

Life and death in Kupang

THE POPULATION OF KUPANG

During the VOC era in maritime Southeast Asia, the evolving port towns were the meeting place for several different cultures, which were blended together within the very economic apparatus that was their *raison d'être*. A number of characteristics have been suggested in terms of defining the colonial port: urban concepts implemented by Europeans; a heavily fortified area; a separation of European and indigenous spheres; pluralistic features; ethnicity as a defining category; numerous migrants among the population; a male majority; a large slave population; an urban centre that was relatively poorly integrated with the hinterland (Hussin 2007:334). It should be borne in mind that these criteria – apart from the first – does not necessarily set the colonial port apart from other Asian settlements. Non-colonial port towns functioned in similar ways, as proven by such examples as Pontianak in Kalimantan, founded by a seafarer of Arab descent. In the Timorese context, the prefix ‘colonial’ nevertheless maintains a degree of relevance: there were virtually no similarities between colonial towns such as Kupang, Larantuka and Lifau, and other settlements in the region.¹ In fact, the list of characteristics above is more or less relevant for the settlement that was founded outside Fort Concordia and which developed into a small town during the eighteenth century.

During the first half-century of growth certain defining features evolved in Kupang. Compared to most Dutch port settlements it was a

¹ The term ‘externally induced settlements’ has been suggested for this type of town. Whether initiated by Europeans or others, the settlements did not develop from within the local society itself, but were founded by outside forces which needed an entry port that gave them access to the products of a certain geographical region; see Hussin 2007:335.

very small place, and although no one seems to have taken the trouble to count the population in this early period, a rough estimate for the eighteenth century can be given. In 1752, Kupang housed 62 European and 765 indigenous Christians, which suggests an overall population of maybe a few thousand.² By this time, therefore, it had developed into a modest, but by Southeast Asian standards, fairly populated place. French visitors in 1801 counted 60 to 80 houses, which may look like an understatement but it must be remembered that Kupang had been destroyed by British artillery four years previously (Lombard-Jourdain and Salmon 1998:398-400).

The number of Company employees varied greatly according to the circumstances. On the eve of the Makassar War in 1667, there were 157 soldiers, sailors and other employees. Most of these were sent to the theatre of war in Sulawesi, much to the consternation of the Timorese allies.³ Henceforth the number of soldiers usually fluctuated between 40 and 75 men, with the total being more often closer to the first number than to the second. Mortality rates were high, at least during the early phases of the fort, and at times the VOC authorities even admitted that disobedient soldiers received lenient punishments due to the weakness of the garrison – the *opperhoofd* had to be economical with his manpower.⁴ Those who survived their service could obtain permission to settle as white free burghers; this category, however, never seems to have been large, which meant the great majority of the urban population were non-European or Eurasian. At times, the government in Batavia was expressly opposed to ex-servicemen becoming new, free burghers, the reasons for which are pointed out in a missive from 1717:

when they are not married, they subsequently and at first opportunity marry one of the daughters or relatives of the allied rajas or grandees of the land. They then usually become bold and have grand pretensions. This is often very harmful for the Noble Company, and also causes a lot of trouble with [the rajas and grandees] as well as among themselves. (Coolhaas 1979:267.)

² ANRI Timor:43, *Brieven Kerkenraad Koepang 1739-1779*, Table of Christians in Dutch Timor, 8-9-1752.

³ VOC 1264 (1667), f. 73b.

⁴ VOC 8310 (1686-87), *Dagregister*, sub 12-9-1686.

Here, the Governor General alludes to the Timorese marriage system. Timorese kings often took several wives from various noble lineages, which would help bind the various parts of the princedoms more closely to the central ruler. It also meant that the family who acted as the wife-giver assumed a position of precedence, as they had the right to ask the wife-receiver for assistance. In the same way, daughters of regents and even kings married Company servants in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and at least six cases are documented.⁵ These marriages were arranged – they were certainly not spontaneous love affairs – to bind the Dutch to the interests of the Timorese elite. There was even a tendency for regular *barlaque* relations to develop since at least three descendants of the Sonbai regent Ama Tomananu married Dutchmen. The difference with the bona fide *barlaque* system was, of course, that the Dutch bride-receivers belonged to different families, although they may have been seen as collective representatives of the Company, that is, the stranger lord.

Few, if any, European-born women accompanied the soldiers and sailors to Timor. Wives of the *opperhoofden* are mentioned from time to time but their ethnic background is not usually stated. What is known for sure is that inter-ethnic marriages were common, not only among free burghers but also among employees, who were able to marry with the permission of their superiors. The *Dagregisters* make regular mention of Company servants who appeared before the *opperhoofden* with their local spouses-to-be to ask for permission to marry. Such consent was regularly given, although the authorities sometimes hesitated when a Dutchman requested marriage to a girl from the highest level of the aristocracy. At certain stages, the Supreme Government in Batavia was decidedly opposed to intermarriage between Company servants and locals and insisted on approving every single marriage, although this may only have resulted in an increase in the practice of having concubines.⁶ The pattern of intermarriage can be studied by reading the baptismal book

⁵ Namely, the first marriage of Pieterrella, sister of King Pono Koi of Kupang, to Thomas Jacobsz; the second marriage of Pieterrella to Floris Jansz; Anna Maria, daughter of Ama Tomananu of Sonbai, married the surgeon Isaacq van Doorne; Eva, niece of Anna Maria, married Pieter Bruyn; Aletta, granddaughter of Ama Tomananu, married the soldier Jan Schrolff; Maria, daughter of Paulus van Coupang, married Jan van Geervliet.

⁶ Such restrictions are mentioned in the *Generale missieven* under 1714; see Coolhaas 1979:49.

from Kupang that covers the period 1669-1732.⁷ Leaving out some cases of obvious liaisons with concubines, between 1669 and 1679 there were eleven clear cases of mixed parentage (Dutch father, Asian mother) recorded, which may illustrate the practice.

Marcus Danielsz – Cornelia from Korbaffo
Abraham Gabriel – Petronella from Paliacatte (in India)
Idier van de Velde – Elisabeth from Sonbai
Dirk Jansz van Aerde – Andresia Perera (presumably a Portuguese mestiza)
Thomas Jacobsz – Pieterrella, princess of Kupang (later remarried to Floris Jansz)
Isaacq van Doorne – Anna Maria, daughter of the regent of Sonbai
Leendert Welcken – Maria from Rote
Roelof Pietersz – Cornelia from Kupang
Michiel Siedelman – Janneke Marius from Kupang
Pieter Noorman – Sibilla from Ndao
Albert Gillisz Buijsman – Maria Marcus from Kupang

Of the 119 mothers of probable Asian origin in the baptismal book, no less than 53 came from Rote, which could be partly because of their reputation for being beautiful, with fair skin and Malay features. They also often came from *nusak* that had been forced to deliver slaves for the Company. Indeed, the *Dagregisters* occasionally point out that the spouse-to-be was a former slave woman, who naturally had to be manumitted and baptized before marriage. In striking contrast to the pattern of the 1620s, there were no more than two women identified as Solorese, despite there being a Solorese kampung in Kupang. It is possible that the Solorese and other peoples in the area became more aware aware of a Muslim-Christian dichotomy over the course of the seventeenth century, especially in family matters. Kupang is a common point of origin, as it is expressly indicated that 27 mothers out of the 119 came from there, but in most cases it is not possible to tell whether the woman in question was Helong or just born at the place. For the rest, there is a very mixed group of mothers, coming from Sonbai, Amfoan, Taebenu, Sawu, Flores, Tanah Bugis, Batavia and India, among other places.

⁷ *Doopboek Timor* (Baptismal book of Timor), 1669-1732 AD, ANRI. Transcript kindly provided by Diederick Kortlang, Leiden.

The wives and offspring of the Europeans, once baptized and integrated into urban society, had their given legal rights. Types of racialism were just as present in Dutch as in Portuguese colonial society, but in both cases they were relatively vague and ideologically undefined: rather, the phenomenon was highly utilitarian. When it suited their interests, the Dutch overseas would emphasize ethnic or racial hierarchy in order to secure privileges for their own group (Jones 2003:7, 38-9, 69-70). For example, the free burghers who stayed in Kupang would typically be characterized as *mixties burger* in official papers if they were Eurasian – a contrast to the Portuguese materials where such distinctions are rarely made. In practice, the *mixties* label in the Dutch East Indies would signify not only mixed blood but also lower class (Bosma and Raben 2008:35). Given the lack of European women, however, the inter-ethnic marriage pattern could not be avoided; this made it necessary to accept those non-whites and Eurasians who were part of the Dutch social orbit. According to Dutch law, widows and children of Company servants and free burghers were able to inherit, and the same law was applied in case of family conflicts. Normally, however, a non-white wife and her children could not travel to the Netherlands once her husband's service had ended (Taylor 1983:17), a regulation that gave rise to awkward situations. According to the British visitor George Tobin (1792), the wives were 'jealous to a degree unknown in colder regions and have been known to administer poison to their husbands on their quitting the country for Europe' (Schreiber 2007:160).

In spite of the Calvinist moral that officials in the East Indies tried to uphold, daily reality was far removed from the Calvinist ideals of family life and sexual prudency. Consulting the baptismal book one finds that many Eurasian children had mothers who were not baptized, and therefore could not have been married to the European father. Unsurprisingly, slaves were kept as concubines, but so, too, were free women. This pattern of a loose moral life is well documented in other areas under VOC control; during the initial phase of a Company post in particular, the Dutch soldiers and sailors tended to lead a 'licentious' life, much to the consternation of the authorities. Official measures would be imposed sooner or later, since the keeping of concubines and the practice of having casual sex debased both the Christian faith and Dutch prestige, and might incur the wrath of God (Bosma and Raben 2008:28). When Anthony Hurt was appointed *opperhoofd* in 1665, he

submitted a report that vividly described the immoral life of his compatriots. His predecessor, Hugo Cuylenburgh, had taken some prisoners on Rote while the latest trouble was suppressed there. Among them were relatives of a grandee called Sebille. Cuylenburgh then married a daughter of Sebille according to Rotenese custom, which was of course highly reprehensible from an official Dutch point of view. However, since his wife was not faithful, he put her in irons and acquired another mistress. The father, Sebille, then appeared before Fort Concordia and asked for his family to be returned to Rote. When the *opperhoofd* did not respond, he furiously announced that he would walk through the various *nusak* and preach against the despicable Dutch and their Termanu friends.⁸ Anthony Hurt made some particularly poisonous remarks about Cuylenburgh:

Furthermore [the garrison] spent its time in the fort, as I was told and partly as I saw with my own eyes, with drinking and futile loose habits, that Mr. Cuylenburgh was able to engage in one day after another. They were so troublesome that it appeared difficult for him to set foot outside the fort. It is true that his impotency has impeded him somewhat, but this is hardly caused by anything else than such a way of living.⁹

With Calvinist fervour, Hurt proceeded to evict the concubines to outside of the area guarded by the sentries. The surgeon, carpenter and smith were summoned to appear before the new *opperhoofd* on which occasion they insisted that Cuylenburgh had permitted them to keep a maid. The latter, however, denied this. It came as no surprise, commented Hurt, that the more lowly Company servants indulged in a loose life, when their master behaved the way he did.

Dutch moral order was not easily implemented in the generations that followed either. The Helong sometimes sold sexual services to Dutch soldiers, as is documented in a case from 1688. One night in October, the soldier Martinus Coccius secretly left the ramshackle palisade around the fort by removing a plank. He went into the Kupangese *negeri* and had sexual intercourse with a woman, perhaps a slave girl, but afterwards refused to pay for her services. This caused much consternation in the

⁸ VOC 1252 (1665), ff. 1226-7.

⁹ VOC 1252 (1665), f. 1227. *Impotentie* (impotency) could mean both lack of power in a general sense, and sexual infirmity.

negeri and Coccius barely managed to run back to the fort. To leave one's post was, strictly speaking, an offence that could lead to death by hanging, but in the end Coccius was only sentenced to six months of hard work in chains. The fornication as such was apparently considered a minor issue here.¹⁰

Far into the eighteenth century there was still, at least from an official perspective, a problem with concubines. By 1745, there were a number of children who had been begotten by Europeans and 'black' mistresses.¹¹ After the death of their fathers they were left under the supervision of a band of 'drunken, beastly and hideously living' mothers, as one source put it.¹² Allegedly, these women tended to neglect their maternal duties, instead leaping around in the wilderness outside Kupang, amusing themselves with the Timorese. The youngsters, especially the girls, 'roamed the roads like sheep', and indulged in various immoral activities. The *opperhoofd* at the time, Jan Anthony Meulenbeek, admonished the wayward mothers, urging them to send their offspring to school, so that they would learn something or at the very least, not cause such mischief. Since his words fell on deaf ears, Meulenbeek subsequently decided to apprehend these so-called 'wild running European children' and turn them over to an Indonesian schoolmaster to be brought up properly.¹³ That previous *opperhoofden* had not taken action on this issue may, of course, imply that they did not see the upbringing of Eurasian children an issue worthy of attention.

Men who were placed under Dutch jurisdiction were known as *Mardijkers*. In VOC times, they stayed in two kampungs: one was called *Mardijka* and located outside of Kupang; the other was called *Fattu Fetto* and situated within the town. Later on, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the VOC cultivated new land in *Babau*, further to the north-east.¹⁴ *Mardijkers* were often Christians, but not necessarily so;¹⁵ unlike on *Ambon*, in *Batavia*, and so on, they did not have any recognizable Portuguese connection, but rather bore Dutch names and

¹⁰ VOC 1460 (1688-89), Resolutions, sub 15 to 16-10-1688.

¹¹ 'Black' could mean any native Southeast Asian, as opposed to Europeans and Chinese.

¹² VOC 8339 (1746), f. 100.

¹³ VOC 8339 (1746), f. 100, 182-4. Meulenbeek himself was killed on *Rote* one month after writing this report; it is unclear whether his principles were upheld by subsequent *opperhoofden*.

¹⁴ *Kartodirdjo* 1973:405. According to a source from the 1840s this was because the *Sonbai* population increasingly placed pressure on the old lands.

¹⁵ Compare *Coolhaas* (1979:280), who refers to 'Christense en heydense mardijkers' (Christian and heathen *mardijkers*).

had never been identified as Catholics. Mentions of Mardijkers are few and far between in the second half of the seventeenth century. The Mardijkers appear to have derived from the Timorese congregations or from the other islands connected to the VOC.¹⁶ Some are recorded as manumitted slaves, but there were also aristocrats among them.¹⁷ One case is Fredrik Hendrick, clearly named after the Prince of Orange. He was presumably a Helong since he resided in the ‘Kupangese *negeri*’. He was baptized in the early 1670s and was married to Susanna, a daughter of Ama Tomananu, the Sonbai regent. The latter bore the Portuguese name Dom Luíz for a while, but subsequently dropped it and did not henceforth appear as a Christian. Nevertheless, he did allow several members of his family to be baptized by Dutch clergymen. The fact that the transition to a Christian semi-urban status was not always easy, is seen from Fredrik Hendrick’s turbulent family life.

