

Ethnic Disorder in VOC Asia

A Plea for Eccentric Reading

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The archives of the Dutch East India Company reflect the concerns and interests of colonial administrators. One intrinsic element of colonial rule, as manifested in its sources, is the tendency to reify ethnic labels. This contribution to the forum tries to encourage alternative readings of colonial archives. Judicial papers can help to challenge the replication of colonial social categories. The method is illustrated by looking at the testimonies of the so-called Chinese rebellion in Batavia in 1740, when ethnic labels could be a matter of life or death. The resulting approach is to foreground dynamics of creolisation rather than to repeat colonial templates of segregation and an essentialist ethnic division.

De archieven van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie weerspiegelen de zorgen en belangen van de koloniale bestuurders. Een intrinsieke karaktertrek van koloniale overheersing, zoals die ook zijn weerslag in de bronnen heeft gekregen, is de neiging om etnische labels te verabsoluteren. Deze bijdrage aan het forum probeert een alternatieve lezing van de koloniale archieven te stimuleren. Gerechtelijke archieven kunnen een tegenwicht bieden aan de replicatie van strikte koloniale sociale categorieën. Deze aanpak wordt geïllustreerd aan de hand van getuigenissen over de zogenoemde Chinese opstand in Batavia in 1740. De benadering leidt tot een nadruk op processen van creolisering en bepleit een sterkere terughoudendheid in het herhalen van koloniale schema's van segregatie en van het maken van een essentialistisch etnisch onderscheid.

Colonial perspectives, with a twist

Without a shade of doubt the archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) are immensely important for Asian history. The contributions of

Manjusha Kuruppath and Jos Gommans to this forum testify to the immense potential these archives provide for local history, connected, comparative and global histories. Now as we are all aware, the perusal of these archives has its complexities, in that the archives are produced by a foreign power that used these documents for the purposes of its domination. For decades we have been alerted to the pitfalls of colonial reporting. As a result, historians have developed at least three different strategies to counter the bias of colonial information: they have started to foreground non-Western actors in history; they have turned the colonial or imperial mindsets, and their archive formation, into a topic for scrutiny; and, most rewardingly, historians have tried to offset the colonial data with whatever was available from other, preferably indigenous, sources.¹

In many cases, however, and in particular when it comes to our vision of colonial spaces, we have to rely solely on colonial sources. The main problem here is not that these archives are biased and that historians would not be aware of that. Rather, the question is whether we are mindful enough of the ways the colonial concerns direct our view, guide our questions and determine our language. In the absence of correcting perspectives, colonial information exerts a gravitational force upon how we look at history: it dictates the range of our view and suggests the terms in which we analyse the societies under Company authority. The archives offer the frames for classifying society and they produce silences and absences that obfuscate certain fundamental dynamics in society. To give an example: how are we to write a history of the enslaved people in the colonies, when we have to rely only on what is being said *about* them? Following the parlance from the archives, we cement them into a single category, that of ‘slaves’, without being able to explore deeply the meaning or variable effects of that epithet for the people involved.

The gravitational force of our classifying reading is enhanced by the unabating popularity of imperial histories, which legitimises our continuing focus on the colonial actors, even if we are gaining a better insight into the mind-sets and praxes of the colonial pen wielders by reading ‘along the archival grain’, as Ann Laura Stoler encourages us to do.² The problem is that imperial studies, whether done by reading along or even against the grain, tend to confirm the colonial discourses, perspectives and categorisations, as these studies remain within the discursive fold offered by the colonial

1 To name only a few important works on Java: Romain Bertrand, *L'histoire à parts égales. Récits d'une rencontre Orient-Occident (xvi^e-xvii^e siècle)* (Paris 2011); Ann Kumar, *Java and Modern Europe. Ambiguous Encounters* (Richmond 1997); Sri Margana, *Java's Last Frontier: The Struggle for*

Hegemony of Blambangan c.1763-1813 (PhD thesis Leiden 2007); and the works of Merle Calvin Ricklefs on the Central Javanese kingdoms.

