

Introduction

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this research is to explore and describe a few of the many aspects of life with the VOC. This project aims to shed some light on the macro historical perspective in which the excavation of the Avondster should be regarded. Taken together the individual articles endeavour to present a complete view of the VOC and its organisation. A General description of the VOC is followed by several articles that treat different subjects related to the VOC. The articles can be divided in three categories. The first category is Trade, the second is Management and Organisation and the third discusses Social aspects.

Introduction

General description of the VOC

Trade

The Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) and the intra-Asiatic trade in the 17th century
Guus Koppenaal, Bor Boer and Linda Beuvens

This article concerns the intra-Asiatic trade. The position of the VOC in the intra-Asiatic trade around 1650 was unique: no other European trading company had been able to establish such a dominant position. How, is the question, was the VOC able to acquire this position and why did European competitors allow the Dutch to control the intra-Asiatic market? Several subjects are treated in this article of which the main subjects are the trade itself and the trade routes.

Social Life

A maritime society: friendship, animosity and group-formation on the ships of the Dutch East-India Company by Michaël Deinema

Much has already been written about the living-conditions and the official hierarchy and division of labour on the ships of the Dutch East-India Company (VOC). These studies, however, have almost invariably been concerned with rules and statutes, in other words with what was conceived by the officials of the VOC, and remarkably less with how life was actually experienced by those sailing on the ships. In what follows, I aim to shed some light on the activities of the men (predominantly) and women who lived, and sometimes died, on board the Dutch East-Indiamen. In particular, I wish to explore the social bonding that occurred there. Who interacted with whom, in what way and why, and how did these interactions relate to the official hierarchy and divisions imposed by the company executives? Any restraints posed by official obligations and hierarchic structure will be examined in connection to this question.

It is not only interesting to know who individuals voluntarily bonded with, but also for what purpose and whether the specific purpose of the interaction affected the choice of partner. In the hostile environment of an East-Indiaman a loyal friend could be the best protection from danger or theft and connections with higher-ranked personnel could assure a host of privileges. Were these, however, the same people one would go to for companionship, to

combat loneliness, to engage in recreational activities with or to confide in when considering lucrative dealings or, more sinisterly, when hatching mutiny? In short, I will try to show the life and character of the people on board the Company's ships as it actually was, as opposed to what it was supposed to be.

***Surgeons in the East* by Marthe Tholen**

The stories of deprivation, disease and death on board of the ships of the VOC are very well known and the impression of voyages that end in disaster because of it is perhaps equally persistent. On top of that the surgeons on board have often been described as ignorant and incompetent and responsible for the loss of lives of many of the crew.

One might doubt whether this is an accurate description of what happened on board, considering the fact that the Company existed for almost two hundred years and that there were always people willing to undertake the journey, despite the dangers.

In comparison to our modern standards, the healthcare was extremely poor. The available knowledge still rested on ancient and medieval assumptions and was, as we know now, not very accurate. It is therefore best to forget our present times and to concentrate on the standards of the 17th century and to try to imagine the surgeon in his proper environment.

Much is already known of the long voyages between Europe and the East, but what did a surgeon do when he arrived at his destination? Did he sail out again or did he remain in Batavia? What diseases did he encounter and how did he try to cure these? And how was the healthcare organised? These questions will be answered in the chapter on surgeons, where a glimpse is given into the ordinary life of a surgeon in the East.

General description of the VOC

History

The VOC (United East India Company) was established in 1602. It was the first multinational company in the world and existed for two centuries. There was a constant competition between several European nations for the riches found in commerce.

The importance of Asia had been recognised by the Europeans long before the 17th century. Since the 13th century the European continent depended on Asia for its spices. Only the Moluccas could provide the in Europe popular spices mace and nutmeg. At first Arab merchants delivered the spices, but the Portuguese took the position of only supplier over from the Arabs due to the decline of the Turkish Empire and their own progress in navigation skills at the end of the 15th century. The Portuguese progress in navigation had started with the founding of a navigation school by Henry the Seafarer (1394-1460).¹ After several expedition in early 1400 the Portuguese reached the southern shores of Africa, the way to the spices of the East lay open.

For one century Northern European countries had to allow Portuguese traders to make profits of over 400 percent. Technical improvements of Northern-European ships and the theft of Portuguese sea maps at the end of the 16th century opened the way to Asia.

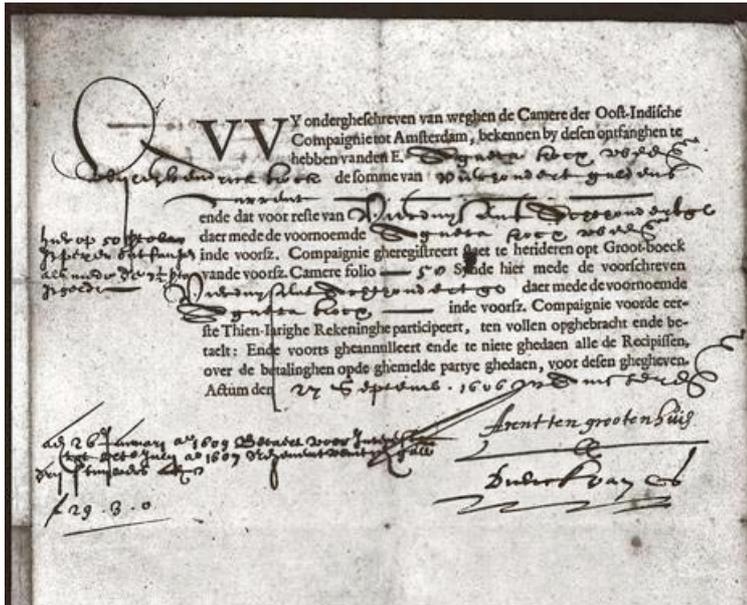
The competition between countries and among traders of the same country was very fierce. In the Netherlands every city had its own company that organised expeditions to the Far East. The fierce competition endangered the total profitability. With the profits of these expeditions the revolt against the Spaniards was financed and diminished returns meant endangering this revolt. So it was decided to bundle all the companies into one, national company.² Another reason to do so was that the risks run by the individual companies were numerous and by uniting themselves they could share both the profits and the losses. With the English East Indian Company as an example in 1602 the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) was founded. With the, until then, largest emission ever the Company obtained a solid financial basis, which allowed for more than one expedition.³ The capital invested in the company was provided by 1143 people⁴ among which 446 were ordinary people (bakers, housewives etc.). The investors were given receipts that we now consider to have been the first bonds.

¹Kinder, H. *Sesam atlas bij de wereldgeschiedenis* (Baarn 1964) 221

²Gaastra, F. *De geschiedenis van de VOC* (Amsterdam 2002) 45.

³Akveld L. and E.M. Jacobs. *De kleurrijke wereld van de VOC* (Bussum 2002) 6.

⁴http://gemeentearchief.amsterdam.nl/schatkamer/300_schatten/geld/voc_aandeel_van_een_wees/all.nl.html



The VOC could, from her foundation, rely on the knowledge and experience of her predecessors the so- called "voorcompagnieën" (pre-companies). This legacy, in combination with broader financial possibilities after 1602, were the causes of the explosive expansion of the company in those days. The various "voorcompagnieën" were owned only twenty to forty ships. The VOC left her predecessors far behind: 'The shipping to Asia developed stormy, within a couple of years 65 ships, divided over 15 fleets, were sent to the Indies. Of these ships nearly 50 returned. The VOC succeeded in forcing back the Portuguese, the former masters of the sea. From now on the VOC became the leading trading-company.'⁵ The success of the VOC was not only profitable for the shareholders; the sensational growth of the VOC was also important for the economy of the Dutch Republic. The prosperity in the period of the 'Gouden Eeuw' (Golden Age) was partially based on the profits made in the shipping. Still it is not justified to over-estimate the Asian trade: 'The volume of the colonial trade (VOC and WIC) can be estimated at 10 percent of the foreign trade of the Dutch Republic. That is a large percentage, but it is important to keep in mind that the largest part of the trade found place *within* Europa. Besides only one third of the population earned their money in the commercial-section.'⁶ The position of the VOC was, seen from an Asian perspective, very modest. The VOC had to find their own place within the existing Asiatic trade-system. Especially in the beginning the VOC proceeded with caution; the contacts between Asians and Europeans were friendly and relaxed. But when times goes by the true face of the VOC appeared. The VOC found it legitimate to use military means to realise their goals. The violent subjection of Bantam (in an earlier stage this happened to the islands which spices) in 1662 ended the free trade in pepper and other articles. The sultan of Bantam was forced to supply *all* the pepper for '15 Spanish realen per bahar of 375 pound or 11 cents per pound'.⁷



The sole reason for the existence of the VOC was the trade in spices like pepper, mace, and nutmeg. The profit margin from the trade in Asia could sometimes amount to 300 percent.⁸ The VOC had a privileged position in Asia, because they were good and cautious merchants and they did not try to convert the native population in the way the Spanish and the Portugese

⁵ Femme S. Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC* (Zutphen 1991)17.

ii Maarten Prak, *De Gouden Eeuw, het raadsel van de Republiek* (Nijmegen 2002)134-136.

⁷ Els M. Jacobs, *Koopman in Azie, de handel van de VOC tijdens de 18e eeuw* (Zutphen 2000)54.

⁸ Gaastra, 23.

did. Once they had established their contacts they set about to obtain monopolies in the spice trade. In the Moluccas for instance, they obtained the monopoly of clove, mace and nutmeg through brutal force.⁹

The inter Asiatic trade was an important link in the commercial policy of the VOC. Initially it was intended to use the proceeds of the inter Asiatic trade to cover the expenses of the return fleet. It was also hoped that by this way of trading no more money would be needed from the Netherlands and that all they had to do was to ship the profits from Asia back to the Netherlands.

The Company did not care about the people she employed, whether they were from Europe or Asia. All the Company wanted was to make profits, the people were merely seen as tools. The VOC was more tolerant than the Portugese who tried to convert the native people, but still she assumed a superiority because of the strength of her armed forces. The Company was ruthless when there was dissent or rebellion, whether it was from the inside or from the outside.

Batavia - Pearl of the East

Batavia was the political and commercial centre of the VOC in Asia. The entire system was coordinated from Batavia, because of its central topographical position in the East. In the second half of the seventeenth century the hinterland of Batavia gained in importance. The produce of sugar and coffee gave the city economic independence and developed a social economic structure. In the Castle of Batavia resided the Governor, the High Government and its Councils. For this reason, whatever other cities tried, like Galle for instance, Batavia remained the most important of the Company's establishments.

Ceylon

The island of Ceylon was an important part of the trade network. There was a Government in Colombo which consisted of a Governor and a Council. They were subordinate to the High Government in Batavia, but they continually tried to operate in an autonomous manner. They tried to achieve that by sending messages directly to the Netherlands instead of sending them through Batavia. In this way Batavia had little control over Ceylon. Galle was the most important harbour of Ceylon, until an artificial harbour was built in Colombo.

⁹ Prak, 133.



Trade

The Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) and the intra-Asiatic trade in the 17th century

Linda Beuven, Bor Boer and Guus Koppenaal

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The position of the VOC in the intra-Asiatic trade around 1650 was unique: no other European trading company had been able to establish such a dominant position. How, is the question, was the VOC able to acquire this position and why did European competitors allow the Dutch to control the intra-Asiatic market.

Although not each of the first fleets were profitable, after ten years the VOC had established a substantial position in the East. The company owned a large number of offices in Asia and dominated the trade in several spices.

While trading with local merchants the Dutch and English noticed that the locals main demand were other Asian products and not the European products they offered.¹⁰ This demand was the foundation for the intra-Asiatic trade. The Dutch Company was the only European Company that incorporated the conquest of the intra-Asiatic market in its strategy¹¹. It wanted to use the profits it made with this trade to finance the shipments of spices for the European market. The main European competitors, the Portuguese and the English, were not able to do much against the realisation of this strategy. Their intra-Asiatic trade was, in contrast with their European trade, in the hands of private traders. These private traders enjoyed military and commercial protection of the motherland, but lacked coordination. Although private traders were more suited to comply to the variation in demand in the home countries, in the time when bulk goods, such as the spices, were the main cargo for patria, coordination mattered most. This shortness of money, strategy and unwilling employees hindered the centralisation of the intra-Asiatic trade¹². Besides a more efficient structure the Dutch Company had a few other comparative advantages in the fields of materials and crews, which could be obtained cheaper¹³.

The main differences with the European competitors, were the consuming and purchasing markets: the VOC did not only have several monopoly positions, but had access to markets where other Europeans were denied access. Especially in the Japanese case, this position gave the VOC a lead in the trade in India: the VOC did not longer need European gold, silver and copper, Japan was its main supplier. Although the trade in Japan was highly

¹⁰ Akveld, L. and E.M.Jacobs, *De kleurrijke wereld van de VOC* (Bussum 2002) 17.

¹¹ Gaastra, F. *De Geschiedenis van de VOC* (Amsterdam 2002) 56.

¹² Winus, G.D, "Luso-nederlandse rivaliteit in Azië" in Knoop, G, *De VOC tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, (Leiden 2002) 107 and Akveld, L. and E.M.Jacobs. *De kleurrijke wereld van de VOC* (Bussum 2002) 180.

¹³ Schipper, H. *Macht in de zeventiende eeuw* (Zutphen 2001) 52-54 and Lucassen, J. *Naar de kusten van de Noordzee* (Leiden 1984) 183-184 and

regulated by the locals, the Japanese settlement made huge profits, around 12 percent of the total profit from intra-Asiatic trade between 1640-1680¹⁴. The easy access to Japanese precious metals saved time, money and risks, especially in comparison with the risks of obtaining precious metals from Europe.

On some markets the VOC did not have any competitors and controlled it entirely. This last advantage combined with the superior coordination was the reason why the VOC could acquire such a dominant position in the intra-Asiatic trade.

Characteristics of the Intra-Asiatic trade

For both continents the most important products were the spices. In the intra-Asiatic trade the range of products however was more diversified. Most important intra-Asiatic products were the precious metals from Japan and the textiles from India. The metals were used to buy textiles and the textiles were necessary to buy spices and pepper. The VOC traded in Asia almost everything that could be traded, but for Europe only the most profitable products, spices, pepper, cinnamon, Chinese silk and Indian textiles were brought back in the 17th century. In the attachment there is an overview of the products the VOC traded around 1650. The diversity of the products is due to the Asian markets.

Sea routes in Asia

The routes the VOC used depended on a variety of factors, the mousson, location of factories, political situations and trading seasons. To reconstruct all these routes between 1650 and 1680 we take the table of Goens from the year 1686 and combine this information with our own findings. For our research we have looked at shipping movements between november 1656 and november 1657. Some of the geographical names have disappeared since, we have tried as much as possible to use current ones.

Main outline of the movements

Three times a year a fleet would leave the Netherlands for the Far East: the Eastern fleet (April), Fair fleet (September/October) and the Christmas fleet in December. This last fleet was logic, because they would arrive in Asia in the most favourable season of the year. Almost all of these three fleets would head straight for Batavia (Djakarta), some though would go directly to Surat (India), Coromandel (India) and Gamron (Persia). From 1665 on the Dutch directors decided to concentrate on Batavia and Ceylon and skip the other routes.

The return fleets would leave Batavia in December or January. Many return fleets would directly go to the Southern African Cape before they would continue their trip to the Dutch Republic. A different route would pass along Ceylon before it reached the Cape and ended in one of the Dutch ports. From 1665 on this Ceylon route was used on a regular basis: the advantage of this direct route was that the cinnamon was faster in the Netherlands, and the quality was better. This Ceylon route became so important, that at some time it surpassed the Batavia route as the most profitable Eastern route. Because of this huge success direct lines between the Netherlands and the Bengals and Coromandel were installed as well, they however were less successful, because of sabotage from Batavia. In 1700 the Batavia strategy succeeded and return fleets would leave only from Batavia, Galle and Ceylon¹⁵.

¹⁴ Gaastra, F. *Bewind en beleid bij de VOC 1672-1700* (Zutphen 1989) 81.

¹⁵ Van Dam, p. 114.

Batavia was the center for the Intra-Asiatic trade and attracted many traders from all over Asia. This city was the spider of the VOC's trading web in Asia: all goods from the Asiatic trade would end up in Batavia before they were shipped to Patria.

