Nigel Worden (ed.), *Cape Town between East and West: Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town*
(Johannesburg, Hilversum: Jacana, Verloren, 2012, xxii + 264 pp., ISBN 978 1 4314 0292 2, 978 90 8704
290 5).

The best kept VOC archives outside the Netherlands are located in Cape Town
and have even been put on the UNESCO World Heritage list. This is to a large
degree a result of South Africans studying the VOC period in South African
history since the nineteenth century. Until the 1970s, this research was
mainly descriptive, 'positivist' in nature, and was dominated by Afrikaans
speaking historians who viewed the VOC's Cape Colony as a proto-Afrikaner
society. The publication of *The Shaping of South African Society* in 1979, edited by
Hermann Giliomee and Richard Elphick, which resulted from a collaboration
of mainly Anglophone researchers, meant a paradigm shift from the previous
outlook. In line with international trends – especially the 'history from
below' movement – the attention shifted away from a history of the VOC
elite, burghers and migrant farmers (*Trekboeren*) to the social underclass, the
development of race relations and the violent expropriation processes in the
frontier zone. *Shaping* was a milestone and set the tone for research of the VOC
period in South Africa with special attention for history of Khoisan and slaves.

Cape Town between East and West confirms a more recent trend in South
African historiography of the VOC period. The book contains ten case studies,
most of them written by researchers affiliated with universities in Cape Town,
and is preceded by an informative introduction by its editor Nigel Worden.
The essays reflect on the social histories of a broad range of social groupings in
Cape Town in the eighteenth century. Besides (freed) slaves, attention is also
given to VOC soldiers, sailors, craftsmen, burghers, alcohol traders, Asian exiles
and members of the VOC elite. The book is a result of a project funded by the
South African National Research Foundation on identity construction in the
VOC period.

With its focus on identity construction the book follows a cultural
turn in South African social history in the twenty-first century. With regard
to identity construction, the essays take their lead from British empire
historian Kathleen Wilson's definition of identity: 'identity results from the
negotiation from where one is placed and where one places oneself within
social networks, working through what is possible and what is forbidden [...]
identity is tentative, multiple and contingent and its modalities change over
time' (Wilson, *The Island Race*, 3; quoted in *Cape Town between East and West*,
xii). In *Cape Town between East and West* this view is reflected in studies on the

performance of identity and a focus on social mobility. The first element of Wilson's definition is for instance addressed in Nigel Worden's analysis of incidents of brawling by VOC soldiers, sailors and artisans from the judicial archives, on the basis of which Worden reconstructs conceptualisations of masculinity and honour. Social mobility is an important aspect of Robert Shell's and Archie Dick's reconstruction of the biography of a schoolmaster from the Cape Slave Lodge from the 1730s, whose notebook they submit to a 'thick description'. They show how this man, on the strength of his intellectual abilities and family relations, managed to overcome the limitations of his social position.

Following Kerry Ward's *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (2009) and the New Urban History, the book also makes a geographical turn. Cape Town in the eighteenth century in *Cape Town between East and West* has a local (material) history, as it had developed from a modest colonial settlement with 3,000 residents in 1730 to a town of 7,000 in 1770. The archaeologist Antonia Malan shows on the basis of estate records how this found expression in city planning and architecture (the typical Cape Dutch style). Simultaneously, Cape Town is approached as a node in a network with connections to the Netherlands, the Indian Ocean and Asia. This aspect emerges, for instance, in James Armstrong's and Kerry Ward's essays on Asian exiles and particularly in the essay by Susan Newton-King about the correspondence network of two freed slaves, contemporaries of the schoolmaster from the essay of Shell and Dick. This correspondence makes a social network visible, that stretched from Cape Town to Amsterdam, Colombo and Batavia, and included (freed) slaves and members of the VOC elite. On the other hand, the essays of Nigel Worden, Gerald Groeneveld, Teun Baartman, Nigel Penn, Alicia Schrikker and Robert Ross demonstrate that in the performance of identity by soldiers, artisans, traders and members of the VOC elite, often European (Dutch and German) social patterns were followed in many ways. More than other VOC settlements, eighteenth century Cape Town was a Dutch colonial town (as the subtitle of the book suggests).

Cape Town between East and West consists of a densely structured collection of excellent essays based on research of primary sources. By negotiating a geographic perspective on VOC history, it should also be of special interest to research on the position of VOC settlements in transcontinental networks elsewhere.

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