

Slavery in the Shadow of the Plantations: Colonial and Indigenous Slaving in Early-modern Maluku

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Abstract

The study focuses on structures of coerced labour in Maluku, eastern Indonesia, and investigates how the local understanding of slavery met and was co-opted by European (in particular VOC) demands for enslaved manpower in the early modern era. While the slave economy of the Banda Islands is well known, other parts were also involved in slaving activities. This is highlighted by a detailed case from 1684, the verbose Dutch report of a punitive expedition to the Aru Islands that describes slavery in the colonial-indigenous intersection. Scrutinizing the sources about local society, one can discern a continuum from an impersonal work-intensive slavery to a personal household-oriented one, even in an area characterized by relative externality and non-hierarchical social relations.

Keywords: VOC, Maluku, Aru Islands, enslavement, colonial violence

1. Introduction

As a geographical convention, Maluku comprises the easternmost parts of present Indonesia minus New Guinea, corresponding to the modern provinces Maluku and North Maluku (see Map 4.1). The usage of the term has changed significantly over time. In the early-modern era it was defined as the northern islands, Ternate, Tidore, Makian, the Bacan Group, and Halmahera. The southern islands of the Banda and Arafura Seas were only included under this term in about the 19th century, as a result of Dutch colonial dispositions. The economic opportunities that offered themselves to the Europeans also gave rise to the term Spice Islands, since clove, nutmeg and mace made the region an early priority for explorers and colonisers. The struggles of the Portuguese, English, Spanish and Dutch to control the spice trade has been told many times, and the turbulent history of Ambon and the Banda Islands is partly well-researched; however, the social consequences have

been less elucidated.¹ The colonial communities that were constructed in these places by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the course of the 17th century had global implications since some 15 percent of the Company profits in the Netherlands came from the spices.² Counted after the gold value, a returning VOC ship in the mid-17th century would on average have a cargo worth 250 million Euros, of which 18 percent were spices from Maluku and elsewhere.³

At first the nutmeg and clove trees grew in the wild, but with the emergence of trade-based polities they were increasingly cultivated. With the arrival of the VOC, the spice trade demanded a comprehensive apparatus of tending and harvesting the trees, and thus a specialisation of work that used coerced labour in various forms. The nutmeg and mace of the Banda plantations were worked by slaves after the infamous Dutch genocide of 1621⁴. In the Ambon Islands, villages were responsible for delivering cloves to the Company, though slaves did much of the work here, too. This went on until the abolition of the spice monopolies in 1864 and the formal abolition of slavery in directly ruled areas in 1860.⁵

Since the 1990s, new published research about the plight of slaves in Banda and Ambon has detailed questions of acquisition, demography, work deployment, and cultural factors.⁶ However, hardly any work has collated slavery regimes in the larger region that is today known as Maluku. A quick survey of the published sources reveals the existence of substantial slave populations in Kisar, Aru, Kei, Ternate, Tidore, Ceram, and so on.⁷ Not all of these were ‘slaves’ in the European and Muslim legal sense, but they were termed as such in the written sources and were clearly in a heavily subordinated and bonded position vis-à-vis the majority population. The present chapter will look into structures of coerced labour in the larger Malukan region and investigate how the local understanding met European demands for enslaved manpower in the early-modern era. This will be elucidated through a detailed case from 1684, namely the verbose Dutch report of a punitive expedition to the Aru Islands that includes numerous references to slavery in the colonial-indigenous intersection.

¹ For studies of Malukan history, see Van Fraassen, ‘Ternate’, Vols I–II; Leonard Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*; Gerrit Knaap, *Kruidnagelen en Christenen*; Tristan Mostert, ‘Spice War’. For eastern Indonesia, Sutherland, *Seaways and Gatekeepers*.

² Els Jacobs, *Koopman in Azië*, p. 37.

³ Van Pagee, *Banda*, p. 7.

⁴ Hanna, *Indonesian Banda*.

⁵ Van Fraassen, *Ambon in het 19e-eeuwse Indië*, pp. 291–294.

⁶ Loth, ‘Pioneers and Perkeniers’, 13–35; Winn, ‘Slavery and Cultural Creativity in the Banda Islands’, pp. 365–389; Carlson and Jordan, ‘Visibility and Power’, 213–43; Hägerdal, ‘A Slave Economy in the East Indies’, pp. 78–95; Knaap, ‘Slavery in the Dutch Colonial Empire in Southeast Asia’, pp. 499–516.

⁷ See in particular the useful ethnography of Riedel, *De sluik en kroesharige rassen tusschen Seles en Papua*.