2 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford 2009).

authors. As Roger Knight remarked, the discourses of colonialism should not be confounded with an analysis of its social realities.³ An analysis of the colonial mind-set does not offer alternative viewpoints on the dynamics of colonial society to those presented by the colonial administrators. In the end, it remains extremely important to read not along but *beyond* the archival grain.

Defining diversity

Looking at VOC spaces, it becomes obvious how the magnetic field of colonial biases works. Without exception, historians tend to look at colonial urban societies from the center outward.⁴ The colonial port cities are viewed as basically hierarchical spaces, linked to economic world systems through the bridgeheads made by the colonial intruders. This interpretation results in a concentric, stratified order in which perceptions of economic power, urban organisation and social order fan out from a nodal point of colonial authority and knowledge formation to what is always phrased in a hierarchic terminology as suburbs, Ommelanden (surrounding areas) and border areas. The centre of power is the locus of social definition.

In many respects, colonial cities were not very different from precolonial cities in Southeast Asia, which were characterised by a great diversity in ethnic composition, and by systems of plural jurisdiction and ethnic separation.⁵ The main difference between precolonial and colonial spaces was, of course, that the latter were governed and dominated by a foreign power. Patterns of ethnic separation and indirect rule were adopted from local practices, but amended to serve the particular political and economic interests of the foreign rulers. Rules of taxation, labour duties, residential distribution and mobility were diversified according to the needs and anxieties of the Europeans. Terms and methods of registration

3 G. Roger Knight, 'East of the Cape in 1832. The Old Indies World, Empire Families and "Colonial Women" in Nineteenth-Century Java', *Itinerario* 36:1 (2012) 32-47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115312000356>.

4 To name a few major publications on VOC-ruled cities: Nordin Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang, 1780-1830* (Copenhagen 2007); Hendrik E. Niemeijer, *Batavia. Een koloniale samenleving in de 17e eeuw* (Amsterdam 2005); Anjana Singh, *Fort*

Cochin in Kerala (1750-1830): The Social Condition of a Dutch Community in an Indian Milieu (Leiden 2010); Lodewijk Wagenaar, *Galle, VOC-vestiging in Ceylon. Beschrijving van een koloniale samenleving aan de vooravond van de Singalese opstand tegen het Nederlandse gezag, 1760* (Amsterdam 1994).

5 See for instance Craig Lockard, "'The Sea Common to All': Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca. 1400-1750", *Journal of World History* 21:2 (2010) 219-247, esp. 241.

were developed to support colonial policies. As a result, the way groups and communities were presented in the archives reflect the concerns and bureaucratic praxis of the Company officials.

Colonialism was about managing diversity. As a result of the policies of diversification, colonial society was usually characterised by clear-cut social identities. However, this was not the only force at work. We do have many indications that formal labels and representations of plurality and separation need some revision and that lived experience deviated from the formal rules. Previous research has shown that the ethnic labels with which inhabitants of Batavia were entered into the Company documents were often gross simplifications or outright misnomers – although we do not know whether the administrators were aware of their shortcomings and to what extent these labels were a bureaucratic shorthand.⁶ Whatever the truth is, we are severely crippled to give a proper assessment of the nature of identification of the peoples in colonial society outside the categories that are presented to us by the colonial authorities.

Batavia revisited

How difficult it is to write a social history of a colonial society on the basis of colonial sources may be illustrated by looking at a case that, literally, occurred under the eyes of the colonial clerks and administrators: the so-called Chinese revolt and the ensuing massacre of most Chinese inhabitants in the city of Batavia by Dutch Company employees and their helpers in early October 1740.

In that month, several thousands of predominantly Chinese attacked landed estates and small fortresses around Batavia and eventually marched upon the city itself.⁷ They did not succeed in capturing either of them, but they managed to create havoc in the countryside and to destroy a number of estate houses and mills. The attacks provoked a reaction of panic in the city, where sailors and soldiers in particular started to hunt down Chinese, looting

6 Remco Raben, 'Round About Batavia. Ethnicity and Authority in the Ommelanden, 1650-1800', in: Kees Grijns and Peter J.M. Nas (eds.), *Jakarta – Batavia. Socio-Cultural Essays* (Leiden 2000) 93-113; Bondan Kanumoyoso, *Beyond the City Wall. Society and Economic Development in the Ommelanden of Batavia, 1684-1740* (unpublished PhD thesis, Leiden 2011) 73-75.

