capital of the central ruler, conveniently translated as “Emperor”, was found useful. All this would play into the border treaties of 1851 and 1859, in which most kingdoms supposedly attached to Wehali were counted as belonging to the Dutch sphere.

From other sources, in particular the ethnographic studies by Vroklage (1953) and Therik (2004), it is apparent that Brouwer missed much of the picture, especially omitting the immovable, but still indispensable Maromak Oan, over whom the Liurais were technically executive rulers. In Rogge’s memorandum, this figure is likewise conspicuous by his near-absence. Rogge distinguishes between symbolically “male” and “female” rajas; the latter were:

[...] beings who might do nothing, real figureheads who do not speak in government matters; appearing at state meetings, they do not even say anything to the [Dutch] government, they just sit quietly and communicate via the governing regent or grandees. They are in fact luxury articles, and can also be found in some somewhat well-situated kingdoms: Wehali, Biboki, and Fialaran have such rajas. (Rogge 1865: 8).

Instead, Rogge states that the Liurai is the central figure who is supposedly the suzerain over thirteen Dutch and eight Portuguese kingdoms. Every seven to ten years he travels around his realm, on both sides of the border, to collect tax from the local regents. At the same time, Rogge realizes the limitations of the Liurai’s powers which were not absolute, since every kingdom had its own governance.

He can be regarded as the head of a confederation; his executive power is limited to foreign affairs and relations with the [Dutch] government. This, however, is only limited to representation, dependent on the other regents. In the perception of the land, the Liurai cannot regulate anything without consulting the other regents. In internal affairs, he can intervene between two of them in the interests of the public order and safety. If disputes arise between them, which endanger a peaceful solution, he can act as an arbiter between the quarrelling parties. (Rogge 1865: 5).

Rogge was trying to capture the intricate realities of local power using western political-diplomatic concepts: confederation, representation, consultation, public order. However, Belunese society was characterized by fragmentation rather than order.

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19 Letter, Resident Hazaart to Governor Pinto, 7-4-1818, ANRI Timor 34.
A regent has direct power only over the people in his land, which is handed over as a crown domain upon accession, and of which he enjoys the fruits during his reign. This domain belongs to the regency, in common ownership with the grandees. The direct internal power is therefore inalienable from possession of land. The people in Belu still belong to the land. The minor chiefs, here called Tommonggongs [Temukungs], and the elders of the people, are the immediate representatives of the respective grandees, the possessors of the land, and must bring all the internal affairs of the people to him for judgement and decision making. They also have a voice in the conventions, mainly when it touches upon the regulation of proceeds for one aim or another, as in, for example, the selection of a raja. A majority have no influence. When opposition occurs, the handling of the matter is impeded and the opponents are won over as far as possible by argumentation, persuasion, or bribery. From this follows frequent vexations from one party and resistance from the other, especially among such a troublesome people who have little inclination for subordination, where egotism leaves its stamp on everything, because of the lack of civilization and few noble driving forces for the common best, having a strong inclination for separation. As people live so dispersed, almost anyone can regard himself as king without concern for other people’s affairs: a society almost fragmented in the single individual. (Rogge 1865: 6-7).

In this ostensibly dispersed system (or non-system), the authority of Wehali became a tool to achieve Dutch colonial ambitions, and Rogge discusses the possible implications of a new contract with the Belu rulers at great length. He alleges that the various rajas were enthusiastic about the prospect of receiving the gezaghebber in their lands, and that a military escort was not even necessary for his safety – although still needed to enhance the prestige of the European visitor. The idea of unsavoury individualism is not endorsed by later ethnographic research which, in contrast, tends to stress the strong structural features of Belu society. Although we know little if anything about Rogge’s political ideals, he certainly represents an official Dutch concern to counter indigenous disorder with ordered colonial rule, as yet hampered by the non-intervention policy. Old hierarchical structures in Europe at the time were being increasingly challenged by popular demands for reform, possibly reinforcing colonial anxieties about harmful individual agency.

