On 8 May 2021, it was exactly 400 years since Jan Pietersz Coen (1587-1629) committed a massacre on the Banda Islands in the Moluccas (Maluku Province), the only place where nutmeg grew at the time. In anticipation of this commemoration, the 1893 statue of Coen in the Dutch city of Hoorn, which dominates the town’s central square (Roode Steen/Red Stone), was again the focus of much anger. In the nationalist-tinged late 19th century, people were looking for heroes from the past. The Aceh War had been raging hopefully for years. The so-called “glory days” of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) were more than a century behind. As an exemplary figure who spearheaded Dutch entry into Asia, Coen was equated with his robust and determined gaze East. He was deemed to have paved the way for Dutch successes in the Spice Trade, and thus seemed ideally suited to fortify the continued belief in the Dutch colonial enterprise. Even when Coen’s statue was placed on its pedestal, many criticized the glorification of a man with such a blood-soaked legacy. During a large protest near Hoorn’s train station in June 2020, speakers drew attention to persistent discrimination and racism in the Netherlands in a broader sense. Recent events in the United States – in particular, the increasingly prominent Black Lives Matter movement and the public’s reaction to the murder of George Floyd – were a source of inspiration.

The actions surrounding the image of JP Coen occur at a moment in which the Dutch colonial past and its disastrously brutal activities in the slave trade are increasingly under review. The Rijksmuseum recently opened a large-scale exhibition on slavery. A well-curated book that pays specific attention to the many slave-related objects in its collection has also been published. Related publications often draw a direct line between this violent past and the institutionalized presence of racism in Dutch society. These sorts of historical reckonings can count on strong opposing sentiments: the same day as the aforementioned protest in Hoorn, a pro-Coen counter-demonstration was also held. Clad in Dutch flags with the VOC logo embroidered on them, a limited group of sympathizers gathered nearby, claiming an emotional bond with ‘their Coen’ and other Dutch colonial figures of an imaginary glorious past. The way in which Dutch colonial history is appropriated and employed in such protests is characterized by rather broad generalizations. Among the pro-Coen protesters, it seemed mainly about the idea that the Netherlands was built on the acquired riches of the Dutch Golden Age. Heroes of yesterday (e.g., Michiel de Ruyter (1607-1655), Piet Hein (1577-1629), JP Coen) were not to be dismissed as violent conquerors and slave traders. They should continue to be respected for the riches they brought home, the riches that continue to make the Netherlands one of the wealthiest nations on earth. On the other hand, ‘four hundred years of Dutch imperialist rule’ – as Gloria Wekker calls it in White Innocence (2016: 2) – cannot simply be erased. The consequences of such imperialism are still felt.

A number of recently published books offer new perspectives on Dutch colonialism and how it developed. Two of these studies – Adam Clulow’s Ambon, 1623 and Allison Games’ Inventing the English Massacre – are about a relatively small event that would have far-reaching consequences for the Dutch Republic’s relationship with England: the execution of 21 British East India Company (BEIC) employees and Japanese mercenaries by Dutch authorities on Ambon in 1623. Both books do more than describe the macabre events that unfolded on Ambon; they also try to explain how this massacre, as the English referred to the incident, should be viewed from both a regional and European perspective. Together with two other books – the first dealing with the Anglo-Dutch conflicts of 1652-1689, the second with how the different companies related to one another – a complex, nuanced picture emerges of the early colonial period. Such works encourage reflection about the violent and uncompromising way colonial stakeholders sought to carve out a piece of the spice trade for themselves. Indirectly, however, these studies also caution against an over-emphasis on the might and supremacy of early colonizers.

Amboin, 1623

Two years after JP Coen ‘punished’ the Banda Islanders, a tragedy took place on Ambon that received far more attention in Europe. In 1623, Dutch authorities arrested a Japanese mercenary in service with the VOC for asking ‘suspicious’ questions about the local fort’s defense capabilities. When he could not explain why this was of interest to him, he was tortured at length. Ultimately, he admitted to being part of a plan organized by English traders to conquer the fort in question. Two weeks later, 21 men were executed on suspicion of involvement in the plot. Ten of these were traders employed by the British East India Company. When news reached London a year later, the ‘massacre’ not only became a symbol of Dutch aggressive, rude, and cruel behaviour, but also one explanation for why the English eventually began focusing on India as an alternative to present-day Indonesia.

Previous studies of the so-called ‘Ambon Bay Massacre’ mainly focus on the underlying cause—that is, the truth (or falsity) of the alleged conspiracy. In this, perspectives were rather divided along national lines. Dutch authors insisted that the English were scheming to take over the fort. In contrast, English authors were invariably convinced that, even if there had been a plot against the Dutch, the Ambon Bay Massacre was nevertheless a miscarriage of justice. Both publications rather pleasingly avoid this question altogether. Clulow’s Ambon, 1623 emphasizes the Asian regional context in which the Dutch operated at the time. This produces a history that counteracts narratives of the VOC reigning supreme from the start. Following in the footsteps of pathbreaking studies like J.C. Sharman’s Empires of the Week, Clulow shows how the Dutch actually began in a much weaker position than previously assumed.

Fear and paranoia prevailed, fueled by a lack of regional knowledge, ambiguity about previous agreements, and the imminent presence of potential competitors (such as the English). One could, therefore, interpret the torture and subsequent executions of 1623 as the result of a collective Dutch panic attack (though this should by no means be read as an excuse or explanation for other atrocities committed locally).