7 On the causes of the uprising: Leonard Blussé, *Strange Company. Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women*

and the Dutch in VOC Batavia (Dordrecht and Riverton 1986) 90-93. Blussé sees a crisis in the sugar industry as the catalyst of rebellion. For a different view: Remco Raben, 'Uit de suiker in het geweer. De Chinese oorlog in Batavia in 1740', in: J. Thomas Lindblad and Alicia Schrikker (eds.), *Het verre gezicht. Politieke en culturele relaties tussen Nederland en Azië, Afrika en Amerika. Opstellen aangeboden aan prof. dr. Leonard Blussé* (Franeker 2011) 106-123.

and burning their houses, and killing all those living within the city walls. The rebels then retreated into the far surroundings. Some insurgent groups were defeated by Company forces, others entrenched themselves in distant sugar mills close to the eastern border, and were chased from Company territory only by June 1741, after which they fled to Central Java. Here they were to take part in further wars between Javanese and Company armies.

The episode of the revolt and massacre stands out as one of the most harrowing moments in the Dutch colonial history of early modern Java. In this short article, the events of the rebellion will only serve as an occasion to look afresh at the identities and patterns of ethnic loyalty in colonial society and explore to what extent our knowledge is funnelled by VOC information.

I will do this in a vein of self-criticism. Many years ago, I studied the spatial distribution and ethnic relations of Asian free and enslaved peoples in colonial towns under Dutch Company rule.⁸ Although I did make extensive use of judicial archives and did question the ethnic labels as they were applied by the Company policymakers, I am aware that my perspectives were still much bound by the frames that were offered by the VOC administrators. This became evident in the reification of ethnic labels such as Chinese, European and a vast array of Indonesian groups, the foregrounding of the concept of segregation, and in the general perspective of a strongly hierarchised colonial space. This approach harks back to a colonial trope. The basic notion of an ethnically ordered urban space was couched in colonial policy concerns and language, as exemplified by John S. Furnivall's concept of a plural society, where people 'live side by side, yet without mingling' – except on the market place.⁹ In other studies devoted to ethnic communities in VOC-dominated areas, we encounter a similar acceptance of colonial conceptualisations. There is reference, of course, to the racial and ethnic mix of inhabitants, but most emphasise, or accept, the predominating image of clear ethnic distinctions and segregation.¹⁰ The VOC sources neatly cater to our own historical, or human, need for clear categories.

In the case of the Chinese revolt and massacre in Batavia, we have to rely on Company archives. Indigenous or at least non-colonial sources pertaining to the tragedy do exist, but they are hardly helpful. One great source on the revolt is the Chinese chronicle of Batavia, the *Kai Ba Lidai Shiji* ('A historical record of Batavia over the generations').¹¹ On the Malay side, there is the equally fascinating *Sja'ir kompeni welanda berperang dengan tjina* ('Poem of the war of the

8 Remco Raben, *Batavia and Colombo. The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities 1600-1800* (PhD thesis, Leiden University 1996).

9 John Sydenham Furnivall, *Netherlands India. A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge 1944) 446.

10 See for instance Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation. A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago and London 2012).

11 Recently re-translated and edited by Leonard Blussé and Nie Dening (eds.), *The Chinese Annals of Batavia, the Kai ba lidai shiji and Other Stories (1610-1795)* (Leiden and Boston 2018).

Dutch Company against the Chinese’).¹² The problem with both documents is that they are produced long after the events and are too terse, in the Chinese case, or too poetic, in the Malay epic, to reconstruct the details of the events and the social dynamics of the people involved. What is more: just like the VOC archives, both accounts are produced by Chinese and Malay newcomers or outsiders in Batavian society and offer little insight into the dynamics of local society. Although not colonial sources, they are not ‘indigenous’ either.