Map 4.1. The main geographical features of Maluku

2. Malukan slaveries

Maluku, in the more extended sense of the word, is a crossroads of Austronesian and Papuan elements and was only fleetingly affected by the Hindu-Buddhist cultures of central Indonesia. The dispersed geography of innumerable minor islands and limited arable land was not conducive to larger polities. Societies were based on kinship groups, villages, and ritual inter-village bonds, and did not primarily live from rice cultivation; rather, the economy was based on individual *kebun* (gardens) and the extraction of food from forest and sea. Slaves are actually mentioned as far back as we have textual sources: a Chinese account from c. 1350 says that

the Bandanese exported spices and ‘small black slaves’ in exchange for textiles, ceramics, and musical instruments.⁸ These slaves were presumably Papuans, perhaps also from Ceram and Aru. Given the prevalence of coerced labour almost everywhere in premodern Southeast Asia, this comes as no surprise.⁹

Despite recent advances of archaeology, a fathomable history of persons and events only emerges with the coming of Islam in the 15th century. This was initially an elite project where local leaders bonded seafarers from Java and the Malay World and developed the spice trade. As such, Islam gave preconditions for a more integrated society, ushering into the extensive sultanates of Ternate and Tidore in the north, and emerging hierarchies in Ambon and the Banda Islands. This process was overlaid by European attempts of Christianisation and control of the spice production. Still, large swaths of Maluku remained autonomous since European control was patchily enforced, and the colonisers had little interest in changing the internal structure of local societies. When it came to slaving (the acquisition and allocation of slaves), nothing in either Islam, Christianity, or local customs, forbade such practices, although the two world religions formally denounced enslavement of co-religionists (Muslims of North Maluku enslaved each other anyway).¹⁰ Three factors made eastern Indonesia a hub of slaving in the early-modern era, approximately the 15th to 19th centuries: the small-scale and vulnerable nature of local communities, the non-Muslim and non-Christian nature of many island societies, and the need of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) for tightly controlled manpower. Adding to this, raiders from various parts of maritime Southeast Asia, such as Raja Ampat, South Sulawesi, and Sulu, captured people on their own accord until at least the second half of the 19th century.

The actual conditions of slaves are described in some detail by European observers. António Galvão stated in about 1546 that slaves called *ngofangare* worked the fields and groves of the North Malukan rulers; this included the planting of trees and the extraction of wine and foodstuff, in particular the important sagu.¹¹ Thus, slavery was already central to the maintenance of the early state. However, other sources make a clear distinction between two categories where *ngofangare* were ‘proverbial’ slaves or people in a subservient position, while *falalom* were the actual chattel slaves who could be bought and sold.¹² The *falalom* belonged either to the court or privately to members of the elite. Being either inherited or prisoners

⁸ Rockhill, ‘Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coast of the Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century: Part I’, pp. 256–257.

⁹ For the variants in the larger region, see Reid (ed.), *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*.

¹⁰ Van Fraassen, ‘Ternate’, Vol. I, p. 81.

¹¹ Jacobs, *A Treatise on the Moluccas (c. 1544)*, p. 133.

¹² Van Fraassen, ‘Ternate’, Vol. I, pp. 79–80.

of war, they tended their master's plantation, were fishermen, and were sometimes rent out. Large retinues of *falalom* increased their master's prestige.¹³

The VOC official Artus Gijssels wrote a comprehensive ethnographic account of Ambon in 1621 which, however biased, is grounded in years of first-hand observations. Slaves in Ambon were ubiquitous and were owned by *orangkayas* (chiefs) as well as individual households. Debt slavery was common; the *orangkayas* are described as kleptocrats who forced the villagers to purchase goods, and failure to pay was eventually punished with enslavement. The Ambonese kept their slaves in the houses where they were disorderly as cattle. When the slaves had served their master a long time, they might be upgraded to a half-free condition and allowed to start a household of their own. The slaves of the *orangkayas* would frequently fornicate with the female slaves of the villagers, even in daytime. When such a relation had been going on for some time, the female slave was made to join the master's household, to the great resentment of the villagers, who sometimes proactively sold the girls to the *orangkayas* for half the price, so they would at least get something out of it. In sum, Gijssels considered the conditions of an Ambonese slave as quite tolerable; for sure, he was treated much better than the slaves owned by the stern Dutch.¹⁴ Gijssels's description partly accords with an 'open' system of slavery as defined by anthropologists: an inclusion in the work of the family and successive incorporation into local society.¹⁵ Data from the late 17th century suggests that slaves often constituted 10–15 percent of the populations of the Ambon Islands and were mostly owned by the elite.¹⁶

Another piece by an 'A.G.' (apparently the same Artus Gijssels) discusses the society of the nutmeg-producing Banda Islands before the intrusion of the Dutch in the early 17th century. The population of Banda was a mixture of people from near and far and had developed a remarkable monoculture system where available land was largely used to cultivate nutmeg trees and food was imported. As a seafaring community it undertook long trade journeys over the Southeast Asian archipelago. Here Gijssels found a system where slaves were used even more extensively than Ambon but also allowed for some circulation within the social hierarchy. An island community might even be inhabited by slaves in the first place, and the slaves may preserve their own beliefs and practices in the otherwise mostly Muslim society:

Another island, Gunung Api or Fire Mountain, is mostly inhabited by the slaves from Neira and Lontor, who maintain their gardens of *sayur* or vegetables. The slaves, which mostly come from Timor, Solor, Surabaya, Kei, Aru and Buton, live ten to twelve families by each

¹³ Van Fraassen, 'Ternate', Vol. I, p. 81.