Japanese mercenaries

In the first part of his book, Adam Clulow returns to the period of JP Coen to show how the history of the Banda Islands and Ambon are intertwined. After discussing why the spices of the so-called Spice Islands were so sought-after in Europe, Clulow explores how the Dutch started to interfere in the trade of nutmeg.
A variety of treaties were supposed to guarantee the VOC’s monopoly position, but whether the local elites actually understood what was in those treaties is another matter. This signals an issue of communication and translation that we will return to later in our discussion on Dutch colonial governance in Asia. The Dutch often had a rather limited overview of their situation. The example of Japanese mercenarism employed by the VOC further underscores this point. How did twelve Japanese mercenaries end up working for the VOC on Ambon? According to Clulow, these Japanese mercenaries were part of an experiment to make convenient use of surplus manpower in Asia. After the bloody Sengoku period (1477-1598), there were throngs of unemployed men in southern Japan. Stationed in Hirado, the VOC saw an opportunity to replenish its short supply of men for defensive or offensive operations. The VOC’s mercenaries, for example, played a central role in the inroads of the orangkaya on Banda Neira. Upon entering Neira’s only museum today, one is immediately greeted by a horrific depiction of these men decapitating locals on the palace grounds. It is here that Ambonese, 1623 reads like a sequel to Clulow’s earlier The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan, in which he presents a detailed analysis of that Dutch period in Hirado (1609-1610). The ‘Japanese’ in this book is understood to mean the way the Japanese themselves determined the contours of the relationship and how limited the influence of the VOC was. Particularly striking are the descriptions of the complex ‘migmazes’ that the VOC undertook annually in a region where they were only temporary, for this reason. The journey of about two thousand kilometers lasted three weeks and resulted in a result of three or four visits to the VOC’s Ambon. The manner in which the VOC dealt with the local population and the manner in which they were treated by the VOC is described in a detailed manner. The VOC’s were entertained in a manner that showed how respectful the VOC was in this region. The situation on Ambon reverberates with the circumstances that the VOC faced annually. Ambon was a painful reminder of their precarious position in the region. The playing field in which they found themselves truly was a jumble of regional alliances and conflicts that brought uncertainty as well as the potential for profit. For the Dutch, the English undermined the VOC and took advantage of the hard work the Dutch had put in to secure their local position. Prior to the massacre, the Dutch appeared to receive the English as profittakers. After 1623, the reporting in England would mainly focus on the inhuma behaviour of the Dutch. It is here that Alison Games’ Inventing the English Massacre offers a valuable addition of insight.

A massacre invented

Already before 1621, the relationship between the Dutch Republic and England had known ups and downs. The conflict between the Habsburg (‘Spanish’) Empire and the Dutch Republic (Dutch Empire) played a prominent role in this. During the Twelve Years’ Truce (1609-1621) there were significant concerns about a possible Anglo-Spanish alliance. This contrasted with the perspective of the English, who relied firmly on the assumption that the Republic owed goodwill for the military support it had received under Elizabeth (1585-1603). This was compounded by a certain disdain toward this new European state sans royal family. As Games argues, the positions of both countries were incompatible at the heart. The VOC was of the opinion that the English held no claim to a stake in the spice islands. The VOC was adamant that the Dutch owed them gratitude. Inventing the English Massacre particularly excels in its analysis of the events and other texts presented on the English side about the conflict. The effects of such reports were substantial. One Dutch official even asked for the termination of agreements about the VOC’s vast holdings in the East Indies. The VOC and Games show how the events that characterized the trial, the massacre and the subsequent sale of the islands, illustrated how much the English and Dutch could learn from each other about the events that transpired in the Indian Ocean for a long time. Before the Dutch and English set foot on Moluccan shores, the Portuguese had preceded them. Such a longue durée view of history makes it possible to draw connections between, on the one hand, shifts in territories, on the other, the way various companies operated under the mandates with which they had been bestowed.

How to outsource an empire

Here, the two recent publications provide a necessary framework to understand this early Dutch colonial period in what Alison Games’ called Outourcing Empire. Co-authors Andrew Phillips and J.C. Sharman present an intriguing overview of the various companies that embarked on journeys of conquest and colonization, and paint a picture of this era in a deeper perspective of how they functioned in practice. Clearly, the VOC contrasts with the English and Dutch in terms of the logic of these companies in order to gain a greater understanding of the role that the English played in the pursuit of conflict with the VOC/Republic and BEIC/England, Outsourcing Empire aims to provide a necessary framework to understand how the first three Anglo-Dutch wars impacted the Caribbean Islands, North America and the Bandas. Although the Spanish would largely ignore Asia, Portugal with its base in Goa played a predominant role in the spice trade in the Indian Ocean for a long time. Before the Dutch and English set foot on Moluccan shores, the Portuguese had preceded them. Such a longue durée view of history makes it possible to draw connections between, on the one hand, shifts in territories, on the other, the way various companies operated under the mandates with which they had been bestowed.

Reframing ‘empire’

The negative image the English had of the Dutch would persist for centuries, not least because of the regularly updated pamphlets which were circulated.

The negative image the English had of the Dutch would persist for centuries, not least because of the regularly updated pamphlets which were circulated.

Notes

1 The author would like to thank Tristan Mostert for important input on this article. Ariz-88: Buffels. Boogeld. Presented in De Nederlandse Boogeldijk, issue 3 (June-July), 2021.

2 Rijksmuseum, 2021. Slavery. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum/Amsterdam Centre for Constitutional History. The study will soon enjoy the many benefits of their publication.