A different view on the lives of Batavia’s inhabitants is offered by the Company archives themselves, in the form of papers produced by the courts of justice (which were Company institutions). In the aftermath of the uprising, the Court of Justice tried to administer the law in the cases of alleged perpetrators of the uprising. Although the majority of Chinese had been killed, some were caught alive and imprisoned. They were called before the judges of the Court of Justice in Batavia’s Castle, interrogated and often tortured. Several dozens of testimonies have been handed down in the court papers, which offer new perspectives on the rebellion and, important to our purpose here, give details about the social world of the witnesses before and during the rebellion.

Although produced by a colonial judicial institution and serving colonial concerns and by colonial mediation, these papers allow us to catch glimpses of the lives and to some extent even thoughts of the people concerned and to criticise the basic assumptions of the same colonial establishment. In itself the use of court archives is not new. For several generations, social historians have explored them in search of voices ‘from below’.¹³ Even the standard account of the Chinese rebellion by Johannes Theodorus Vermeulen, written eighty years ago, made use of some of the court papers.¹⁴ But Vermeulen, and the few others who used the judicial archives, did not read them in order to reassess the ethnic labels as they appear in these and other Company documents. The case here is not a plea to explore a different set of sources, but to read them differently.

A society in a state of panic

The archives of the Batavian Court of Justice provide us with intriguing insights into the lives and forms of identification of the Batavians during

12 Jan Rusconi, *Sja’ir kompeni welanda berperang dengan Tjina* (Wageningen 1935).

13 For instance Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire. Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge 2009); Eric Jones, *Wives, Slaves, and Concubines. A History of the Female Underclass in Dutch Asia* (DeKalb 2010); South African historians have for some time already made

fruitful use of criminal records to write a social history of the Cape: see for instance Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald (eds.), *Trials of Slavery. Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705-1794* (Cape Town 2005).

14 Johannes Theodorus Vermeulen, *De Chineezen te Batavia en de troebelen van 1740* (Leiden 1938).

and after the so-called Chinese rebellion, when Batavian society was under an enormous strain of violence. The testimonies contain detailed narratives of the vicissitudes of individual inhabitants during and after the revolt and their social networks. The court papers can be read not only for ambiguities of ethnic nomenclature, but also for the patterns of loyalty and trust in society. At this moment in the history of Batavia, issues of social distance and proximity, of ethnic labelling and identification became a matter of life and death.

The great value of these testimonies is that they can reveal perspectives that are radically different from that of the Company administrators and the Chinese officials in the city. Here we read about the Chinese rebellions' background, their trip from China to Batavia, their jobs and homes. We meet the Chinese labourers, leaving behind women and children in order to take refuge in the rebels' camps, and others hiding in the woods and waiting until it is safe to come out again. Not only Chinese were interrogated. Others, whether rebels, victims, perpetrators or onlookers were also summoned before the court to testify. On the basis of their stories we can get a much clearer picture of the events, the motivations behind the uprising, the mechanisms of mobilisation, and, above all, the loyalties and trust of a wide array of people in Batavia's countryside.

Evidently, the testimonies are not free from interference by colonial officers. Some statements were extracted with the help of severe torture. Moreover, the testimonies are not rendered *verbatim*, but are rephrased by the secretaries of the Court. We therefore are unable to recover the exact wording of the accounts and the way their narrative was constructed. Although a major handicap, it should not inhibit us too much, as we are not after a discourse analysis, but try to find indications of social and cultural realities beyond the colonial façades.

To begin with, we do encounter many ambiguities of colonial labelling in these judicial documents. Captains of the Balinese auxiliaries appear who carry Muslim names, which raises the question how much they still identified with a 'Balinese' culture.¹⁵ There is a man with the Chinese name of Tan Hokseeng¹⁶ who had a 'Balinese' mother who had brought him up after the early death of his father.¹⁷ There are many 'shaven Chinese', which means that

15 Abdul Akim Getewel in the source: National Archives, The Hague (hereafter: NA), Archives of the Dutch East India Company (hereafter: VOC), inv.nr. 9394, Kopie-criminele en civiele processtukken van de Raad van Justitie in Batavia, 1740-1741, Attestation of Abdul Akim Getewel a.o., 27 January 1741; also Ismael van Bali in Idem,

Attestation of Ismael van Bali a.o., 12 December 1740.