Number of VOC ships in and to Asia ¹⁶

	To Asia	From Asia	Batavia	Ceylon	Coromandel and the Bengals	other
1650-1660	205	103	103			
1660-1670	238	127	112	9	5	1
1670-1680	232	133	108	23		2

Two lines dominated the trading network: a vertical route from Batavia to the North-West, the North and the North East. Along these lines were the factories of Persia, India and Ceylon, Malacca, Achter India, China and Japan. The second route, horizontal route is from west until east, from Persia to India, Ceylon, Malacca, China and Japan.¹⁷

These routes depended upon the moussons, a southwestern mousson from March until October and a north eastern mousson in the rest of the year.

The routes within Asia we will explain with the information of the year 1657. The table contains the shipmovements for the two mousson seasons.

The year 1657

To find the different trading-routes, we read the *daghregister* of the year 1657. We found familiar trading-routes in comparison to Goens.

The specific events that took place in the year of our research are very important for the conclusion. What political or military events occurred and influenced the trade. To figure this out, we read the *generale missieven*. These are a registration of all the correspondence between important and influential persons in that area. By reading this correspondence, the choices made and written down in the *daghregisters* are more understandable.

In the *daghregisters* it is carefully written down when a ship leaves the harbour of Batavia and where it is headed, what crew is on the ship etc. This is crucial information, but it is difficult to extract the main events. Therefore we turned to the *generale missieven* and here is a short review of the most important events of the year 1657 in comparison to our own findings.

Generale Missieven	Daghregister
A total of 19 ships arrives in Batavia from the Netherlands. None of them sank.	In the daghregister we only found thirteen ship this may be because the daghregister spread November 1656 till October 1657.
By making peace with Maccassar, the trade revives and the profits increase.	We found three ships that sailed from Batavia to Maccassar, and four vice versa. In the year 1657 only one ship set of to Maccassar, according to Goens.

¹⁶ Van Dam, p. 117

¹⁷ Van Dam, p. 124

Peace is also established with Jambij and trade revives.	Zero ships went to Jambij that year, only two arrived from Jambij. In the year 1686 none.
There is some disorder in Siam, concerning the bercedence. This disturbs the trade	Seven ships went to Siam and three returned. This is a lot in comparison to the findings of Goens for the year 1686, which tells us only one ship went to and returned from Siam
Trade with Japan increases.	Seven ships sailed to Japan
Silk production fails due to bad weather	This probably happened in China, where most of the silk production for the VOC took place.
15 ships are sent to Goa to block the harbours.	This is due to the lasting competition with Portugal over this trade post.
The harbour of Bantam is also blocked, due to war.	This is in accordance to our results
Several military missions are sent to Bantam.	
The temporarily loss of Ceylon.	In November 1656 one ship arrives from Ceylon then in March 1657 one. Then one in July and finally in October one sails off to Ceylon and returns the same month. The temporarily loss could have taken place in between those months.
The rice harvest in Maccassar fails.	
Four yachts and four small boats are sent to Atjeh to block the harbour.	This probably occurred in the last two months of the year since we did not find any notice concerning a sending of that sort
The trade on Suratte and Persia is temporarily stopped, because of the disappointing profits made.	Still, several ships are sent to Suratte (two in July and several ships arrive from Persia (one in January, one in March, four in July and one in August). This is ambivalent.
Several ships are sent to fight pirates.	
A trade mission to China fails and the VOC cannot realise a trade post in China.	The realisation of a trade post may have failed but trade itself continued, according to the amount of ships sent to China

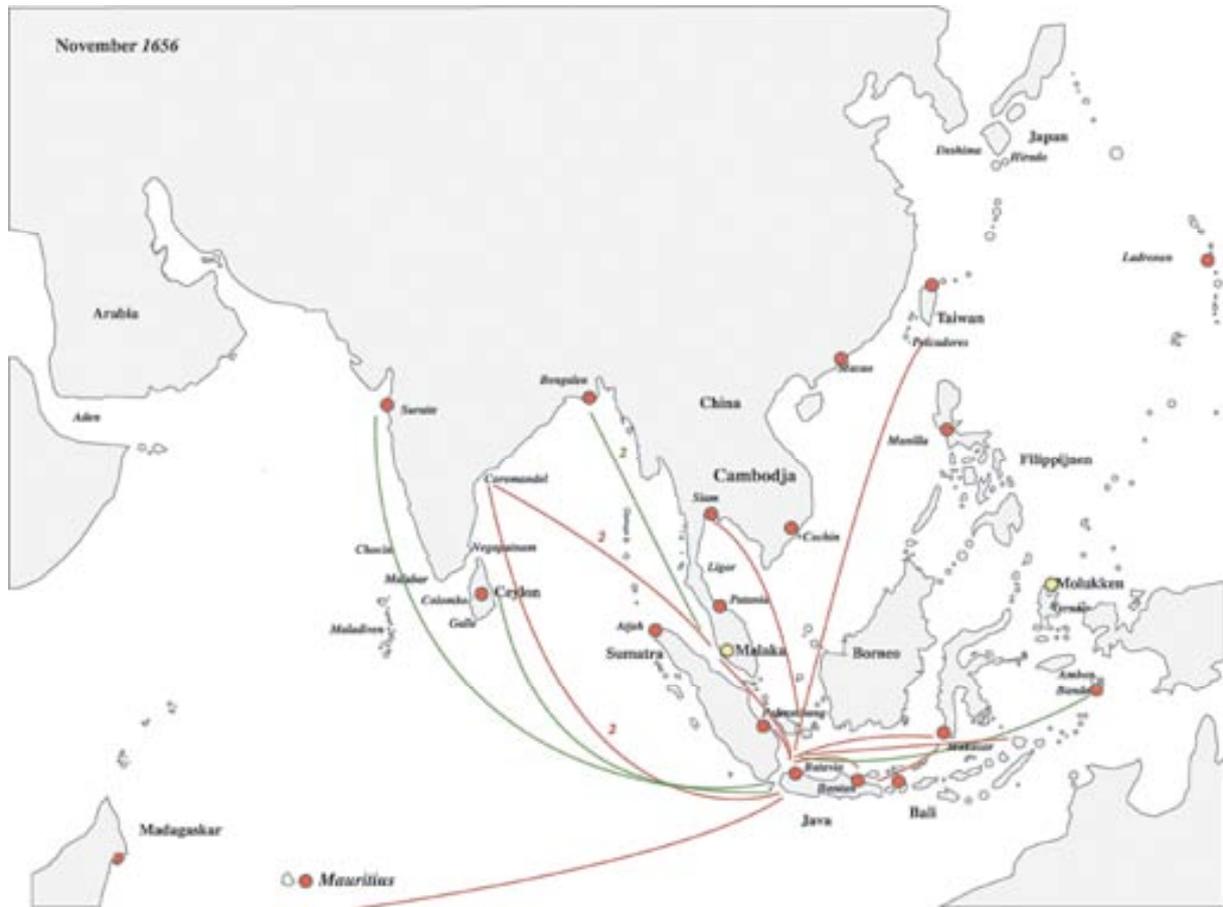
To extract a conclusion out of these findings, we need the comparison with another year. We wanted the year 1657 to weigh against the year of 1686, studied by Goens. He found several trading routes we also found, but the number of ships differs a lot from our results. We could take the fact that the VOC was not as profitable in 1686 as it was before in consideration. This could explain why Goens found less ships. Nevertheless a comparison cannot be made. In addition we haven't inquired into the *lasten* (a measurement for content), like Goens, which would be interesting for further research. We can only show the main trading routes during the two mousson seasons and extract the main routes. This is done below on the maps.

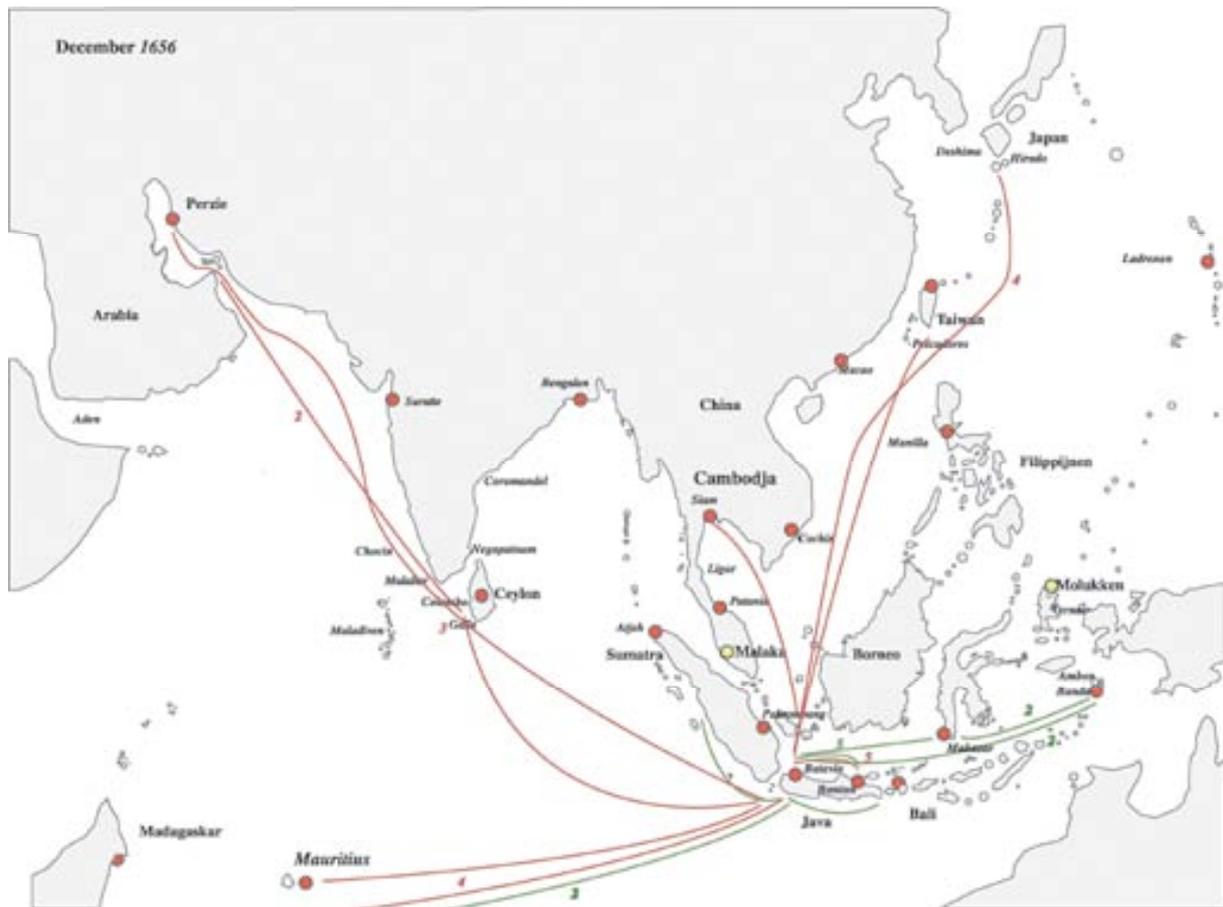
The exchange of products took place primarily in Asia. The most profits were made by Intra-Asiatic trade and not in the beginning by trade with Europe. It was a complex system of supply and demand in Asia and the Dutch seemed to have figured this complex system out, at least for a few decades.

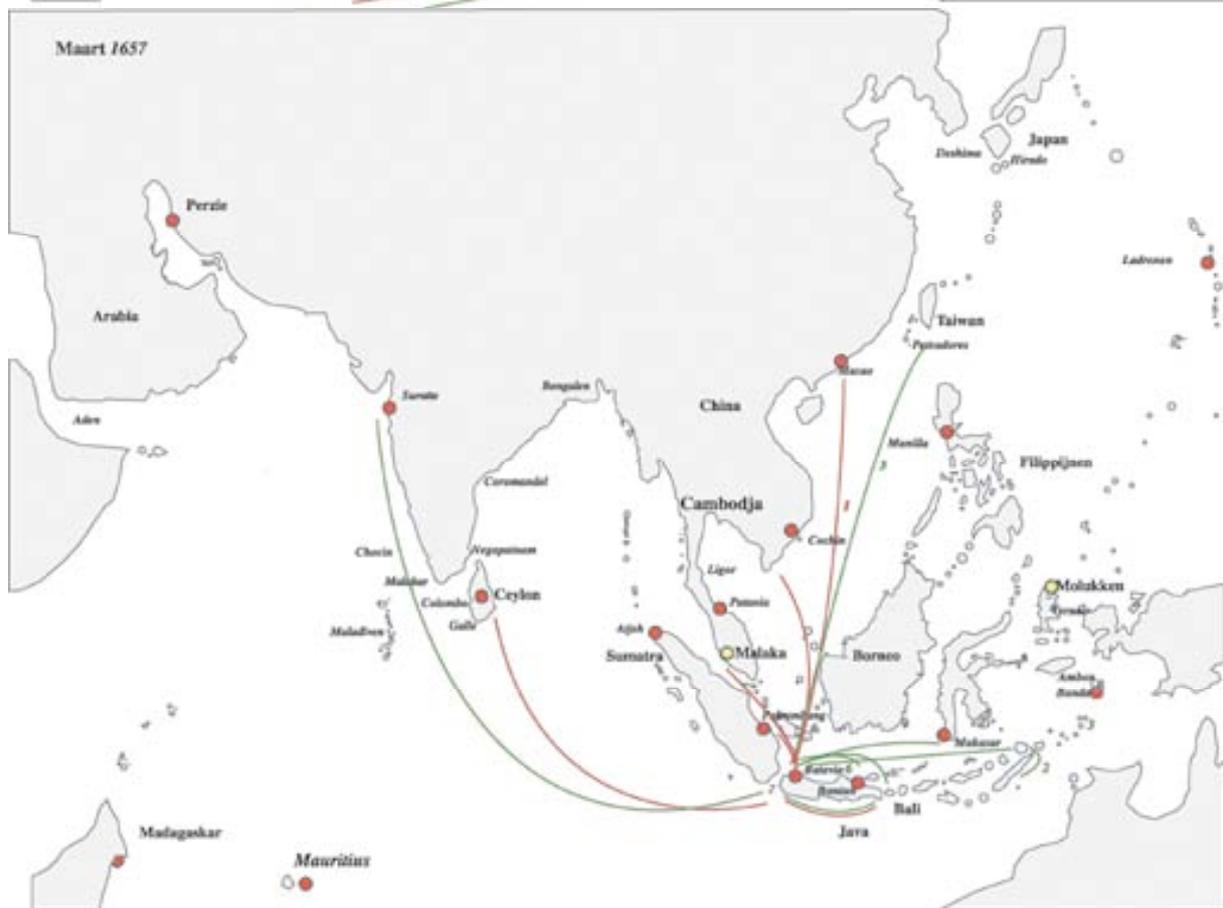
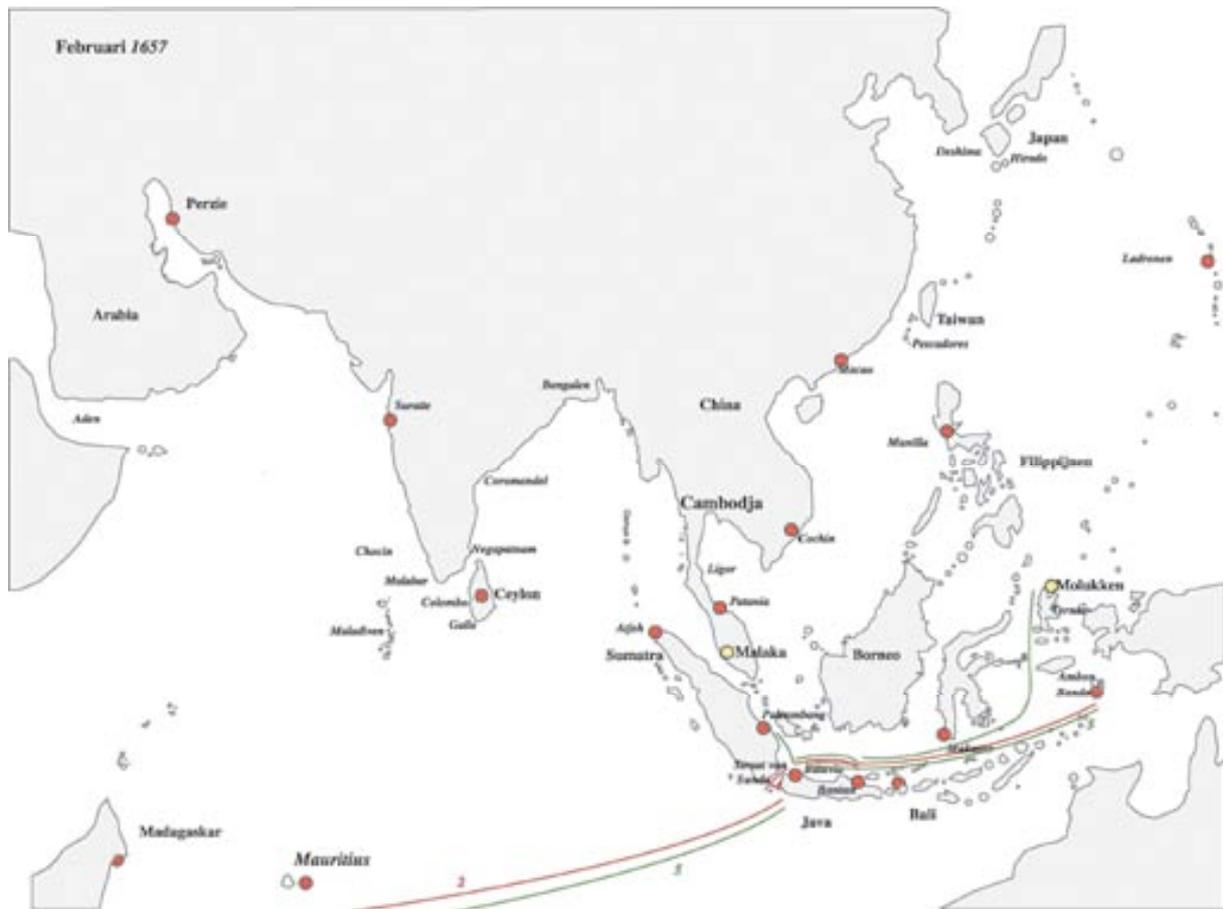
From Batavia to	Amount of ships in lasten of				Total	
	500	320	250	160	lasten	ships
Patria	5	5	2	2	4.920	14
Coromandel (2 in may/june; 6 in july/aug.; 2 in okt./nov., 1 through to Perzie)	2	5			2600	7
Bengalen (4 in june, 2 passing Ceylon; 2 in aug.; 1 passing Coromandel and through to Persia and 2 to Malacca)			5	4	1890	9
Japan (5 of wich 1 return to Coromandel and Bengalen, 1 to Siam)		2	3		1390	5
Siam, in August		2			500	2
Tonkin				1	160	1
China	2	1			890	3
Suratte, 2 in Aug., 1 return to Ceylon; 1 in Okt. by Malacca	2	1			890	3
Persia, in Aug.	2				640	2
West coast Sumatra, 1 in June; 1 in Sept.; 1 for Baros Ceylon, 2 to get provision from Bengalen, 2 for navigation to Malabar		1	1	1	730	3
Timor				1	160	1
Makassar			1		250	1
Ambon		1	1		570	2
Banda		2	1		890	3
Ternate				1	160	1
Total	12	27	20	16	22200	43