On 7 August 1673, Fredrik Hendrick arrived at Fort Concordia and approached the *opperhoofd*, Jacob van Wijckersloot. He complained about a certain *bijvrouw* (co-wife) whom he had kept before his marriage to Susanna, but who was now incompatible with Christian standards.¹⁸ The co-wife, however, continued to cause trouble for the pair and assaulted them verbally in a blasphemous way. Fredrik Hendrick suggested that the Company should keep her in a particular slave house for a while, where she could fetch water for the garrison. The *opperhoofd* found that he could not refuse this request, and the woman was consequently taken into custody. Her plight did not last long, however. Five days later Fredrik Hendrick came back and asked for the woman to be released, though on certain conditions: she must never again live in the house belonging to Fredrik Hendrick and Susanna, or even speak to them, and if she married someone in the future according to the non-Christian *adat*, then she should pay back a sum in gold that Fredrik Hendrick had previously given her. Moreover, if she ever again acted aggressively towards the pair, and this could be proven by witnesses, she would become a slave belong-

¹⁶ By the first half of the nineteenth century local tradition explained that a Mardijker community had existed from before the Dutch arrival. They would have built the *perahu* that the envoys of the king of Kupang used to sail to Solor to invite the Company. From this point of view, the Mardijkers were originally Rotenese and Sawunese people who had remained on Timor for one reason or another (Sartono Kartodirdjo 1973:405). Rotenese Mardijkers are expressly mentioned in 1688 (VOC 1460 [1688-89], *Dagregister*, sub 10-9-1688).

¹⁷ VOC 1553 (1693-94), Resolutions, sub 21-5-1694.

¹⁸ At least incompatible in theory, considering all the concubines kept by Dutchmen in Kupang.

ing to the Company.¹⁹ The strictly personal dimensions of the conflict remain unknown to us, but it was underpinned by the clash between the Western principle of monogamy and the Timorese *adat*. Although one wife was the norm in the traditional system, wealthy people could afford several. Marriage on Timor involved an economic exchange where a bride-price was paid to the family of the bride, often over a long period of time. When a Christian marriage was carried out and the old relation was nullified, the received wealth was in question; the *belis* had to be returned if the ‘co-wife’ remarried.

The outward appearance of the *Mardijkers* was far from stately. Although they obviously adopted elements of Dutch dress and habits like their Batavian counterparts, a notice from 1742 indicates that they were difficult to distinguish from the lowest strata of early colonial society. At that time, the slaves of Kupang did occasionally escape, yet they were seldom caught by the Timorese allies living in the surrounding area. One reason was that the *Mardijkers* were accustomed to entering the Portuguese sphere without notifying the VOC authorities, and the Timorese could simply not tell the difference between a *Mardijker* and a slave. The authorities tried to solve this problem by forcing the *Mardijkers* to carry a licence whenever they made such outings. Since both Timorese and *Mardijkers* were generally illiterate, the licence consisted of a paper with a red seal. The village leaders were to check those who passed by, and if they failed to stop the eloping slaves, they should be apprehended themselves.²⁰

Other ethnic components of early colonial society in Kupang that were mentioned, were the Rotenese, both slaves and free men. Some of the latter were hostages complete with retinue and they did occasionally undergo baptism. In the early days of Fort Concordia they were quite simply lodged in the fort’s magazine, proof that their numbers were small. Of vital importance for the Kupang community were the Solorese, who stayed in the quarter that, to this day, is still known as *Kampung Solor*.²¹ The free Solorese were either fishermen or temporary residents who carried out small trade, and during the early days of the port they complained about poor treatment at the hands of the

¹⁹ VOC 1301 (1673-74), *Dagregister*, sub 7-8-1673, 12-8-1673.

²⁰ VOC 8335 (1742), f. 19.

²¹ Nowadays the Solorese identity of this quarter has vanished.

Dutch.²² As was usual in the Dutch port towns, Malay – not Dutch – was the daily language of communication. It is doubtful whether even the *Mardijkers* understood any Dutch.

THE CHINESE IMPACT

In the early days of the Dutch establishment on Timor, the Chinese appeared to be more involved with the Portuguese than with the Company. The commercial network of the *Topasses* included Siam, where there was a sizeable Chinese population, and it is known that the Chinese worked in the sandalwood trade at Lifau.²³ Likewise, the ship that arrived annually from Macau must have been partly manned by ethnic Chinese, with individual Macanese choosing to remain on Timor. In the same way, a number of Catholic Chinese stayed on Flores where they lived as seafaring merchants.²⁴ The Makassarese connection was still important here; a Chinese junk joined Francisco Vieira de Figueiredo in 1663-1664, sailing from Makassar to Timor and also visiting Kupang.²⁵ Chinese people did not, however, settle permanently in Kupang until quite late in the seventeenth century. Under the entries for 1687, the baptismal book mentions a non-Christian woman called Anna from Taiwan, who had children with two different Dutchmen, but apart from her, no mothers in this document are indicated as being Chinese.²⁶ In the same year, as related above, a Chinese person staying on Adonara did the Company the service of shooting the troublesome *kapitan* Assam. As is well known, the overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) were an important commercial player in much of Southeast Asia during the Ming and Qing dynasties, despite official disapproval of overseas migration. They were well established in the port towns of Java long before the coming of the Europeans, and along with the rise of Dutch power, their position was

²² VOC 1428 (1686), f. 279a.

²³ Lombard-Jourdain and Salmon 1998:394; VOC 1426 (1685-86).

²⁴ The Macanese Lourenço Lopes married a daughter of Matheus da Costa and the Amanuban princess, and went on to play an important role in Timorese politics (Leitão 1952:11); the exact ethnic background of Lopes is not clear, however. A certain *mestizo* from Macao married Jan de Hornay's Timorese widow some time after 1644 (Leitão 1948:251). For more on the Chinese on Flores, see VOC 1531 (1692-93), *Dagregister*, sub 8-4-1693.

²⁵ VOC 1246 (1664), *Dagregister*, sub 12-3-1664.

²⁶ Coming from Taiwan, Anna (also spelt Ama) could of course have been a non-Han Chinese, as a a number of Austronesian groups inhabited the island.

strengthened since they were able to secure a monopoly on providing certain economic functions. Their success was not solely due to their skills, but also due to the fact that they were able to take the place of indigenous peoples whose commercial activities had been destroyed by the impact of the Dutch. In early colonial Batavia the Chinese settlers provided much of the human infrastructure, serving as merchants, shopkeepers, agriculturalists, and so on; the VOC establishments in Java would have been rather helpless without the benefit of their skills (Pan 1999:152-3; Furnivall 1944:45).

The Chinese junk trade on Batavia seems to have peaked between 1690 and 1730 (Gupta 2001:122). It is therefore not surprising that Chinese seafarers and merchants begin to appear in the Kupang records towards the end of the seventeenth century. For example, four Chinese sloops arrived in March 1694 from Batavia, duly furnished with official trading passes. Four years later six minor sloops, also from Batavia, made a stopover at Lifau. By this time, the Portuguese traders from Macao still tended to obtain the best quality shiploads of sandalwood (Souza 1986:182). By the end of the century, the available sandalwood supplies were almost depleted and in 1698, the Chinese could not acquire more than 8 to 10 bahar (up to approximately 1,800 kg). One ship ventured to go to Belu in the east and trade directly with the locals, thus avoiding the, sometimes trying, stay in Lifau.²⁷ This was typical of Chinese entrepreneurship in the East Indies: they explored commercial possibilities that the Dutch merchants and sailors declined to even attempt. Periodical shipwrecks testified to the potential dangers of their enterprises. A Chinese called Soim Ko²⁸ sailed from Batavia towards Timor in 1698. At the north-eastern cape of Flores, Tanjung Bunga, his craft was lost and all his goods were stolen by the locals. That Tanjung Bunga came under the authority of the *sengaji* of Adonara and hence nominally under the Company's authority was of little or no help. Soim Ko eventually made it to Kupang, where the authorities permitted him to go back to Batavia on another keel in the company of one of his men.²⁹

²⁷ VOC 1609 (1698), f. 42, 98.

²⁸ Without seeing the *hanzi* characters I cannot confidently restore the Chinese names to their normalized *pinyin* form. The element *ko* is an honorary suffix typical for Hokkien people originating from Fujian; compare with Mandarin *ge*, 'elder brother'.

²⁹ VOC 1609 (1698), f. 42.

Several Chinese ships henceforth sailed from Java to Timor, normally on an annual basis. Indeed, the bulk of private long-distance trade was carried out by the Chinese. While the Portuguese factions were fighting each other from 1702 onwards, the *huaqiao* merchants began to gain an advantage over the Macanese traders. Since a large part of the Timorese wood went to Batavia, and from there to China, the price of sandalwood tended to drop.³⁰ A list of incoming ships to Kupang in 1714 is illustrative of this, while also showing the rather limited volume of shipping to this port:

- Laurens Lucasz from Osbeck, free burgher on Timor with his sloop, six *lasten* [6 x 1250 kg], and furnished with Their Excellencies' pass. Leaving on 23 August 1713, via Java's east coast, arriving here on 1 September this year.
- Que Tsiam Ko, *nakhoda*, with his sloop, about 35 *lasten*, and furnished with Their Excellencies' pass. Leaving on 21 September, via Semarang and Java's east coast, arriving here in the Babau Bay on 28 December in the same year, and in the same evening appearing here with his sampan. Going directly to Batavia on 28 April this year with our knowledge.
- Tio Pian Ko, *nakhoda*, with his sloop, about 35 *lasten* and furnished with Their Excellencies' pass. Departing on 29 September 1713 from Batavia, via the east coast of Java. Arriving here in the Babau Bay on 28 December this year. The *nakhoda* Tio Pian Ko passed away in Larantuka. In the past year [the ship and goods] have been sold at a public auction to the burgher Laurens Lucasz who resides here, and is still kept here.
- Tjet Ko, *nakhoda*, with his *kunting*³¹, about 16 *lasten* and furnished with Their Excellencies' pass. Departing from Batavia on 9 October 1713, via the east coast of Java, arriving at this roadstead on 25 February 1714. Departing with our knowledge on 4 May this year, going directly to Batavia, bringing 30 picul of sandalwood.

³⁰ Souza 1986:182-3. Much sandalwood from Malabar in India was likewise brought to East Asia, forcing down prices further.

³¹ A *kunting* (*gonting*) is an open, broad ship, often used for fishing with a dragnet, but also for trade (VOC-Glossarium 2000:66).

- Que Pan Ko, *nakhoda*, with his *kunting*, about 14 *lasten* and furnished with Their Excellencies' pass. Departing on 23 December via Semarang, arriving here at this roadstead on 29 March 1714.³²

Like their white counterparts, the Chinese were periodically deterred from settling permanently in Kupang. In 1717, the Governor General ordered eighteen Chinese and their families to return to Batavia, stating the reason that from time to time, they were found to have stayed there without official permission, 'while this greatly self-assured and bold nation has manifold pretentions and is therefore very dangerous in various respects when they are numerous, and is never to be much trusted'.³³ Apart from the Christian and non-Christian Mardijkers, no more than four Chinese men were permitted to stay in the port town. This restrictive policy soon obviously slackened since references to Chinese settlers steadily became more common in the following decades. By the end of the VOC period there were twice as many Chinese as there were Dutchmen (Schreiber 2007:160). The reason is not hard to find. As the small port town developed and urban routines were becoming more sophisticated, the Chinese emerged as an indispensable element of society, regardless of the European distrust of them that can be gleaned from the above quotation. Since Malay and Makassarese merchants were not welcome in the region, the Chinese could fill their role. Much of the economic activity lay in their hands, not least when it came to merchant trips to other islands and ports in the region, and as middlemen in the early colonial structure, they could hardly be replaced. From a wider perspective, the eighteenth century saw increasing activity by overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, in spite of such incidents as the Dutch massacre of Chinese in Batavia in 1740 Furnivall (1944:46). The *opperhoofd* Elias Jacob Beynon described the situation of the local Chinese community in 1758 – a situation that was of mixed benefit for those involved – as follows:

The Chinese who stay here provide a good service as regards the commerce, and keep the shipping alive. In the same way, the leasing out [of

³² VOC 1853 (1714), ff. 13-4.

³³ Coolhaas 1979:279-80. This followed a resolution issued by Batavia on the same subject (Lombard-Jourdain and Salmon 1998:397). In the same year, 1717, the Company issued a general prohibition against marriages between Chinese and non-Chinese (Pan 1999:153).

economic activities] is favoured and kept in a good state by them. However, most of them are poor and unable [for productive work]. They have a lieutenant who is in charge of them, and pay an annual fee.³⁴

Some conclusions can be drawn about relations between the Chinese and the Dutch and other ethnic groups. Like everywhere else in the VOC sphere, the Chinese community was expected to live in seclusion from other ethnicities, and they depended on Dutch protection to thrive. The *opperhoofden* thought that the Chinese lived disorderly; they were forever coming and going with their sloops, which made it impossible to carry out the required checks on them. In view of this, the authorities decided that any Chinese who leased commercial monopolies must also be in charge of their fellow countrymen and monitor their movements;³⁵ moreover, it was ordered that the gates to the settlers' quarter must be closed every night (Schreiber 2007:160). The suspicion was mutual. In January 1741, a message from Batavia arrived at Kupang with news that a Chinese rising against the Company had failed and that most of the Chinese in the city had been killed. Upon hearing the news about the massacre, some of the Kupang Chinese panicked, gathered their most valuable items and fled into the wilderness. The Dutch second-in-command approached those who remained and told them to stay inside their houses. The local Dutch, he asserted, did not intend to do them any harm as long as they behaved properly.³⁶ Within a few days, everyday life resumed in the little port, but the incident pointed to the vulnerable position of the Chinese; at least, they were prepared to believe that their non-Chinese neighbours might re-enact the horrors of Batavia.

The Dutch authorities were in fact keen to keep the Chinese community contented. This can clearly be seen in a legal case from 1745. To the right of the Koinino River, close to Kampung Solor, lay an area that the lord of the land, the Helong king, had long ago given to the Chinese to use as their graveyard. However, in 1743 the yard was taken over by the burgher Gabriel Vent, who built a fence around it and began to plant maize. Vent did not care to remove the graves and the Chinese complained to the *opperhoofd*. Vent alleged that the land had been turned

³⁴ VOC 3033 (1758), f. 1855a.