16 The names are rendered as they appear in the sources.

17 NA, VOC, inv.nr. 9395, Kopie-criminele en civiele processtukken van de Raad van Justitie in Batavia, 1740-1741, Attestation of On Ongko and Tan Hokseeng, 31 January 1741.

they were converts to Islam, who adopted Arabic or local names and cut their queue. Many so-called Chinese, especially those born in Batavia, operating within both Chinese and other communities, were known by both Chinese and Malay names, and had relatives in both Muslim and Chinese circles.

Some testimonies reveal the social world of the inhabitants, and the networks in which they operate. There is for instance the testimony of a Chinese man who was accused of being a ringleader.¹⁸ This Ong Pieko was also known as Si Piet – the Malay term of address ‘Si’ suggests that his network extended over Malay-speaking inhabitants of the city. We do not know where he was born. He was married to a local, probably half-Chinese woman, who, as the documents show, had strong connections in the Javanese communities, probably her mother’s kin. Her sister was married to a Muslim, an uncle is *peranakan*-Chinese.

Si Piet was accused of being a ringleader, but in the end, he succeeded in convincing the judges that he had had no role in the uprising. According to his statement, he and his wife fled with their children when Indonesian Company troops burned down the sugar mill where they lived, and took refuge in villages where they knew the people. These were mostly in-laws of the wife, and their acquaintances. Si Piet left his wife with one Javanese relative, Ince Gintot, to give birth to another child, and travelled through the Ommelanden in order to get a letter of pardon from the government. Not only did Si Piet and his wife foster extensive family relations among Javanese and Javanised Chinese, but they also had a wide-ranging network of people of various Indonesian descent, such as Balinese and Buginese. During his quest for safety, he was arrested by Company troops. His testimony, and those of many others, show the intricacies of social relations in the eccentric zones of colonial society. Gone are the simplified notions of separate ethnic groups that are the backbone of most studies of colonial societies.

Another account comes from a woman called Agatha Rooth. She was twenty-seven years of age, and had four years earlier moved to the small estate on the Great Marunda, east of Batavia, close to the coast. Her husband was Arnoldus de Groot, a European burgher, which means that he could have been in Company service and had chosen to stay in Batavia after his contract expired, or that he was born in Batavia and had opted to make a living outside employment of the Company.¹⁹ In early October 1740 several Chinese who lived on the estate had come to her husband and had reported that many Chinese around Batavia were being arrested. They begged De Groot to go to the sheriff to assure that they would not be caught, but he refused.

18 NA, VOC, inv.nr. 9305, Kopie-criminele rollen van de Raad van Justitie in Batavia, 7 september 1740-1830 augustus 1741, 19 april 1741 (case against Ong Pieko).

19 No Arnoldus de Groot has been found in the ship’s pay ledgers (*scheepssoldijboeken*).

When Chinese rebels approached, De Groot summoned his slaves and other people living on his estate, consisting of Malays and Bugis, a total of sixty men, and armed them. He positioned himself in the attic of his house, with his men and a small group of Dutch soldiers. At the very moment the rebels arrived, the Company sergeant and his men ran for their boat and took flight, leaving three men dead. Agatha first hid in a room in the house, but when she saw the Dutch soldiers running for the boat, she also fled to the river, carrying her child in her arms. She jumped into a boat, together with several, what she or the clerk called ‘native’, women and a few enslaved women. They hid in the woods, where many people seemed to roam around. They met Malay men, whom Agatha knew. They told her that the city was burning, that the Chinese were victorious – which was not true – and that her husband was killed by the Chinese – which sadly was correct. The Chinese had tried to convince the Indonesians on the Great Marunda to join them, giving them rice and promising money, but the Indonesians had accepted the rice and had fled in the night, in their canoes. In the end of her wanderings, Agatha reached the sea and hid in a fishing hut on poles, together with four enslaved men and women from her household. Later she was found by fishermen who brought her to Batavia. There she reported to the government.