¹⁴ Gijssels, 'Grondig verhaal van Amboyna', pp. 397–444, 450–494.

¹⁵ Reid, 'Closed' and 'Open' Slave Systems in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia', pp. 156–181.

¹⁶ Knaap, *Kruidnagelen en christenen*, p. 167.

other. They are still mostly heathen. Sometimes they catch wild boars who were there a hundred years ago before the Bandanese took the Mohammedan religion. The slaves may catch and eat the boars without knowledge of their masters.¹⁷

Gijssels also outlines the slaving circuits that existed in eastern Indonesia. The various settlements of Banda all had their favourite destinations. Thus, the village Sammer on Lontor went with 5–6 large *perahu* (vessels) to Ceram each year, to purchase slaves, turtle-shell, rice and beans. The example of Gunung Api, referred above, also indicates a wide array of origin-points that was not restricted to East Indonesia. Gijssels refers in some detail the customs that regulated who was a slave or a free person. For example, if a free man fornicated with another man's slave, and she became pregnant, he might keep the child as his own if he paid a sum or provided a new slave to the other person. On the other hand, if a free woman was made pregnant by a slave, she would have to negotiate with his master, otherwise the child would also be considered a slave. There were complicated rules for when a person or family could claim someone as a slave, with issues that apparently spanned several generations. Among the roots of this plethora of customary regulations lay the fact that especially the chiefs (*orangkaya*) and their sons commonly held slaves as mistresses, with numerous children as the inevitable result. According to (selectively followed) Muslim principles, these should be considered free when begotten by free fathers. Finally, Gijssels found that many Bandanese were in fact descended from slaves, who had escaped from other places or gained liberty when their merchant masters had died. Despite all the circulation, slaves had no 'persona' since they could not bear witness in public.¹⁸

In sum, the early European reports suggest a rather wide application of coerced labour in the Malukan region. They could be systematically used for agricultural labour by the elites but were also incorporated in individual households. The distance between 'free' and 'slave' was often small, and social circulation occurred, which gave rise to numerous customary regulations to determine who was the one or the other.

3. European interventions

The establishment of Europeans in Maluku after 1512 initially seems to have had a limited impact on the extent of slaving and slavery. Portuguese sources of the 16th century frequently mention slaves as a self-evident matter, being the property of both Europeans and locals, but the newcomers were mainly interested in

¹⁷ Gijssels, 'Beschrijvinge van de eijlanden Banda', p. 76.

¹⁸ Gijssels, 'Beschrijvinge van de eilande Banda', pp. 80–83.

acquiring cloves and nutmeg cultivated by local means. Large-scale circulation of slaves for use in economic production was not their concern, although many purchased slaves in Maluku privately.¹⁹ One group of consequence, however, were the Merdekas (Dutch; Mardijkers) of Ambon, who were or descended from slaves converted to Catholicism and had a role as soldiers who defended the Portuguese positions.²⁰ Some of these were in due time re-enslaved by the Sultan of Ternate in North Maluku and assigned to row his *kora-koras* (war vessels).²¹

The situation changed with the build-up of the Dutch positions after 1599. Up to 1663, when the Spanish left Maluku, the VOC made itself the overlord of the region, although its control over economic activities was never perfected. Widespread enslavement accompanied the conquest process, as prisoners of war were reduced to unfree status and defeated enemies forced to yield slaves as punishment.²² Most notoriously, the genocide in the Banda Islands in 1621 was followed by the construction of a new plantation economy where a mostly imported body of slaves toiled on the nutmeg plantations – a system with interesting parallels to the slave economies of the West Indies.²³ With hundreds of port cities, factories and fortresses spread from South Africa to East Asia, the VOC had capabilities of quite another order than the Portuguese to transport enslaved labour over large distances.

The need for tightly controlled workers and servants in the VOC establishments meant that suitable sources of enslavement must be identified. Early reports of scouting voyages regularly mention interesting items of trade, but also the availability and prices of slaves. These reports were then digested by the Supreme Government in Batavia, and to a less degree the Gentlemen XVII in the Dutch metropolis and were the basis for strategic decisions. Distinct slave circuits soon emerged, as outlined by Marcus Vink: South Asia was the most important provider up to the 1660s, after which Southeast Asia became the more prominent source. A smaller amount arrived from Africa, Madagascar, and the Mascarenes.²⁴ However, slaves from eastern Indonesia were in fact important for the VOC establishments at all times. A look at the published contracts and agreements made with Asian rulers during the 17th century discloses that 115 out of a total of 612 diplomatic instruments actually mention slaves in one context or another. Thus, slaving was a prominent concern for the VOC diplomats and certainly not a marginal part of the Company activities. Now, about half (55) of the instruments with slave paragraphs refer to

¹⁹ De Sá (ed.), *Documentação para a história das missões Padroado portugues do Oriente*, VI, p. 126.

²⁰ Lobato, *Política e comércio dos portugueses na insulândia*, p. 129.