A survey of sea traffic of the VOC in 1686, by R. van Goens jr.

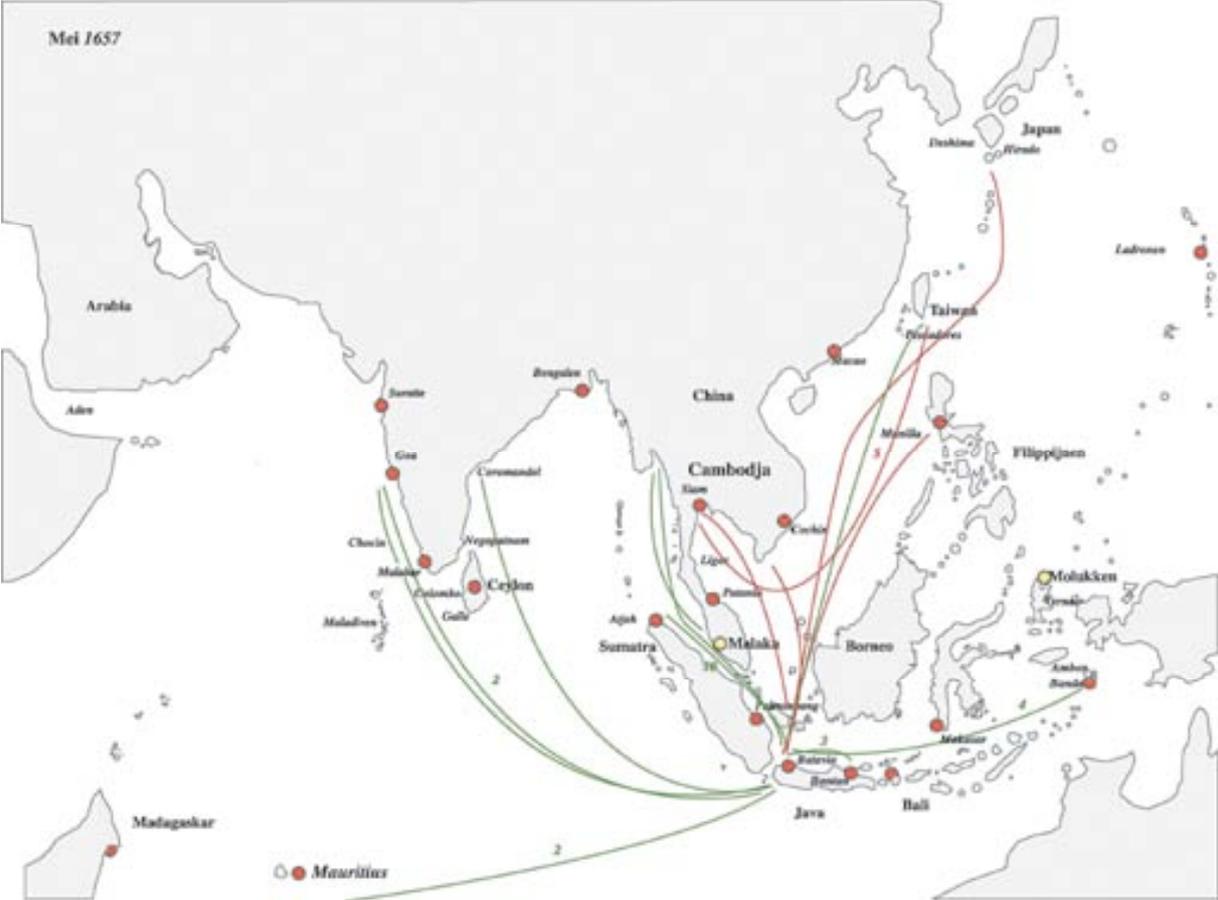
The NE monsoon

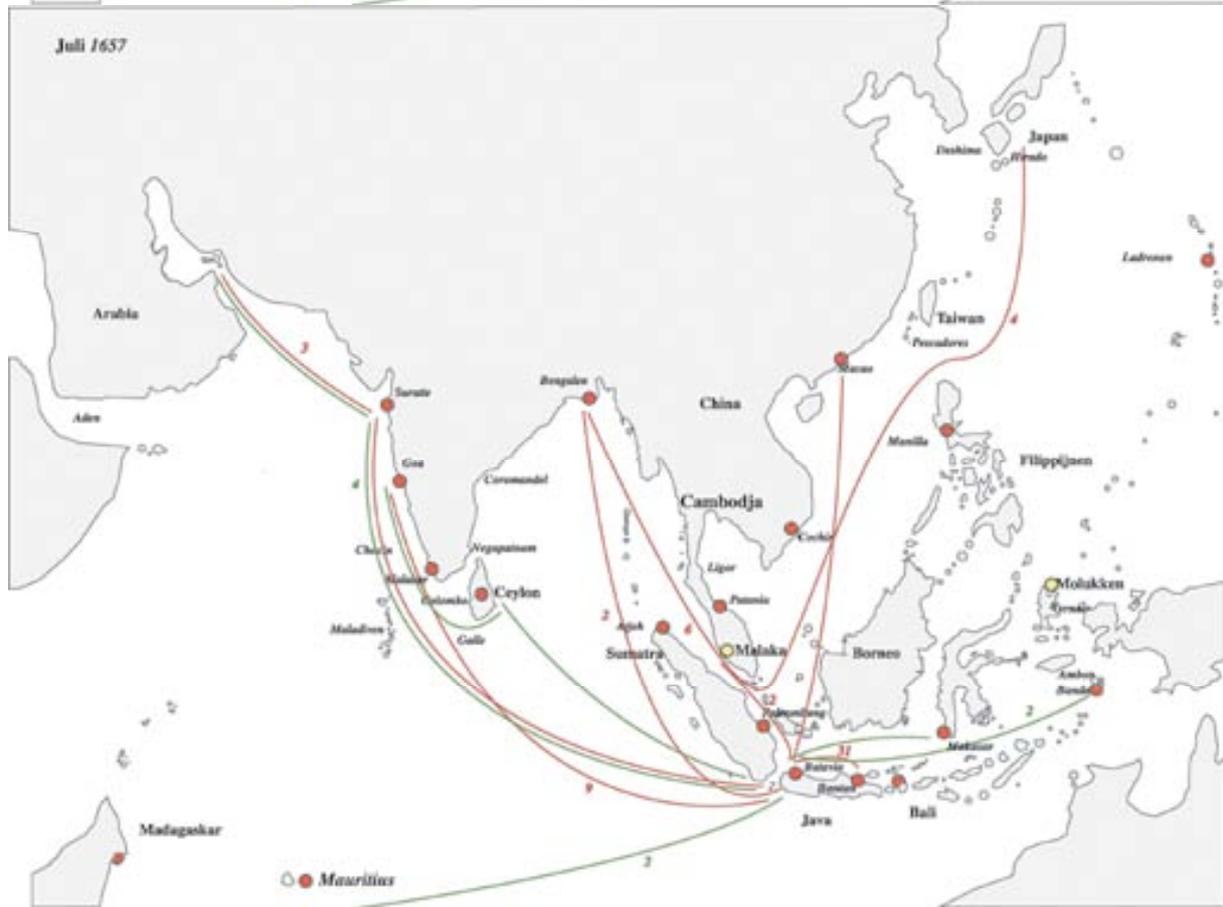
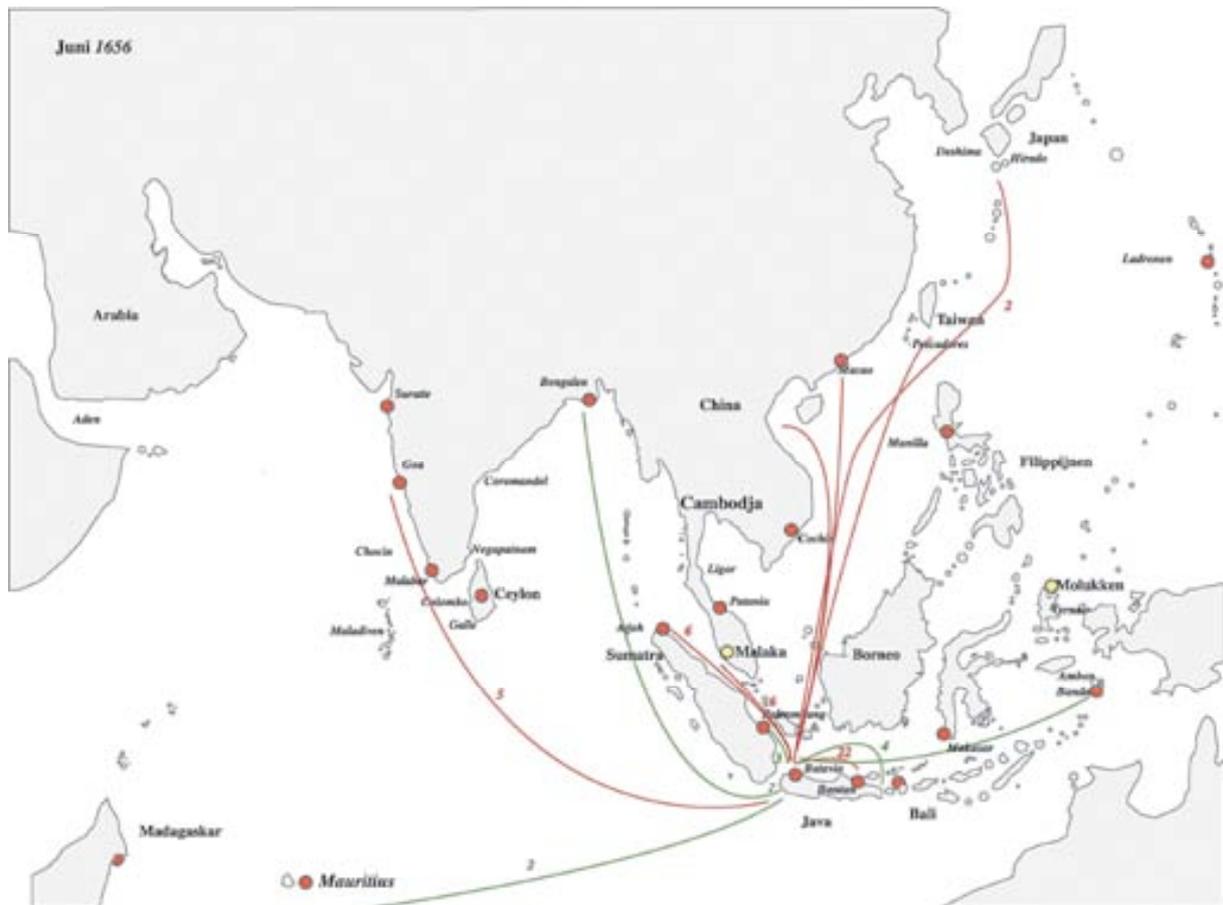