Agatha Rooth’s story shows indeed that as ‘Europeans’ she and her husband could appeal to the protection of the *voc*. Their life on the Great Marunda estate, however, was strongly embedded in this typical Ommelanden society. Ethnic diversity was great, but those who had been born or had lived for a long time in this surrounding, spoke each other’s language and were apparently on speaking terms. There was a kind of familiarity between the people in this neighbourhood, extending from enslaved members of the household, to Chinese and Indonesian inhabitants of the estate. This was a hybrid society, in which immigrant identities slowly dissolved but in which members did not share one new amalgamated culture but approached each other on shared cultural grounds, language and proximity.

Creolised lives

The perusal of these sources enables us not only to review and rectify some of the *idées reçues* on the Chinese rebellion, but also to see how the dynamics of proximity and distance worked in locations removed from the power hierarchies of the central colonial government. The revolt, and the court sessions that ensued, permit us to look beyond the lenses of colonial authors and spawn confusion about the nature of social identities and the effects of Dutch colonial ethnic policies, as presented in the Dutch sources.

There is much to learn from these personal accounts. Most importantly, we are alerted to the intensity and relative ease of intercommunal relations.



▲
Drawing by Jan Brandes depicting Javanese cavalrymen in Batavia, ca. 1784.
The drawing is part of Brandes' sketch book, part 2, ca. 1779-1785. © Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam, ng-1985-7-2-129, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.225380>.

People – apart from the most recently arrived – spoke the same language, Batavian Malay. Networks extended across boundaries; people in a neighbourhood were not only acquainted, it seems, by economic relationship – as Furnivall implies – but also by geographic proximity. For those who were less hampered by status considerations – as were the Dutch Company officials and the Chinese elites – and who were integrated in the Ommelanden society by their economic functions, boundaries were fluid. This did not mean that all groups easily or fully mingled or intermarried. Especially higher-class people chose their marriage partners far more out of considerations of prestige and cultural awareness.

We observe various forces at work that tended to blur boundaries and confound clear ethnic labels. Although historians are inclined to stress difference and separation, the court documents show that processes of creolisation were stimulated by forces such as miscegenation, conversion, patterns of employment, and massive enslavement. This last institution was perhaps one of the most important motors behind creolisation. Half of the population within the city walls of Batavia consisted of enslaved people, brought to Batavia by force from the outer islands in the Indonesian archipelago. During their time of enslavement, but also after manumission, they went through a forceful process of cultural creolisation, in language, religion and other cultural traits.

Mixing and creolisation were not the reserve of enslaved people. To a greater or lesser extent, every group in the colony showed tendencies of mixing with other groups. Especially the imbalance of sexes stimulated miscegenation, as men took enslaved women or local women as their sexual and marriage partners. On the one hand, miscegenation was dictated by sex ratios, but on the other hand it was hampered by power status and cultural chauvinism. Among high-ranking Europeans and Chinese community leaders, most of whom were newcomers to Batavia, certain forms of miscegenation and hybridisation were frowned upon. Not coincidentally, both groups have produced texts in which racial or ethnic mixing and the loss of one's 'own' culture were derided and condemned.²⁰ For the majority of society, however, these considerations were much less acute.

There are signs that outside the immediate orbit and class of powerholders, the process of miscegenation and creolisation occurred so fast and on such a large scale, that we might start to think a bit differently about colonial cities, not as foreign enclaves in a largely indigenous countryside, but as basically dynamic places where processes of localisation were extremely forceful. This concept of localisation does not mean that newcomers were 'indigenised', in the sense that they were absorbed by a pre-existing local

20 Walter Henry Medhurst (ed.), *Ong Tae Hae. The Chinaman Abroad. A Desultory Account of the Malayan Archipelago Particularly of Java* (Shanghai 1849) 33; Raben, *Batavia and Colombo*, 267.

culture. As most of the inhabitants of Batavia consisted of recent immigrants, the mix was basically between various groups of newcomers or their descendants. The new cultures that evolved were the result of creolisation.²¹ This process is not equivalent to the old-fashioned and rickety concept of a melting pot, as creolisation was not a monolithic process. Differences were not entirely erased, and new distinctions between groups developed. In that sense, mechanisms of segmented and synthetic creolisation were both seen to be at work.²²