²¹ Lobato, *Política e comercio*, p. 134.

²² Mostert, *Spice war*, pp. 208–209, 403.

²³ Loth, 'Pioneers and Perkeniers'; Winn, 'Slavery and Cultural Creativity'.

²⁴ Vink, 'The World's Oldest Trade', pp. 140–146.

eastern Indonesia, meaning the islands to the east of Bali. A lot of them relate to Ambon, Banda, and the islands of North Maluku, sometimes detailing conditions of slave trade but more often aiming at capturing runaway slaves. Judging from the contracts, maroonage was a large 'problem' for European as well as Asian society since the paragraphs detailed the conditions for mutual restitution of runaways.²⁵

Generally, the Banda Islands were at the centre of the slave circuits in eastern Indonesia and beyond. The *perkeniers* dependent on the Company needed thousands of slaves to work the *perken* (plantations) that dotted the main islands of the Banda group and gave the Company astronomic profits. As I have discussed in another study, we possess some proto-demographic data that gives information on the profile of the 17th-century slave population.²⁶ In 1638, the Banda Islands housed 3842 persons over the age of twelve, thus maybe 6000 all in all. Of these the majority, 2190, were slaves.²⁷ In the early decades of the Banda colony, the VOC made great efforts to transport enslaved people from South Asia the long way to Banda, since famines and warfare often provided a large supply in South India and the Bay of Bengal.²⁸ Later in the same century, manpower from Sulawesi, Timor, Papua, and southern Maluku became increasingly important. All these areas were the subject of warfare and raiding, mostly by Asian groups from the region, which generated large amounts of slaves. On the contrary, Balinese and African slaves were rare although they were frequently used in other VOC settlements. The turmoil in South Sulawesi after 1667 and the small-scale wars that regularly affected the societies around the Banda Sea fed into the colonial slave economy.²⁹

4. A case: the Aru Islands

Now, how did the European society, with the Atlantic slavery as its base of reference, meet the local slaverries that existed throughout the world of Maluku? Part of this has been explored by Gerrit Knaap in a study of Ambon, a multi-ethnic spot that harboured both European, Ambonese and other Asian settlers who all kept numerous enslaved workers and servants.³⁰ However, much less is known about the surrounding island societies which were under VOC suzerainty but remained autonomous, partly due to geographical inaccessibility: Wetar, Kisar, Buru, Ceram,

²⁵ Data compiled from *Corpus diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum*, I–IV.

²⁶ Hägerdal, 'A Slave Economy'.

²⁷ Wurfain, *Reise Nach den Molukken und Vorder-Indien 1632–1646*, pp. 106–107.

²⁸ *Corpus diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum*, I, p. 414.

²⁹ Hägerdal, 'A Slave Economy'.

³⁰ Knaap, 'Slavery in the Dutch Colonial Empire in Southeast Asia', pp. 499–516.

Leti, Moa, Babar, Damar, Aru, Kei, Tanimbar and dozens of others. Some of these insular groups were subjected to ethnographic studies in the 19th and 20th centuries, when slavery was either on the decline or formally abolished.³¹ These studies usually depict societies which, for all their smallness, still were markedly hierarchical and genealogically orientated, with a rough division in three or more social estates. These would be nobles, freemen, and slaves if we use the approximate Western terms. Still there were considerable differences between the islands. For example, Kisar and the Kei group observed a much larger social distance between social estates than the Aru Islands which had a 'flatter' society with strong Papuan features (though speakers of some fifteen Austronesian languages).³² Aru is in fact an interesting example of the effects of coloniality on a low-technology society with dispersed power structure. An early perceptive although heavily biased Dutch report from 1670 introduces the Aru Islands in the following way:

The land of Aru consists of a fragmented land and is divided in many islands and islets, which are almost beyond counting. The foremost are called Ujir, Wasir and Wamar; these three are to the west. Those in the east we can hardly tell of, but those that are inhabited with *negeris* are the following: Conganvani [Komfane?], Batuley, Aduar, Mariri, Balatan, Waijukur, Celirea, Waroublay [Warilau?], Baun, Wrakkan, Woor, Barakai and Krey or Karwan. On some of these are three or four *negeris*, well populated.

The population of Aru are robust people who are not industrious. They are heathen but not at all religious, and they do not have idols like in Kei or Tanimbar, and no public gathering places where to hold *bicara* [deliberation]. However, in Ujir a part has turned Moors due to the shipping that the Makassarese previously conducted there. Generally speaking, the land is a flat and fertile one. All sorts of provisions may be obtained there. However, they do not have large livestock or oxen, deer, etc. but have good quantities of pigs, chicken, cassowaries, and other animals. Thus, as nature has provided these people, they do not work much, and the easterners mostly live from robbing slaves whom they then sell; for the land in itself has no slaves, but they are obtained through warfare since anyone captured in war becomes a slave, and those are the ones they sell.