³⁵ Van Goor 2004:507. As in Makassar, the rights to manage the trade in lucrative commodities and extract customs fees on their export were auctioned off to individual traders (Jacobs 2000:35).

³⁶ VOC 2534 (1741), f. 145-6.

over to him by a written deed, but the Helong king knew nothing about this. Closer investigation produced a document stating that the Helong executive regent and the king of Amabi had bestowed the graveyard on Vent. The validity of this paper, however, was extremely dubious, for Amabi was an immigrant community that had no right to make deeds. After a period of deliberation between the council and the allied regents, it was decided that the deed was invalid and that the graveyard was to be given back to the Chinese. If the VOC were to argue with the Chinese, they might just move out of the area completely and into the Topass stronghold, Tulang Ikan. The *opperhoofd* pointed out that this would be a major disadvantage to the Dutch; without assistance from the Chinese ‘nation’, they would not be able to carry out their business. Henceforth, land transfers could only take place with the consent of the original lord of the land, the king of Kupang, and with the knowledge of the *opperhoofd*.³⁷

There was also much economic co-operation, as evident from the *Dagregisters*. Partnerships between Europeans and Chinese as well as other ethnic groups were very common when it came to shipping. A Chinese might use the ship of a burgher or a *Mardijker* to sail to the Portuguese ports, possibly employing a Solorese crew, as the Solorese were known to be good sailors.³⁸ In 1737, we even have a case of a ship that was owned by the Sonbai regent Nai Sau, which was rather unusual given the Timorese distrust of the sea. The trader Lo Tam Ko obtained permission from the local authorities to use the regent’s craft in order to go to Alor for trade.³⁹ In spite of the policy of separation of the nationalities mixed marriages between the Chinese and non-Chinese population did occur. In May 1732, a burgher called Dirk Tielman applied to the *opperhoofd* and council to marry the Chinese lady Tsjij Nio. The council had no objections, but ordered that she must first be baptized. It was decided that the holy act should be carried out the coming Sunday and then the

³⁷ VOC 8339 (1746), ff. 209-11. Similarly, witnesses from the early nineteenth century asserted that small trade was completely in Chinese hands and that they were the best artisans (Lombard-Jourdain and Salmon 1998:409). Nation in this case is what today would be termed an ethnic group.

³⁸ VOC 8332 (1738-39), *Dagregister*, sub 25-9-1738, 12-3-1739.

³⁹ VOC 2049 (1736-37), *Dagregister*, sub 22-2-1737.

two could be legally married.⁴⁰ How much religious instruction could be given during this short period of time is of course debatable, with the marriage following a common pattern in pre-modern society of allowing the wife to follow the husband's religion by social routine.

Although they may not have been rich in terms of average wealth owned, the economic entrepreneurship of the Chinese often caused envy, which in a few cases led to murder. A particularly ugly case occurred in 1731. The victim was one Tsióng Tsay, who had been shipwrecked at Dehla on Rote and henceforth remained in Kupang. One April morning he went out with his modest merchandise, consisting of a few knives and handkerchiefs, to sell them in the neighbourhood. Later that same day he was found dead by a fountain. Beside the body were a few fragments of a cutlass and a comb with a plume, similar to those the Helong used as head decoration. For seven months nothing further was found that might solve the murder case, but in November, the Sonbai regent Domingo brought one of his subjects, Nai Loppo, to the fort. Domingo suspected that Nai Loppo, who was also a cattle thief, had killed Tsióng Tsay. By implication, the Helong comb was a deliberate red herring. After due interrogation Nai Loppo admitted to the VOC authorities that he and his friend Nai Tanes had been present on the occasion, but that they were only the henchmen of a Rotenese called Olu who stayed in Kupang as a *Mardijker*. Nai Loppo stated that Olu had murdered the Chinese, while the two frightened Sonbai had run away at the sight of the crime. Olu was taken into custody, although he denied any knowledge about the matter. Suspicions against him grew when it appeared that the fragments found at the side of the body were a fit with his cutlass. Olu claimed to have lent the cutlass to Nai Tanes, to use in a raid against the Amarasi. To the VOC council, the matter seemed a dark affair, while all that remained was to capture Nai Tanes, which was subsequently done a few weeks later. Nai Tanes confessed that he was the actual murderer, assisted by Nai Loppo, but emphasized that he and his friend had done it at the request of Olu. Olu, it transpired, owed Tsióng Tsay a sum of money, a fact confirmed by an entry in the official *Boek van*

⁴⁰ VOC 2239 (1731-32), *Dagregister*, sub 6-5-1732. She was baptized as Helena van Batavia and married Tielman, who was himself a Eurasian born in Kupang, one and a half months later. The couple already had a young daughter born out of wedlock. See the baptismal book of Kupang 1669-1732. There might be a connection to the Tielman family of the late colonial period, members of which held high positions in the Kupang administration.

gedagtes ('Book of thoughts', a legal protocol book) Olu denied the debt in spite of the evidence of the book.

In this way, the perpetrators had been identified, but Olu's role in the matter was still not clear. The allied Timorese regents, who were present at the legal proceedings, decided that little trust should be placed in the two Sonbai: if they listened to such attempts to identify accomplices, many innocent people might be drawn into the affair. They therefore gladly left it to the *opperhoofd* and his council to pass a sentence. In the end, Nai Loppo and Nai Tanes were sentenced to death, but the execution was left to the Sonbai leadership to carry out, since legal practice prescribed that the allies only punished their own subjects. The two men were thus disposed of according to the 'ancestral laws or the customs of the land'.⁴¹ The VOC authorities still had grave suspicions about Olu, and he was instructed to return to Rote and never again appear in Kupang. To all this might be added the fact that the goods stolen from the dead body of Tsiong Tsay consisted of three handkerchiefs and nine reals, far from a lucrative haul even by frugal Timorese standards. The reputation, therefore, of general Chinese prosperity crumbled upon closer inspection.⁴²

Apart from this and a few other incidents, relations between the Chinese and other ethnicities do not stand out as being particularly strained in the VOC documents. By far, the most trouble for the Chinese traders could be expected from the Portuguese of Lifau, who occasionally held up ships suspected of contravening the rules, and lodged complaints to the *opperhoofd* about matters such as the Chinese trafficking of arms.⁴³

SLAVES

Slavery is a global phenomenon, which has afflicted almost all complex human societies. One might wonder whether there is a human (or, one might say, inhuman) impulse to relegate other human beings to a state

⁴¹ VOC 2239 (1732), *Vergaderingen*, 1-4-1732.

⁴² VOC 2239 (1732), *Vergaderingen*, 22-11-1731, 12-12-1731, 8-2-1732, 1-4-1732.

⁴³ See for instance VOC 8332 (1739), ff. 23-6. The evidence, including sworn witness statements by some East Timorese kings, suggests that the accusations of trafficking may not have been altogether unfounded.

of permanent dependence, or even to the status of a commodity. Certain economic factors have been suggested as general explanations of the phenomenon of slavery. A classic theory sees it as a combination of the limited supply of labour and the availability of land, which would make for a 'rational' use of socially inferior manpower resources. More recently it has been argued that the keeping of slaves was often irrational in economic terms and instead was closely related to the status of the slave owner (Boomgaard 2003:88). Southeast Asia in general, and Timor in particular, provide plenty of evidence for these two historical rationales.

A study of slavery in Southeast Asia indicates a considerable breadth and variety in the use of dependent manpower, which questions the customary Western distinction between free and unfree. Indeed, there were degrees of dependency on patrons and masters, rather than a clear-cut set of circumstances. In much of Southeast Asia we can see a rough division between a relatively hard, chattel form of slavery, and a milder form of dependency. The latter gave the dependents certain rights that were laid down in both tradition and through a legal framework. On the one hand, in areas like Sumatra and Thailand it was not uncommon that people gave themselves up as slaves, since *corvée* labour and other hardships might prove more oppressive than being enslaved, which at least secured a measure of protection by the patron. On the other hand, there was a considerably harsher type of slavery, which involved people who had been taken as prisoners of war, those reduced to slavery due to offences committed or rebellious conduct, or those who had been captured in slave raids. This is what could be termed true Southeast Asian chattel slavery, where people became a commodity to be bought and sold arbitrarily (Reid 1988:129-36). The most menial work was reserved for these people. There were even comprehensive economic systems of slave raiding, such as those conducted by the Iranun pirates from the southern Philippines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Similarly, the capture of slaves was a significant by-product of the expansion of the VOC in the early modern period.

From examining Portuguese documents, it appears that Timor conformed to the Southeast Asian pattern of having both milder and harsher forms of slavery. In Tetun, the lingua franca of much of the island, there was a conceptual division between the *lutu-hum* and the *ulun-houris*. The *lutu-hum* worked the fields and tended the cattle of the lords and grandees. They could not move from their current land, but neither

could they be bought and sold, and they are therefore similar to those people who were called serfs in Europe. The *ulun-houris*, however, were the chattel slaves, usually war captives. The name means ‘living head’, as these slaves owed the fact that their heads were not chopped off to their captors and subsequent masters.⁴⁴ As in other places in the world, it was far from certain that a prisoner of war was allowed to remain alive. The Timorese ritual practice of headhunting meant that defeated enemies, and even women and children, would frequently be beheaded in order that their heads be used in feasts. If you were kept alive you would owe your life to your captor and subsequent masters. On the other hand, if a master died without direct heirs, his slaves would automatically be freed and incorporated in the clan of the master – not, however, if it was a princely lineage. The early anthropologist Henry Forbes, who visited East Timor in the 1880s, did not consider the fate of the non-free population to be particularly harsh (Forbes 1884:417).

In the local VOC records, the distinction between the two categories is less clear. Their Timorese allies, newly arrived from the inland, professed to have very few slaves among them, probably meaning that there were few chattel slaves. The documents use the terms *slaven* and *lijfeigenen* (serfs) arbitrarily, although they are actually two slightly different concepts; this perhaps indicates that the Company servants had difficulties in grasping the local situation. At any rate, chattel slaves were an interesting commodity for the VOC. As the acquisition of large profits from the sandalwood trade remained uncertain, slaves became an obvious ersatz product from the Timor region. Since the five loyal allies were weak in terms of manpower and had few slaves to offer, the Company had to look elsewhere to obtain human cargo. The constant troubles which brewed on Rote, Sawu and the Solor Islands meant there was the opportunity for a supply to be brought to Batavia. As should be evident by now, life on the islands of eastern Indonesia was far from pristine or harmonious. On the contrary, no one was safe anywhere: the eastern islands were beset by internal violence and external raids for as far back as detailed records exist.

With their superior technology and ability to transport many people

⁴⁴ Serrão and Oliveira Marques 2006:396-7; Matos 1974a:190. Vroklage (1953, I:549), says that prisoners of war were regarded as the highest among the categories of slaves among the Belu of Central Timor. This, however, applies to the era of late colonialism, when slavery and slave trade had long since been officially abolished by the Netherlands and Portugal.

over large distances, the Dutch, Portuguese and Makassarese could fully take advantage of the political fragmentation of eastern Indonesia, thus changing the character and scale of the slave trade. The case of Rote may aptly illustrate the Western impact. Already in 1654 the Kupang post had sent 142 war captives to Batavia to prove that the unprofitable Timorese stronghold at least had something to give in return. One hundred and forty-two was in fact no small number for this period, given the small populations of the towns. The Governor General, however, found that the Rotenese were not a very desirable addition to the population, either in Batavia or on the plantations of the Banda Islands ‘due to their wicked and murderous character’ (De Roever 2002:257). In other words, the Rotenese seemed to be so independent, that the Company felt uncomfortable dealing with them. Nevertheless, the quest for slaves continued into the coming years, with the need for manpower and profit apparently triumphing over any doubts over the Rotenese character.

In 1660, the commissioner Johan Truytman intervened on Rote and forced Tullia, the ruler of the *nusak* Dengka, to agree to deliver slaves. At least according to the Dutch interpretation of the agreement, the ruler was to bring 100 slaves to the reliable VOC ally Termanu, from where they would be shipped over to Kupang. It was up to the ruler to decide from where the slaves would be taken. Soon afterwards the *opperhoofd* Hugo Cuylenburgh complained that Dengka did not wish to fulfil the agreement, and in spite of sending reminders, the Dutch had only acquired thirteen people.⁴⁵ At the same time, another *manek*, Sode of Lole, had promised to take charge of a number of people who had belonged to an executed grandee, and to then deliver them to the Company. Sode proceeded to gather 80 or 90 people, but then regretted it and set them free with the words ‘Should I deliver my friends as slaves to the Dutch? I would rather give them [...] humans to eat.’⁴⁶ The sequel to this story is best told by Hugo Cuylenburgh himself in a report:

Since the sailors and the soldiery had to rest idle [in Kupang] for some days, I had them gathered and pointed out to them that this was not efficient. Since King Sode had fooled the commissioner in a false and rascal way [...] one should attack him with weapon in hand in order to

⁴⁵ VOC 1236 (1661), f. 506.

⁴⁶ VOC 1236 (1661), f. 507.

inspire terror in this nation [the Rotenese]. It was then decided to take the entire force, consisting of 936 men, namely 307 soldiers and sailors and 629 Sonbai, Amabi and Kupang, who were to assault Lole. [...] On 18 October, [1660,] we marched there. On the 19th we attacked them at daybreak. We cut down about 500 people without losing a single man of our own, God be thanks, and with only two wounded. The destruction of the *negeri* Lole has inspired fear all over Rote, and made them fulfil the contracted delivery of slaves. On 2 January 1661 King Tullia came here with the remaining ones, so that the Noble Company got its 100 slaves from Dengka.⁴⁷

The obvious cynicism that appears in the related case should probably not lead us to believe that the Dutch – or Europeans, since a good part of the VOC employees came from other Western countries – were more inhuman than anyone else. Slavery was, quite simply, a phenomenon that was so self-evident that hardly anyone questioned its morality. Western abolitionism, it should be remembered, only gained ground towards the late eighteenth century (Hunt 2007:160-7, 205), and in the largely underpopulated area of Southeast Asia, slaves were the most obvious source of mobile labour (Hoskins 1996:4). Similar attitudes to slavery were found in the Portuguese sphere of influence, especially when East Timor was subjugated in the 1660s and 1670s. A number of female slaves found their way to Macao, but their import was stopped by the local bishop in 1748; this was primarily an attempt to avoid the sexual licentiousness that allegedly accompanied their presence (Disney 2009, II:349). Somewhat later, in 1772, a French visitor noted that the only commerce of the native East Timorese was the deliveries of slaves to the Makassarese in exchange for cutlasses and daggers (Lombard-Jourdain 1982:100).