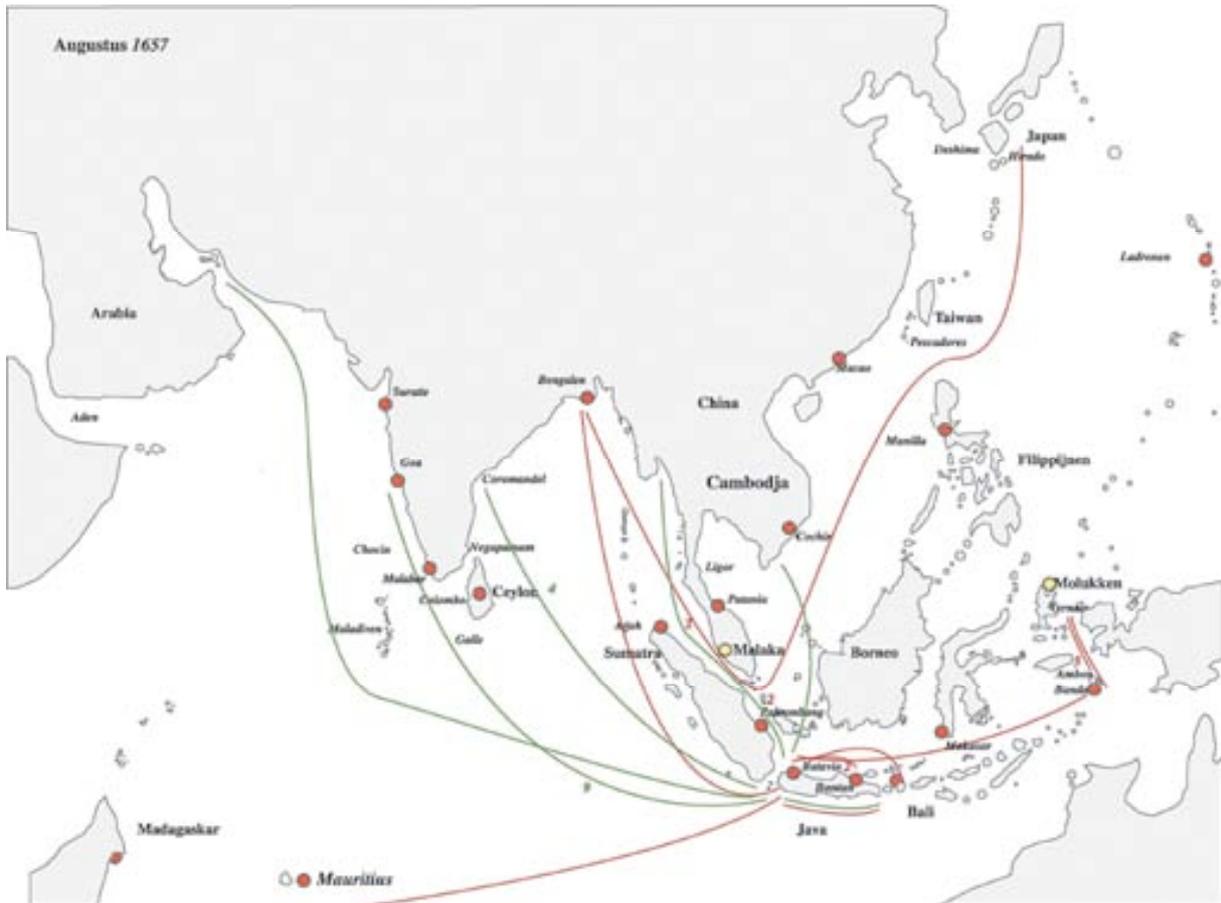


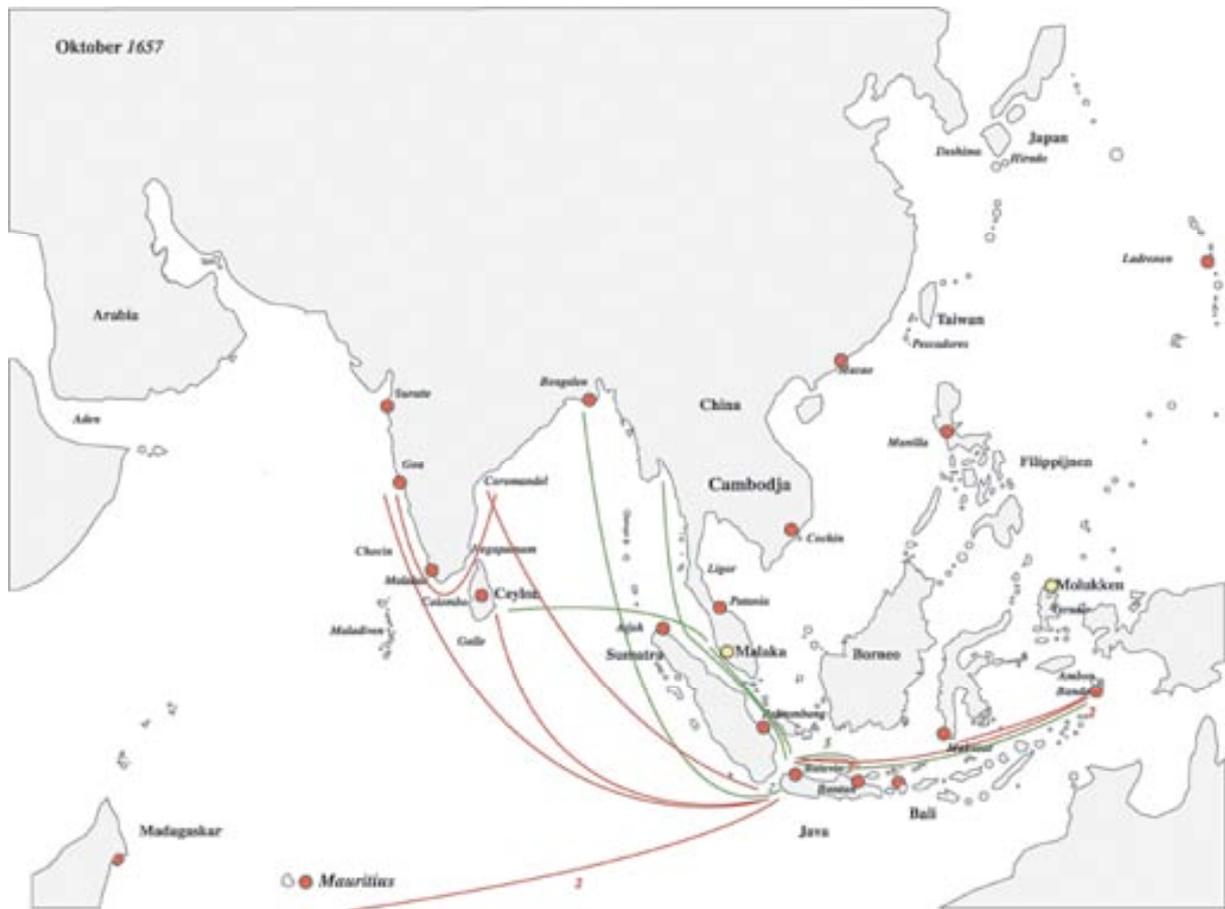


The SW monsoon









Management and Organisation

The Netherlands versus Asia

Sander Versteeg

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Management and Organization

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The chambers: Between executers and powerful city-ambassadors

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Conclusion

Introduction

The Dutch United East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) was the first multinational enterprise of the world. In the 17th and 18th C. hundreds of ships were sent to the east. It took a lot of money to build and equip the ships, and therefor a considerable amount of capital was needed. At the same time the risks of the trade voyages were enormous. The extreme weatherconditions, the indigenous wars and the uncertain economic fluctuations made it all very difficult. Opposite to the economical drawbacks stood the large opportunities to make money. The trade in spices, the core business of the VOC, was very lucrative. In the 17th C. the merchants of the VOC were choosing to trade because the profits counterbalanced the costs.

The world in which the VOC operated, between Asia and Europe, was unique and many-sided. The world in which the VOC was operating was a colourful (*kleurrijke*) one. It was a world of paintings, interesting objects, articles of dress, beautiful handwritings, scientific masterpieces, tropical fruit and cultural interaction. Above all the VOC had an international character. In the pre-modern period, the VOC held a *scharnierfunctie* (pivotalpoint) between two worlds, between two cultures. The point of departure of this article is this *scharnierfunctie*, aggravated on the dynamic shipping-industry.¹⁸ The shipping-industry was the backbone of the VOC; that's why it is an interesting field to explore. I am going to do some research on the process of communication between Asia and Europe. What were the differences between the two different components of the VOC in Asia and Europe? How was the VOC managed? What were the problems faced by the managers of the VOC? And in what way were the problems being solved?

I hope that the answers on these questions are going to shed some light on the colourful world of the VOC in Asia and Europe. The VOC was not only the first multinational, it was a company situated in an inter-cultural space. Exploring the VOC tells us much about the history of Asia and Europe (The Dutch Republic). It shows us the richness of the pre-modern world and the cultural interaction between sophisticated continents.

¹⁸ onder redactie van Leo Akveld en Els M. Jacobs, *De kleurrijke wereld van de VOC -Nationaal Jubileumboek VOC 1602-2002-* (Bussum 2002).

Management and Organization

Structure and decision-making: the VOC in the Dutch Republic

One of the characteristic elements of the VOC was the tight organization and the bureaucratic decision-making.

The highest in rank were the members of the board of directors: The *Heren XVII*. The *Heren XVII*, who consisted of delegates from the different municipal chambers, held two to three meetings a year.¹⁹ On paper the organization was well-balanced, but in reality it was a bit more complicated. The chamber of Amsterdam was the most important, because the city of Amsterdam was the wealthiest city in the Dutch Republic. The meetings of the *Heren XVII* lasted for one or more weeks. The time of the meetings was largely dictated by the trading and sailing seasons between Asia and Europe. The shipping-season began at September and ended at June. The most of the "return-ships" returned at the end of August or September in The Dutch Republic. The autumn session can be considered to be the first in the annual cycle of meetings. In the early spring (February / March) the second meeting took place. But what was being decided at this meetings, concerning the shipping?: 'in the autumn the definitive equipage for the coming season was resolved on, and in the early summer the preliminary decision was taken on the numbers of ships to be dispatched (...)'.²⁰ At the first meeting the definitive *equipage* was made. The equipage was about how many ships, articles and men were going to be sent to Asia. At this first meeting there were also decisions taken on the quantity of gold and silver to be sent to Asia, and it was decided when the sales were taken place. At this meeting it was also important to draw a clear list of goods which had to be imported from Asia. At the second meeting a special committee reported on the results of the autumn auctions. These results were important to see which products were in favour and which were not. After the auctions the definitive *eis der retouren* (definitive order) was made. This demand embodied how many products were asked from Asia by the *Heren XVII*. The government in Batavia were also making demands. These demands were very crucial for making the equipage at the first meeting. To get a clear picture of the process of decision-making it is important to emphasize the period of time between the making of the orders and the execution of these orders. It took about nine months for the demand to arrive in Batavia. It took two and a half years before the goods arrived in the Dutch Republic! This meant that the *Heren XVII* had to plan carefully. The directors had to have in mind that the situation could be changed in this period of more than two years. At the same time they had to make some important policy-decisions which had to fit in their short- and longterm strategies: 'Via the system of provisional decisions, the *Heren XVII* tried to create some continuity in the shipping-industry'.²¹ These provisional decisions could be changed if there was reason to do so. Besides the first and second meeting there often was a third meeting (only in the 17th C). This meeting was planned at the beginning of the summer (in July or August). In this meeting the *concept missive* (concept letter) of the *Haags Besogne*²² was read and criticized. At the same time the directors made a prudent estimate of next years equipage. The purpose of this

¹⁹ De VOC consisted of six chambers: Amsterdam (8), Zeeland (4), Delft (1), Rotterdam (1), Hoorn (1) en Enkhuizen (1). The numbers behind the items above are the number of delegates. The 17th member was coming from a city other than Amsterdam. This membership circulated between the other cities.

²⁰ J.R. Bruijn, F.S. Gaastra en I. Schöffers (ed.), *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th centuries* -deel 1- (Den Haag 1979-1987)22.

²¹ F.S. Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC*, 155.

²² The Haags Besogne was an important committee which was situated at The Hague and prepared the agenda of the Heren XVII.

estimation was that the chambers could now already begin with their activities. During the third meeting the directors were looking to the progress that was made by the chambers (for example the progress concerning the equipage). At the same meeting the financial situation was being discussed and the letters from Asia were read. Especially the sales results of the different Asian *comptoir*en (settlements) were important. To give an example: the purchasing of *lakense stoffen* (cloth) needed to be based on clear information about the exact selling place. This was because people in every region had specific preferences concerning colours and quality.²³ For the well-functioning of the company it was essential to have detailed sales information. Because an increase in the demand meant an increase in the production (supply). The production could only be started with an effective and well-balanced combination of the capitalgoods labour, capital and nature: an rational allocation of these capitalgoods was realized in the company. Everything was intertwined with each other. Besides the salesreports there was also the *Navale Macht*. This document was prepared in Batavia and informed the directors in the Republic over the fleet present in Asia. On the basis of this document the government in Batavia gave advice about the building of new vessels. In the contacts between Asia and Europe the *Navale Macht* played an important role. The Haags Besogne was the first to read the *Navale Macht*. The directors in The Hague provided some information about the vessels in the Republic and added it to the *Navale Macht*. To give an example: ‘an appendix to the *Haags Verbaal*²⁴ (...) records a list of 162 Company ships: 62 had been copied from the *Navale Macht* drawn up in Batavia (...), 78 had left home after that date or lay ready to sail in the estuaries of Holland and Zeeland, 11 were in harbour and another 11 were under construction in the shipyards of the chambers.’²⁵ The Haags Verbaal was sent to the *Heren XVII*. On the basis of this information the *Heren XVII* were making important decisions concerning the building of new vessels, the so-called *aantimmering* (construction of ships). An important document concerning the construction of ships was the *octrooi* (charter). It formed the basis of the ‘Loffelijcke Compagnie’ (praiseworthy company); it was an essential document in the production-process: ‘All the appointed (alloted) tasks, such as the building and equipping of the ships or the take up or selling of the return wares, were divided according to a fixed division over the chambers (Amsterdam _, Zeeland _ en de kleine kamers ieder 1/16).’²⁶ The differences and imbalances between the chambers were being ironed out at a later moment (*liquidatie en egalisatie*).

The chambers: Between executers and powerful city-ambassadors

After the technical settlement of the *aantimmering* by the *Heren XVII* the production-process began. Immediately the necessary amount of timber was bought; the workers began with their work: The planned timetable: purchasing of timber straight after the decision, leaching timber and laying down keels in November or December, after which the ships would stand in the yard for at least three months to be finished off in the spring, would make it possible for the new ships to sail in September of the following year.’²⁷ Between the decision to build a ship and the moment of the delivery laid approximately eighteen months. The tight timetable effected the conduct of business. Business had to be as efficient as possible, because the goals and deadlines had to be realized. For that reason it was important to work as long as possible; the VOC was a continuous company. The chambers had an uninterrupted working-programme. Besides, the directors were striving for standardization of the production-process.

²³ Jerzy Gawronski, *De Hollandia en de Amsterdam, twee schepen en een bedrijf* (Amsterdam 1993)20.

²⁴ Het Haags Verbaal was het jaarlijkse verslag van het Haags Besogne.

²⁵ DAS, 23.

²⁶ Gaastra, 159.

²⁷ DAS, 25.

The instructions and regulations were laid down in the *charter*. In this charter the length, the height and the volume of the various ships were described. The tight rules were constantly the cause of tensions between the *Heren XVII* and the chambers. For example: the chambers wanted to sail with bigger vessels. More voluminous vessels meant more cargo, and that meant more sales and higher profits for the chambers. There were 'verscheide excessen' (several excesses); it happened that chambers ignored the rules in the charter and were constructing larger vessels than allowed. The disobedient chambers were criticized and there was settled that in the future 'all the resolutions would be strictly observed'.²⁸ The standardization was also expressed in the masterpiece of Nicolaas Witsen - *Architectura Navalis*-. Witsen describes in detail the design, the weight and the special use of shipequipment. The standardization of equipment within the production-process and the enormous knowledge and know-how of the working men (as described by Witsen) were very important for the well-functioning of the company.²⁹ Besides the standardization there was also a process of concentration. The different parts of the VOC were all concentrated in a large industrial complex. In the 17th C. the *Oostenburg* complex was created in the city of Amsterdam, which was quite unique. The concentration of shipyards, warehouses, workshops and even houses for the working-men was very efficient.³⁰

The allocation of tasks between the *Heren XVII* and the chambers, concerning the shipping was clear. The *Heren XVII* took the decisions; the chambers were the executors. It was all very clear: "The chambers aren't allowed to build or to buy vessels, without the approval of the *Heren XVII*."³¹ Although there were sometimes tensions between the *Heren XVII* and the chambers, between the decision-makers and the executors, the relationship was mainly a good one. The chambers were working hard to realize the goals of the *Heren XVII*. The clear technical organization of the chambers and the division of labour were important causes for the efficient conduct of business. Meilink-Roelofs writes about the organization of the chambers: 'the growing volume of the VOC was leading in Asia and Europe to a process of specialization and differentiation of the administration. In the chambers, different departments with special tasks came into being.'³² In the chambers, the directors were in charge. The directors could not personally be hold responsible for the debts of the company. The chamber of Amsterdam had twenty directors; a small chamber had seven directors. The chamber of Amsterdam had four departments which were all responsible for the tasks imposed on them. In Amsterdam the departments were responsible for the *equipage*, the warehouse, the recipient of the goods and the administration (the audit-office).³³ The federal structure of the VOC had many similarities with the federal form of government in the Dutch Republic. The different cities had specific interests which they tried to defend, which sometimes caused tensions. Especially the self-willed chamber of Zeeland caused these tensions. The chambers were part of the VOC but were also representatives of their cities. They had an specific urban character. They were the executors of the resolutions but were at the same time very powerful on the fields in which they were operating. The chambers had their own administrative apparatus and their own way of book-keeping. The chambers could spend their money independently. The chambers organized the auctions and they were also equipping the vessels. Besides they were in close contact with important magistrates of the

²⁸ P. van Dam, *Beschrijvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*. Eerste boek, Deel 1 (F.W. Stapel ed.) (Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën Grote Serie 63), 's-Gravenhage 1927 (oorspronkelijk 1701) 461.