Concerning the easterners, they are a fickle people, and we shall not speak much of them as they have no shipping. Rather, they come to those who conduct petty commerce and go to Banda. That is, first, those from Trangan where one finds the *negeris* Soli, Laaba, Fatural, Ngaiguli, Feruni, and Wattovani, as well as the 12 *negeris* situated in Serwati. These *negeris* have an excess of livestock such as pigs, chicken etc., and also *kacang* [grams], beans and a

³¹ De Jonge & Van Dijk, *Forgotten Islands of Indonesia*.

³² Hägerdal, 'On the Margins of Colonialism: Contact Zones in the Aru Islands', p. 558; Rodenwaldt, *Die Mestizen auf Kisar*, p. 45.

little rice. Sagu is abundant there. This is the best place in entire Aru from where to obtain provisions.

[...]

The trade of Aru is in slaves, turtle-shell, and a bark called *kau*, which can be best obtained by the easterners when there is peace. Small pearls are found; however, it is still unsure what quantities can be obtained.³³

We get a picture of a small-scale and religiously discreet set of societies where agriculture mixed with the gathering of sea and forest products, some of which had a global demand (pearls, turtle-shell, later complemented with trepang). External commercial and religious influence had a role via Makassar and the VOC. The captive manpower that resulted from internal volatile conditions was profitably linked to the Banda-centred slave trade that was needed for the spice production. Intimate and less personal variants of slavery existed side by side. The sources note that masters allowed slaves to live in other settlements, and the murder of a slave, if not compensated, could lead to war between villages.³⁴

But who were the people called slaves or serfs (*slaven*, *lijfeygenen*) in the Dutch reports? Some details of Arunese society can be culled from the VOC sources but the first true ethnographic accounts are from the 19th century. The official and ethnographer J.F.G. Riedel made some perceptive observations in 1886. As he says, social hierarchy was divided into roughly six estates. These were the *tamata guli jinjine* (the highest nobility), the *tamata guli* (those that have a certain socially respected position), the *tamata jinjinei* (the rich), the *tamata pangar duoie* (land-owners), the *tamata reagaga*, *tamata panuabali*, or *gagaja* (common people), and *kabean* (slaves). In former times the elders of the households (*tura anasi jaeai*) held authority together with the *gul* (the ‘first among equals’). After the arrival of foreigners from Ternate, Tidore, Seram and Gorom, leaders arose who bore the titles *Gul Ursia* and *Gul Urlima*, referring to the usual ritual division in Maluku between the *Ulisiwa* and *Ulilima* moieties.³⁵ Malay or European titles such as *raja*, *orang kaya* (‘wealthy man’), *kapitan* and *mayor* were also used, at least in communication with foreigners.³⁶ However, there was room for social circulation since the various estates were mixed by intermarriage. Papuan slaves were usually bartered with the Ceramese for gongs and elephant tusks but were not permitted to marry Aruese

³³ VOC 1275, Report, 20 March 1670, f. 379v-380v. Most of these names can be identified on modern maps; I have used the modern forms when known.

³⁴ VOC 1287, Dagregister Banda, sub 28 November 1672.

³⁵ For which see Van Fraassen, ‘Ternate’, II, pp. 460–512.

³⁶ It should be noted that persons known as ‘raja’ in the late colonial era were not monarchs over substantial territories, but rather village leaders similar to the *rajas* of Ambon and Seram.



Map 4.2. Approximate route of the Dutch expedition to Aru in 1684.

women. Murderers, arsonists, and adulterers also fell into slavery when they were unable to pay the fine that had been determined by the elders. By paying double the amount of the fine, one could later acquire freedom from slavery.³⁷

When Riedel wrote his ethnography of the South Malukan islands, the Dutch slave trade had not been operational since the early 19th century, which likely changed the incentives of slaving. Nevertheless, Aru society was still not deeply affected by colonial control, which was only implemented in the following decades along with the great upsurge of pearl-fishing around the coasts.³⁸ For all the difficulties in translating the slave concept to non-Western languages, there was clearly a social estate defined by the loss of personal freedom of movement, although it was also possible to regain it. The sources make it clear that the *kabean* had existed since the 17th century and probably much longer, although the *kabean*-ship may have been strengthened by the great demand for slave exports (and affected by the subsequent slump).

5. The Aru expedition of 1684

In 1684, 25 years after the first permanent VOC post was established on Aru, the Company decided to send a military expedition to the islands (see Map 4.2). Several incidents had irritated the Dutch in the past few years, especially the killing of two merchants who travelled along one of the many natural canals that divide the Aru Islands. Among the grievances were also issues relating to slaves.³⁹ From a Dutch point of view, the culprits belonged to the villages of the south, interior and the east side (Backshore) which were almost inaccessible to large Dutch ships and considered more uncivilised (*woest*) than the pro-Company and partly Christianised villages of the west side. As it was, a small Dutch detachment of 70 soldiers under Captain Jan Jacobsz Heysselbergh sailed over from Banda in April and bought up auxiliaries from the western villages Wamar, Wokam, Ujir, Wasir, Fangabel, Maikoor and Karanguli, who had suffered slave raiding at the hand of the easterners. In the following two months the VOC fleet of seventeen *sabir* (local ships) devastated much of the human habitation on the islands. Villages were burnt as the terrified inhabitants fled into the rainforests that cover the islands. A very detailed *dagregister* (log) allows us to follow the expedition blow by blow.⁴⁰ Two villages at the coast of Trangan Island, Feruni and Ngaiguli had received slaves who had escaped from their harsh predicament in Ambon and Banda. After a spate of burning, killing and enslavement in another part

³⁷ Riedel, *De sluik- en kroesharige rassen*, pp. 251–252.