Nevertheless, there were ways to obtain slaves other than through warfare and raiding. The Timorese rulers did not exactly wield absolute power, since the resources to monitor and control their subjects were limited and they had to act within the frames of the *adat*. Still, they could take measures against people whom they did not like. Pelon's initiated report of 1778 states that the rulers sometimes falsely accused a person of black magic, theft or adultery. Without any further formalities the

⁴⁷ VOC 1236 (1661), f. 507; compare Fox 1977:96.

suspect would be declared a slave, along with all his family members. The ruler appropriated the goods owned by the family, and was careful to sell the new slaves to foreigners in order to keep them out of the way. Sometimes friends of the victim could release him by paying an amount of gold. The Timorese aristocrats who lived close to Fort Concordia used to bestow the slaves on the *opperhoofd*, as a part of the gift economy that emerged between the VOC and its allies (Pelon 2002:33). The Chinese bought slaves from among the local populations in exchange for firearms, which were being increasingly disseminated on Timor. On Captain William Bligh's second visit to Kupang in 1792, the British noted the eagerness of the Chinese to purchase weapons from them for this purpose (Schreiber 2007:160).

The amount of slaves brought annually from the Timor region to Batavia and others greatly varied, with figures in the VOC records suggesting that it was not usually significant in demographic terms. In 1704, the number of slaves transported to Batavia was 20, in 1705 it was 23, in 1706 it was 14, and so on (Coolhaas 1976:299-300, 354, 423). By far the worst case of slavery occurred in 1756 when the VOC commissioner, Johannes Andreas Paravicini, attacked the disobedient *nusak* Landu on Rote and captured more than 1,000 people. Such events, however, were quite rare. When in 1758 the authorities in Batavia ordered the Kupang post to send 200 slaves to the *perkeniers* in Banda, it proved impossible to dispatch more than 30; at the time, there was no war going on of the magnitude that could have supplied the Company with such great numbers of prisoners. The *perkeniers*, on the other hand, found the slaves from this area to be of poor 'quality' and by the 1760s they were unwilling to pay even the original price for the manpower brought in from Timor. Finally, in 1768, it was decided that the trade be abolished.⁴⁸ As for Batavia, the number of slaves from the Timor region was small compared to the greater slave contingents from Bali, Sulawesi, et cetera. Out of 615 slaves brought to Batavia in 1652, there were less than 25 from this part of the archipelago (Niemeijer 2005:402-3). The French traveller Baudin, who visited Timor in 1801 and 1803, asserted that the Kupang post was able to deliver a regular supply of 200 per year to the headquarters of the VOC, being 'nothing but well-shaped children who are intended for the pleasures of the local personnel and the rich people'.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ VOC 2941 (1756), ff. 715-46; Fiedler 1931: 33-5; VOC 3249 (1769), f. 36.

⁴⁹ Baudin, quoted in Pelon 2002:13.

The words appear to suggest sexual abuse of minors, though the number of children affected is probably exaggerated. The conditions of freight transport from Kupang to Batavia were as appalling as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, with death being common on the month-long trip; being uprooted from their domestic environment, the captives succumbed to the lack of hygiene and proper food on the tightly packed ships. Due to sickness and apparent psychological stress, the new environment cost the lives of many Timorese slaves en route to Batavia. The fate of the survivors remains to be studied, but one must assume that they, like other groups, were used as house servants, artisans, shop assistants, dock labourers, and so on. Skilful slaves were taken from India to Batavia up until circa 1660, but after that the VOC preferred Indonesian slaves.⁵⁰

As in Batavia and other port towns, a large part of the population of Kupang itself consisted of slaves. How many slaves there actually were in the VOC period is a moot question, but in 1836, the number of slaves directly owned by the Dutch was 1,200. By comparison there were 800 European and ‘coloured’, and 200 Chinese households. This, it might be added, was 18 years after the official abolition of the slave trade, so the proportion of slaves would have been higher in previous years. The *op-perhoofd* Hans Albrecht von Plüskow, who died in 1761, personally owned around 140 slaves, half of which were sold after his death. Of the nearly 70 slaves which remained, about 23 were Timorese, at least 24 were Sawunese and at least six Rotenese. There were also people from faraway places like Bali and Mandar.⁵¹ The high number indicates that, as in Batavia, slaves were not only a matter of economic rationality. Rather, high status was associated with owning a large amount of people; it was a way to display wealth and resources (Boomgaard 2003:86).

While the bulk of the slaves of Kupang were owned by individual burghers, *Mardijkers* and others, there was a smaller category of Company slaves. They stayed in a particular slave house within the precinct of the fortress. Those who ended up there were often physically weak, had been rejected by the burghers, and were not fit enough to be shipped to Batavia – one might almost consider this to a fortunate turn of events considering the high mortality rate of the slave transports. By

⁵⁰ Rodriguez 1997:366. Anecdotal evidence, as in Barchewitz 1730:583-6, suggests that the girls sometimes ended up as prostitutes. The lives of a few Timorese household slaves are briefly mentioned by Jones 2003:195-202.

⁵¹ VOC 3251 (1769), ff. 522-4.

the mid-eighteenth century there were roughly 50 in number, emaciated figures who had the task of serving the soldiers in the fort. The Company and private slaves were partly fed with *gula*, which was brought over from Rote.⁵²

There is reason to believe that in general, the slaves were poorly treated by the burghers, *Mardijkers* and Company servants. Perhaps this was to be expected, however, for the statutes of Batavia prescribed quite draconian measures for slaves who spread rumours about their masters or threatened them.⁵³ Black slaves in British North America in this period were castrated and mutilated for serious offences, and as late as the 1740s, they could be broken on the wheel or slowly burnt to death – all perfectly legal since the English Bill of Rights of 1689 did not cover non-free people (Hunt 2007:78). Such atrocious punishments are rarely found in the Kupang documents, but the wretchedness of life as a slave is illustrated by the very frequent attempts at escape. When going outside of the fort, the Company slaves were usually chained two by two and guarded by a soldier, which is indicative of their plight. The authorities quite correctly suspected them of trying to run off at the first opportunity. Those who managed to escape tried to pass the allied Timorese settlement and reach the Portuguese sphere. Topass strongholds like Lifau and later Oecusse were common destinations where the slaves could hope for shelter. The Portuguese leaders and the Dutch were both unhelpful when it came to returning refugees to each other; in the Portuguese case, this was especially so if the slaves accepted the Catholic religion. After the mid-eighteenth century, the stream of runaway slaves to Oecusse became demographically significant and had grave consequences for the Dutch position on the island, as will be shown in Chapter IX.

That the slaves took a great risk in attempting to escape is indicated by an event in 1694. On the morning of 3 May that year, the badly hurt slave girl Raja, 12 to 13 years of age, was brought inside the walls of the fortress. Together with her mother, Kapy from Sawu, she had tried to escape a week earlier but had been captured again. The two women were brought before the *opperhoofd* Willem Moerman. The latter observed

⁵² Fiedler 1931:27; compare Fox 1977. In the late seventeenth century the slaves are sometimes described as performing heavy tasks such as maintaining ovens for producing lime. It is therefore possible that their physical capability decreased over time, the best slaves being acquired by the burghers and *Mardijkers*.

⁵³ Harrison 2007:486; on the poor treatment of slaves in Batavia, see also Niemeijer 2005:191.

that both had wounds on their bellies, as if they had been stabbed. Kapy alleged that they had been hurt by sharp branches, falling over in their haste as they tried to escape. Moerman let someone treat the wounds. The next day, however, Raja passed away, and the surgeon found that she had a lethal wound that went deep into the body. Suspicious, Moerman interrogated Kapy as well as the Rotenese settlers who had witnessed the two women's attempt to escape. Step by step, a tragic story unfolded.⁵⁴

It all began one night in late April, when seven slaves ran away from Kupang. The exact reason for their flight is not mentioned, but one of the owners was the notoriously aggressive Floris Jansz. The Dutch immediately dispatched a party of Rotenese, who reached the refugees by mid-morning, in the wilderness outside of Kupang. The slaves scattered into the forest in order to escape from their pursuers. Raja and Kapy were slower than the rest, and the Rotenese approached them. The thought of what their master would do with them made the terrified Raja ask her mother to end her life. Kapy took her knife, 'inspired by the devil' as she later said, and stabbed her daughter and then herself. The two women fell to the ground before the eyes of the pursuers, who, terrified by the macabre scene, ran back to Kupang and fetched more people at their hamlet. When they returned they saw blood but no people, and therefore withdrew to Kupang empty-handed. The women had come round and had crawled away to hide. After hiding in caves and rocks for two or three days, Kapy was found by some Timorese who brought her to Kupang. Raja was subsequently found and handed over to the authorities despite dying in front of their very eyes. The mother recovered from her self-inflicted wound, but her miseries were not over. It was decided she would be sent to Batavia, where the authorities would investigate the case. Her final fate is unknown.⁵⁵

This event is rather unusual, since it was investigated in some detail. The tragedy, however, does suggest there was a fear of reprisals among runaway or disobedient slaves. Runaways that were caught were routinely whipped, a harsh punishment that was meted out to deter other potential escapees.⁵⁶ In view of this, suicide was seen as an attractive alternative, even for young people. At the same time, the case shows that a comparatively dutiful official like Willem Moerman took time

⁵⁴ VOC 1553 (1693-94), *Dagregister*, sub 3 and 6-5-1694.

⁵⁵ VOC 1553 (1693-94), Confession, sub May 1694; Report, sub 21-5-1694.

⁵⁶ VOC 1367 (1680-81), *Dagregister*, sub 27-2-1681.

to investigate serious incidents in a bureaucratically adequate manner. The type of slavery that the VOC dealt in was more impersonal than the traditional forms of Southeast Asian slavery, but the early colonial apparatus did, after all, adhere to a set of rules that were sometimes applied, even in distant Kupang. This is indicated by another incident involving the *opperhoofd* Jacob van Wijckersloot. Although he was accused by the Timorese allies of oppressive behaviour, he maintained some strict principles in the area under direct Dutch jurisdiction.

One late evening in March 1679, the corporal Leendert Welcken, reeling drunk, arrived back at the house where he stayed with his Rotenese wife, Maria Theunisz, and their young son when not on duty in the fortress. The corporal was hardly an exemplary husband; he was of a violent nature and Maria later claimed that she often feared for her life. As Welcken entered the house, he threw out his wife and son and grabbed the slave girl Trijntje, who was nine years old at the most. He smeared her genitals with coconut oil and then proceeded to rape her. Maria Theunisz, however, immediately took action and reported the violation to Van Wijckersloot. The surgeons of the fort had a look at the girl and found that her female organs had been badly injured. Welcken defended himself by stating that he had been very drunk, that it was the middle of the night, and that he actually believed he was penetrating his wife. Van Wijckersloot commented that Welcken deserved to be hanged, and that such a thing ‘had never been heard of even among these wild and brutal heathens, let alone in a well-ordered state of governance’. In the end he was flogged, bound to a pole and sentenced to forced labour for 99 years. Maria Theunisz was allowed to divorce him and to keep the house.⁵⁷ An indigenous woman could thus obtain a legal advantage over her European husband, as long as she was a member of the Christian community. It would appear that Van Wijckersloot wanted to make an example of him; if such behaviour were to be left unpunished, the consequences could be very harmful for the small VOC settlement.

In spite of its (more or less) urban character, Kupang was in many respects imprinted by local geography and society; after all, the great majority of the population originated from the Timor area. One may ask, then, if conditions for the slaves differed substantially among the neighbouring Helong and Atoni groups. Fragmentary evidence sug-

⁵⁷ VOC 1346 (1678-79), ff. 14-17.

gests there were both similarities as well as differences. A less benevolent system of dependency than the one prevalent in East Timor appears to emerge, at least when looking at the situation superficially. One case has survived – , presumably because a *Mardijker* family was involved, which drew the VOC administration into the issue. Fredrik Hendrick's wife, Susanna, the daughter of Ama Tomananu of Sonbai, appeared before Willem Moerman in December 1692. She complained about a Solorese man called Wuring and a relative of hers called Taly. Taly and Wuring had tied up a slave woman, some distance from Kupang, who belonged to Susanna, and they had beaten her so badly that she had died. Moerman took care to investigate the case, the more so since Susanna was an aristocrat and a Christian. The following day he asked the people involved why the slave had been treated in such a cruel way. Susanna's brother replied that the two perpetrators did not intend to kill the slave, but had only meant to chastise her, since she had been disobedient and had tried to escape. 'Now that she has died', he proceeded, 'no one has lost anything except the owner who [ordered to] chastise her, and the customs of [the perpetrators'] land gave them complete power over the life and death of their unfree.'⁵⁸

Moerman, again displaying a sense of responsibility, was not content with the reply, and the following day, summoned a meeting with the allied kings and regents. Moerman asked what punishment would be meted out in the instance of a slave being killed. The regents replied that they were not used to punishing this type of misdemeanour as everybody was able to treat their slaves as it suited them. This was true not only for slaves, but also for commoners. Every *temukung* could condemn his subjects to death or allow them to live without there being a need for a legal case. The regents told Moerman about several similar cases where they themselves had been involved. Some days previously, the regent of Amabi had beaten a woman from another domain to death, since she had married his subject but subsequently attempted to escape from her husband. The assembled aristocrats pointed out that previous *opperhoofden* had never discussed such issues in the council. The woman's fate, they assured, would not cause the least bit of commotion among the locals.

Moerman reluctantly had to set Wuring and Taly free. He admonished the princes not to treat their subjects with such cruel punishments,

⁵⁸ VOC 1531 (1692-93), *Dagregister*, sub 5-12-1692.

but rather, to use discretion and kind words. That same evening he wrote in the *Dagregister* that the Supreme Government in Batavia had ordered the Kupang officials to interfere as little as possible in the business of the locals. It was therefore best to let the matter rest, since the regents were used to this cruel but ingrained custom. Moreover, the perpetrators and Susanna's family were 'heathens'.⁵⁹

Moerman's account might be biased and self-justifying, but apart from this it is possible that the princes exaggerated their own authority over the life and death of their subjects and slaves. They had an interest in keeping the Company away from their internal business, instead restricting its interventions to the mediation of larger conflicts. The *adat* may have permitted a measure of arbitrariness, but the decentralized and scattered power structure also kept a check on the range of actions undertaken by the aristocrats. Abuse of this might have easily led to the ubiquitous Timorese phenomenon of them voting with their feet.