Grijzen, writing at a time of increasing efforts to subordinate native polities to a bureaucratic structure, is much less enthusiastic about the authority of Wehali. In his detailed ethnography, he outlines the well-known legends about the ancient migration from Sina Mutin Malaka (White China Melaka) to South Belu, and the Wehali origin of the various Belunese kingdoms. While Brouwer and Rogge only speak about the Liurai, Grijzen is mainly concerned with the sacred lord, the Maromak Oan. Although the Maromak Oan of Wehali must have wielded great power in bygone days, his authority had decayed with the passing of time. Most of the heirlooms had been taken away from Belu in the eighteenth century and subsequently destroyed. The main kingdom in the north, Fialaran, fell out with the Maromak Oan over some political issue and

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20 Rogge (1865: 3).
21 As discussed in detail in Vroklage (1953), Herman Schulte Nordholt (1971), and Therik (2004).
stopped paying tax in the mid-nineteenth century, and Wehali was further weakened by intrigues hatched by its sister kingdom, Wewiku. In the eyes of the officious Dutch controleur, Wehali kingship was largely a thing of the past, although the old glory had not entirely vanished.

Truly, not much is left of the absolute faith in the supernatural power of the Maromak Oan; however, when there is danger or disasters befall people in Belu, and they do not know any other means to avert them, from time to time they will invoke help from the Maromak Oan as a last resort. In one field, however, the name of the Son of God is mentioned on solemn occasions with the same reverence as before, namely: in the field of legends. There he is still the ruler par excellence, the man who rules over the fate of land and people. [...] Certainly, the Maromak Oan now largely belongs to tradition, and will probably be entirely so assigned in the near future. However, knowledge of his ancestry and previous power is necessary for a good understanding of the political situation in Belu and the relationship with various kingdoms in Portuguese Timor. (Grijzen 1904: 24-25).

Grijzen’s disdain for the central Belu lord is accentuated in his reminiscences of the border delimitation in 1898, when he paid the Maromak Oan a visit.

Shortly after our arrival, the meeting with the ruler took place. Now, for long time I have learnt to conjure up but a modest image of “rulers” and “self-rulers”; nevertheless, this “Son of God” once again really disappointed me. He was a rather dirty, insignificant, middle-aged little man who, as far as could be seen, did not exert the least power, even over his own subjects. (Grijzen 1924: 597).

This scornful attitude towards the Maromak Oan is characteristic of the increasing colonial disapproval of indigenous rulership in the nineteenth century. While East Indies rulers were initially regarded as respectable counterparts, changing conditions after 1800 increasingly marked them as detached from civilized governance. Technological and economic advances, bureaucratization, military disparity, and emerging racialism caused officials all over the Dutch possessions to castigate sultans, rajas, and chiefs in the severest terms. To the bestuursambtenaren, Timorese rajas seemed to be the anathema of the progress which they believed characterized the fast-developing Dutch society (Bongenaar 2005: 266-268; Maarten Manse 2021: 44-45).

Unsurprisingly, the diatribes of the colonial official-cum-scholar are partly at odds with later research. In fact, the precedence of the Maromak Oan has led a life of its own up to the present, although the last incumbent died in 1970. For people who argued that Timor is one whole, the idea of Wehali as the navel of Timor and of a Timor-wide partition into three Liurais and further

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22 People in present-day North Belu tend to stress that they have never been subordinated to Wehali, but constitute their own hierarchy. Judging from European data, this is only part of the picture. Historical tradition, as recorded by Herman Joseph Seran, posits a matrimonial fetosawa-umamane relationship as a Fialaran prince once married a Wehali princess, thereby establishing a relationship between North and South Belu (Seran 2007: 141).
local rulers under the Maromak Oan played a certain role in the convulsions which led to Timor-Leste’s independence. 23

Among our three colonial visitors, a clear trajectory can be found in their estimations of indigenous authority. While Brouwer sees the Liurai or “Emperor” in positive terms as an essential tool to assert obscure Dutch claims against the Portuguese, Rogge, writing after the inclusion of most of Belu under Dutch suzerainty, is more careful, highlighting both the role of the Wehali hierarchy and the fragmented aspects of the same. Finally, Grijzen points out the decline and ultimate irrelevance of the old sacral lordship for the system of petty kingdoms which the Dutch ventured to monitor.