³⁸ Giay, 'The Other Side of a Maritime Frontier', pp. 69–86.

³⁹ VOC 1401, Instructions for the expedition to Aru, f. 737–745.

⁴⁰ Included in VOC 1401, f. 861–928.

of the island, the VOC fleet closed in on 19 April, finding that the population of Feruni had fled since they had been warned by their neighbours. Captain Heysselbergh tried to arrange a meeting with the village chiefs to settle the case:

In the afternoon we saw some of these *negeri* inhabitants at a distance. We then sent the *krankbezoeker* from Wokam, Ernst Kuyper, and the *orangkaya* Elias of Maikoor, saying that they need not fear but assuredly come to us, and that we wanted to ask them about some slaves who had fled to Banda and stayed in this *negeri*. They then said to our errands that they knew that we came for the slaves, and that they would provide us others instead. They then fled to the forest again.

Towards the evening some of these people returned to their old place, bringing a small boy, so thin and sick that he could hardly stand on his legs, covered with scars. Through the *orangkaya* Elias, whom we had sent to them, they presented him as restitution for a slave. The other one would be brought from another *negeri*. We sent back this sick boy who was really not worth 6 rixdollars, and said that we did not ask for such, but able and sound slaves, like they had from us.⁴¹

In the end the Dutch did not get their slaves back despite repeated threats. The war council took the decision to simply destroy the villages of Feruni and Ngaiguli and the adjacent groves of trees from which the inhabitants extracted their food. Ngaiguli was first to suffer:

Sunday 23rd [of April]. In the morning, as the headstrongness and disregard for the Noble Company and its envoys could no longer be tolerated, we ordered (after many warnings and threats) our white and black soldiers to cut all their coconut trees. When, towards the afternoon, we had accomplished that and put the *negeri* on fire, we went to the *negeri* Feruni [that was treated in the same way].⁴²

In all its ferocious aspects, the story (of which we only have the Dutch version) is interesting due to the locked positions from both sides. The refugees from the VOC hubs of Banda and Ambon were kept by the villagers at great risk, suggesting bonds of friendship and honour. The Arunese villages were small with perhaps some hundreds of inhabitants, and mainly used bows and arrows as weapons. One by one they were almost chanceless against a well-organised European-led force but still refused to extradite or replace the ex-slaves when their meagre livelihood was threatened with ruin. Perhaps the refugees had skills useful for the rather low-technological society, raising their social status. On the other hand, the Dutch

⁴¹ VOC 1401, Dagregister Captain Heysselbergh, sub 19 April 1684.

⁴² VOC 1401, Dagregister Captain Heysselbergh, sub 23 April 1684.

expeditionary force did not hesitate to wreak full vengeance on two otherwise inoffensive villages ('sacrificing the *negeri* to Vulcan', as Heysselbergh himself writes) for the sake of a few runaway slaves. With large numbers of slaves being used in the economic system of the VOC, a strain of white anxiety is discernible in the documents. The system must be kept in place and routes of escape eliminated. Much of this can be seen in the contracts that were made with Malukan villages and rulers, where paragraphs about the restitution of runaway slaves are frequent.

After a brief rest in the VOC post at Wokam in the east, the fleet proceeded to traverse one of the canals and reached the Backshore, where some of the villages were hostile to the VOC-affiliated eastern settlements (figure 4.1). The main village of Barakai Island was attacked and destroyed after considerable bloodshed – the only real battle during the expedition. The fleet then steered to the north where Mariri was likewise reduced to ashes. After these feats, Captain Heysselbergh engaged in deliberations with Kobroor, a coastal village on the island of the same name, which had a history of trouble with the Company's close ally Wamar. The background of the conflict was carefully disentangled. However, the Dutch peace brokering was not for free.

As these people, without exceptions on either side, were inclined to a new peace, we asked what the most forceful way would be to make this happen. They said that it was done by the drinking of blood mixed with *saguer* [an alcoholic drink]. However, before this was done, the costs of the Noble Company for dealing with them and other rebels were stressed, [asking] what quantity of slaves they could provide to the Noble Company. They mumbled among themselves a little, and then presented a slave and two gongs as a gift, which we politely declined. For the second time they presented two slaves and two gongs. We then claimed 24 good slaves on the condition that they would then be accepted as Company friends and receive a letter of alliance. If they were subsequently bested by the people of other *negeris*, they should come to our garrison keeper in Wokam or to the Governor in Banda, who would give them a helping hand.