While both indigenous and Dutch forms of slavery might appear harsh in retrospect, the system also entailed a degree of social mobility: slaves were not given their status of non-free on a permanent basis.⁶⁰ In a long letter to Batavia, Paulus van Coupang, the Helong aristocrat and Christian priest, set out to prove his rights to the regentship of Kupang by emphasizing the slave ancestry of a rival branch of the regent family:

Furthermore, Ama Tano alias Snik Snak pretends that he descends from the princes of Pulau Semau via his father and mother, but that the mother of Rasi Fo [Paulus's father] is from a simple family. However, it is not as Ama Tano pretends, but like this. Ama Tano's grandfather on his mother's side was from Sumba, and was a slave called Somma. Together with his son Tirrou he went with a *perahu* from Sumba to Dengka [on Rote]. The Dengka, however, took hold of them. They subsequently both escaped from Dengka to Termanu, and were likewise taken into custody by the Termanu. The father, Somma, died there, and the son Tirrou fled from Termanu to Pulau Semau, where he was taken into custody by Kapuli Attawanek. He remained there, and that is Ama Tano's ancestry from his mother's side.⁶¹

⁵⁹ VOC 1531 (1692-93), *Dagregister*, sub 6-12-1692.

⁶⁰ As, for example, in Batavia, where a slave woman under VOC jurisdiction could end up being the wife of a low-ranking Company servant (compare Taylor 1983:16-7).

⁶¹ VOC 1623 (1699), f. 73.

Another letter by Paulus indicates that an offspring of Somma called Bare Somma (Tirrou of the first letter?) married the daughter of a minor Helong chief and begot the mother of the pretender Ama Tano.⁶² Although the letters are intended to castigate Ama Tano, Paulus presupposes that a slave could substantially climb the social ladder and marry a nobleman's daughter, finally ending up as the in-law of a princely family.

Manumission by locals is mentioned in the Dutch legal documents from Kupang, particularly in cases where it involved economic transactions that in turn led to disputes. A case from 1694 tells of how a Rotenese man called Baffy Horry fell in love with the slave woman Kilo Anak in the early 1660s. She belonged to a Helong lady who was the aunt of the regent, Ama Susang. The owner agreed to hand over Kilo Anak to the Rotenese as his wife, on condition that she was exchanged for two slaves. Baffy Horry delivered one when he received his wife, and would provide the other one at a later occasion; only then would Kilo Anak be legally free. However, after some time Baffy Horry passed away without having delivered the second slave to the Helong lady. By then, the lady had died, but Kilo Anak was reclaimed by the regent family of Kupang nevertheless; she was placed at the disposition of Ama Susang himself, residing at his *sonaf*.⁶³ In other words, the *adat* system was more regulated than the Dutch accounts usually gave them credit for, and the testimonies heard by the VOC authorities show that people went to great lengths to prove the distinction between free and dependent status.⁶⁴

To sum up, slavery in Kupang and its Timorese neighbourhood was similar to the complex of slavery and dependency that flourished in early modern Southeast Asia. Forms of dependency that were built upon a personal relationship between master and dependent occurred alongside a harsher and non-personal type of chattel slavery. The Dutchmen maintained their port under modest circumstances and had no desire to interfere in the local system. The cultural encounter, however, may have contributed to making slavery in the Dutch – and, for that matter, Portuguese – area relatively more severe. Slaves became a type of merchandise that could be bought and sold in a way that had no counterpart

⁶² VOC 1623 (1699), f. 79.

⁶³ VOC 1553 (1693-94), Resolutions, sub May 1694.

⁶⁴ The Dutch records from Kupang in the nineteenth century contain many cases describing long and detailed investigations, instigated by Timorese aristocrats, to determine to whom certain individuals and groups actually belonged. See for instance ANRI Timor:55, *Register der handeligen en besluiten*, sub 16-6-1845.

in the traditional system. One can only speculate on the impact of the firearms that were distributed among Dutch allies and Portuguese clients, which in turn had ramifications for the power resources and ability of the ruling classes to maintain control. Slave trade in the Dutch East Indies was formally abolished in 1818, and slavery itself in 1859-1860, while Portugal forbade slavery in its colonies in 1869. The actual implementation of the central decrees was, however, slow. In fact, it is fair to say that, until recent times, the Timorese have been aware of those who are descended from slaves.⁶⁵

The psychological consequences of the slavery system can be found in the deep suspicions towards foreigners harboured by local populations. The foreign congregations appeared to have as few moral doubts about trading in humans as the local aristocracy, and perhaps even fewer. This is what the French global explorer Péron discovered on his visit to Kupang in 1801, the year after the end of the VOC; Péron became acquainted with a pauperized aristocratic Helong family which had been ruined through the greed of an *opperhoofd* and now made a modest living from fishing. In particular he befriended the youngest son Cornelis, and asked if he would like to accompany him on his trip back to Europe. At first Cornelis seemed enthusiastic, but soon he was overcome with dark thoughts. With his hands he made a number of piles of sand of different sizes in order to illustrate his point to Péron. With expressive words and gestures he went on to explain the predicament that might follow on from such a trip:

In Kupang the man Péron is the friend of Cornelis; but in the country of France a man comes and tells you: 'Sell this red [brown] man to me', and he shows such a large sum of money to you [pointing at the smallest pile of sand]. You reply: 'This red man is a friend of the man Péron.' You give the same answer to those who come and offer you these other piles of sand; however, finally someone gives you a sum of money as large as the last [and biggest] pile of sand, and you say: 'May the red man become a slave.' Then I will not further see the man Péron. I am forced to work in

⁶⁵ Knaap 1995:200-2; McWilliam 2002:141-2. I understand that this is also the case in the Solor Islands (Siti Dasi, 's Hertogenbosch, personal communication, 2007). Riedel 1885:9 writes that the Dutch domains of Kupang, Funai, Taebenu, Amabi, Amarasi and Lesser Sonbai only had crown slaves (*leksuân*) by the late nineteenth century, whose origins could no longer be traced. Everywhere else private slaves were found, due to ongoing petty wars which the Dutch were unable to prevent.

misery, and the poor Cornelis, who is far away from his father Neas and his brother Pone, dies from sorrow and sickness. (Péron 1807:158-90.)

ARENAS OF INTERACTION

We will now have a closer look at the forms of interaction between the VOC authorities and their Timorese allies. The VOC drew up a great number of contracts with the various rulers of maritime Asia, and were perceptive enough to grasp the importance of local ritual and custom when concluding them. The Company officials on Timor found they were able to ignore the non-Christian aspects of a blood oath that the allies promised would be 'followed and upheld as sacrosanct, and considered by our subjects to be unbreakable' (Heeres 1931:75-7). The durability of such agreements would have obviously been enhanced if the Dutch co-opted the local community by building upon old perceptions of alliance and precedence. The rather rudimentary contract of 1655 and the extensive and detailed one achieved by the diplomat Paravicini in 1756 were hardly remembered by the illiterate aristocracy. What was remembered was that there were white foreigners from the Company who, at some point in the past, had concluded an agreement with the five allies over the territory owned by the original lord of the land, the king of Kupang.

The *opperhoofd* and his council remained in regular contact with the allied kings and regents, who were encouraged from the start to allow their children to be educated in Malay, a language commonly understood by the *opperhoofden*.⁶⁶ The preserved *Dagregisters* reveal that meetings with the aristocrats initially occurred on an ad-hoc basis, with one or several regents appearing before the *opperhoofd* whenever there was a need to raise one issue or another, or else they could be summoned for a meeting with the council, a *vergadering*. The *opperhoofd* saw the regents several times each month and therefore had a general idea of what was going on among the allies. Or to be more precise, he heard what the regents decided to tell him. A wide range of topics were discussed: external threats from Amarasi and the Topasses; news from the inland; internal disputes; the death or subsequent accession of persons of importance;

⁶⁶ VOC 1229 (1659), ff. 865b-866a.

corvée service; agricultural issues; runaway slaves, and so on.

During the ordered term of governance of Willem Moerman (1686-1699) the routines for interaction between the VOC and the Timorese were institutionalized. Moerman decreed that the regents of all the five princedoms must appear at a *vergadering* in Fort Concordia once a month. During these regular meetings any disputes that might have arisen between the princedoms were straightened out.⁶⁷ For obvious logistical reasons the princes of Rote, Sawu and Solor were not usually present. In the assembly hall each regent or king had his particular seat, and in accordance with the dual structure of the Timorese domains, the regents would normally attend rather than the kings themselves. The plaintiffs would speak for their cause, and this would be followed by deliberation among the regents and the *opperhoofd* and his council. The VOC scribes, proficient in Malay, kept minutes of the meetings, which have partly survived in Dutch translation, and offer an invaluable insight into the political culture of an early colonial hybrid society with its insoluble mix of foreign and local perceptions. Moerman also started the valuable practice of writing a memorandum for his successor, including a systematic survey of the various Company dependencies and their characteristics. These measures, of course, were not unique within the VOC system; in South Sulawesi, for example, the Dutch authorities similarly had to maintain a grid of regional kingdoms and economic interests that demanded steady lines of communication with the local elites. But while South Sulawesi suffered endemic rivalries, minor conflicts and, at times, even major eruptions, the Kupangese situation was comparatively manageable (Knaap and Sutherland 2004:13-5).

Company-owned ships from Batavia used to appear twice a year, in spring and late summer. Care had to be taken in order that they were not hit by the monsoons, and so they were eagerly awaited by Dutch officials and Timorese rulers alike. The notes in the *Dagregisters* reveal the increasing anxiety of the *opperhoofden* if for some reason the ship was delayed. The ships were their lifeline to the outer world and brought much-needed supplies and reinforcements for the fort. They were also an important part of the economy of exchange that constituted part of Dutch-Timorese relations. In the time leading up to the arrival of the ship in the late summer, the allies of Timor, Rote, Sawu and Solor col-

⁶⁷ VOC 1609 (1698), f. 51.

lected an amount of gifts in kind to be sent to Batavia. Since sandalwood was not usually available, the gifts from the Timorese rulers consisted of a few picul of beeswax, sometimes complemented with slaves, gold, or an amount of snakewood, which was used for medical purposes.⁶⁸ In the eighteenth century, they also included a limited amount of beans; beeswax and beans were similarly the standard products given by the Rotenese rulers.

In exchange, Batavia sent luxury goods to the aristocrats that corresponded to the value of the gifts. These included shotguns, gunpowder, drums, ceremonial staffs, cloths, buttons, liquor, and the like. The kings and regents eagerly looked forward to these counter-gifts, and were quick to inform the authorities if Batavia had forgotten to send someone his due share. Communication with Batavia was maintained by means of letters, which became part of an annual routine by the 1690s. They were written in Malay by persons trusted by the kings and regents, who then signed them collectively with crosses.⁶⁹ The letters themselves paid homage to the stranger lord in Batavia, who was addressed in terms that portrayed him as an entity of standing: Tuan Bangsawan yang Mulia Gouvernadoer Djindraal dan Tuan Raden van India (The Noble Aristocrat Lord, the Governor General, and the Lords of the Council of India).⁷⁰

Another arena of interaction was the church (for an overview of Reformed Christians on Timor, Rote and Sawu in the eighteenth century, see Table 1.). As a trading organization the VOC had a limited interest in proselytizing, but in a few places like Ambon, Menado and Batavia sizeable reformed communities developed (Boxer 1990). In the Company dependencies of the Timor region, the growth of such a community was modest. Dominican sources allege that Frei António de São Jacinto baptized the king and most of the people in Kupang during the first half of the seventeenth century, but the superficial nature of these conversions soon became apparent (Biermann 1924:40). The aristocracy of the early

⁶⁸ Some years the regents did manage to obtain some sandalwood. For example, in 1709 the allies delivered 11,233 pounds of the valuable wood as a gift (VOC 1776 [1709]). Incidentally, this collection occurred during a brief period of peace between the VOC allies and Amaran.

⁶⁹ Only a few ruling Timorese princes are known to have been literate enough to sign with their own names, all at the end of the VOC period: Jacob Liskoen of Funai (d. after 1806), Don Jacobus Albertus of Amanuban (d. after 1809) and Alphonsus Adrianus of Greater Sonbai (d.1802).

⁷⁰ For a preserved original written in Malay, see, LOr 2238, UB Leiden, Letter from the emperor of Greater Sonbai, 1800.

VOC period generally posed as non-Christians, and so did the Sonbai and other immigrant aristocracies. The *opperhoofden* might have made disapproving remarks about the paganism of the allies at times, but they did not interfere in their domestic way of life. Christianity was also allowed to develop at its own speed. Fully ordained Dutch priests stayed on Timor for comparatively brief periods of time, and church services were therefore usually taken care of by the *krankbezoekers*. The latter were of a lower clerical rank and were often non-whites from places like Ambon.⁷¹

Table 1. Reformed Christians on Timor, Rote and Sawu, eighteenth century

	1752	1779
European council members	5	
Native council members	44	
All council members		35
Commoner Europeans	57	
Commoner natives	402	
All commoner Christians		520
Native children	257	
Native non baptized children	49	
All non baptized children		60
Timorese territories		
Sonbai, adults	24	
Sonbai, children	55	
All Sonbai Christians		210
Kupang Kingdom	35	7
Amabi	8	34
Taebenu	7	11
Amfoan	4	6
Amanuban		5
Rotenese territories		
Thie	1,212	
Thie, adults		1,420

⁷¹ The clerical persons staying in Kupang since 1670 are enumerated in Valentijn 1726, III:127.

Thie, non baptized children		25
Baã	136	
Osipoko	36	69
Dengka	213	839
Lole, adults	318	
Lole, children	190	
Lole, all baptized		1,223
Lole, non baptized children		20
Oenale	103	566
Landu		159
Korbaffo		174
Ringgou		123
Batuisi		24
Bilba		23
Diu		19
Bokai		60
Sawunese territory		
Timu		267
Timu, non baptized children		51
IN SUM	3,155	5,950

Source: ANRI Timor: 43, Letters from the Church Council of Timor

Over the course of the eighteenth century the allied kings and regents began to accept the reformed religion. The first to do so were the Sonbai co-regent Domingo (reign 1708-1739) and the king of Amfoan, Dom Manuel (reign 1708-1718). In both cases it seems that we have a Portuguese entry to Christianity. Domingo and his sister were baptized as children in 1675, being the offspring of Dom Domingos Sonbai and the pagan woman Babyllas. Dom Domingos in turn was the eldest son of the old regent Ama Tomananu, who was initially known as Dom Luíz. Looking at his name, he appears to have retained a Christo-Catholic identity, as is also indicated by the early baptism of his children.⁷² The

⁷² *Doopboek Timor* (Baptismal book of Timor), sub 16-2-1675; VOC 1579 (1695). Domingo's sister Aletta later married the VOC soldier Jan Schroff. The latter was an intermediary between Sonbai and the Company (VOC 1961 [1721], f. 5).

characteristically Portuguese name Dom Manuel likewise suggests that the princely family of Amfoan was acquainted with Catholicism since before its migration to Kupang in 1683.