**Prospects for rulers and ruled**

The three authors were all confronted with the central question pertaining to colonial expansion: What use was the subordination of Belu? What could the land, enabled by the expansion, yield to the global economic apparatus? How would this benefit the locals? In 1899, C. Th. van Deventer launched the idea that the colonies were not principally a Dutch milch-cow but that the Netherlands owed a “debt of honour” to the people of the East Indies. However, ideas about the Dutch duty to promote progress and civilization had been found much earlier than the so-called “Ethical Policy” which took shape around 1900 (Van den Doel 2011: 150; Manse 2021: 50). It is therefore interesting to see how concerns about the possibilities of the land came up when “marginal” and remote corners of the colonial realm were concerned.

Brouwer is the most explicit voice in this respect; he was writing at a time when very little was known about the interior of Belu and hence its potential was still unknown. As a mining surveyor, his main concern was copper, a metal of vital importance to the fast-growing society of the West, where the Netherlands was in its early stages of industrialization. In his report he speaks enthusiastically about alleged findings of copper and iron ore and other minerals, none of which proved profitable judging from later reports. He taxes his informants rather differently: the raja of Harneno has proven mendacious, serving the Dutchman “childish, impertinent” lies, while the Babas (Chinese) turned out to be much more “developed” than the locals and provided important data. He also received samples of an indigenous medicine, said to cure cancer and venereal diseases, from the governor in Dili. Crops and forest products such as rice, sandalwood, and coffee are described in some detail, alongside indigenous weaving techniques and whaling. Appended is a long list of the samples of plants he sent to Batavia for closer consideration. He provides a quite extensive mapping of the opportunities to extract a profit from the land, and emphasizes that Belu is well worth acquiring – especially, it might be assumed, since he was trying to obtain mineral concessions there.

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23 The modern history of Wehali is treated by Francillon 1980. For current ideas about Wehali as the origin point (father and mother) of other communities of Timor, see Andrey Damaledo 2018: 71-83, 103, 105.
The inhabitants are inevitably associated with primitivism, although Brouwer also offers a benevolently patronizing aspect of this.

In fact, we Europeans often imagine that only we are happy; however, we err. How often do we not envy our childhood and wish it back – these people still possess that childhood, the innocent, the unconsidered. But, as we regain our reason after making such a wish, and think about the noble satisfaction which higher development has given us, the delight in childish joy lasts only for a moment, before making way for a grateful feeling on our part, and for the hearty wish that these people might also embrace more development and civilization. (Brouwer 1849: n.p.).

For all his mission civilisatrice, he is far from uncritical of the Dutch colonial project. He notes that, from their experiences in the Dutch colonial hub, Kupang, previous writers have castigated Timorese people as lethargic, although the Belunese differ in many respects. He also comments on the proficiency in Portuguese of the Luso-affiliated aristocrats, compared to the lacklustre Dutch cultural influence. Finally, he makes the somewhat surprising statement that the Timorese he has encountered do not resort to physical violence in daily life, and refers to a conversation with Governor Monteiro Torres.

He was able to tell me that people said that the Dutch handled the people under their rule so terribly harshly they complained “that the Dutch officials had them beaten!” (Brouwer 1849: n.p.).

No such colonial doubts crossed Rogge’s mind, at least in his 1865 Memorie – unsurprising considering its official character. He mentions a number of points which could be addressed when new contracts are enforced: education, vaccination, resources to build infrastructure, government rights to allocate leases and sub-leases in order to control opium and weapon sales. Like Brouwer, his opinion about the possibilities of Central Timor is partially positive: it does not compare too badly with other indigenous states in the Netherlands East Indies under indirect rule. Still, it is obvious to this official that the people are insufficiently developed to nurture own interests, not least considering the frequent petty wars in the region. Forceful intervention could only have an advantageous effect on peace and order, and the wellbeing of this “society still mired in its childishness”.