²⁹ N. Witsen, *Architectura Navalis ofte Aloude en Hedendaagsche Scheepsbouw en bestier* (Amsterdam 1671).

³⁰ above all: J.B. Kist, *Van VOC tot werkspoor, het Amsterdamse Industrieterrein Oostenburg* (Utrecht 1986).

³¹ Van Dam, 452.

³² M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, 'Hoe rationeel was de organisatie van de Nederlandse Oost-Indische Compagnie?', *Economisch- en Sociaal-Historisch Jaarboek* 44, 1982, 182.

³³ Femme Gastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC*, 161.

city-council. These informal and formal contacts were very important for the functioning of the company.³⁴

The Asian company: between dependence and autonomy

The Asian part of the VOC was in the 17th C. very dependent on deliveries from the Republic (especially timber and silver). In the same time the VOC-administration increased as result of the rapid expansion of the company in Asia. The "monsterrollen" (*Muster-Rolls*) are giving us information on the number of VOC-employees. The Muster-Rolls annually furnish a complete specification of all the land and sea personnel in Asia. In 1625 this involved an average of 4500 personnel employed; about 1688 this number was 11.551; in 1700 there were 18.117 VOC-employees in Asia. It is clear: within seventy-five years the number of servants quadrupled!³⁵ The scaling up of the company in Asia led to a considerable increase of her autonomous status in the Asian region: The Governor-General and Council were subordinated to the *Heren XVII*, but far away in Asia, where the VOC was fighting in wars and concluding treaties (...) they were neglecting the formal rules. The High Government ruled as a supreme and high-handed committee concerning -internal- Asiatic affairs. This sometimes led to tensions".³⁶ The tensions between Asia and Europe were increasing in affairs concerning war and peace. The Asian directors wanted to realize a trade monopoly on the Island of Ceylon in 1650. To realize this goal it was important to get rid of the Portuguese. The peace of Munster (1648), which ended eighty years of fighting during the so-called *Dutch Revolt*, necessitated a careful approach. The directors in the Republic were constantly underlining the importance of the peace-treaty; this document had to be respected by the Asian part of the company. There was a lot of irritation when it became clear that Portuguese vessels were being stopped and fired at. These actions were in violation of the peace-treaty of 1648 and the policy of the *Heren XVII* at that moment.³⁷ ³⁸ The autonomous character of the Asian part of the company was also realized because of the developments in the intra-Asian trade.³⁹ Each year this trade was increasing. Batavia became an important staple-town. The city was functioning as a central junction between Asia and Europe. Batavia was called -*rendez-vous*- in Asia: 'It was the central point, where all the links (administrative, commercial and maritime) came together.'⁴⁰ In the second half of the 17th C. a process of cultivation began in the Ommelanden. The city became very powerful. In the Castle of Batavia the meetings of the High Government were held. The High Government was the highest authority of the VOC in Asia. This high institution counted seven members, a Governor-General and six Councils of the Indies. Batavia had much influence at the equipping of the vessels which were sailing home. It was important to work efficiently. Batavia needed to know how many vessels were available for the return-journey. The *dagh-registers* (daily minutes) are giving us a lot of information of this planning-process; the daily minutes are giving an enumeration of the arriving and leaving of vessels in Batavia. On the 5th of February 1659 the vessel

³⁴ zie F. Gaastra, *Bewind en beleid bij de VOC 1672-1702* (Leiden-Zutphen 1989): The knowledge and the political power of the city magistrates, who were sometimes working as VOC advisers, were very important for the VOC.

³⁵ F. Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC*, 84-86.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 66.

³⁷ George Winius, *Luso-Nederlandse rivaliteit in Azië*, 105-130 in: G. Knaap en G. Teitler, *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, tussen oorlog en diplomatie* (Leiden 2002).

³⁸ S. Arasaratnam, *De VOC in Ceylon en Coromandel in de 17de en 18de eeuw*, 17-28 in: M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs e.a., *De VOC in Azië* (Bussum 1976).

³⁹ The intra-Asian trade was the trade *within* the Asian world. The goal of G.G. Coen was clear: the profits should be sufficient to compensate the costs of the returning fleet. This goal was never achieved.

⁴⁰ F. Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC*, 71.

"Bloemendaal" returned from the Strait Sunda; on the 9th of February the vessel "Brouwershaven" was sent to Bantam; on the 25th of February the vessels "Vinck" and " 't Hart" were leaving from Batavia to Ambon via Japara.⁴¹ Batavia was organizing, coordinating and supervising the whole process. On the 7th of April the document said: "the vessel 'Raethuys', that was held till the 16th of October in Pallicatta, and was ordered to leave six or seven October, had to leave immediately to the Republic and was ordered to prevent further delays.⁴² Batavia was managing the intra-Asian trade and decided which vessels were going to return to "t vaderlant" (the Republic). In the first half of the 17th C. the *Heren XVII* decided which vessels should be stay in Asia: 'mostly the smaller type ships, sometimes an older East Indiaman, which was not considered sufficiently seaworthy to undertake the return voyage, were destined to remain in Asia (...)'.⁴³ In the second half of the 17th C. Batavia was deciding which vessels should remain in Asia and which vessels should return. The decisions were made on the basis of the available maintenance-information: 'the vessels "'t Serpent" and "St. Jan Baptista" were in such a bad shape that the vessels should be broken up'.⁴⁴ The vessel - *de Avondster*- was at one moment in such a terrible condition that the vessel was not be able to accept the return-voyage; the commercial risks were too high: the Avondster was from now on used to patrol before the coast of Java and to blockade the port of Bantam. These tasks were especially designed for old vessels.⁴⁵

The policy-making and the profits of the intra-Asian trade were related to the price-policy and the monopoly-position of the VOC. There was a clear difference of opinion between the Republic and Asia concerning the prices. The Asian company wanted high prices for their spices. On the island of Ternate, the VOC destroyed many clove trees because they wanted to limit the supply and raise the prices. At the central part of the Moluccas the VOC was checking the planting of new trees in such a manner that the production did not increase too fast.⁴⁶ The high prices in Asia also prevented the buying up of the goods by competitors. The authorities in the Republic had a different opinion. The main goal of the *Heren XVII* was commercial expansion. To grow fast in Asia it was important to limit the prices: high prices would only benefit the competitors.⁴⁷ The different views concerning the prices effected the debate over the monopoly status of the VOC. The debate started when the system of the passes was introduced. That system was not accepting vessels without a pass. Strange vessels of the competitors could be stopped in the future; the goal of the system was to strenghten the monopoly-position of the VOC in Asia. After a few years it became clear that the system did not work. It was impossible to check all the vessels in the Asian region. The pass-system tells us something about the monopoly-position of the VOC. It was impossible to create a tight monopoly-structure in Asia because there were too much competitors. Besides, private trade was too lucrative. Many local merchants were trading illegally with Asian merchants. The private trade frustated the high ambitions of the VOC to control all the trade in their territory. The *Heren XVII* wanted to create a tight monopoly-systeem; Batavia was in favour of free trade (mainly from self-intersted motives).⁴⁸ Both visions were quite different from each other. The debate caused a lot of tensions between Asia and Europe. In reality a compromise was "reached". Officially the monopoly was the central element of the VOC

⁴¹ J.A. van der Chijs, *Dagh-register, gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlands-India - 1659-* uitgegeven door het Ministerie van Koloniën, 's-Gravenhage 1902.

⁴² ibidem, voor het jaar 1641; april, 125.

⁴³ DAS, 23.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, for the year 1640; december, 123.

⁴⁵ Menno Leenstra, *De geschiedenis van het schip de Avondster, aan de hand van diverse bronnen*, 5. (not been published).

⁴⁶ Prak, 132-133.

⁴⁷ Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC*, 137.

⁴⁸ Gaastra, 120.

commercial policy. In reality private trade was accepted by the authorities, because the monopoly was not realistic.

The tensions between Asia and Europe grew during the 17th C. because of the autonomous character of the Asian company. The directors in the Republic wanted to create a system in which they have more control over the Asian part of the company. In this view it was essential to centralize the decision-making. It was necessary that the direct orders from the *Heren XVII* would be acted upon. The system had to be efficient, quickly and transparent. The Asian company had to be less autonomous and more reliable. One of the measures taken to fight corruption and autonomy was the installation of an *onafhankelijke fiscaal* (independent fiscal). In 1687 these men were placed in Ceylon, the Coromandel Coast, Bengal, Surat, Malacca and the Cape of Good Hope. The addition "independent" meant that the *fiscaal* was no longer subject to the local governor and council, but that he was placed immediately under the authority of the *Heren XVII*. The *fiscaals* should fight against abuses (for example private trade) of his colleagues and local superiors. The *fiscaal* could directly correspond with his superiors in the Republic without interference from the Asian authorities. The Asian authorities could not kick him out of office because he was "protected" by the *Heren XVII*. In the beginning of the 18th C. the function was abolished because of the incompetence of the *fiscaals* and the powerful resistance of the Asian authorities. This example shows us the difficulty in creating a coherent system. It shows us the different views of Asia and Europe. Besides it shows us the problems concerning the communication and the decision-making within the VOC.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The VOC was a modern company because of its financial structure and her tight, modern (hierarchical) organization. The centralization of its buildings, the clear and efficient division of labour and the standardization of the production-process were all the ingredients of a success story. But there were also problems. The communication between Europe and Asia was often problematic. The distance in time and space between Europe and Asia was in the 17th C. enormous. It took nine months before letters arrived at their final destination. The decisions of the directors were always *provisional*. The information could change. The *Heren XVII* held three meetings a year; the decisions were about the *equipage*, the *aantimmering* and the financial policy. The important documents which were used in this process of decision-making were the *Navale Macht*, the *charter* and results of the auctions. The relationship between Europe and Asia was with a lot of tensions. One of the causes was the spectacular rise of Batavia in the 17th century. Asia became less dependent of the Republic; Asia was becoming an autonomous entity within the VOC company. The Asian company coordinated the intra-Asian trade and decided which ships should return to the Republic and which ships would be sailing in the Asian waters. The tensions were concentrated at two matters: the monopoly-position and price-policy of the company. The Republic wanted low prices and an expansive commercial policy. The authorities in Asia wanted high prices to get high profits. There were also tensions concerning political-diplomatic matters. The Dutch authorities wanted to increase their influence in Asia and installed an independent fiscal. This function was not a solution. The authorities in Asia could do what they wanted to do. The VOC was a company with two different faces. Both parts of the company had other goals, intentions, structures and visions. But both parts were functioning well despite the problems they were

⁴⁹ F.S. Gaastra, *The independent fiscals of the VOC, 1689-1719* in: All of one Company: The VOC in biographical perspective: essays in honour of M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs under the auspices of the Centre for the History of European Expansion (Leiden, 1986) 92- 102.

facing. The VOC was the first multinational company in the world. It was the pivotal point between two worlds, two cultures and two systems.

Social Life

A maritime society: friendship, animosity and group-formation on the ships of the Dutch East-India Company

Michaël Deinema

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Introduction

Much has already been written about the living-conditions and the official hierarchy and division of labour on the ships of the Dutch East-India Company (VOC). These studies, however, have almost invariably been concerned with rules and statutes, in other words with what was conceived by the officials of the VOC, and remarkably less with how life was actually experienced by those sailing on the ships. In what follows, I aim to shed some light on the activities of the men (predominantly) and women who lived, and sometimes died, on board the Dutch East-Indiamen. In particular, I wish to explore the social bonding that occurred there. Who interacted with whom, in what way and why, and how did these interactions relate to the official hierarchy and divisions imposed by the company executives? Any restraints posed by official obligations and hierarchic structure will be examined in connection to this question.

It is not only interesting to know who individuals voluntarily bonded with, but also for what purpose and whether the specific purpose of the interaction affected the choice of partner. In the hostile environment of an East-Indiaman a loyal friend could be the best protection from danger or theft and connections with higher-ranked personnel could assure a host of privileges. Were these, however, the same people one would go to for companionship, to combat loneliness, to engage in recreational activities with or to confide in when considering lucrative dealings or, more sinisterly, when hatching mutiny? In short, I will try to show the life and character of the people on board the Company's ships as it actually was, as opposed to what it was supposed to be.

Official divisions

Several main divisions marked the official distinctions between people aboard a Dutch East-Indiaman. First and foremost stood the hierarchical division between major officers, petty officers and ordinary crewmen. A second division pertained more to one's social status than to one's position in the ship's chain of command, namely the division between those housed behind the main mast and those living in front of it. The cabins behind the main mast were the maritime residence of the major officers, the surgeons, the reverend and any official guests travelling on the ship. The infinitely less comfortable and less healthy area in front of the main mast was reserved for the rest of the ship's inhabitants.

Another division concerned the different roles people were expected to play for the Company in Asia. This determined whether one would be a sailor, officer or specialist (surgeon, reverend) on the Company's ships, or a merchant, a soldier, or an artisan in the Company's outposts. Ordinary crewmen were divided into groups comprising six to seven men called *bakken* (bowls) who were supposed to eat together and the sailors were divided into work-shifts called *kwartieren* (quarters). The final main division was a legal one, that between slaves and freemen.

The chain of command

The only one of the main divisions that was much further elaborated was the hierarchical one. Until 1742 the senior merchant was theoretically the highest authority aboard a ship, superseded only by the fleet-commander, if several Company ships sailed together. Afterwards, the skipper or captain officially assumed this role and the position of senior merchant disappeared. In practice, however, skippers were seen as the most important officer on a ship long before 1742. On smaller ships they had assumed this role as early as the second half of the 17th century.⁵⁰ It seems as though the statutory change of 1742 was more a case of theory adapting to practice than vice versa.

Serving directly under the senior merchant was the merchant's assistant, who usually acted as ship's secretary and accountant, and was counted among the major officers. The officers serving directly under the skipper were divided by their specific area of responsibility. Several petty officers were in charge of any of the following: ship's labour, punishments and maintenance of order, ship's maintenance, food and drinks, and weaponry. Navigation, however, was the responsibility of a major officer, the senior steersman or first lieutenant, who was assisted by several petty officers.

The soldiers on board of the ships sailing to Asia, who usually made up approximately one third of the entire crew⁵¹, had their own chain of command, even though all soldiers were ultimately submitted to the ship's commander and skipper. When a soldier was tried for a crime, they seated in the ship's court. If a ship carried 60 or more soldiers, they were commanded by a sergeant. If there were less, a corporal acted as commanding officer. Slightly lower in rank was the *lantspassaat*, followed by the *adelborst* (midshipman) and then the ordinary soldier.

Guidelines of justice

When a Company law was broken aboard a ship (the VOC, being a pseudo-state organisation, had the authority to issue laws) the Ship's Council, consisting of the senior merchant, assistant, skipper, senior steersman and *hoogbootsman* (the petty officer responsible for ship's

⁵⁰ J.R.Bruijn and E.S. van Eyck van Heslinga, "De scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie en het verschijnsel mouterij", 9-26 in: J.R. Bruijn and E.S. van Eyck van Heslinga (eds.), *Mouterij. Oproer en berechting op schepen van de VOC* (Bussum 1980) 13 and 19.

⁵¹ Bruijn, "De scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie", 13.

labour), would convene to try and (if found guilty) sentence the perpetrator. When senior merchants slowly started to disappear from the Company ships from the second half of the 17th century onwards, their place on the council was taken by another officer. If the charge was exceptionally serious (such as mutiny, murder or attempt-at-murder) the case had to be tried by the *Brede Raad* (broad council), consisting of major officers of several Company ships and with the fleet-commander acting as chairman. Only when a delay could bring the ship into serious danger, could such cases be tried by the Ship's Council.⁵² When a soldier was tried, the sergeant or commanding corporal and the *lantspassaat* took the place of the senior steersman and the *hoogbootsman* on the council.⁵³

Sentences were spoken according to the official Company Article Letter, which stated exactly which crimes deserved what punishments, sometimes leaving some room for circumstances. This Article Letter was drafted, and its contents decided upon, by the highest Company directors. At the start of each voyage and several times during a voyage this Letter would be read out loud to all crewmen, who were expected to know and respect its contents. The punishments prescribed by the Company Article Letter were usually severe, including keelhauling, running the gauntlet, branding, whipping, imprisonment and heavy fines. The death penalty was awarded to mutineers, murderers and sodomites(!). Considered nearly equal to the death penalty in severity was abandonment on a desert island or coast.