Other princes soon followed suit. An important event in this respect was the baptism of the emperor of Sonbai in 1720, where the *opperhoofd* Barend (Bernardus) van der Swaan and Domingo's sister Aletta were baptismal witnesses. The nine-year-old emperor, who bore the Atoni name Bawa Leu, was henceforth known as Bernardus de Leeuw. From this point onwards the so-called emperors were baptized, either before or at the time of their accession.⁷³ The process, however, was very uneven: while the royalty of Sonbai and Amfoan opted for Christianity, the kings of Kupang, Amabi and Taebenu were only occasionally baptized, remaining attached in reality to their traditional religion until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. There is an interesting distinction between princely and regent families in this respect. In the case of Amabi and Taebenu, the executive regents bore Christian names from the early eighteenth century onwards, in stark contrast with the kings themselves. This is hardly surprising, though, when we consider the structure of the Timorese princedoms. The 'female' kings were figures who were given the tasks of keeping custody of *leu*, and performing the right rituals (H.G. Schulte Nordholt 1971:371-4). Their duties obviously made them less susceptible to religious conversion than the 'male' regents who handled daily affairs – at any rate if Christianity was to become a serious practice rather than simply something to which lip service was paid.

The situation was somewhat different on Rote. Conversion of the unruly island started late, but in 1720, Benjamin, the heir to the important *musak* Thie, was baptized.⁷⁴ When he later became *manek* of Thie (1729-1746), Benjamin attempted to take advantage of his position as a Christian prince, and with Dutch assistance, looked for the means to expand his power at the expense of Termanu. The *opperhoofden* did not always appreciate their enterprising ally, but after a series of particularly

⁷³ That is, at least until the end of the VOC era. Some of the rulers of Lesser Sonbai in the nineteenth century only appear under their Atoni name (genealogy appended to Ruychaver 1918). For example, Mesie Nisoni (reign 1839-1860) is known to have been a 'heathen' although his father, Pieter Babakase (reign early 1820s), had a Christian name (*Raad voor de zending* n.y., 1102-1:1403, Archief van Utrecht; ANRI Timor:55, *Register der handelingen en besluiten*, sub 16-6-1845). As the number of Dutch records outlining the inner conditions of the dependent princedoms declines in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to draw conclusions on this point.

⁷⁴ *Doopboek Timor* (Baptismal book of Timor), ANRI, sub 26-5-1720.

bloody events in 1746-1749 – discussed below – the *opperhoofd* at the time, Daniel van der Burgh, decided that conversion was the best antidote to rebellion. He requested the presence of no less than ten or twelve schoolmasters who were to cover the Rotenese missionary area and educate the children in the reformed religion.⁷⁵ As studied in detail by James Fox, the Rotenese actually developed their own system and processes to aid Christianization and the spread of education (Fox 1977). Nine Rotenese domains had *manek* with Christian names in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Christian character of the Rotenese partly explains why many European visitors in the nineteenth century preferred Rotenese people over other peoples in the region. As for the Muslims of Solor, the Company avoided any attempt at introducing Christianity, and on Sawu direct Dutch interference only commenced in the late nineteenth century. An interesting detail about Sawu is that the sub-regent Dangka was baptized in 1720 at 31 years of age, due to a peculiar family set-up; his step-father was a Dutchman called Frans Brockaerd.⁷⁶

What did the conversion of rulers mean, therefore, apart from them henceforth bearing a Christian name? Not much, some would argue. Willem Morman in 1692 found that those who had been baptized seldom went to church, and he angrily admonished them at a gathering in the fort where their knowledge of the creed was examined by the *krankbezoekers* and schoolmasters.⁷⁷ The French engineer Pelon found that Christians in the late eighteenth century hardly merited having a denomination: ‘I do not think there is a country in the world where the Christians are more ignorant and superstitious than in Timor and the neighbouring islands’ (Pelon 2002:42). Among other things he noted that the aristocrats decided through divination whether it was auspicious or not to baptize their offspring. The missionary Reint Le Bruyn arrived on the island in 1819 as the first regular clergyman since 1802, and found little or nothing that distinguished Christians from non-Christians.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, evidence from the eighteenth century suggests that Christianity played a functional role in Dutch-Timorese relations; having a Christian identity was strongly associated with a particular outward

⁷⁵ VOC 8342 (1749), ff. 91-2; VOC 8343 (1750), ff. 83-6.

⁷⁶ *Baptismal book of Kupang*, sub 26-5-1720.

⁷⁷ VOC 1531 (1692-93), *Dagregister*, sub 22-7-1692.

⁷⁸ *Nagedachtenis* 1830; Coolsma 1901:823; *Raad voor de zending* n.y., 1102-1:1394, Archief van Utrecht. Le Bruyn, however, was not more unfavourable to the locals, as he married Jacoba Manoh, a daughter of the king of Amfoan (ANRI Timor:51, *Register der kommissien* [1834]).

appearance that in turn tended to engender a certain kind of royal authority. In a letter from 1747, the king of Kupang asked Batavia to send a coat, camisole, trousers, hat, sword and two muskets, since he intended to convert to the Christian religion. In the same way, an emperor of Greater Sonbai who was a Christian and stayed in Kupang in the mid-eighteenth century, was remembered in later tradition as Nai Sobe Kase, 'Mr Foreign Hat'.⁷⁹

There is also ample evidence that several persons from the princely families took the new religion seriously. One example is Paulus van Coupang, pretender to the Helong regentship in 1698, who served as *krankbezoeker* and schoolmaster for many years and led the church service in Kupang at a time when there were no European clergymen in the port town. When Warnerus van Loo was dispatched by the clerical authorities of Batavia in 1732 to inspect church, school and religious service, the priest found the following situation:

He [Van Loo] has found it necessary, because of the death of the elder Johannes Tano [regent of Kupang] and the deacon Erasmus Hans, to replace them with the elder Leendert van Dijk in order to restore the church council. This has the following constitution: two elders and two deacons, so that in cases of death, there will still be one or two members of the assembly to monitor the church. To that end I [Van Loo, changing to first person] have, after the aforementioned nomination, appointed people who are good-natured, humble and lead a pious life, in order to lead in concert the true Christian reformed religion and to be church deputies; namely Raja Daniel of Amfoan as elder; and Cornelis Zegers as deacon. And regarding that the deacon Amos Pietersz Thenoe⁸⁰ has turned to debauchery, and that his character and life has consequently turned very un-Christian and bad, which is unsuitable for any deputy let alone a church servant, I have after much deliberation decided that Thenoe is unworthy to serve in this position. Therefore we have appointed Tobias

⁷⁹ VOC 8340 (1747), ff. 109-11; Fobia 1984:81. Nai Sobe Kase's place in the pedigrees suggests that he could be identified as either of the historical rulers Don Bernardo (reign 1752-1760) or his brother Albertus Johannes Taffy (r.1760-1768).

⁸⁰ Amos Pietersz Thenoe was a disciple of François Valentijn, spoke good Dutch and was proficient in the Arabic-derived Jawi script. He had served in Kupang since 1717 as *krankbezoeker* and interpreter, and performed valuable services to the VOC. He was nevertheless a wayward figure and a notorious wife-beater (Valentijn 1726, III:127; Troostenburg de Bruyn 1884; Taylor 1983:46; VOC 2239 [1732], ff. 68-70).

[regent] of Amabi as deacon in his place. This, being the church council of this place according to the maxims of the church of Batavia, which are mostly followed in the eastern churches, has been considered to be presented to the *opperhoofd* and the council for their approval.⁸¹

We can therefore see that the church organization at this time leaned heavily on the authority of individual pious aristocrats of the Kupang, Amfoan and Amabi princedoms, who were even given leading positions in the local church community. Of the other persons mentioned, Amos Pietersz Thenoe was an Ambonese and Erasmus Hans probably a *Mardijker*. Clearly, religious space was a meeting-point where important interactions took place between Europeans and Timorese – in spite of the official Dutch attempt to keep these two worlds apart.

ROOM FOR NEGOTIATIONS

We have seen that there were well-defined arenas of interaction, but did these permit the Timorese allies to successfully negotiate their duties and rights? Were they able to achieve solutions favourable to themselves and their princedoms? The minutes from the *vergaderingen* are careful to render the arguments of the regents in detail. Of course we do not know how faithful these were, especially since they tend to allow the *opperhoofd* the last word, but it is nevertheless evident that the Company officials deemed it worthwhile, and perhaps even essential, to be aware of the Timorese mindset. There are a number of cases recorded in which the five allies bluntly refused to follow the recommendations of the *opperhoofd* and his council, and the *vergadering* was dissolved without having reached a consensus.

On a *vergadering* in September 1745, Buni, the king of Kupang, unexpectedly stood up and declared that he intended to marry a princess from Taebenu. As he explained, Kupang and Taebenu had an old wife-giver and wife-receiver relationship. Everything was ready for the wedding celebration ‘in accordance with their devilish practice’ and his subjects were already gathered within his palisade. The *opperhoofd* Jan Anthony Meulenbeek, a far from tactful figure, retorted that the wedding was most untimely, especially since Buni had not yet been properly

⁸¹ VOC 2239 (1732), f. 111.

installed with regnal powers. The king must therefore wait for a licence to arrive from Batavia. Buni upheld his cause and the other four allied regents intervened on his behalf. They pointed out to Meulenbeek that Buni must be installed at once and then proceed with the wedding, or else there would be plenty of trouble from his subjects, who had delivered cattle and other necessities for the feast, and from the Taebenu wife-giver. In the end Meulenbeek reluctantly complied with the request in order to avert any calamity in 'this weird and fickle country'. Buni was triumphantly installed inside Fort Concordia and then in his *negeri*.⁸² From a Timorese point of view, this was all completely logical; the marriage had been preceded by ritually laden preparations and negotiations carried out behind Meulenbeek's back. To cancel the wedding would indeed have sparked trouble, as the *opperhoofd* eventually realized.

The *vergaderingen* were the normal arenas for discussion. In case of lasting disagreements one could, however, apply directly to the Governor General in Batavia. While the *opperhoofden* quickly came and went, the Supreme Government remained the *Father and Mother Company*, an entity with royal connotations. On a few occasions the allies managed to deliver letters directly to Batavia without them being screened by the *opperhoofd*. This was for instance the case in 1674, when the allies were fed up with Jacob van Wijckersloot, the *opperhoofd* at the time:

We kings and *orangkaya* let the Noble General know that it has pleased God the Lord to send us grasshoppers, and in such amount as the hairs on our heads. They eat all the foodstuff that we have sown and planted, so that we now suffer hunger, to the point of being on the verge of death, and have nothing at all to eat. Above that, Jacob van Wijckersloot punishes us much harder than God the Lord, and does so in manifold ways. We work day and night with our wives and children and have made three lime ovens. Above that we have to break coral stones and carry lime. 200-300 people have to carry large trunks of trees, climbing up and down the mountains without getting a mouthful to eat. He also punishes us very hard when a slave belonging to the Company or one of its associates escapes. He summons all the *orangkaya* to the fort and demands one or another of us in exchange. And when we very amicably declare that we do not want to do that, and say that we are not obliged to watch his

⁸² VOC 8339 (1746), ff. 39-43.

slaves, he does not listen to us, and wants us to give him another one instead. [...] Likewise he punished a certain raja from Kupang called Bissiso.⁸³ The raja made a large house. He was summoned to the fort and asked: 'Where did you get so many spikes?' The raja then answered: 'O Mister Commander, the previous captain gave me all these spikes in exchange for beeswax.' The commander did not believe him. He said: 'I have witnesses.' Having heard them, the commander let him loose. However, when he wanted to go to his house, the sergeant came and dragged him along to the dark hole, where he became seriously ill from sorrow. He asked to be released since he was almost dead from sickness. He would give him gold, slaves or pigs, but the commander did not accept it. However, afterwards he asked for eight picul snakewood and when he received them, he let the commander loose, who, as time passed, became sicker and died. Also, the rajas had heard that Van Wijckersloot had increased the price of rice more than the Company, asking 56 heavy rijksdaalders for a *last*. All the rajas then went to the fort and asked the commander to decrease the price and again sell it like before. He said he could not do that, but that they must pay three kwartjes for a ration. They had to go away and could not obtain any food. However, the Commander sells to the Portuguese as he wishes, and fills the bellies of the Company people. [...] Jacob van Wickersloot lets his soldiers roam around, and his slaves roam through the entire *negeri*, shooting hogs, bucks, sheep and hens. They also steal tobacco, eggs and *ubi*. They bring it away, and when the people ask for money, they stab and beat them and chase them away.⁸⁴

Van Wijckersloot partly describes the same events in the *Dagregisters*, in such a self-righteous manner that it shows him to be of stern character. In fact he remained in charge until he fell victim to the dreaded Timorese fever in 1680, and his popularity visibly increased towards the end of his term. The letter was signed by six Timorese lords, first among them Ama Besi, who might have taken the initiative for the diplomatic coup. It was the same Ama Besi who voted with his feet four years later and then stubbornly fought the Company and its allies until his death in 1688. Indeed the complaints of the allies are remarkably similar to those made by the *opperhoofden* against the Portuguese. Backbreaking *corvée*

⁸³ Bissiso was no upper ruler. 'Raja' should be understood here in a more general sense, presumably as an equivalent of the Dawan word *usif*.

⁸⁴ *Dagh-Register* 1887-1931, the year 1674:224-6. *Ubi* is an edible tuber (*VOC-Glossarium* 2000:119).



A group of Timorese soldiers. Illustration based on a sketch by Johan Nieuhof.

work, extortion, economic exploitation and undisciplined encroachment were darker sides of the asymmetric relationship of an early colonial milieu, but there were also control mechanisms in place; Batavia could not afford to let unsuitable *opperhoofden* drive the local allies to rebellion.

This is seen by the sad career of the temporary *opperhoofd* Willem Tange a few years later. Three princes from Sonbai, Kupang and Amabi travelled to Batavia in 1684 and brought a new letter of complaint to the Governor General. Tange was accused of corrupt behaviour, since he had accepted bribes and had incited Rotenese princes to take up arms against each other. He also forbade the Timorese locals to travel to the surrounding islands, forbade them to raise sheep, and demanded excessive corvée labour. Added to this, he was accused of being a particularly rude figure, who used bad language to the aristocrats. This time Batavia reacted swiftly, for obvious strategic reasons. If Tange's machinations brought unrest in Rote, the VOC system in this part of the archipelago could potentially break down. The obnoxious *opperhoofd* was therefore recalled, and spent his next years 'unhappily trudging' while writing reports on Timorese affairs, all of which were useful for later historians.⁸⁵ Three Company servants who defended Tange's conduct commented that the Timorese lords became arrogant when they were ordered to carry out some duties, saying: 'We do not want to do it! We will write to Batavia!'⁸⁶ While the Dutchmen interpreted this attitude as unbecoming and stubborn, it equally shows that the Timorese leadership was well aware of its rights, and would take action if these were contravened.