In the spirit of evolutionism and progress, Rogge deems the Belunese to stand “on a very low rung of development” and have “very few needs”. He sees the import of “foreign elements” as necessary to promote trade. At the same time, his view of the economically important Chinese is ambivalent: they have marital ties with the “intellectually under-developed” lords and their activities do not always benefit the people. In contrast to Brouwer, Rogge

24 Rogge (1865: 6).
25 Rogge (1865: 25).
only very briefly mentions local products of importance, such as beeswax and sandalwood, and displays a very guarded optimism about the progress of trade.

For all his encyclopaedic knowledge of things Belunese, Grijzen is even less enthusiastic about the prospects of the land. His ethnographic survey of the political structure, family life, bride-price, adjudication, religion, and so forth does not portray a society in change, or with much interest in changing its own conditions. For example, when describing the roads, or absence thereof, he comments:

The chiefs and the population do not feel the least need for improvement; moreover, most of the chiefs have too little power to force their subject to do regular work on the roads [...] the transport of trade items can only take place using *picol* horses; the population is generally not very eager to do coolie service. (Grijzen 1904: 13).

Similarly, young Belunese from well-to-do families fail to improve their lot by embracing European education. The Dutch authorities had set up schools in Atapupu, Jenilu, and Fialaran around 1865, mostly earmarked for the children of chiefs and rajas; however, they were soon forced to close because of lack of pupils. Economic structures in the interior were also weak. Most of the trade by far was in Chinese hands, but these “sons of the Heavenly Kingdom” often follow Belunese *adat* rather than Chinese customs, and most of them do not take a significant amount of goods to the outside (Grijzen 1904: 35). This image of a rather pristine society is also paralleled in Grijzen’s reminiscences in which he repeatedly stresses the lack of any real European influence in most of Central Timor – and often the glaring lack of respect for the colonial representatives (Grijzen 1924).

**INDIVIDUAL OBSERVATIONS AND COLONIAL CIRCULATION OF KNOWLEDGE**

Decolonial theorists have often stressed the coloniality of knowledge in which a western epistemology has regularly excluded references to subjects outside the European/western sphere. This, by implication, would have created a systematization of knowledge in which people such as Brouwer, Rogge, and Grijzen saw the Belunese through a prism of fundamental externality. Recent interventions have suggested that this view of the workings of coloniality is too black-and-white to be entirely convincing (Paul Anthony Chambers 2020). Nevertheless, the coloniality of the early writings on Belu ties in with Winichakul’s observation in a Thai setting, that territoriality is socially and humanly constructed by way of classification, communication, and enforcement (Winichakul 1994: 17). Knowledge production about Belu was made at the interstices between two colonial powers which both regarded the region as marginal, but also those between coloniality and a Timorese indigeneity which contrariwise perceived Belu as central – even in a cosmological-global sense.
This ambivalent perception of a virtual *terra incognita*, which was simultaneously a periphery and an exemplary centre, is interestingly developed by our three authors, who roughly belonged to three stages of the colonial subordination: first, the curious prospector and self-made diplomat, then the observant official presiding over a recently appropriated region, and finally the systematic official-cum-scholar who realized that you need to understand those you wish to dominate. There is no indication that any of them knew about the texts of the others; instead, we see three concurrent (in space, not in time) attempts to make sense of a basically unknown society, grounded in their different backgrounds as jurist, military officer, and trained *bestuursambtenaar*. In line with the colonial circulation of knowledge via educational institutions, which proliferated after the mid-nineteenth century (Fasseur 1993), the last author, Grijzen, is in fact the most sceptical about indigenous governance and general prospects. Together, their texts form fragments of the "paper empire" of data systematized by the colonial knowledge regime (Manse 2021: 11).