Sometimes skippers would blatantly disregard the Article Letter and punish crewmen arbitrarily. A late 17th century German observer saw life on a VOC-ship as a form of slavery, a life that depended solely on the mercy of the skipper and the other officers. A contemporary Dutch ship's surgeon agreed with this point of view.⁵⁴ Brutal behaviour by skippers did not pass unnoticed by Company officials either. There is a record of a skipper being fined in 1691 for excessive brutality against his crew.⁵⁵

The petty officer in charge of maintaining order and executing punishments was the provost. In full accordance with the customs of the age, this "servant of justice" was authorised to use torture to exact confessions.⁵⁶ Very eager to "assist" the provost in his duties were the quartermasters. The German soldier Raetzel recalled that upon their embarkation unto the East-Indiamen "De Voetboog" in 1694, he and his fellow soldiers were hit and kicked to their lodgings by the provost and the quartermasters.⁵⁷

Power and privileges of officers

The power and privileges enjoyed by the ship's officers exceeded by far the examples thereof given above. The crew could amuse themselves with music, plays or sailors' games only with the skipper's express permission. What is more, the skipper (or senior merchant) could decide whether the crew's rations should be increased or decreased and did so sometimes for his own profit.⁵⁸ When sailing to Asia, certain points along the way were traditionally points of festivity and rations would be doubled on such days. The skipper, however, could decide that such festivities were either imprudent or unsafe and cancel them.⁵⁹ Skippers could also decide

⁵² Bruijn, "De scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie", 19.

⁵³ Van Dam, *Beschrijvinge*, 603-604.

⁵⁴ J. de Hullu, "Amusement" 126-133 in: J.R. Bruijn and J. Lucassen (eds.), *Op de schepen der Oost-Indische Compagnie. Vijf artikelen van J. de Hullu* (Groningen 1980) 126.

⁵⁵ Van Dam, *Beschrijvinge*, 611.

⁵⁶ Idem, 100.

⁵⁷ Roelof van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur. Duitsers in dienst van de VOC* (Nijmegen 1997) 149.

⁵⁸ Martin Wintergerst, *Reisen auf dem Mittelländischen Meere, der Nordsee, nach Ceylon und nach Java, II* (Haag 1932) 65.

⁵⁹ Johann Jacob Merklein, *Reise nach Java, Vorder- und Hinter-Indien, China und Japan 1644-1653* (Haag 1930) 8, and De Hullu, "Amusement" 127.

whether there would be any stops along the way, whether at the Cape Verde Islands, Madagascar, Mauritius or even at the Cape of Good Hope, even though they were actually directed to stop there.⁶⁰ But as with trials, when it came to important things such as stopping at the Cape or changing rations, a skipper or senior merchant could not disregard his other officers' opinions without peril. Therefore they were usually consulted.

The other officers could do more than simply voice their opinions or put pressure on the commanding officer. The quartermasters and their superior the *hoogbootsman* could decide which sailor got what job and for how long.⁶¹ Clearly, some jobs were more desirable and safer than others. It was also left roughly to their discretion whether the sailors were directed in a normal or heavy-handed manner, during their many labours, and they too could have themselves (secretly) privileged with more rations.⁶² Any officer could ask for permission to take on more assistants, or replace dead ones, and could also nominate candidates for these positions. Such abilities, including the fact that nearly all officers had direct access to the commander, made officers very powerful indeed and very desirable friends.

Officers did not necessarily have to abuse their power to gain privilege. They had plenty to start with. Obviously they were paid more than the average sailor or soldier and the major officers enjoyed the enormous privilege of residing in cabins behind the main mast. But the Company granted them with more advantages. They got more rations and got first (and often only) pick of caught fish or game.⁶³ Parties among officers were definitely more frequent than among the rest of the crew, more opulent and, importantly, more often included women.⁶⁴

The will of the crew: pressure, disobedience and mutiny

With such massive inequalities on board it was not always easy for the officers to maintain power or use it to its fullest extent. Officially speaking, disobedience of any order constituted mutiny. Bruijn and Van Eyck van Heslinga distinguished two types of mutiny: the mass-strike and the attempt to gain control of the ship's command. Even though the first type was less harmful and less violent than the second, they were officially treated the same. The penalty for both was death. Even simply planning a mutiny carried the death sentence. Hardly ever were all mutineers executed, however, for this would have left some ships practically empty on the open sea. Usually, the officers contented themselves with executing the "leaders".

A lot of dissent, however, was never marked as mutiny. According to a reverend in 1633, the crew of his ship, unwilling to suffer hunger any longer, completely disregarded their officers' orders to sail home around Ireland and Scotland and directed the ship instead through the Channel, a road that was shorter but more dangerous. It is unclear whether anyone was punished for this disobedience.⁶⁵

Physical separations and how they were overcome

⁶⁰ Merklein, *Reise nach Java*, 8-9.

⁶¹ De Hullu, "Matrozen en soldaten" 50-81 in: Bruijn, *Op de schepen der Oost-Indische Compagnie*, 55.

⁶² A.C.J. Vermeulen, "'Onrust ende wederspanningheyt'; vijf muiterijen in de zeventiende eeuw" 27-43 in: Bruijn, *Muiterij*, 42.

⁶³ Van Gelder, *Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 157.

⁶⁴ For an example of an early 18th. century officers' party see: "Muziek. Peter Kolb, passagier, maart 1704" 53-55 in: Vibeke Roeper and Roelof van Gelder (eds.), *In dienst van de compagnie. Leven bij de VOC in honderd getuigenissen [1602-1799]* (Amsterdam 2002) 54.

⁶⁵ "Bedorven voedsel. Seyger van Rechteren, ziekentrooster, juli 1633" 267-268 in: Roeper, *In dienst van de Compagnie*, 267-268.

All obstacles to interaction between certain people on board could in principle be overcome, but they all had a very real significance. Official and social barriers were not the only obstacles to (informal) contact between those on board. Physical separation was just as significant. Passengers hardly ever ventured in front of the main mast and ordinary crewmen were hardly ever allowed there.⁶⁶ This obviously made it hard for these groups to bond. Because their duties required this, officers, surgeons and reverends were more mobile, perhaps unwillingly so, seeing that those who had the choice often opted to stay behind the mast. The officers, surgeons and reverends too, however, would spend most of their spare time here.

Another separation existed between soldiers and sailors. Although both slept between-decks, sailors spent much of their time working on deck while soldiers usually stayed idly between-decks. Especially on ships having only two work shifts this could be a serious impediment to contacts between sailors and soldiers.

Some activities did bring everyone together. When a dead person was hauled overboard, usually everyone attended. Afterwards, when the deceased's goods were auctioned, most were present as well, as prospective buyers or as spectators.⁶⁷ When physical punishments were executed, everyone had to be present, because such punishments were also meant to deter others.⁶⁸ There were also non-formal occasions at which people came together. Musical or theatrical performances on deck by crewmen, held at the skipper's discretion, were attended by most, including passengers.

A convenient place for soldiers, sailors and petty officers to mingle, was the *boevenet*, the only place on board where the crew was allowed to smoke. It was probably here, that the exchange of stories and drinks between sailors and soldiers occurred, that the 18th century German soldier Wolf wrote about.⁶⁹ It may also have been here that the coalition of sailors, soldiers and petty officers, who mutinied on ships like "Het Meeuwjtje" (1615), the "Henriette Louise" (1653) or the "Windhond" (1733) first met and hatched their plans.⁷⁰

Bakken and kwartieren

Upon embarkation, sailors and soldiers had to become part of dinner-groups called *bakken*. These groups, consisting of six or seven men, had their own tables at which they would have their dinners throughout the journey. Important though they were, little else is known about these *bakken*. It is unclear whether these groups were formed by the crewmen themselves or by the quartermasters or other officers. It is also unclear if crewmen could change *bak* or if the groups were rearranged when death took its toll and some groups became ever smaller. There are indications that soldiers and sailors usually did not eat together. The names of some of these groups, such as the "*Hoogduitse bak*" (High German) suggest that they might have been arranged by nationality.⁷¹ Major officers, specialists and passengers always ate in the dining room behind the main mast.

Sailors and soldiers were both divided into work-shifts called quarters by the officers, but because soldiers were generally unfit for this type of work, for them the quarters had little significance. The sailor's day, however, was largely dominated by these four-hour shifts, especially if there were only two quarters on board. Because these shifts were continuous (day and night) having only two quarters meant that sailors never had more than four hours rest or

⁶⁶ The sisters Lammens and the sisters Swellengrebel spent virtually all their time here.

⁶⁷ *Idem*, 63.

⁶⁸ Bruijn, "De scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie", 24.

⁶⁹ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 169.

⁷⁰ See: "Bijlage I. Lijst van bij muiterij betrokken personen." 148-163 in: Bruijn, *Muiterij*.

⁷¹ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 157.

sleep. In such cases sailors often jumped into their hammocks with their wet clothes still on, just to save time.⁷² Obviously, they would not have felt much like having long chats with the soldiers who shared their sleeping-area. When the crew was large enough to allow three quarters the sailors had eight hours rest for every four hours of work. Such circumstances must have been much more conducive to nurturing contacts outside of one's quarter. Still, for most sailors, the quarter, as well as the *bak*, must have been their main frame of reference when establishing contacts, if only because their quarter-mates all shared the same rhythm. Solidarity may also have been enhanced by the fact that the quarters were supposed to look after their own sick.⁷³

The importance of quarters certainly increased the differences between sailors and soldiers, but yet another group was left out of the quarters. Although there are recorded cases of the "ship's boys" (crewmen too young to be true sailors) being part of a quarter, officially they were not assigned to them. Perhaps they served in quarters only when there were many sick and dead, as quarters sometimes were rearranged if one became too small.⁷⁴ Otherwise, if the sailors were too busy to bother with them, these boys may have turned either to the soldiers or relied on each other for their social life on board.

Friendship

For many lowly soldiers and sailors, having a good friend on board they could trust was an absolute necessity. As true comrades, they could look after each other's possessions and shield them from the ever present threat of theft when the other was away on guard, working on deck or answering a call of nature. They could share food and drinks and could nurse each other. This was true throughout the Company's history. According to the German soldier Georg Bernhard Schwartz, who served the VOC between 1734 and 1741, a sick person, who did not have a comrade to bring him his rations, was bound to die of hunger and thirst.⁷⁵ A century earlier, another German soldier related that during a bad storm good friends would tie themselves together in order to die together. Such friendships were thus more than a survival strategy. It is reasonable to assume that friends of this kind shared their thoughts and feelings, their anxieties and their joys as well as their rations. Not surprisingly, these friends usually had similar backgrounds and the same nationality.⁷⁶

Of course there were also less intimate forms of friendship. The sisters Lammens and the sisters Swellengrebel (who were passengers on a Company ship in the seventeen fifties) left their ships considering almost everyone they had stayed with behind the main mast their friend. They were also very taken with the major officers and passengers of the ships that accompanied theirs on their journeys and whom they had met several times.⁷⁷ Although contacts between major officers, specialists and passengers generally seemed to have been good, friendship did not come automatically. The German passenger Peter Kolb wrote that he gained the ship's officers' (who were virtually all from the Dutch Republic) friendship *because* he tried to speak Dutch with all his might.⁷⁸

In front of the main mast more casual forms of friendship existed as well. Soldiers and sailors told stories amongst themselves and to each other and shared the pleasures of tobacco and arrack. As mentioned before, the passenger Arnout van Overbeke called this friendship.

⁷² De Hullu, "Matrozen en soldaten", 57.

⁷³ De Hullu, "Matrozen en soldaten", 55.

⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁷⁵ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indische avontuur*, 157.

⁷⁶ Ibidem.

⁷⁷ Barend-Van Haeften, *Op reis met de VOC*, 63, 103, 114, 138 and 146.

⁷⁸ "Muziek", 53 (my italics).

The German soldier Heinrich Muche described his relationship with the third steersman in 1670 as friendship. So did the German sailor Georg Naporra in the seventeenth fifties, referring to his relationship with several petty officers.⁷⁹

Protection and favours

The friendship of an officer could be very profitable for a sailor or soldier. Muche and Naporra both gained much from such contacts. Naporra stated that often petty officers would protect him and other crewmen from the skipper's arbitrary behaviour.⁸⁰ Some officers took this responsibility extremely seriously.

As soon as a German merchant's assistant came aboard his ship in 1774 three North German soldiers offered themselves as his servants hoping to profit from, what he himself described as, his "practically meaningless" protection. He consequently took on one of them as his servant and let the other two sleep in his cabin, away from the other "wretches".⁸¹ The fact that they were from the same part of Germany as he was, must have played a part in convincing him to help them and in their decision to come to him in the first place. German officers, however, were a rarity. The historian Van Gelder claims that, despite the examples of Muche and Naporra, Germans had more trouble finding the protection and favour of officers than Dutch crewmen, and that this made their passages exceptionally hard.⁸²

Of all the petty officers the quartermasters, provost and *bottelier* were probably the most valuable friends, but being friends with the specialists on board also had its advantages. The surgeons, for example, controlled the drug supplies. These drugs were very popular and frequently "disappeared" from their medicine-chests.⁸³ These were often sold or given away. And what to make of the reverend who in 1672 allowed the *bottelier*, of whom he spoke very highly, to marry a Bengal slave, of whom he spoke very badly, but refused to grant some "rough folk" the same favour?⁸⁴

Animosity and socio- cultural divisions

Much animosity aboard the ships was neither personal nor based on experiences. Differences of nationality⁸⁵, race or religion were very capable of causing many tensions. Mutineers were more often than not of foreign descent. Although the percentage of foreigners aboard VOC-ships ranged between 30 and 60 percent in most periods of the VOC's existence (especially around 1650 and after 1740 the percentage of foreigners was high), foreigners probably accounted for approximately 80 percent of all mutineers.⁸⁶ On one occasion in 1667 a group of North Europeans had planned to take over the ship "Huis te Velden" and *throw all Dutchmen overboard*.⁸⁷ Often, the main body of mutineers consisted of a single national group, being either Germans, Scandinavians, English, French-speaking crewmen, Chinese or

⁷⁹ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 156.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ "Afscheidsbrief. Karl Friedrich baron von Wurmb, onderkoopman, oktober 1774" 45-47 in: Roeper, *In dienst van de VOC*, 46.

⁸² Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 284.

⁸³ Van Dam, *Beschrijvinge*, 615.

⁸⁴ "Huwelijk en begrafenis op zee", 100-101.

⁸⁵ Here I mean nationality in the pre-modern sense, that is: sharing mainly language and a certain sense of cultural unity.

⁸⁶ Jan Parmentier and Ruurdje Laarhoven, "Inleiding" 1-37 in: *De avonturen van een VOC-soldaat: het dagboek van Carolus Van der Haeghe 1699-1705* (Zutphen 2002) 12-13 and Bruijn, "De scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie" 16 and 25.

⁸⁷ Vermeulen, "Onrust ende wederspanningheyt", 52.