Perhaps it is more useful to think of colonial societies not as societies that derived their dynamics primarily from colonial policies of separate treatment and ethnic labelling (as I still surmised in my previous study), but as a web of new moral spaces that were determined by various processes of creolisation. Company rules and regulations were indeed motivated by the urge to manage diversity and to enforce segregation; but once we move out of the Company books, away from the foreign authorities, we see large numbers of people transgressing formal ethnic borders, stepping out of their alleged ethnic domains.

Decolonising visions

Through this small exercise we become aware that our vision of the essential plurality of colonial cities, which is a trope in the historiography, is primarily a product of colonial concerns. In many ways, eccentric reading of the court records on the 1740 tragedy produces a much more complex picture: that of colonial societies as fundamentally creolised or mestizo societies.²³ In the reality that filters through these records a more fundamental distinction appears than those based on ethnic separation: that between the established and the outsiders. This distinction operates in two ways. In the first place, the communal categories, as we know them, primarily reflect the concerns and ignorance of Dutch immigrant elites. The accounts alert us to the fact that most of our representations reflect a conceptualisation of colonial spaces and their social dynamics that is state-centered. The ethnic categories as employed in the Company sources, which

21 Charles Stewart, 'Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory', in: Idem (ed.), *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* (New York 2007) 1-25.

22 Orlando Patterson, 'Context and Choice in Ethnic Allegiances: A Theoretical Framework and Caribbean Case Study', in: Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory*

and Experience (Cambridge 1975) 305-349, esp. 317.

23 For a later period, and in bold criticism of Furnivall's concept of plural society: Charles Coppel, 'Revisiting Furnivall's "Plural Society": Colonial Java as a Mestizo Society?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20 (1997) 562-579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1997.9993975>.

have guided so many historians, are in fact essentialist classifications based on a crude colonial geography of Asia. The ethnic labels as employed by the Company administrators and scribes are not completely fictitious, but at least insufficient to account for the dynamics in society, especially if we move away from the center. The rules of colonial difference were not cast in stone.

Secondly, we see patterns of social interaction that are the result of a process of localisation or creolisation that seems to absorb most of the inhabitants of the areas outside the colonial center. Outsiders in this process of localisation are Europeans who, not coincidentally, mainly live in the walled city or its immediate surroundings, and are socially programmed by colonial status considerations. A fairly isolated community, it seems, was also formed by the labourers at the sugar mills, who were new Chinese immigrants, speaking the local languages badly, and depending mostly on the patrons of their clans and *kongsis*. It is interesting in this respect that although Batavian-born Chinese did join the rebellion, and even some Javanese, most of the insurgents were apparently newcomers from China. It seems that more locally rooted Chinese and certainly the Chinese who converted to Islam, did not take part in the revolt.

The glimpses from the court records from Batavia enable us to look beyond the barriers of Dutch colonial labelling and make us aware of the precarious nature of colonial reporting and of how our knowledge is constituted by our reliance on colonial social categorisations. Ever since the 1970s and 1980s, we have become aware of the effects of colonial administrative violence.²⁴ The focus on issues of coercion and control raises the question whether we have been overlooking currents happening under the wings of colonial rule that point in different directions; not to ethnic segregation but to creolisation.

Awareness of the space-power continuum can be a fruitful source for further investigation of 'colonial' societies. We can read the witness accounts and interrogation reports from the colonial court archives not as the expression of Dutch colonial concerns – which is also possible – but as the narratives of lived experiences of people around the city. This can result in a questioning of our preconceptions and of the processes of our knowledge formation. This act of investigating societies and, through them, our own knowledge basis, is also a step in the act of decolonising, perhaps not a decolonisation of the archives themselves, but at least of the way we relate to them.

24 The classic text is of course Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in: Idem, *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi 1987)

224-254. See also Benedict Anderson, 'Census, Map, Museum', in: Idem, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. ed.; London and New York 1991) 163-185.



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