Much has been written about the close relationship between the emergence of ethnography and colonialism (Hägerdal 2017: 582-583). From a post-colonial point of view, the Orientalism pervading the nineteenth-century texts about Timor have had an impact on writings about the island up to the present time. The well-known magistral study by Schulte Nordholt, *The political system of the Atoni of Timor* (1971), which also covers Belu, was written by a former colonial official and largely built on Dutch colonial reports, using structural anthropological methods developed for the training of colonial officials (Peter Berger 2009: 28). Bernard Vroklage’s similarly verbose work on Belu (1953) presents raw data gathered during seven months in the late colonial era via missionary channels, based on highly contested ideas about *Kulturkreisen* (Fritz Bornemann 1953: 292). Without denying the great empirical value of modern studies of this kind, the intellectual genealogy also highlights the problems of studying a historical society which has left almost no texts of its own. For pre-colonial and colonial Belu, we have no choice but to use European texts by people like Brouwer, Rogge, and Grijzen in conjunction with oral narratives recorded in the colonial and post-colonial eras. Ongoing research in linguistics and archaeology is likely to broaden the picture in the future.\(^{26}\)

Nevertheless, a critical reading of these texts can illuminate the uneven, multi-faceted trajectory of colonialism. In the vein of Ann Laura Stoler (2010), we can undertake an ethnography of the colonial archive and, with her famous formulation, read the texts along the archival grain. While the locals described by Brouwer, Rogge, and Grijzen do not really have an autonomous voice, the European hopes, ambitions, and frustrations visible in the texts bring an awareness to a local reality which defied complete classification and subordination. To return to the concept of concurrences, the

\(^{26}\) For a pioneering attempt to enrich our understanding of the Timorese past by using lexical evidence, see Fox (1991). New avenues of using archaeology are found in McWilliam et al. (2012).
texts also reflect local efforts to order their own lives in the face of European encroachment – a historical dynamic at the interstices. The Belunese of the colonial texts are supposedly lazy, disrespectful, mendacious, undeveloped, unwilling to do coolie service, attached to faded power symbols, socially fragmented, and satisfied with little. Especially when seen in conjunction with modern anthropological research and oral traditions, this can equally well be interpreted as silent resistance, and a partly successful one at that, especially when compared to the extreme violence marking the progress of Portuguese colonialism on the other side of the border in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Houben 2021: 119-123; René Pélissier 1996: 257-292). We can give the last word to Grijzen who, with a characteristic mixture of cynicism and self-righteous paternalism, outlines the dilemma of the colonial state (and, perhaps, the gross misrepresentation of his own role) in words somewhat reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s novel Victory: setting out to create a stable colonial regime, there was little economic opportunity to be had in the end, but considerable skill among the indigenous people to use any benefits offered by the white strangers – at least until taxes and corvée service drastically changed the tone.

Indeed, our officials often played Santa Claus to the chiefs, offering all kinds of presents, just to make or keep the gentlemen happy. Therefore, the budget also included a post for “items for gifts”. No wonder the inhabitants of the Portuguese borderlands, who languished under the yoke of the bandera mutin, regarded us as a sort of angel. More than once did I traverse Portuguese territories which had rebelled against their overlords and where no Portuguese dared set foot, without encountering the least obstacle. When we were careful to bring just a small Dutch flag, everywhere we were as if in Abraham’ bosom. (Grijzen 1923: 492).

27 Here, also it is possible to refer to Ricardo Roque’s statement of “mutual parasitism” in an East Timorese context, in which colonial and local elites used each other to their own advantage. Space does not allow me to follow this interesting track in this article; see Roque (2010).

28 “[Trader Morrison] was the dearly beloved friend of a quantity of God-forsaken villages up dark creeks and obscure bays, where he traded for produce. He would often sail, through awfully dangerous channels up to some miserable settlement, only to find a very hungry population clamorous for rice, and without so much ‘produce’ between them as would have filled Morrison’s suitcase. Amid general rejoicings, he would land the rice all the same, explain to the people that it was an advance, that they were in debt to him now; would preach to them energy and industry, and make an elaborate note in a pocket-diary which he always carried; and this would be the end of that transaction. I don’t know if Morrison thought so, but the villagers had no doubt whatever about it. Whenever a coast village sighted the brig, it would begin to beat all its gongs and hoist all its streamers, and all its girls would put flowers in their hair and the crowd would line the river bank, and Morrison would beam and glitter at all this excitement through his single eyeglass with an air of intense gratification”. (Conrad 2018 [1914], Chapter Two).

29 The white flag; the old Portuguese flag was white (later blue-white) with an emblem, while the modern green-and-red version was adopted after the revolution of 1910.
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