They said that they did not have that many slaves in their land but promised to obtain four of them. Finally, we put the amount to 18 slaves, to be delivered in three terms: six now, six next year, and the same amount the next year again. On this statement they asked to go back to their people in the *negeri* to hold a *bicara* [deliberation] with each other.⁴³

Again, the Dutch never got their slaves. Despite the ostensive agreement, the inhabitants stayed in the nearby rainforest to wait out the Company troops. On the next day, Heysselbergh ordered his men to burn Kobroor, then steering his fleet northwards for more devastation.

⁴³ VOC 1401, Dagregister Captain Heysselbergh, sub 11 May 1684.



Figure 4.1. A village on Barakai Island, Aru, illustration by A.J. Bik 1824.

The expedition so far had failed to reach any result further than burning villages and killing some people, apparently leaving the populations enraged – two men from Tanimbar Islands who followed the Dutch were attacked and killed in revenge by the Kobreorese on the same day as the burning took place. When a peace agreement was finally at hand with an important settlement, the Dutch tried to make the expedition pay by meting out a penalty or ‘gift’ that was far in excess of what the village could yield. For want of other valuable items, human bodies became the measurable wealth; again, a closed, impersonal slavery meeting a relatively open one with disastrous consequences.

The fleet proceeded to burn the settlements Batuley and Kumul, since men from the area had recently killed a Dutchman during a visit to the VOC hub in Wokam with the fake purpose of selling slaves.⁴⁴ The vessels then sailed the Sisirwatu Canal to reach Wokam where the soldiers were allowed some rest, while the boats captured along the way were divided among the VOC-allied villages. However, there was still the northernmost island of Aru, Warilau, to deal with. Some years ago, the people of Warilau had robbed a sloop with VOC traders and were thus the object of chastisement. As the Dutch soon found out, the island was filled with morasses and difficult to traverse, while the inhabitants disappeared in the rainforests with their valuables.

Around mid-day the shipper Jan Mayer returned, bringing an old man, a woman, and two small children. He related that still some houses had been found in the forest, however

⁴⁴ VOC 1401, Dagregister Captain Heysselbergh, sub 13–14 May 1684.

When *orangkaya* Bolboey entered, we asked what proofs he could bring. He said that he had no other proof than what he heard from the mouth of his sister. According to the witness of other *orangkayas* he beat her so long with rattans and so on, that she acknowledged to have fornicated with this Harmen. Since Harmen did not deserve this fine but paid out of fear, we helped this innocent man to what was his. We also asked Bolboey why [...] he had said to our errands that he did not want to come, and that he had nothing to do with the Noble Company. We told him that all this was very ill done. Thus, we condemned him, as an example for others, for his insult against the Company commissioners who represented the Noble Company itself, to pay three slaves for the Noble Company.⁴⁷

In a similar case discussed on the same day, the *orangkaya* Boysilla from Ujir was accused of 'unbecoming actions and hurtful cursing words'. When confronted with this, Boysilla declared that he had been very drunk and argued that this excused his behaviour – in spite of being Muslims, the Ujirese consumed alcohol like other Arunese. The Company officer retorted that one had to pay when sober for what one did when drunk. Boysilla was fined one slave, two gongs and two ivory tusks, and was to be detained until all this had been paid. The terrified *orangkaya* immediately provided a slave who was placed with the others, in the yacht bound for Banda.

Other issues concerned runaway slaves. *Orangkaya* Jonas from Wokam complained that two of his slaves had escaped to Wamar, a small island and *negeri* a few kilometres away. On closer inspection, it turned out that the slaves had rejoined their old master. The Dutch ordered to bring them back and sent a vessel to effectuate this. In another case, the *orangkaya* Carbou declared that one of his slaves had gone missing and asked for assistance to track him down. Now, however, it turned out that the refugee had killed a *mardijker* (freedman in European service) from Ujir with an arrow. If found, he would therefore be sent over to Banda for due punishment. In a third case, a slave had fled from Fangabel to nearby Ujir, from where he was to be extradited. The VOC officers found the frequent maroonage disturbing for the stability and tried to counter it.

Furthermore, we considered the complaints by these people concerning their slaves escaping, which happens in this and that *negeri*, yearly and daily, which brings great discomfort and injury to the owners. Thus, to prevent this, we have in general announced to the *orangkayas* that if anyone is found who has harboured another man's slave for three months, he must pay two slaves. If this goes on for a year, there is an increase to four items.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ VOC 1401, Dagregister Lieutenant Rosenburch, sub 25 May 1684.

⁴⁸ VOC 1401, Dagregister Lieutenant Rosenburch, sub 25 May 1684.

Thus, the ownership of slaves loomed large in inter-village relations. Although the *kabeanship* of the Aru Islands might have been comparatively household-oriented and open, enslaved people were not necessarily integrated in their masters' families, but frequently took any opportunity to escape from their predicament. In the case of the slaves of Jonas of Wokam, they apparently felt more security or affinity with their old master on another island, for reasons that we can only guess.