The self-assured attitude of the local princes stunned one of the next *opperhoofden*, Arend Verhoeven. In early 1687, the newly appointed Verhoeven sailed from Batavia to Solor. Aboard the Dutch *jacht* (fast-sailing vessel) was also the widely-travelled *sengaji* Dasi of Lamakera. When the ship finally reached the roadstead of his home village, Dasi asked to take his goods ashore, which Verhoeven gladly agreed to, 'the more so since we were salvaged from a great stench and filth'. Then, however, the *sengaji* insisted that he must stay for some days to be with his wife, as he had not shared a bed with her since his departure last year. A sharp exchange followed between Verhoeven and Dasi, since the *opperhoofd* needed him at once as a diplomatic presence on the unruly island of Rote. In the end Dasi stepped into the barge that would bring him ashore

⁸⁵ Now kept in Leiden as H 49:u (1688) and H 49:v (1689), KITLV.

⁸⁶ VOC 1414 (1685), ff. 158a-162b.

and snarled at the *opperhoofd*: ‘You are just a new resident and you should not act so sternly already, or else we will complain about you and see to it that you are recalled again.’⁸⁷ Verhoeven seethed with anger, but the *jacht* had to proceed to Kupang without Dasi; later, however, the *sengaji* did loyally serve the Company on Rote. In Kupang, Verhoeven heard a similar comment from Ama Kobo, a regent’s son from Amabi. For the princes, the Supreme Government of Batavia was more than an ally; it constituted a distant stranger kingship, a benevolent body of appeal to a much higher order than the sometimes unreasonable *opperhoofden*.

A further incident in this vein occurred in 1713. The allies had just suffered a devastating Topass invasion and living conditions were not easy. According to the Timorese, the situation was aggravated by the attitude of the *opperhoofd*, Reynier Leers. Eventually the empress of Sonbai repeated the strategy from the days of Willem Tange, dictating a frank letter to the Governor General and his council:

The ruler of the Sonbai nation, Nonje Sonbai [Bi Sonbai⁸⁸], with her assistant regents Nai Sau and Nai Domingo as well as the regent of the Taebenu, the loyal allies of Your Excellencies, find themselves obliged to send these few paragraphs to Your Excellencies due to dire straits. This is otherwise not at all our custom. It is only in order to make known the very bad conduct and governance of the prefect and *opperhoofd* Mr Reynier Leers. This [conduct] has never been seen among the previous *opperhoofden*, as long as we have enjoyed the protection of the Company. Then, the lack of civility of the quoted Mr Leers before the aforementioned Nonje Sonbai is unprecedented [?]. We will not tire out Your Excellencies with his story, which is too verbose. We also want to relate that about ten months ago, when there was some need of *jagung* [maize], we supplied the aforementioned *opperhoofd* Leers with this grain, as much as our subjects could manage, for 9 stuyvers per 40 pounds. When again we had to buy this grain for food, we had to buy it from the hands of the *opperhoofd* for 18 stuyvers per the same 40 pounds. This caused great discontentment among our people for, if they wished to stay alive, they had to sell almost everything in order to fill their bellies, so that a large part

⁸⁷ VOC 8310 (1686-87), *Dagregister*, sub 18-4-1687.

⁸⁸ In the documents this lady is variously referred to as Usi Tetu Utang, Bi Sonbai and Nonje Sonbay. The first compound of the latter name could be either a rendering of Nyonya, equivalent to Dawan *Bi* (Lady), or else the Dawan word *Nomi* (gold).

of them, with wives and children, went over to the Portuguese. However, this is not the only reason [for discontent], but also the sharp words that the aforementioned *opperhoofd* spoke against us seven months ago: in case we once again picked up a fight with our enemies and [if we] happened to retreat under the fortress of the Company, then he would fire at us and not spare the people of the Company allies. Because of this and other atrocities that may come out of this, the aforementioned ruler asks Your Excellencies (in order to avoid such a sad occurrence), that if the *opperhoofd* Leers stays here any longer, Your Excellencies in the coming year may allow her person [the empress] to come by way of the Company ship, at her expenses, in order that she may give Your Excellencies an oral account about things, since she is not at all intending to be lodged with her arch enemies, the Portuguese in Lifau. However, if Your Excellencies do not wish to take the effort to provide the ship, then the aforementioned Nonje Sonbai asks permission to depart from here in a good Chinese vessel.⁸⁹

There are similarities between this epistle and the letters of 1674 and 1684. The price of crops is an issue, and so is the foul language of the *opperhoofd*, which offends the honour and self-esteem of the ruling elite. As in 1684, the inconsiderate acts of the *opperhoofd* have disturbed the political balance, and some people have even left for the Portuguese area. This time, the native discontent coincided with a time of serious internal conflict among the Dutch of Kupang. The members of the council refused to sign the report to Batavia penned by Leers. On a late September evening in his chamber in Fort Concordia, the desperate Leers drew up a letter to his superiors, in which he castigated his compatriots: the second-in-command and the sergeant boozed around in the Kupangese *negeri* to the scorn of the locals, the economic balance sheet had to be drawn up by Leers himself, and so on. He asked Batavia to be kept on as *opperhoofd*, but to no avail. He was considered to have mismanaged the conflict with the Topasses, which, together with the allied complaints, led to his prompt replacement by a more amenable figure.⁹⁰

There was, therefore, a certain amount of room for negotiation and complaint. The position of the Dutch community was relatively weak and could hardly survive without the five loyal allies. Conversely, the

⁸⁹ VOC 1841 (1713), ff. 1-4.

⁹⁰ VOC 1841 (1713), ff. 57-9; Coolhaas 1979:48-9.

allies leaned on the authority of the stranger lords to maintain internal harmony and deter foreign invasion. As a matter of fact, conditions in the West Timorese enclave differ markedly from Rote, Sawu and Solor, which suffered repeated crises and resistance against the Dutch order. Apart from the Ama Besi incident in 1678 and a similar case relating to the Kupang principedom in 1743-1744, there were no open rebellions against the authority of the VOC in the Kupang area. The difference with the unruly Portuguese area is stunning, as is the contrast with Dutch relations to various new Timorese allies after 1749, when the Company began to expand over a larger territory. In spite of numerous causes of discontent and outright oppression, the bonds of loyalty forged in the 1650s lasted for three centuries.

THE COMPANY AS MEDIATOR

One important factor in these lasting bonds was the Company's role as mediator. While the five allies were usually able to solve their own problems, the perceptive Willem Moerman identified a number of principal causes for disputes within and between the principedoms. Firstly, there was a real danger that chiefs and rulers knowingly violated each other's conceived prerogatives. Timorese rulers were faced with the perennial problem of keeping their people under their control. The five principedoms contained small populations, each of them numbering less than 10,000 people in total, and sometimes substantially less than that.⁹¹ Data from the late colonial period suggest that the population of each principedom lived scattered outside Kupang, so that there were no clear borders between the five, but rather, a complex of enclaves. All this made the retention of people crucial for the leaders. In fact, the most common cause of conflict in the Kupang area was attracting people from other domains and declining to return them. Other transgressions included

⁹¹ According to the local *Dagregister* of 9 August 1675 (VOC 1319), there was a census taken of the number of "weerbare mannen" (able-bodied men) among the allies. According to the Sonbai aristocrat Ama Pot, who reported the numbers to the Dutch opperhoofd, the numbers were as follows:

1,780 in Sonba'i

740 in Kupang

320 in Amabi

Altogether there were therefore 2,840 fit men. If this excludes slaves, it would suggest an overall population of perhaps 12,000-15,000 souls. The number fluctuated, however, with coming of new groups to the VOC sphere. It is also possible that the Timorese underreported their numbers to avoid excessive *corvée* service.

cattle theft and deliberate vandalism, such as the damaging of water canals. This could easily spill over into violence between the princedoms.

Secondly, mere accidents – such as the cattle belonging to one community damaging the crops in the field of another – might ignite animosity. It was also possible that the highly inflammable houses caught fire and damaged other houses in the process. Thirdly, individual family affairs could be blown up out of all proportion. Especially the *belis* was (and is) of prime importance to traditional Timorese society. The *adat* requires *belis* to be paid in full to the family of the bride before she is fully detached from her origin family; otherwise, she and her children may be claimed back. Moerman noted that the payment or restitution of such wealth sometimes caused conflicts. Fourthly, political disobedience was not uncommon within the Timorese princedoms. Although there was a clear hierarchy in terms of prestige and precedence, the actual exercise of power took place on a horizontal rather than a pyramid-shaped level, with the various *amaf* and *amaf naek* (*temukung*) wielding authority that was rarely checked by the princely centre. Thus a lesser *temukung* might refuse to obey his putative lawful overlord, either ‘abusing’ his power for his own end or with the support of some other ruler or chief.⁹² Moerman observed that the Timorese elite tended to come to the *opperhoofd* when they were not able to straighten out their own disputes, which led him to establish the aforementioned routines of deliberation. The *vergaderingen* conventionally ended by the drinking of a glass of arrack as a symbol of concord.

Not least of all these, Sonbai’s pretentious nature caused the Company great anxiety. While the Lesser Sonbai polity was only the second-ranked princedom, after the Helong lord of the land, the elite eagerly guarded the position of precedence that they claimed. The nature of this precedence is stated in rather uncertain terms in the VOC reports, but it surfaces in some cases of dispute. When parts of the Amfoan and Taebenu population arrived from north-western Timor in Kupang in the 1680s, Sonbai claimed that they had long since been its subjects.⁹³ These claims led to a serious row in January 1696. Willem Moerman referred in the *Dagregister* to ‘the Taebenu who are also Sonbai and also descended

⁹² VOC 1609 (1698), ff. 50-1.

⁹³ Long before the Taebenu’s migration to Kupang they were considered to be of Sonbai affiliation. For example, a note from 1676 mentions ‘the Sonbai under-regent, Siko Taebenu’ (VOC 1327 [1676-77], *Dagregister*, sub 22-11-1676).

from the ancestral house of Amfoan'. In order to elucidate the relations between the allied groups, Moerman asked that the empress herself, Bi Sonbai, appeared in the *vergadering*, which she did. The lord of Amfoan, Nai Toas, showed his ceremonial respect for the empress in the name of diplomacy. However, the Taebenu elite remained intractable. Having a *barlaque* relationship with Kupang, they preferred to come under the complete authority of the Helong king and have nothing to do with Sonbai of Amfoan.⁹⁴ As far as Moerman could determine, Sonbai did not harbour any actual pretensions of governing the Taebenu congregation. Rather, it was a symbolic issue, since the Sonbai elite demanded that Taebenu acknowledged the empress and brought her gifts of food. The Taebenu inclination to side with the Helong created a great deal of bitterness among the Sonbai elite, who launched a Timorese *mission civilisatrice* theory. Upon their arrival from the original land of Sonbai, they said, 'they had found the land of Kupang [...] to be nothing but scrubland and wilderness. They had made it neat and habitable. Now a newcomer had withdrawn from the power and authority of his lawful mistress, to the pleasure of the regent of the land [the king of Kupang], although several times we gave word of it to Ama Susang.'⁹⁵ The dispute involved certain objects of authority, a drum, halberd and musket, which had been bestowed upon them by the Company to indicate that Taebenu was a subordinate ally. These objects, according to the Sonbai, had been wrongfully kept by the king of Kupang, who thereby interfered with Sonbai prerogatives.

The dispute was left to simmer for almost ten years but then erupted in September 1705. Visiting the main *negeri* of Taebenu, the Dutch found that the commoners were armed with shotguns, shields, cutlasses and assegais. The Taebenu leaders welcomed the white lords and bade them to sit down with them, going on to declare that the Sonbai had insulted them by decapitating a Taebenu man. The severed head underwent the usual ritual treatment; as the head had been taken by an ally, however, its ritual treatment, according to their *adat*, showed an immense lack of a great disrespect, scorn and injure for the Taebenu. They therefore now wished to take their revenge. The Dutch made them promise to wait until a *vergadering* could be held on the next day. However, once the Dutch had gone the promise was at once broken, and a Sonbai settlement was

⁹⁴ VOC 1577 (1695-96), *Dagregister*, sub 2 and 3-1-1696.

⁹⁵ VOC 1579 (1696), f. 8.

attacked. Since they were much stronger in terms of manpower, the Sonbai were able to repel the Taebenu and pursue them to their main *negeri*. When the *opperhoofd* Joannes van Alphen heard about the commotion he mounted his horse and galloped back to the *negeri*, where he was met by a grisly sight. More than 20 mutilated corpses, mainly women and children, lay scattered in the desolate settlement. Three other Dutchmen rode to the empress Bi Sonbai and asked her to command her subjects to stop. However, although the dispute originated out of perceived disrespect to her person, she was, symbolically and literally, a female lord with little executive power. She replied that any admonition from her would be fruitless, but at least supplied the Dutch with a *temukung* to accompany them. With him at their side the Dutchmen were finally able to stop the hostilities which, as they stressed, could have brought ruin to the entire VOC-led complex.⁹⁶

In fact, the dispute ended as quickly as it started. The issue was provisionally laid to rest in a *vergadering*, although clear animosity remained between the parties involved, who preferred to use the Company for what it probably was in Timorese eyes – a stranger lord whose very ‘strangeness’ ensured a reasonably fair mediation. Apart from the bloody events of 1705, the Company was generally able to stop any conflicts that threatened to erupt before they escalated into full-scale violence. In the same year, 1705, the Sonbai and Kupang principedoms were at loggerheads, again over a symbolic issue. An aristocratic Sonbai lady had been given to Ama Tomananu, the king of Kupang (not to be confused with his namesake, the Sonbai regent), but he soon ignored her. She was therefore spirited away from the royal *sonaf* by some fellow countrymen, who felt the conduct of the king to be an insult. The Sonbai later allowed her to appear wearing the attire of an unmarried woman at a feast where some Helong were present. Perhaps this alluded to sexual impotency on the part of the king (who died childless after a long reign). At any rate, a sizeable Helong troop soon marched against the Sonbai settlement to exact revenge for the mockery. The Company servants, however, took immediate action; they brought the parties to a halt and promised to bring about reconciliation at the next *vergadering*. This was fulfilled and in the end the lady stayed with the Sonbai community while Ama Tomananu got back the bride-wealth that he once paid for her.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ VOC 1728 (1706), ff. 51-2, 87-93.

⁹⁷ VOC 1711 (1705), f. 28.