Javanese. This indicates that where the Dutch were in opposition with the others on board, the other national groups were not necessarily on friendly terms with each other either. The Company executive Nicolaas Witsen -who stated in 1671 that it was better to have a diverse crew made up of different nationalities in order to avoid conspiracies- would have agreed with this assumption.⁸⁸ A slightly less serious example of hostility based on nationality was the scolding and name-calling of sick and vomiting Germans by Dutchmen aboard “De Voetboog”.⁸⁹

Asians were particularly hard-hit by discrimination. Until well into the 17th century they were not even allowed to serve as crewmen on Company ships. The mutiny of Chinese sailors aboard the “Java” in 1783 provides ample illustration. After some Chinese killed several major officers and passengers, all Chinese crewmen were silently taken below deck one by one and bludgeoned to death and subsequently thrown overboard. The authorities in Batavia later concluded that the Chinese had been enraged and driven to mutiny by their unreasonably harsh treatment by the skipper. The preacher Metzlar, who had survived the Chinese attack, agreed with their conclusions.⁹⁰ On the same day as the killings on the “Java”, rumours arose on the “Slot ter Hoge” that several East-Indian slaves were planning a rebellion. Based on these rumours alone, it was decided that all those suspected would be thrown overboard, alive and with hands and feet bound together. This happened without any formal trial. Instead, the entire crew was convened and asked whether they agreed to this form of execution. All agreed, even the (probably fear-stricken) Asian crewmen. This procedure was positively unheard of and received severe criticism from the Company executives.⁹¹

Distrust played a very important role in the relations between the different nationalities. Sometimes skippers would increase the amount of guards on a ship, simply because there would not be enough Dutchmen, who they trusted.⁹² This distrust of foreigners by officers was enlarged by the fact that they could not understand what the foreigners talked about among themselves. In the 18th century, the entrance of Asians as crewmen added another dimension of distrust. Europeans of all nationalities were equally fearful of the Asians. This fear of Asians was clearly illustrated when, after the Chinese mutiny on the “Java”, the Javanese crewmen were also temporarily chained up, just in case.⁹³

Differences of religion provided another obstacle to harmony on the Company’s ships. Recognising this fact, the Article Letter stated that only Calvinism (which was the main form of Christianity practised in the Dutch Republic) could openly be practised and that religious disputes would be severely punished.⁹⁴ Religious violence was usually kept low. Religious animosities were always present, however. Even in the 18th century, the divisions were still so strong, that a soldier, who was a former theology-student and who acted as the comforter of the sick, would not spare a moment of his time nor a single prayer for a dying catholic.⁹⁵ Some went even further. The mutineers on the “Nijenburg” in 1763 revealed that one of the reasons for their rebellion was the fact that the quartermaster, the *botteliersmaat* (assistant of the *bottelier*) and the *bootmansmaat* (assistant of the *bootzman*), did not respect some of the sailors’ Catholic faith and confiscated their rose-garlands and even threw a prayer-book overboard.⁹⁶

⁸⁸ De Hullu, “Matrozen en soldaten”, 59.

⁸⁹ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 161.

⁹⁰ Van der Tempel, “Wij hebben amok in ons schip”, 143 and 146-147.

⁹¹ Idem, 128-132.

⁹² “Muitertij. Pieter Jansz Veltmuys, schipper, 1667.” 63-67 in: Roeper, *In dienst van de Compagnie*, 63.

⁹³ Van der Tempel, “Wij hebben amok in ons schip”, 130 and 142.

⁹⁴ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 284 and De Hullu, “Handhaving van orde en tucht” 101.

⁹⁵ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 161.

⁹⁶ G. de Bruin and A.J.J. van der Wal, “Allons Duytsche broeders’: de muitertijen op de ‘Nijenburg’ in 1763” 67-83 in: Bruijn, *Muitertij*, 72.

Traditionally the greatest division was between sailors and soldiers. This animosity expressed itself through mutual name-calling and the occasional physical contest.⁹⁷ A soldier was also often the victim of one of the sailors' cruel jokes or games. One of the reasons for this animosity was probably that the sailors resented the fact that the soldiers usually did not have to work on board. Another reason may have been that sailors were more often from the Dutch Republic (as the Dutch Republic contained several mostly maritime provinces such as Holland, Zeeland and Friesland), while soldiers were more usually recruited from the German hinterland.⁹⁸ As mentioned before, this brought the additional problem of religious divisions. Not that sailors were all that concerned about religion or its prescriptions, at least according to the many German soldiers that wrote about them. Their descriptions of the sailors were usually most unflattering. The consensus among these authors was that sailors formed a completely unique breed of human being with their own life-style, habits and jokes, and were of an extremely "godless" nature, although one author mentioned that there were in fact some pious exceptions among them.⁹⁹

Whereas soldiers were only temporarily in this alien maritime world, for the sailors it was their home. Besides having the sailors feel that the soldiers were intruders and the soldiers feel that they were unwanted guests, this situation reflected a different choice of and a fundamentally different outlook on life. Most soldiers hoped to save money, hold on to their honour and virtue and eventually repatriate and reintegrate into ordinary society.¹⁰⁰ Sailors, on the other hand, would always be a type of outcast or refugee from regular society, out of the grasp of mainland conventions and considering solid land only as a place of fun, sex and relaxation.

Groups and group activities

The picture that emerges of life behind the main mast in the journal of the sisters Lammens and Swellengrebel is one of a closed-knit harmonious group. The officers, passengers and specialists regularly enjoyed tea or coffee together and light-hearted conversation. In the evening they all had dinner together and enjoyed themselves with music or plays performed by crewmen. Most of them displayed a sincere interest in the actions and expertise of the others. Within this group, of course, there existed even smaller units of loyalty. The sisters Lammens, for example, were accompanied by their brother and servants, who altogether formed a distinct group, virtually a household. The skipper and senior steersman also formed a type of group, they were both ship's officers, with similar expertise, duties and lifestyle. Whatever differences existed between the people behind the main mast, they were in almost constant contact with one another, and in any case must have been viewed as a privileged unit by most others on the ship.

As has already been shown above, the people in front of the main mast can not be seen as a single grey mass, nor as a single group with a sense of solidarity. The area was simply too large and the people there too numerous and diverse. Groups of different types were formed that often showed overlaps. Spatial compartmentalisation of the workplace certainly led to one kind of group formation, if a "group" is defined as a collection of people who are regularly in personal contact with one another and repeatedly seek each other out for one or several specific activities. This, however, did not prevent its members from being part of other types of groups as well.

⁹⁷ De Hullu, "Matrozen en soldaten", 110.

⁹⁸ Jan Parmentier, "Inleiding", 12-13.

⁹⁹ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 153-154 and 284.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem.

A group, as defined above, could be formed around many different activities, which did not always exclude each other. It may be helpful to distinguish activities which were part of an individual's task on the ship and those activities which he would indulge in his spare-time. A cook's-mate might therefore regularly have sought out a certain group of sailors or soldiers to smoke with, when his duties for the day were finished. Most likely, however, he would have sought out those smokers with whom he shared a form of solidarity, such as maritime experience or nationality, which could be seen as factors that eased group-formation. Other activities around which groups could be formed were music making, games, or conversations. Some of these activities were more or less bound to nationality or religion. Music-groups were commonly associated with Lutherans (and thus with Germans), because the musical character of Lutheran church services encouraged music making. These would often practise together and perform for the crew or at the dinners behind the main mast.¹⁰¹

Certain sailors often liked to organise "sailor's games", such as the smith's game, where the roles of different smiths and smith's apprentices were divided among experienced sailors, and after going through certain scenarios of role-playing ended up with everyone hammering away at the bottom of the unfortunate one who had been appointed the role of anvil! The poor "anvil" was usually a soldier or inexperienced sailor, who was resented by the others for his cockiness.¹⁰² Although according to the 17th century German soldier David Tappe, who recorded these games most vividly, the victims voluntarily participated in these games and sometimes even shared in the fun of the joke, it is hard to believe that they did so without substantial pressure from the other participants.

More intellectually challenging games, such as chess and checkers, were played as well and may have been a nice pass-time for soldiers who had formerly been students or for those who, although uneducated, were eager to test their minds. Such games would have been a nice addition to discussions about the flora and fauna and other natural phenomena encountered along the way, which were very prevalent aboard VOC-ships. For those more interested in gambling, games of chance, card-games for example, were an option. These were not allowed, due to their potential for causing fights, but must have been prevalent, since the provosts were instructed to vigorously and constantly be on the lookout for them.¹⁰³ Especially gambling must have fostered a sense of being a group, as it was illegal, and gamblers most probably chose only those whom they felt they could trust, such as countrymen or men of similar experience or those who were easily intimidated, as playing partners.

The same must have been true for partners in other illegal activities, such as stealing and mutiny. As has already been mentioned, most mutinies were carried out by foreigners and then mostly by foreigners of the same national group. Even if the ones who masterminded a mutiny were of a different nationality (Dutch, for example) than the bulk of the mutineers, they would usually approach members of one other national group, whose members they knew carried certain grievances, to help them in their enterprise. On the ship the "Duinenburg" in 1766, for example, the Spanish sailor Jean-Baptiste Paradijs approached mainly French soldiers and sailors with his plans and directed his main co-conspirator to do the same. Conspirators not always participated voluntarily, however, as is shown by the fact that Paradijs only gained the co-operation of his main co-conspirator by means of severe threats.¹⁰⁴

Small groups of ordinary robbers also existed. They are hardly ever mentioned, but their existence may be deduced from the fact that some robberies were too large to be

¹⁰¹ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 166.

¹⁰² De Hullu, "Amusement", 129.

¹⁰³ Idem, 131.

¹⁰⁴ I. van Meurs, "'Courage, François' ; een samenzwering op de 'Duinenburg' in 1766" 84-96 in: Bruijn, *Muiterij*, 86-87.

committed by a single person and the fact that some newcomers, who were robbed upon embarkation, were too scared to report the robbery, even if they knew who had done it.¹⁰⁵ Finally, groups must have existed for all sorts of lucrative dealings on board. Cloths, foodstuffs, alcohol and tobacco that people brought with them could be and were traded on board. Even books changed hands.¹⁰⁶ Officers as well as ordinary crewmen participated in this. Property of the dead was auctioned in case the deceased had not made a will. The accountants or merchant's assistants who were in charge of these wills, sometimes consciously sabotaged them to gain personal profit from the sale of their goods.¹⁰⁷

The Company allowed sailors and soldiers to ship to Europe one chest full of oriental goods for their own profit. Some are known to have distributed their excess goods among the chests of others, who had not themselves taken full advantage of this rule, in exchange for a small share of the profit.¹⁰⁸

Whether the activities around which groups formed were legal or illegal, the solidarity and divisions imposed by nationality, religion, maritime experience and function played an important role in the group formation process. Among these solidarity, nationality assumed special importance, due to its links with language. Remarkably, it seems that a particular soldier's or sailor's social position on the mainland had little effect on whom one interacted with on board. Perhaps a reasonable previous social position did help when seeking protection of senior officers, but ordinary crewmen seem to have cared little about it.

Sometimes groups were formed *before* their members went on board. The mainly German mutineers on the "Nijenburg", of whom half were soldiers and the other half sailors, had already met each other at one of the inns that forcefully recruited personnel for the VOC.¹⁰⁹ In such a case, divisions imposed by the VOC, whether one would become a soldier or sailor or what quarter one belonged to, were obviously of little significance to the group formation process, at least at first.

Status

The group of people that lived behind the main mast was naturally not a group of equals. The steersman could not forget that the skipper was his superior. A revered guest, such as the Swellengrebel's father, the retired governor of the Cape colony, would command the utmost respect of all. Despite having no official function or powers on board, such a person would occupy the highest status on board and would probably be the centre of attention (and concern) behind the main mast. A special problem arose when a VOC-skipper was sailing as guest on another skipper's boat. They would demand the same privileges (such as a reasonably spaced private cabin, which sometimes led to the ad hoc building of extra cabins) and, in the case of an emergency, might be tempted to dispute the ship's skipper's command. Passengers like the Lammens sisters considered themselves superior to the reverend and secretly made fun of him for having received only a carpenter's training.¹¹⁰

Status behind the main mast was thus usually defined by one's social position upon embarkation. It was, however, susceptible to change. The decline of the senior merchant's position relative to that of the skipper is a case in point. The skipper's greater powers in practice may long have been overshadowed by the senior merchant's "magnificence" in

¹⁰⁵ De Hullu, "Handhaving van orde en tucht", 109-110.

¹⁰⁶ Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 169 and 172.

¹⁰⁷ Warwinck, *Reisen van Nicolaus de Graaff*, 19.

¹⁰⁸ De Hullu, "Matrozen en soldaten", 72.

¹⁰⁹ De Bruin, "Allons Duytsche broeders", 68.

¹¹⁰ Barend-Van Haeften, *Op reis met de VOC*, 58.

attitude and dress and his formal place at the head of the Ship's Council, but in the longer run this status could not be maintained without the actual power it suggested.

As has been mentioned in the previous section, social position prior to embarkation did not automatically convey status in the world in front of the main mast. More fundamental differences among men, such as differences of nationality and religion assumed greater importance here when determining status. The subcultures of nationals or of those of similar religion were, however, not strictly egalitarian either. When the skipper Pieter Jansz. Veltmuys reported a mutiny of Scandinavians on his ship in 1667, he mentioned that there had been two among them who were held in such esteem by the others, that they had easily convinced them to unite.¹¹¹ According to Georg Naporra, who was himself a Company sailor in the mid-18th century, among sailors the highest regard was earned by those who could swear the meanest and drink the most.¹¹² Sailors with the greatest maritime experience and who were also prepared to support and teach others with less experience were respected by all, even if they were disliked, because their tutelage could mean the difference between reasonable comfort and suffering or even between life and death.¹¹³

What status among the crew actually meant, is very vividly demonstrated by the "sailor's games". The smith's game, described above, involved the victim being spanked by the other participants. Other games, such as the "horse thieving" game or practical jokes included tar being smeared on the victim's face and private parts or even the placing of excrements in the victim's neck.¹¹⁴ These obvious forms of humiliation are very reminiscent of modern day games of sadomasochism, which revolve around power and status, as well as sex. This analogy becomes even more appropriate, when we realise that the crew was denied female contact for months on end and that homosexual encounters were punishable by death.

The differences in the criteria determining status behind and in front of the main mast can in part be explained by the different living conditions in these two localities. The area behind the mast afforded its inhabitants a much greater measure of privacy, spare time and security, than the area in front of it. This allowed the people behind the main mast to recreate their living-conditions and routines on the mainland up to a certain extent. The reasonable security, for example, allowed passengers to carry those valuables that acted as status symbols, safely. There was no need to ally oneself with people one did not like or deemed socially inferior, or to otherwise adapt one's social behaviour, simply to survive. It can also be argued that the occasional presence of women cultivated more of a sense of normalcy. Besides the significance of living conditions, the fact, that those with a high status behind the mast were indeed very powerful people on the mainland, cannot be forgotten. One remark from the sisters Swellengrebel's father, the former governor of the Cape colony, for example, to the Company executives could easily have ended the skipper's career or ruined his reputation in certain social circles, if he believed that the skipper had treated him disrespectfully.

The situation was very different in front of the main mast. First of all, it was very unlikely that someone with sufficient influence and power to truly affect another person's social position on the mainland, would ever enlist as a Company sailor or soldier. Secondly, the absence of privacy, much spare-time and especially security, completely undermined the importance of social positions, since adaptation was absolutely essential. This extremely hostile environment, where injury, theft, disease and death lay constantly on the prowl, was much more conducive to xenophobia than to the recreation of mainland social hierarchies.

¹¹¹ "Muitelij." in: Roeper, *In dienst van de Compagnie*, 64.

¹¹² Van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur*, 164.

¹¹³ *Idem*, 155.

¹¹⁴ "Matrozenspelletjes. David Tappe, soldaat, juli 1667" 55-58 in: Roeper, *In dienst van de Compagnie*, 57 and De Hullu, "Amusement", 130.

These same circumstances determined that personal merit, experience with ship's life and character were more important than fictitious, or at least useless, social pretences.

Healthcare on board the ships of the VOC

Marthe Tholen

*'Cripple and blind
Let your wounds be bound
On deck before the mast
The surgeon can be found'¹¹⁵*

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Introduction

In this article I propose to look at the undertakings of surgeons, especially in the Far East and the food that the crew on board the ships in Asia had to eat. The stories of deprivation, disease and death on board of the ships of the VOC are very well known and the impression of voyages that end in disaster because of it is perhaps equally persistent. On top of that the surgeons on board have often been described as ignorant and incompetent¹¹⁶ and responsible for the loss of lives of many of the crew.

One might doubt whether this is an accurate description of what happened on board, considering the fact that the Company existed for almost two hundred years and that there were always people willing to undertake the journey, despite the dangers.

In comparison to our modern standards, the healthcare was extremely poor. The available knowledge still rested on ancient and medieval assumptions and was, as we know now, not very accurate. It is therefore best to forget our present times and to concentrate on the standards of the 17th century and try to imagine the surgeon in his proper environment.

Much is already known of the long voyages between Europe and the East, but what did a surgeon do when he arrived at his destination? Did he sail out again or did he remain in Batavia? What diseases did he encounter and how did he try to cure these? And how was the healthcare organised? I hope to be able to answer these questions in the following chapters.

Doctors and Surgeons

In the 17th century there was a great difference between a Doctor and a surgeon. The first difference was that a Doctor had studied at a University and a surgeon had been trained by the

¹¹⁵ Free translation of this rhyme by author. A.E. Leuftink *Chirurgijns Zee compas: De medische verzorging aan boord van Nederlandse zeeschepen gedurende de Gouden Eeuw* (Delft, Koninklijke Nederlandsche gist- en spiritus fabriek, z.d.). 31.