At the end of May 1684, the Dutch sailed from Aru with their small cargo of enslaved people, leaving a situation that was more unstable than ever. In their missive to the metropolitan hub in the Netherlands, the Supreme Government in Batavia complained about the poor judgment of Heysselbergh who had severely overstepped his orders.⁴⁹ It was only in 1691 that the VOC was able to achieve a semblance of peace, which was nevertheless disturbed by new incidents in the coming years.⁵⁰ The rising demand in trepang during the 18th century, as well as the prospects for pearling, made Aru an important link in the seascape managed from Banda. Enslavement had a large role in this; proto-demographic figures from the last years of the 17th century show that about a sixth of the slave population on Banda originated from Aru.⁵¹ The majority of them were women, presumably since they were more likely to survive a raid and somewhat easier subjects of coercion. Paradoxically, therefore, the Dutch needed both stability and instability to get something out of Aru; stable economic circuits to obtain sea and forest products, but also continuous slaving that went on beyond the Dutch pale in Wokam. The situation offers certain parallels to other parts of Southeast Asia such as Timor, as well as European footholds along the coasts of Africa. In fact, the precarious balance broke down with a bang in 1787 when the VOC establishment on Aru was violently overturned and the whites were either killed or enslaved under spectacular forms.⁵² Although the Dutch eventually returned, it was only around 1885–1907 that local resistance was quelled, and a new administrative order built up.⁵³ In the process, the colonial state made efforts to suppress the slavery they had been so instrumental in encouraging in the old days.

⁴⁹ *Generale missiven van gouverneurs-generaal en raden aan heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, IV, pp. 712–713.

⁵⁰ *Generale missiven van gouverneurs-generaal en raden aan heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, V, p. 446.

⁵¹ Hägerdal, 'A Slave Economy in the East Indies', p. 85.

⁵² Hägerdal and Wellfelt, 'Tamalola', pp. 430–456.

⁵³ Giay, 'The Other Side of a Maritime Frontier'; Spyer, 'The Eroticism of Debt', pp. 515–538.

7. Conclusions

A look at coerced labour in the Maluku Islands, in the extended sense of the geographical term, provides a rather differentiated spectrum of unfreedom even in pre-European times. In North Maluku, where we actually do have some indigenous texts to compare with the European records, the *ngofangare* served their masters on various levels, and the line is blurred between them and the sellable *falalom*. Both were essential components in the political economy of the sultanates before the onset of European control.⁵⁴ The precolonial societies of Ambon and Banda were based on villages and alliances rather than state structures, but also kept numerous slaves and give proof of a continuum from household tasks to large-scale productive work. At the same time, social status seems to have been in a steady flux in economically dynamic places like Banda, so that well-to-do people might have had a slave background. The Atlantic Portuguese and Dutch sea powers might have impacted on this, both through the warfare they created and the steady demand for enslaved people for Banda and other places. However, they also adapted to some of the features of the East Indonesian societies they coopted: the prestige of having and displaying a multitude of slaves, the lending of slaves against payment, the patterns of raiding warfare, and so on.⁵⁵

Much less is known about slavery outside the hubs of Ternate, Ambon, and Banda. Serious ethnographic descriptions of Wetar, Kisar, Leti, Kei, Tanimbar, and so on, were made when slavery was already officially abolished or on the decline.⁵⁶ Here, the Aru case is instructive for understanding how slavery worked in a low-technology society which was mostly beyond colonial control. The biased but detailed relation of 1684 provides a window that highlights the slave-related issues that arose in the confrontation between European expansion and local agency. The value of slaves as chattel is shown by the cases where they were payment for fines or forced tribute, a choice made over other products of the islands. Moreover, slave raiding occurred on both sides. The VOC promptly kept captives as slaves (although this was not in the written instructions for the punitive expedition), while on the other hand indigenous raiding was among the causes for the chastisement. Certain sources of Maluku society, for example, Gijssels in his writings about Ambon, appear to condone the image of a relatively benevolent and intimate slavery, but this is complicated by the issues reported among Arunese chiefs. Many of these issues were about maroonage, as slaves frequently tried to escape their predicament. This

⁵⁴ Van Fraassen, 'Ternate', I, pp. 79–82.

⁵⁵ Boomgaard, 'Human Capital, Slavery and Low Rates of Economic and Population Growth in Indonesia, 1600–1910', pp. 83–96.

⁵⁶ Riedel, *De sluik- en kroesharige rassen*.

is reminiscent of the European-governed places in Asia, as well as the sultanates of North Maluku: where there was slavery, there would be runaways.⁵⁷ But there were also signs of inclusiveness and social solidarity, as villages refused to give away slaves or ex-slaves to the whites, even when facing terrible consequences. The micro case of Aru speaks to the general Malukan pattern of a continuum from an impersonal work-intensive slavery to a personal household-oriented one, although it was an area characterised by relative externality and non-hierarchical social relations. A systematic study of the Malukan islands beyond the European pales will no doubt increase our knowledge of acquisition, deployment and commoditisation of coerced labour among the island societies.

⁵⁷ Vink, “The World’s Oldest Trade”, pp. 168–175; Van Fraassen, *Ternate*, I, p. 81.