What is remarkable in all this is not that tension and occasional violence spilled over, but that the Company was regularly able to stop it. The VOC reports repeatedly describe how Timorese leaders disputed with each other, or how armed troops, incited by a minor incident, stood ready to attack each other. In the end, however, they were brought to their senses by the Dutch. The relative absence of outbreaks of internal violence seems to indicate that Dutch diplomacy as such was only half the story. Surrounded by hostile Portuguese clients, the allied Timorese knew full well the consequences of a breakdown of the system, and tended to accept the Company as a mediator. In this respect the latter were truly stranger kings, outsiders who held a social and political order in place. That the five allies were sometimes self-assured and independent in their relations with the Europeans does not detract from the stranger king syndrome – one might well consider the lack of actual obedience that minor lords showed prestigious polities like Sonbai and Wehali.

SAVAGES

Visible appreciation of the allied Timorese is strangely ambivalent in the VOC records. While the *opperhoofden* seldom lauded their native counterparts, their reports nevertheless often suggested the image of a harmonious co-habitation. The individual characteristics of the kings and regents were described in rather categorical terms. Some of the rulers were praiseworthy in Dutch eyes, especially those who obeyed the Company admonitions and decrees, and readily provided products and *corvée* labour.

This is contrasted by another set of images depicting the Timorese as savages, in the sense of being the complete opposite of putative Dutch virtues. This is not an unambiguous trait in the texts but is highly situational, and the Dutch discourse varied markedly over time. It must be emphasized that we are not dealing with literary images – there were few printed works with Timorese themes – but solely with texts produced by administrators who were in regular contact with the allied leaders. The extant reports, moreover, only contain such information that was considered useful to the superiors in Batavia and Amsterdam.

The savage image was only loosely connected to the two primary traits usually associated with exoticism: race and religion. Racial ste-

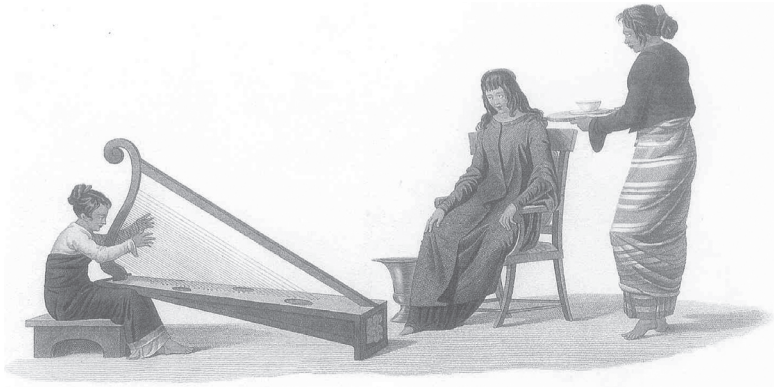


The interior of a Timorese house in Kupang. French illustration from the expedition of L.-C. de Freycinet, 1818, published in the travelogue *Voyage autour du monde* (1824).

reotypes existed in this era, but were far less fixed or ideologically grounded than they became in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The physical features of the Timorese, which often evoked comments by nineteenth-century visitors, are rarely alluded to in the VOC reports. However, one occasionally comes across rather negative descriptions of their character (*aard*), which was characterized as being wild (*woest*). An explicit but somewhat opaque denunciation can be found in the late eighteenth-century account of Pelon:

Regarding their character, one may be assured that they are lazy, superstitious, indolent, treacherous, rascally, mendacious and ignorant. However, these faults, dangerous among other nations, are not to be feared here, due to their lack of genius or courage. (Pelon 2002:16.)

In the eyes of the Frenchman, the indigenous population had many faults but did not act upon them sufficiently to threaten the Europeans. This negative judgement is not unanimously confirmed by other writers,



A lady and her servants in Kupang. French illustration from the expedition of L.-C. Freycinet, 1818.

who tend to present a wide array of views on the Timorese and their character. In 1699, William Dampier described them as dexterous and nimble, yet lazy and only alert when it came to treachery and barbarity (Dampier 1939:170). Forty years after Pelon, his fellow countryman Louis de Freycinet provided a more balanced judgement about the character of the islanders, particular points of which are at complete odds with those made by Pelon:

Good, timid and hospitable, although anxious and turbulent neighbours, such is the character of the inhabitants of the interior of the island, with exception of the eastern part and probably of the mountain people of the centre and the south-west, who are reputed to be vicious and unsociable. The Timorese is otherwise barbarian in his enmity, a skilful deceiver in war, although he generally loves the truth. [...] Their judgement is sound although narrow, and their intelligence is remarkable. [...] The Malay [native] of Kupang is distrustful, brave, an intrepid and ferocious warrior; being very attached to his customs, he hardly supports a master who forces his habits or puts a yoke on him which is too heavy to bear; but since he is lazy and without ambition he easily accepts the yoke of the Dutch, who do not extract direct taxes or *corvée* service from him. The nonchalance and near-hatred of work, the love for vengeance, the cruelty

sometimes taken to the point of cannibalism and a strong penchant for thievery, are the most characteristic traits of their nature.⁹⁸

An anonymous report written six years later, in 1824, asserted that no islanders were probably as peaceable, mild and forbearing as the Timorese, which was also shown by the Chinese traders who could traverse the land without fearing anything. Apart from in times of warfare, one never heard about murder or grave injuries through violence.⁹⁹ Unsurprisingly, the perception of the racial characteristics of the Timorese was described with a bias towards the expectations, interests and type of interaction of a Western visitor, and has very limited explanatory value in terms of the local culture and society.

In line with this, Dutch disapproval was mostly limited to the aspects that were detrimental to the Dutch position. The brutality that characterized the skirmishes between the allies and the Portuguese clients was heavily commented upon, although, as we have seen, the Timorese martial practices seem to have been tacitly accepted by the Company servants. The numerous notes in the *Dagregister* speak for themselves. On 4 September 1688, the Sonbai leader, Ama Beta, came to Willem Moerman and announced that his raiding party had taken the head of a man from Amanuban and a woman from Amarasi. He suggested that he deserved a bottle of arrack for this exploit, which the *opperhoofd* was quick to provide.¹⁰⁰ The mendacity of the Timorese, on the other hand, was strongly condemned in various reports – it complicated any Dutch attempts at mediation between the allies when there were problems of any kind.

Religion as such was usually considered to be an internal Timorese affair, though their ‘superstitions’ were strongly frowned upon when they impeded Company initiatives – such as the Timorese reluctance to dig for metals in the ground. For example, in 1756, when a Company expedition set out to look for gold-filled rivers inland, the indigenous population refused to go to work at Tepas near the Noelmina River, and could not be moved by any efforts, promises or threats. This was ‘surely

⁹⁸ Freycinet 1825:632-3. ‘Malay’ is to be understood here as any native of Austronesia stock. A partly similar judgement of the Timorese character is found in the French travel account of Francois-Étienne de Rosily from 1772 (Lombard-Jourdain 1982:95). Freycinet may have been influenced by Rosily.

⁹⁹ *Timor* 1824, Collection Schneider, Nationaal Archief.

¹⁰⁰ VOC 1460 (1688-89), *Dagregister*, sub 4-9-1688.

out of idle and blind superstition, through which they, when they thought or heard about it, were caught by a horrific fear, anxiousness and agony. They could not be made to move, saying that they must first obtain seven red hogs, of the colour of the gold, and red rice.' The officer Giese impatiently had to wait 'until they had found the aforementioned hogs and therewith made their laughable *pemali*'.¹⁰¹

Much scorn was reserved for the perceived Timorese laziness. Dutch complaints about indigenous inertia were occasionally heard during the early decades of Fort Concordia, but did not become a mainstay until somewhat later. Governor General Speelman stated in 1683 that

the Timorese are averse to all work, apart from what their livelihood demands. From a young age, this nation is used to handling arms and has no other inclination than warfare, and to pride themselves in victories with the conduct of lengthy amusements. And if their throat and belly curse their sluggish hands they would again violate their neighbour and unpermitted, bless themselves with his surplus. Anyway, that our Timorese are such lovers of the arms is no wonder considering their righteous hatred against the Portuguese, and they regard themselves lucky enough as long as they are called friends of the Noble Company and may live under its protection, although they also know that they must protect themselves. (Coolhaas 1971:529-30.)

Such remarks became more common in the eighteenth century for obvious reasons. During the course of this century the colonial authorities began to consider ways to make this rather unprofitable outpost pay for the expenses involved in maintaining it. Since access to sandalwood was limited (although much improved after the political upheaval of 1749), various other products were brought forward as possible cash crops: beans, indigo, pepper and cinnamon (from Flores). Even the cultivation of silk was mentioned for a while, leading to a few frustrated remarks by the Governor General Dirk Durven (1731). The idea turned out to be rather vain,

in a land where the [Company] servants themselves at closer explanation held the opinion that such a thing would have no effect. Firstly, since the

¹⁰¹ VOC 2941 (1756), ff. 206-7. *Pemali* is a Malay concept used as an equivalent to the Atoni concept *leu*, sacred spirit power. The Tetun equivalent is *lulic*. Rituals connected with the collection of gold existed all over Timor; see the nineteenth-century description in Lombard-Jourdain 2000:179-82.

land was full and crawling with ants, and because of the poor and simple dwellings of the indigenous [population], which are made of wood, covered with straw and protected with bamboo. They have their sleeping places upstairs and place their cattle below. Secondly, since the inhabitants are so lazy by nature that for the entire year they grow nothing but *jangung* (in the Netherlands known under the name of Turkish flour) for their substance. Due to that, it is unlikely that they are to change their dwellings or build houses for the purpose [of handling silk production].¹⁰²

One might add that similar views were held by Portuguese officials, who added a gendered perspective; a report written shortly after 1769 concluded, after discussing the potential resources found in the Portuguese sphere: 'All these natural advantages are of little interest for learning more of the character of the inhabitants of these islands, who are indolent people who cultivate idleness and vices as their main passions; the wives are those who do almost all the domestic and rural work, which does not leave any more for the men to do than making holes in the ground where the same wives then go and spread the seed.'¹⁰³

Accusations of Timorese inertia have been common until the present time, and are in fact part of a modernity-oriented discourse related to evolutionism. Since the seventeenth century the idea had developed that *cultura* was an opposite to the state of nature and barbarity. Culture was understood as a state of being that surpassed the state of nature and was primarily associated with the Christo-European world (Nünning 2005:106). In the eighteenth century this idea developed into a form of evolutionist thinking where every successive (cultured) generation was understood to gain in intellectual and material advancement. In this model of continuous ascendancy, non-European cultures in general and low-technology groups in particular would fall by the way side. The stern critic of Timorese life Jean-Baptiste Pelon, observed that 'these islanders are not at all industrious and do not even strive for the future, since they follow the old customs of their ancestors, and are content with little, be it cloths or foodstuff' (Pelon 2002:16). Pelon was perceptive enough to

¹⁰² Van Goor 1988:264-5. Illustrations of Atoni houses built on poles may be found in Cinatti 1987:201-4.

¹⁰³ Matos 1974a:31. De Rosily in 1772 also observed that the women performed all domestic chores, leaving the men to wage war and look after the cattle (Lombard-Jourdain 1982:95). Compare Bastian 1885:15.

attribute the perceived inertia to the strength of the *adat*. Innovations in the traditional economic system were not logical or desirable for the Timorese communities, that is, not under the conditions that external powers tried to impose. The introduction of new cash crops failed in spite of the assurances of the *opperhoofden* that cultivation would increase the wealth of the local elites. On the one hand, this was to do with the primitive agriculturalist knowledge of the Company servants, who induced locals to plant crops under unsuitable conditions. On the other hand, it was probably to do with the fact that this new enterprise would entail a great deal of hard work, removing manpower from where it was previously needed and all for an outcome that was at best uncertain, and even hazardous. According to ethnographic literature of the nineteenth century, there is a belief in Timorese culture that one should only plant what one needs, since any surplus would bring sickness and misfortune (Bastian 1885:16).

These images of savages and dullards, it should be pointed out, were balanced by an image of alliance and trust that bound the Company and the Timorese together. The annual reports often contained a mantra-like formulation to the effect that the allied regents lived in harmony and peace with each other and the Company. After the British takeover of Kupang in January 1812, the official C.W. Knibbe summed up the situation: 'The native princes here have no contribution whatsoever to pay to the Government, yet they are always very much inclined in every respect, to assist the Government'.¹⁰⁴ As a collective, the kings and regents were sometimes referred to in very paternalistic terms: they were portrayed as innocent and gullible (*omnozel*) figures who had to be protected from abuses carried out by the Kupangese burghers and others. As individuals, however, they were sometimes even praiseworthy. *Opperhoofd* Barend Fockens noted in a memorandum from 1777 that

Daniel, presently king of Amfoan, although young, seems to give proof of truly good intentions for the Noble Company, and to follow closely in the footsteps of his deceased father, Bartholomeus, due to which I have treated him with the same courtesy in all the issues at hand; the more so since he, although being the weakest of all the regents, has been ready for action as often as was requested, and delivered limestone for the construc-

¹⁰⁴ ANRI Timor:21, *Engelsch archief 1812*, Letter from Cornelis Willem Knibbe to Richard Phillips, 28-3-1812. Although having a Dutch name, Knibbe was a British civil commander.

tion of Fort Concordia. Also, one should add to his praise that he is the only Christian regent whose mindset seems to have rejected most of the paganism.¹⁰⁵

Other leaders, like the long-lived Sonbai regents Ama Tomananu (died 1685) and Nai Sau (died 1739), were referred to as indispensable councillors to the *opperhoofden*, whose terms at any rate seldom lasted more than five years.

Of course the blend of ethnic stereotypes and assertions of harmony provoke questions about the real feelings of trust between the Company officials and their supposedly uncultured allies. The personal feelings of the writers are often rather hard to discern, but one example is found in the *Dagregister* from 1735, and reveals a rather ambivalent attitude. A large troop of Topasses and Greater Sonbai warriors threatened the VOC domain, and an ominous rumour spread in Kupang that some of the allied regents had actually invited the invaders. The Dutch nervously suggested that the allies bring their children inside the fort, and it was implicitly understood that they would be held hostage. The regents replied that they would gladly do so, adding that if someone proved unloyal, his offspring could, as far as they were concerned, readily be sold by the Company as slaves. ‘So it was’, wrote the *opperhoofd* Gerardus Visscher, ‘that in many minds were sorrow and worries, so that I myself began to feel troubled. However, I put my trust in God Almighty, and after putting everything in good order I chose the the parole *God is my salvation*, and then calmly went to sleep’.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ VOC 3473 (1777), f. 514b.

¹⁰⁶ *Dagregister*, sub 16-3-1735, H 244, KITLV.