¹¹⁶ For instance Bontekoe. A.E. Leuftink *Chirurgijns Zee compas*. 11.

guild. A Doctor was a learned man and he studied anatomy, internal diseases and the uses of medication. He did not bother himself with injuries, whereas a surgeon was not allowed to meddle with diseases, but only with wounds and fractures. They are also known as barbers, because traditionally they shaved people in their shop. The surgeons resented that name, and consistently called themselves surgeons.

The VOC needed medical men very much, as on every ship there were at least two surgeons, but usually more. There was always a supreme or senior surgeon, and some junior surgeons. Nicolaus de Graaff, for instance, had four surgeons under his command, on a ship of 300 people.¹¹⁷ However bad the VOC needed these men, one couldn't simply sign on as a surgeon. The surgeons guild of every city took exams before people could open a practice. Later they made a distinction between the 'Land examination' and the 'Sea examination', because at sea, one was supposed to have less duties than on land. We shall see that this supposition was far from the mark. The VOC itself also took examinations, because there were a lot of foreigners, of whose abilities they had no knowledge. After a few weeks the candidate heard in what rank and on what salary he was going away. In 1669 the Indian Council passed a decree that everybody who wanted to practice as a surgeon in the East, should pass an examination. They did this to have further control over the medical standard.¹¹⁸ This was also very necessary, because many men applied to for employment as surgeons in Batavia. These men were apprentices who wanted to better their situation or they were surgeons who, because there was only limited space on board for surgeons, sailed in the capacity of soldier or sailor.

The duties of a surgeon at sea and in the East were far more complex than his tasks on land in Europe. There all he had to do was setting fractures, but at sea he also had to treat diseases. It may seem strange that the Doctors who tried so very hard to prevent surgeons from joining their ranks, willingly gave their position away when it came to practice at sea. The reason of this lay in the dangers at sea and the low salary to compensate for it. Therefore only a couple of Doctors went to Asia, whereas hundreds of surgeons made the journey.

The position of the surgeon can be concluded from a manual where the Company's servants were divided in classes. Senior surgeons and Doctors were in the second class with the junior or under merchants, ordinary surgeons were placed among the assistants and the junior surgeons were placed with the constablesmates.¹¹⁹ In the beginning surgeons on board were treated just like the junior officers, but that slowly changed. At first they were granted to eat in the cabin and in 1739 they were granted a permanent place in the cabin with the officers.¹²⁰ This is an important shift in position and shows something of the importance and the necessity of the surgeon.

Injuries and Wounds

Apart from the times when epidemics played havoc with the people on board, the most common jobs of a surgeon were indeed those of setting fractures and performing amputations. When serving on a ship in wartime, removing bullets from bodies was also a very common procedure. We might expect people to die anyway, but the surgeons were actually very

¹¹⁷ Wansink, J.C.M. (ed.), *Reisen van Nicolaus de Graaff; gedaan naar alle gewesten des Werelds* ('s Gravenhage, Martinus Nijhoff, 1976). 168.

¹¹⁸ Schoute, D., *Occidental therapeutics in the Netherlands East Indies during three Centuries of Netherlands Settlement Publications of the Netherlands Indies Public Health Service* (Batavia, Netherlands Indies Public Health Service, 1937). 46.

¹¹⁹ Schoute, D. *De Geneeskunde in den dienst der Oost-Indische Compagnie in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Amsterdam, J.H. de Bussy, 1929). 152.

¹²⁰ Schoute, D. *De Geneeskunde in den dienst der Oost-Indische Compagnie in Nederlandsch-Indië*. 49.

skilful. Especially amputations were usually successful and very necessary, because gangrene was an ever-present danger and they could not as yet disinfect the wounds.



For an amputation the patient was seated with his back to the fire, so that he would not see the heated instruments. On board a ship this was always in the caboose, as it was not allowed to make a fire anywhere else, because this was the only place with a stone floor. There were two troughs; one was filled with water and the other one was for the amputated parts of the bodies. The patient would get a drink by way of sedative. If after a long voyage there were no alcoholic drinks anymore the patient would have to do without sedative. He would probably faint from the pain and miss the rest of the operation.

The surgeon would mark the place of incision with a bit of string soaked in ink. Then he would apply a band about two fingers above that line, to stop bleeding and pain. With a sharp knife the flesh was cut through to the bone and then the bone itself was sawn. Any splinters would be removed with a forceps. The arteries were cauterised with the instruments in the fire and the stump was then covered with lint and a hog's bladder.¹²¹

The VOC paid people who were incapacitated because they were maimed in her service a specified sum. The tariff for the loss of parts of the body was as follows:

Right arm:	800 guilders
Left arm:	500 guilders
One leg:	450 guilders
Both legs:	800 guilders
Right hand:	600 guilders
Left hand:	400 guilders
Both hands:	1000 guilders
One eye:	400 guilders
Both eyes:	1200 guilders ¹²²



Disease and Medication

Of all the diseases on board, scurvy has been given the most attention by researchers. It was probably the only disease that could be effectively cured. Everybody knew that fruits and vegetables would restore the patients the only difficulty being that at sea, it was somewhat difficult to obtain these. While travelling in the East Indies scurvy was hardly ever a threat to the health of the men because they were always in the proximity of land and also because the journeys were not very long so the food could be preserved.

The diseases the surgeons had to treat in the East were mostly fevers but also genital diseases and dysentery. Fever did not mean flu or something of the sort; it was everything, from malaria to beriberi. Surgeons tried their very best with all sorts of medication, but one could doubt whether recovery could be attributed to that, because in most cases they did not know what had caused the disease. An other example: beriberi is caused by a lack of vitamin B. In the 17th century however, the surgeons did not know what to do with it. Christophorus

¹²¹ Leuftink, A.E., *Chirurgijns Zee compas*. 35-36.

¹²² Schoute, D., *De Geneeskunde in den dienst der Oost-Indische Compagnie in Nederlandsch-Indië*. 19 and 54.

Frikius, a surgeon, fell ill with symptoms of beriberi. He was placed in a sort of sauna where he had to inhale the vapours of different sorts of herbs and said that it achieved his recovery.¹²³ If a patient did not recover, it was considered to be his own fault. A treatment for malaria was found in the 18th century, but often the surgeon could not distinguish between the different diseases and he was often disappointed in its healing powers.¹²⁴ It meant that he had been too greedy with food and drink and had led a sinful life.

Genital diseases

Especially with genital diseases both Doctors and surgeons had hardly any idea how to cure them. In the 18th century a Doctor from Amsterdam, Abraham Titsingh, wrote that the Doctors were very relieved to leave this part of their profession to the surgeons, as the use of their medication was fruitless.¹²⁵ The diseases of Venus as they were called, were treated with syrup made of guajac wood or with mercury. As they were aware of the dangers concerning mercury they always tried guajac first. We know now that it has no healing power whatsoever, but it was used for over four centuries. The healing qualities of the other option, mercury, are equally doubtful. It was applied in several forms, depending on the surgeon. There were pills, blisters, ointments and mercury fumes. As it was believed that by relieving a person of its juices, through sweating and through administering laxatives for instance, mercury had one good aspect. A person treated with mercury would start to produce an enormous amount of saliva, sometimes a couple of litres per day. This was seen as a favourable omen, whereas in fact this is one of the first signs of mercury poisoning.¹²⁶

Medicine chest

This chest would contain all the medication and materials a surgeon could possibly need when on board and in the East. Originally a surgeon had to provide it himself from his salary, but later the Company took this job over, which effectively meant a raise in wages to attract more surgeons.¹²⁷ It was considered to be of great importance and the medications were prepared with the utmost care by doctors and apothecaries. On board the surgeon took on the role of apothecary as well.

When the Company decided to undertake the task of preparing the medicine chest, she started to take some precautions, she had not taken before. The chests were prepared by an apothecary or by the hospital, the way it was done in Amsterdam. The chests were then inspected by the Company's doctors and surgeons (in the Kamer Zeeland two of both professions). After they were approved of by the inspectors, they were sealed and brought on board. The skipper received the key and was only allowed to give it to the surgeon once the ship was at full sea. During the time the ships lay waiting for the right wind, with the crew on board, the surgeon had to make do with a small assortment of materials (37) and with just a little (14) medication.¹²⁸ Later this number became 50. The precaution of sealing the chest was taken to prevent the surgeon from selling the contents of the chest and replace them with cheaper materials, or not replace them at all, which could have disastrous consequences.¹²⁹

¹²³ Ibid. 71-72.

¹²⁴ Leufink, A.E., *Harde heelmeeesters: Zeelieden en hun dokters in de 18de eeuw* (Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 1991). 26.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 106.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 109.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 28.

¹²⁸ Schoute, D., *De Geneeskunde in den dienst der Oost-Indische Compagnie in Nederlandsch-Indië* 101.

¹²⁹ Leufink, A.E., *Harde heelmeeesters: Zeelieden en hun dokters in de 18de eeuw*. 27.

The categories of medication in the chest as listed by Verbrugge (who wrote a minute travelling guide for surgeons), based on the orders of the Seventeen. Behind the category are a few examples of the individual sorts of medication in that category or an explanation of the category itself.

Opiata or sedatives

Laxatives

Mellita: Prepared with honey.

Conserves and Rob.: Wood.

Oils: Rose oil, Poppy oil.

Salves: Basil salve.

Waters or Lotions: Fennel water, Life water (really useful!).

Farines: Prepared with flour.

Powders: Burned alum powder.

Blisters: Mercury.

Chemicals: Mercury.

Herbs: Speedwell, Fungus.

Roots: Sarsaparilla.

Flowers: Clover, Camomile.

Barks, fruits and seeds: Fennel seed, acorns, laurel.

Gums or Resin: Myrrh, Opium.

Minerals: Vitriol, Red lead.

Animals: Pig's fat, eyes of crabs.

Medical equipment: Saws, pots, pans, suppository spoons, scissors.

Medical finds on the site of the Avondster

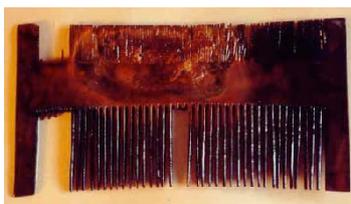
Looking at the place where the following medical equipment was found, it is very likely that they belonged to the surgeon and the medicine chest.



Pot containing mercury. Quicksilver or Mercury was used in different concoctions, for genital diseases (see above) but also for instance to bite off surplus flesh from ulcerations.¹³⁰ Nicolaus de Graaff mentions it as a trading product, in the same breath with pepper and cloves.¹³¹



Medicine Jars. These jars could have been used for numerous purposes, but when regarded in the light of medical equipment, they probably contained pills or ointments.



Combs. The combs that were found in the wreck bear witness to the original occupation of the surgeon, that of a barber. Even though most surgeons considered this as beneath their dignity, they still retained that position and therefore they had to comb and shave as well as heal and cure. They were not listed as necessary

¹³⁰ Verbrugge, J., *Chirurgijns of heelmesters reys-boeck* (Middelburg, 1676-1677). 62.

¹³¹ Wansink, J.C.M. (ed.), *Reisen van Nicolaus de Graaff*. 188.

in the catalogue compiled by Johannes Verbrugge, but he states at the end of the list “etcetera after everybody’s believe and opinion”.¹³²



Barber’s basin. This basin was used for shaving and for bleeding. The hollow in the rim fits a neck or an elbow. It is listed as one of the objects that should have been in the medicine chest.¹³³

Organisation of healthcare

In the East surgeons often went on board again, to assist on the numerous journeys there. The other possibility was service on land, usually in hospitals. As Batavia was the centre of the Company’s commercial activities it also meant that most of the European and Dutch population was living there. It was the largest European town in the East and also the busiest, surgeons not excepted. There were hospitals in other forts or towns, but there is very little information concerning them. The hospital in Batavia and the other medical facilities however, are well documented and therefore I shall concentrate on these.

In 1621 Batavia officially received her name, but before that there had already been a small fort. There was a hospital of sorts, but no specific mention is made of a hospital until in 1620. This hospital was made of bamboo and was replaced by a more solid building in 1626. This structure was torn down in 1628 to be able to defend the town in a war with the king of Mataram. A third hospital was built after the war, but it was situated outside the walls of the town and it was soon decided that it was not a safe place for the patients. In 1632 a Resolution was passed to build a new hospital, this time inside the town. In the years between this Resolution and the occupation of the hospital (1640) the patients were probably housed in an emergency hospital on the site of the new one.¹³⁴

The medical activities were organised from Batavia and based on how things were done there. The history of the hospitals in other offices or forts will have been the same as Batavia, only on a smaller scale. There are not many decrees and Resolutions on healthcare in this period. The reason why there was not much interest in bodily health, was that the soul was considered to be more important.¹³⁵ Still the hospitals in the East played a more prominent role in society and were more flourishing establishments than their European counterparts. The explanation of this is twofold. In Europe people preferred to be nursed by their family, because hospitals were not exactly a pleasant place to be. Hospitals were for the poor and destitute and people usually tried to postpone their going there for as long as possible. In the East this was impossible, as most people did not have a family to turn to. The second reason why these institutions were more successful in the East, is that it was more important to keep the people alive. The Company needed these men very badly and tried everything to nurse them back to health, whereas in Europe hospitals were almost solely based on Christian charity and religion took precedence over healing far more than in the East.¹³⁶ In 1642 people in the Company’s service (soldiers, sailors and junior officers) were

¹³² Verbrugge, J., *Chirurgijns of heelmesters reys-boeck*. Lijste der Medicamenten.

¹³³ Verbrugge, J., *Chirurgijns of heelmesters reys-boeck*. Lijste der Medicamenten.

¹³⁴ Schoute, D., *De Geneeskunde in den dienst der Oost-Indische Compagnie in Nederlandsch-Indië*. 110-114.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 116-117.

¹³⁶ Schoute, D., *Occidental therapeutics in the Netherlands East Indies during three Centuries of Netherlands Settlement*. 35.

actually forbidden to remain at home, but had to repair to the hospital¹³⁷, probably because in this way the VOC could have some control over the treatment of its men.

This hospital was not the only one in Batavia. The Board of Deacons set up an institution for orphans and sick people (especially elderly people) and included natives. Later it was decreed that it should also house the insane.¹³⁸ Another hospital was built for the Chinese and maintained by the Chinese population.¹³⁹ In 1666 it was decreed that a house should be built for the isolation of lepers. In Ambon a house for people with leprosy was erected in 1699.

Two other medical institutions that should be mentioned were the Surgeon's Shop and the Medicine Shop. In the Surgeons' Shop people could have their ailments treated in the way we now go to see our physician. The Senior Surgeon of the Castle stood at its head and he was also the man who took the examinations of new surgeons. Young people could receive a formal training under the auspices of Surgeons' Shop.¹⁴⁰ In 1625 the first midwife was officially appointed and in 1642 it was decreed that all midwives should sit for an examination.¹⁴¹

The second institution was the Medicine Shop, where all the medication for all the settlements was made and the medicines from Europe were stored. In 1668 a commission was appointed to check the supplies every year and see if everything was accounted and paid for.

The reason why there is not very much information on how surgeons lived in Asia, is that they were not organised in a guild, as they would have been in Europe. Because of their different position and their scattered nature of their posts, it would have been far more difficult to organise themselves in a body than for instance carpenters, who mainly worked in Batavia on the wharf and who did not constantly travel through the colony.

I think we can conclude that, although it was different from the way things were done in the Netherlands, it was done in a thorough manner. The organisation was in the hands of the Indian Council in Batavia and from there the ships and hospitals were supplied with a competent staff of surgeons. Even though the principle on which the hospitals were founded was not the compassion for the sick, but the money of the Company, it meant that they were given the best possible treatment, something that was not done in Europe.

¹³⁷ Schoute, D., *De Geneeskunde in den dienst der Oost-Indische Compagnie in Nederlandsch-Indië*. 138.

¹³⁸ Schoute, D., *Occidental therapeutics in the Netherlands East Indies during three Centuries of Netherlands Settlement*. 50.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* 39.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 39.

¹⁴¹ Schoute, D. *De Geneeskunde in den dienst der Oost-Indische Compagnie in Nederlandsch-Indië*. 147.

